

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

OU_218021

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

OSMANIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Call No.

923.1/9639

Accession No.

24627

Author

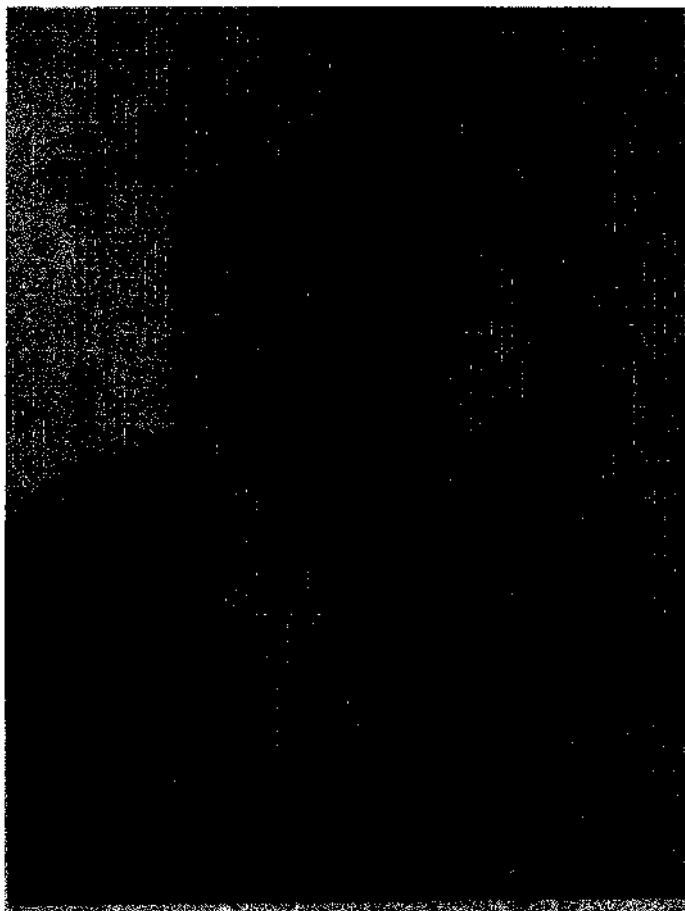
M. C. G.

Title

George. S. Gordon 1945

This book should be returned on or before the date
last marked below.

**The Lite of
GEORGE S. GORDON**



George Stuart Gordon
From a drawing by Christopher Ellis

The Life of
GEORGE S. GORDON

,8 81 1942

by
M. C. G.

With an Introduction by
LORD• HALIFAX

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
London New York Toronto

1 945

INTRODUCTION

important occasions he took infinite pains in consulting those he trusted: but in my dealings with him it was always obvious that his views were his own, however much he may have owed to the help of others in forming them.

Few men had a finer sense of relative proportion and value. As the administrative head of the University, it was his duty to protect it at a time when private interests everywhere had to give way to national necessities. But the University could make important contributions to the war effort of the nation. In such circumstances a lesser man might have fallen into one of two opposite errors: he might either have clung to University under cover of serving national interests, or have made a patriotic flourish of sacrificing the University to supposed public needs. With sure touch, Gordon felt his way through this tangle of conflicting claims; his judgment was seldom, if ever, at fault; and without doubt it was greatly trusted in the outside world as well as in the University.

Nor, throughout those anxious times, did he ever for a moment lose his cheerful poise or his robust confidence. It did one good to talk to him. It does one good now to remember him. His name will live as a fine citizen and a great Vice-Chancellor.

HALIFAX

August 1944

P R E F A C E

'The best that we find in our travels is an honest friend. He is a fortunate voyager who finds many. We travel indeed to find them. They are the end and the reward of life. They keep us worthy of ourselves; and when we are alone, we are only nearer to the absent.'

This is the story of the journey of George Gordon; I joined him near the outset, and shared with him its joys and hazards. The friends he met by the way have remembered what I could not know, and given me their memories freely.

So far as is possible he has, through his letters and papers, been made to tell his own story. The portrait which illustrates it is as faithful as I can make it: but it could not have been complete without the aid of his friends. It owes much to the clear memory and affectionate observation of Lord Normand, who was with him throughout his undergraduate years in Oriel and the time he spent in Paris: to Stuart Miller, who first became his friend in Glasgow and was with him in Oxford: to E. C. Gregory, whose friendship with him began during their years together in the Army: and to Mr. Veale, who was his friend and willing helper in the last three difficult years of his term as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford.

With his eye for the comedy of life and his constant interest in men and their doings George Gordon was inevitably attracted by biography. It was a subject on which he chose more than once to lecture, and he published in 1938 an essay on *The Lives of Authors*.

His legacy of comments and reflections is at once a guide and a deterrent to any writer of a memoir: he had much pondered the triumphs and pitfalls which attend such work. 'We cannot

PREFACE

be thankful enough for the gossips', he writes, 'when they tell the truth. In this business the smallest facts may have their relevance. It is not of the gravest importance to us to know that Wordsworth was seen to cut the unopened pages of a book with a knife which had just been used for the butter; or that, in the same category of facts, Charles Darwin was in the habit of tearing a book to pieces, that he might pocket, for later perusal, the few pages that interested him. But the greatness of the men is not impaired, and the information in either case is not without relevance.'

Relatives and close friends are not often, he considered, good biographers. They are misled into panegyric and stories of fine adventure, and the result is 'glossy, high-minded and unsatisfactory'. Yet he thought it essential that a biographer should have affection for his subject. He admired the *Life of Scott*[^] written by Lockhart his son-in-law, partly because he is never caught 'standing in the light', and also because he shows his man 'not only from infancy to age, and on the platform of his time, but from getting up to lying down: from five in the morning, when Scott rose and lit his fire, to ten in the evening, when he ended his day with a whisky toddy in the family circle'.

Perhaps, after all, George Gordon would not have frowned upon a memoir written by his wife, supported by the vigilance and recollections of his friends, and founded on material provided, all unconsciously, by himself.

CONTENTS

Introduction by LORD HALIFAX
page v

Preface
page vii

Chapter One 1881-1902
Boyhood—Glasgow University
page 1

Chapter Two 1902-1906
Oriel College, Oxford
page 8

Chapter Three 1906-1908
Paris—Clarendon Press—Magdalen Fellowship
page 23

Chapter Four 1908—1913
Marriage—Oxford Magazine—Times Literary Supplement
—Tutoring
P^a& 37

Chapter Five 1913-1919
Leeds—War—Visit to Gallipoli Peninsula
page 46

Chapter Six 1919-1922
Leeds
page 67

CONTENTS

Chapter Seven 1922-1928

Merton Professorship—Visit to Scandinavia—Holidays
-Society for Pure English—Book Society—Clubs—Science
and Education
page 75

Chapter Eight 1928-1938

Magdalen—Speaking and Lecturing—Visits to Spain, Italy
and France
page 99

Chapter Nine

Literature and Craftsmanship
page 143

Chapter Ten 1938-1942

Vice-Chancellor—Honorary D.C.L.—Literature and
Life
page 152

ILLUSTRATIONS

I . GEORGE STUART GORDON

*From a drawing by Christopher Ellis
frontispiece*

il. 1888
facing page 6

in. 1900
facing page 7

iv. *Facsimile of a page of notes for a speech made at* MAGDALENE
COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE, *in 1929 on the occasion of the Annual
Celebration of the Birthday of* SAMUEL PEPYS
facing page 106

v. SPAIN, 1935
facing page 107

vi-vii. *Facsimile of a letter to*
MALCOLM ROBERTSON
facing pp. 112 and 113

VIII. WALES
facing page 140
(By kind permission of the WESTERN MAIL*)*

IX. MAGDALEN, 1937
facing page 141
(By kind permission of the OXFORD MAIL*)*

One

i 881-1902

George Stuart Gordon was born on 1st February 1881. He was the eldest son and second child of William Gordon and his wife, Mary Napier. His grandfather, George Gordon, was a handsome and lovable man, afflicted with a hot temper and rebellious nature. At the time of his death he was serving as factor to Colonel Gordon of Cluny, and left his large family in the necessity of making their own way in life. Ability was not lacking, and his sons with their legacy of brains and dreams faced the world and found their place. Two of them, George and John, went to America, passed through Harvard, and had successful and distinguished careers. William, the eldest, remained in Scotland, migrating southwards to Stirlingshire: and it was there, at Falkirk, that George was born.

Since there is now no one who can record his childhood and few memorials of it have been preserved there is little to be said. True to the Scottish tradition, William Gordon, not without sacrifice, gave to his children the best education within his power. It is known that George read prodigiously—he was 'aye readin'. There were certain books of his boyhood which remained his friends for life: among them were *Kidnapped*, *Treasure Island*, *The Count of Monte Cristo* and the *Waverley Novels*. It was never safe to leave him in a room with *Kidnapped*. If he began he would read it to the end in defiance of all conventional hours for meals, bed, or exercise. Nobody can ever have enjoyed more than he did 'those hours of vacancy, which educationists have fortunately never understood, because, as a rule, the secret of them dies with youth'.

The words are his own, and throughout his life he constantly emphasized the importance of these hours of leisure. 'One of the most telling signs, whether in the schoolboy or the under-

graduate, or indeed in grown men, of a good education is the use he makes of his leisure: his power to employ his freedom: to be interested in something on his own account. There is more free time in schools than there used to be: and that is right. A boy, after all, must find *himself*; no one else can properly do it for him, though he can be put in the way of it; and it isn't in the class-room that he does it. The class-room is essential; there are things to be learnt there that can be learnt in no other way. Plenty of work is essential; we all, whether boys or men, go to pieces without it. But it is in our spare moments that we grow. It has all been put in a somewhat cryptic sentence: "Don't let your schoolwork interfere with your education." Cut out the irony which partly dictated the sentence, and there is no better advice. All good schoolmasters understand it and follow it, so far as routine will allow: but boys should hear it and know it too.' He was amused and delighted to hear one of his own boys complain at an early age that, if he did not have more free time, he was afraid his 'brains would go bosh'.

George had inherited his grandfather's quick temper, but, unlike him, he got it early under control. He would, however, flare up at a hint of tyranny, and hated a bully: and so it often fell out that in a fight his opponent was much bigger than he was. Like his friend, Alan Breck, he was a 'bonny fighter'. His father, as an official, tender about the public reputation of his family, discouraged this habit, especially as the mothers of the bullies were always ready to lodge complaints about the punishment taken by their offspring.

He told me once, that when he was a young boy, his elder sister and he were taken by their father on a visit to his native countryside in Aberdeenshire. They set out one day to pay calls on various relations in neighbouring farms. After the first few visits George's patience gave out, and he refused firmly to go on with it. At the next house of call he sat down by the gate,

and would go no further: his father and sister went on alone. As they walked down the drive to the farmhouse, his father, who himself was hard to move when his mind was made up, turned, and looking back at the small figure by the gate remarked, 'Isn't he a thrawn brute?'

He received the early part of his education at the High School of his native town. He was much attached to his headmaster, Dr. Campbell, a fine classical scholar, who was at some pains to direct him in his reading. Dr. Campbell's idealism, combined with an outspoken Highland intolerance of what seemed to him unworthy, exposed him for a period to some persecution at the hands of certain members of his Governing Body. The situation led to a public attack on one of them by a small party of Dr. Campbell's pupils. Their leader was George Gordon, their missiles potatoes and tomatoes. The affair was brought into court, William Gordon prosecuting. The sentence turned on the condition of the potatoes. Were they cooked or raw? 'Boiled, Your Honour.' The boys were admonished and fined. George once referred to this incident in proposing a toast at the dinner of a Law Society. 'Beyond being once fined for assault, I have little knowledge of the Law.'

He has written of his 'happy and unhurried' schooldays, and of his headmaster: 'I was never, I regret to say it, one of those highly favoured students who spring delightedly from slumber and hail the dawn. Dr. Campbell, the great Rector of my time, used to shake his head about it, I remember, and found me difficult to cure____He is one of the three or four teachers in School or University to whom I am conscious of owing what can never be repaid. He moulded by one process our minds and characters; and this is rare. There are many teachers who can impress their pupils with the value of moral honesty, who can deal, and deal well, with conduct. There are a good many, though not so many as one would like, who can teach the more difficult habit of intellectual honesty; not many can do both,

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

and in the same breath, but those who can are the great teachers. As I look back on Dr. Campbell, I find myself singling out these three commanding qualities; a sense of honour so high and pure that all duplicity was shamed by it; a complete unselfishness; and a profound and daily sense of the sanctity of truth. It was impossible for us to be mean in his presence; or to do in his absence without a sharp sense of guilt what we felt *he* would have disapproved. ... He died prematurely, in the height of his powers, and died, if ever a man did, for his school. Deaths such as these are not wholly loss. Out of such sacrifices the living draw their strength.'

The school produced several able and distinguished men. Of these Craigie Aitchison, who became Lord Advocate for Scotland, and later Lord Justice Clerk, was a contemporary of George Gordon.

In 1899 George matriculated at the University of Glasgow. His entrance coincided with the appointment of Professor J. S# Phillimore to the Chair of Greek. In his Address at the ceremony of affection and admiration in January, 1925, when Phillimore's portrait was presented to the University, Gordon recalled that he had entered the University on the same day as Phillimore, though, as he said, rather less noticeably. Undoubtedly the man who influenced and helped him most during his years at Glasgow was Professor Phillimore: he swiftly discovered Gordon's quality, and, being a conscientious as well as a great man, pursued his discovery. He invited him to his house: it was in his study that George first met Steuart Miller, who had come up to Glasgow two years earlier. These meetings became frequent and they talked into the early hours of the morning: they were the turning-point in the career of a Scottish youth, now encountering in the friendly intimacy of a man of great personal distinction, who was a master of the art of courtesy, traditions which it was to be his duty later to appreciate and serve. Phillimore must also have had considerable patience, since these young

students seemed to take no account of time. *In those long delightful evenings', he wrote to Phillimore long after, 'the struggling mind emerged from the body.' It was in Phillimore's study that George first discovered that he was something more than a successful student.

In 1907, when he was elected to a Magdalen Fellowship he wrote to Phillimore: 'Did you see the paragraph about my origins in the Mag.? Some lover of truth had traced them back to 5 The College, Glasgow. There was never a bit of truer research done.'

Professor Brogan wrote recently in a letter to the editor of *The Times Literary Supplement*. 'The late J. S. Phillimore once told me that George Gordon was the most brilliant young writer he had ever taught; that every essay he wrote in the ordinary Greek Class in Glasgow could have gone straight to the printer, without revision or correction.' Many years later Phillimore wrote to his old pupil, after reading an Essay that he had just published: 'If I could write like that I would do nothing else, day and night.'

In an introduction to a Greek author that he was reading with his class Phillimore had written: 'To the Greek, literature was not, as to the Hebrew, the utterance of a few exalted or distracted moments, but a steady companion of the art of living.' The sentence had evidently arrested Gordon's attention, because after Phillimore's death, in an address describing the change that had come to the literary theatres of Glasgow University with the arrival of Phillimore and Raleigh, he said that truth had become companionable, and literature was revealed, not primarily as the utterance of a few exalted and distracted moments, but as the great and perpetual Mistress of the Art of Living.

No more, however, can be said of this influence and friendship without encroaching upon George Gordon's own testimony which will appear later with his other Essays.

In 1900 Walter Raleigh succeeded A. C. Bradley in the

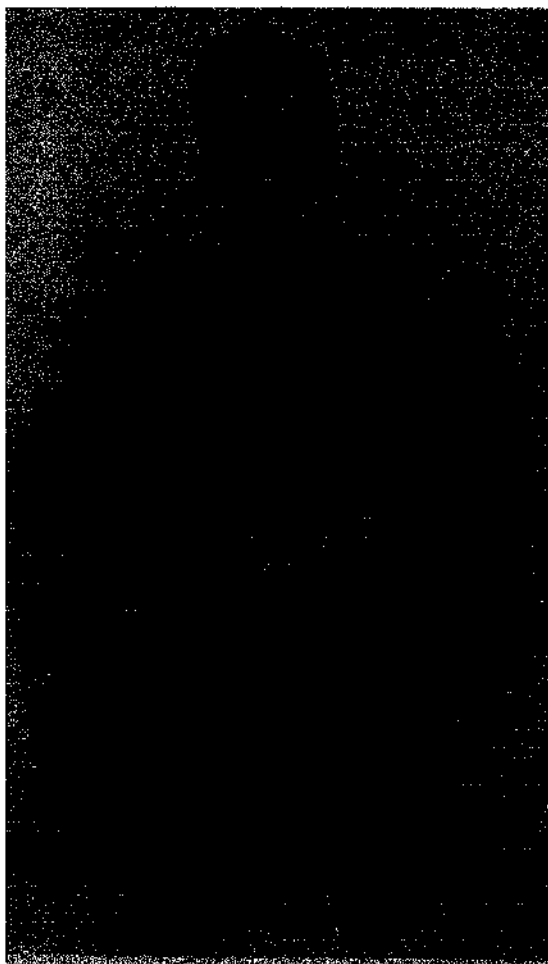
LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

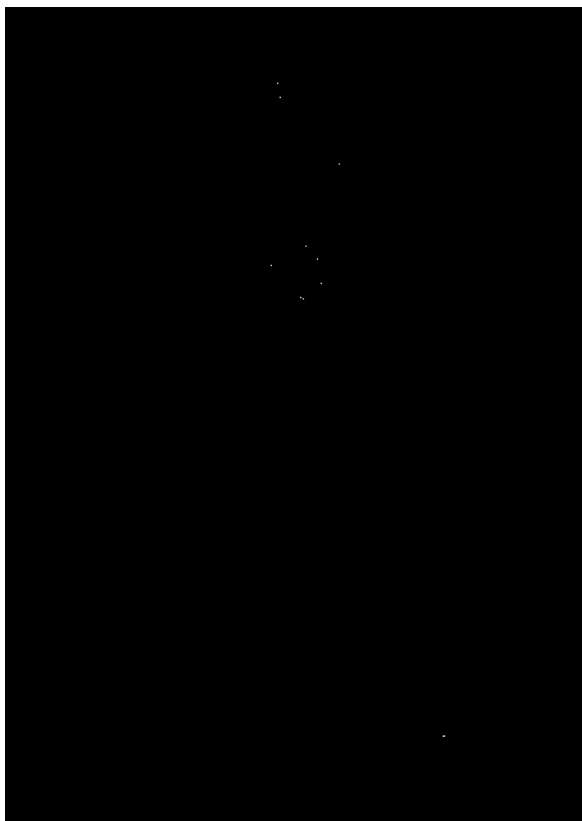
Chair of English Literature at Glasgow. Although Gordon had much admired and enjoyed Raleigh's lectures during the year he attended his class, and the distinction of his essays had been noticed by Raleigh, their friendship did not ripen until they were both in Oxford.

It was during these undergraduate years at Glasgow, in the exhilaration of freedom from the routine of school life, that George formed the habit of reading and working late into the night. His friend, George Galbraith, who had taken him under his protection, and whom he described to me in an early letter as one of the decentest and best-hearted fellows he had ever known, would often rise in the night in order to send him off to bed. The legend of his absentmindedness also began at this time. There were many stories—his appearance at breakfast one morning fully dressed, complaining of a queer feeling of discomfort: he was discovered to have put on all his clothes over his pyjamas. He might be found at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, absorbed in a book by the fire, while his luncheon lay, still untouched, on the table. Absentmindedness, however, was not a correct description of his state: it was the outcome of an astonishing power of wholly absorbing himself in whichever of his interests at the moment held his mind: while this lasted, he was unaware of his surroundings. He carried this intensity into both work and play.

In later years when he had achieved, by a great effort of will, complete victory over the foibles of his youth, and was unfailingly punctual at all meetings and public appointments, he was indignant when from time to time this hydra reared its head. A facetious contemporary, who asked him if the *Westminster Gazette* was still his morning paper, had a frosty receptidn.

Those who have read the preface to his published letters are already familiar with the story of the part he played in the students' enthusiastic and boisterous reception of Lord Rosebery as Lord Rector of Glasgow University; also of his escapade in





1900

policeman's uniform when he held up the traffic for a time, on the night of a torch-light procession, before it was realized by the authorities that he was a rascally student masquerading as a traffic policeman. These frolics were typical, and were repeated later, especially during his time in the army—which at moments was for him a cheerful open-air adventure.

There was talk and endless discussion with his friends by day and night. 'All was grist, even then, to the mill of his discerning, catholic mind', says Galbraith, 'and he found the unity of truth in strange vessels.' He had begun the game which he played with ardour to the end of his life—the game of living.

'I do not know', writes Steuart Miller, 'what George's plans for himself were when he came up to Glasgow. I fancy Phillimore widened his horizon all round. Certainly he gave impulse and direction. George had a good ballasting of inertia. In him action was a response to stimulus or pressure, and his wisdom was to know when to respond. I expect he was responding to pressure when he went off to Oxford to try the Oriel group of scholarships, and there is no doubt that the pressure came from Phillimore.'

Two

O R I E L 1902-1906

IN his first letter to me from Oriel he wrote: 'My nervousness about everything has frozen somehow into a sort of nervous carelessness. You must combine the two, for pure nervousness and carelessness are bad singly.' 'A man born and bred like George', writes Miller, 'is bound to feel uncomfortable when he enters a system such as was the Oxford system of that time; he *ought* to be uncomfortable; if he is not, he is not true to type. To begin with, his simmering irritation even boiled over into his letters to Phillimore.' Fresh from the stimulus of Phillimore's teaching, the argumentative keenness of the Scottish student and the applause or unconcealed dissent of the Scottish classrooms of that time, he finds at Oxford a lack of 'inspiration' and 'healthy enthusiasm': he complains of the bored 'demureness' of the Oxford undergraduate at a lecture, and the apathy of the lecture-rooms.

Throughout his undergraduate years he remained 'a terrible Scot' and an 'exile', and he continued to rail at the Oxford system and its paternal government. But this does not mean that he was unhappy or refractory. 'He was cursing the Oxford system', says Stuart Miller, 'as he might have cursed a strange golf-course: the unaccustomed lay-out and by-laws might irritate him, but there was a bogey to beat; and George set about doing it.' He admitted in letters to Phillimore and Miller that he was learning something at every turn, and that the order and vigour of the social economy in Oxford were just what he wanted,

'In Oriel', he wrote to me, 'I have discovered four Scots—or rather they have discovered me. I have a St. Andrews man across the passage from me.' The St. Andrews man was R. W. Chapman; another of the Scots was W. G. Normand from Fettes. On the same staircase he found two scholars of the

ORIEL 1902-1906

year, R. Barkeley Smith, a Cliftonian, and J. Maynard Fletcher from Sherborne. Gordon and Chapman were a little older than the other three, and had read more widely. But all of them had the combination of seriousness and levity which made for the whole group a common basis for friendship. Accident had thrown them happily together, and from the beginning of their first term intimacy grew and friendship prospered—a friendship which lasted all their lives. Smith shared with Gordon a closer confidence than any of the others; but to them he never denied anything that friendship asked or could offer. Fletcher died young, in India, soon after leaving Oxford.

George maintained also his friendship with some of the men he had known in Glasgow, especially with Steuart Miller of Trinity and Montgomery of Balliol. 'One gusty day', writes Miller, 'as I was punting up the Cher I came upon a man struggling in a clumsy yet dignified manner to control a canoe, which was spinning round in the wind. This was George. It must have been early in his first summer term, since he had not yet learned to manage his craft. We got ashore on the farther bank of the river; it was at Marston Ferry, and we walked up to the little inn. There was a musical box there that played only one tune—"The Sailor's Home", it was called, or some such name. The tune so delighted George that he played it over and over again—played it so often that I never forgot it. Nor did he. When we met here not so many years ago, I sang the tune to him, and then he sang it to me, more correctly. He remembered every particular of that afternoon some thirty-four years before, though there was nothing memorable about it. He must have remembered it as one remembers some holiday or truancy of boyhood.'

When his friend R. B. Smith was asked what recollections he had of these undergraduate days, he replied: 'Will you be surprised when I say that I don't seem able to contribute memories of George. I was surprised myself, and wondered why. The

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

reason seems to be that he never stole the play from others. He never turned his surroundings into a background. If he made a play at breakfast his object was to make others play, and not to show himself any funnier than they. I can remember only one occasion which seems to contradict this picture of him, but really I think it illustrates it. About 1904, he and I had hoped to meet at dinner in London, but I couldn't be in time for dinner, nor even for the opening of the show. These were the great days of the Music Hall, and we arranged to meet at the Tivoli. As I took a ticket, I realized that we had arranged no time or place, and I wondered how long it would be before I found him. As I got into the theatre his was the first face I saw. He was sitting forward with a look of the keenest enjoyment on his face. The turn on the stage at the moment was performing dogs. Everyone else was sitting back, not very interested.

'This does not mean that time spent with him was ordinary time—it wasn't. I always looked forward to it as something wonderful which he was going to share with me. I have a consciousness of wonderful moments and days shared with him, and they don't seem to split themselves up into incidents which can be related. I think of him very often but it is nearly always in relation to something which is happening now, and I picture his quick feelings of love and hate.'

There was an incident of Oriel days which his friends never forgot, nor allowed him to forget. It was to them a revelation of his innocence of minor practical details. It happened on a Sunday morning in his second year. W. G. Normand went to see him (probably to make sure that he was out of bed: for he was 'a treasure at the sleeping'). He had just sat down to breakfast, and was cutting the top off a boiled egg: he said in his aggrieved voice, 'I told my scout to put on the eggs when he called me, an hour or so ago, and they ought to have been soft by now'.

The following extract from the French Journals of Mrs. Thrale and Dr. Johnson was found in his scrap-book: it had

evidently interested him to find that another person had shared his difficulty.

23 Oct. 1775

⁴Do you remember, said she, turning to Mrs. Strickland, the story of Lady Catherine Howard and the Eggs?—How was it, dear Madam? cry'd I. Why, said the Abbess, when poor Lady Catherine's turn came to boyl the Eggs during her noviciate, she boyled them so hard nobody could cat them; she was reprimanded for this Trick twice, and the third time being worst of all, and the Eggs boyl'd quite blue, as we call it, the Superior used some very severe Expressions. What can I do? at last says Sister Kitty, I put the Eggs on before I went to Mattins that they might be tender, but I think nothing *will* soften them for my Part'.

Long afterwards, when George had occasion to return to Oxford during the vacation for a night, and found himself alone at home, he wrote, 'With the use of the hour-glass I am discovering the truth about eggs'.

His helplessness in practical matters was to become a legendary joke in his family. He laid claim to be the gardening expert: but the only flower he could identify was the fuchsia. This particular plant had been fixed in his mind in his boyhood. The joke was improved when, as President of Magdalen, he became *ex officio* Chairman of the Botanic Garden Committee, and later still a Curator of the University Parks.

He professed to be the gardener 'in a consultative capacity*. On one occasion we dug a hole in our garden for the purpose of getting gravel for the paths. 'They wanted a hole, and when I saw their hole I said, "We wouldn't have called that a hole in France: bring me a spade". And I went into the house and got ready, and came out and they brought me a spade, but a plaything of a spade, and I told them to bring me a real spade such as I had used in France' He did not dig the hole.

LIFE OF GEORGE 8. GORDON

I have sometimes thought that his professed ignorance **was** only a humorous exaggeration.

On the occasions when he succeeded with much effort in overcoming practical difficulties he made great capital out of it. He wrote in October, 1903: 'For the last three days I have been pretty constantly engaged nursing my next-door neighbour—who is also my closest friend here.' (It was R. B. Smith.) 'He got his collar-bone broken when playing footer on Thursday. He tells everyone who visits him—and they visit here in a case like that at the rate of forty a day, and in threes and fours—he tells them all how excellent and housewifely a person I am! My great task was arranging his pillows and cushions, and helping him out of and into bed, making his tea, buttering his bread, washing his face, etc., arranging lights in the room, and keeping windows open without draught! He won't let me shave him—**wisely.**'

In later years when he and his friends were together there was always much merriment about his 'winter' or 'summer difficulty'. This was their way of describing certain situations in which he was constantly involved, and which almost elude explanation. It appears that it was in his second year that the incident occurred which illustrates his readiness to allow a small practical difficulty to thwart his intentions, and yet turn it to advantage. He said one day that he had done a lot of work in the last week because he had not been able to go out. When asked why, he explained that he had lost his cap. A search soon discovered the cap in the recesses of a sofa. But for over a week this obstacle of the lost cap had prevented him from leaving the College, and he had spent the time, quite unconcerned to look for his cap, in a bout of reading. He had this habit of burying **a** difficulty, doing nothing about it so far as one knew, and telling no one what it was. It has been suggested by one of his friends **that** the difficulty of dealing with his manuscripts may have been **linked** with this **phase** of his **character**.

ORIEL 1902-1906

In the Michaelmas term of his second year he wrote to me: 'Here now, I am considered, so I believe, something of a strange fish, a humorist, who may say anything at any time—rather an inconvenient reputation, because people look in for a few minutes just to see what mood you're in; and then report, "Gordon's reading poetry, and raving about the smell of the earth".'

His friends say that from the beginning he was recognized as possessing outstanding qualities: the others knew without discussing it that he was entitled to conduct his university life in a manner which would have been foolish and presumptuous in an ordinary scholar of Oriel. He had his individual habits, and made no concession inconsistent with his personality: he took his own course without thinking whether it conformed or not. Lectures he seldom attended, having already covered in his work at Glasgow much of the reading required for Honour Moderations. His hours of work were not those of the average undergraduate. He usually began to read between dinner and midnight, stopping only when his interest flagged.

He was bred on the classics, 'all the wooden-faced old literary swells of Greece and Rome', which he never quite forsook, and he was always strongly attracted also by mediaeval literature, although most of his reading afterwards was to lie in later centuries. At that time, in 1903, he was reading poetry—Meredith, Matthew Arnold, Browning. 'I'm awfully glad you are liking Meredith', he wrote to me. 'I have heard these jarring notes discussed frequently, or what jar even upon men. I suppose they differ from those which would offend women. I must confess I wouldn't wish to have poets without these jarring notes. They are a part of life, and poetry is not meant to be quite an evasion, to which people retire when they want to get rid of *things*.'¹

In Oriel days he could and would read anything that was in any way readable, and what he was reading at any moment

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

depended very much on the accident of what he picked up. He had already the faculty, which he never lost, of extracting the contents of a book by merely turning over the pages, beginning often at the end and turning them backwards. His eye seemed to catch anything that was interesting or absurd, and however rapid the process might be, it was always critical.

Throughout his life his reading continued to create surprise by its unexpectedness. During one of his annual visits to Normand in Scotland he had one morning an attack of toothache which prevented his joining the rest of the party in their expedition for the day. It was discovered in the evening that he had spent the day reading the proceedings of the Highland Agricultural Society in many volumes. He could tell his host who were the best cattle-breeders in the neighbourhood, and the names of their most famous prize bulls. He had evidently enjoyed the day, and forgotten the toothache. On another later occasion he engaged one of his sons, who was studying accountancy, in a serious conversation on that subject, astonishing him by his command of details which presumably could neither interest nor concern him. The work on Accountancy was afterwards found on his library table. He had picked it up, grown interested, and read it.

This picture of him is clear in the mind of W. G. Normand. In his rooms at Oriel, at ease after tea, sitting in a long comfortable chair, he would pick up a book, and deftly turn the pages with one hand: when he was not smoking he stroked the back of his head: his legs were crossed, and one foot tapped the floor as he read. Suddenly he would say: * Listen to this', and he would read a sentence which had aroused his criticism: then would begin a discussion which might last till dinner.

Yet, when he wanted to read seriously, he allowed no interruption, and could be forcible and severe in repelling invaders. But they knew his ways, and, when the mood for reading was on him, respected his solitude.

But, although he read much, he was no recluse, and neglected none of the social opportunities of the College. On every convivial occasion he was in the centre of the most hilarious. He had a gift for improvising on the piano and sang songs—many of them from a students* song-book of the Glasgow days. His wit and satirical comments on College life were the delight of his contemporaries. One of their amusements was to sing a sort of oratorio, with suddenly repeated choruses, which composed themselves as they went along. They were far from complimentary to authority, and furnished an outlet for feelings outraged by some resented criticism or exercise of discipline.

These were halcyon days, enlivened by his good humour. His friends contrived that his unconventional hours of work, and his enormous capacity for sleep, once he had gone to bed, did not get him into trouble with the College Authorities. They made sure that he arose and breakfasted at a not too unreasonable hour. The service was amusing in itself. He had a way of reproaching them for his own backsliding. If they woke him about eleven he would say: *But I had to go to a lecture at ten.* They knew well that he had never had the faintest intention of going to a lecture at ten, and that he had gone to bed in the early hours of the morning, determined to have his usual eight hours sleep. But he made it appear that they had involved him in this breach of duty, and abridged his education by depriving him of a lecture.

An incident occurred in his second year which gave him much mischievous amusement. L. R. Phelps was then Senior Tutor of the College: he prided himself on his memory, and liked also to display his powers of conversation. One evening he asked Gordon to come to his room, and have a talk with him after dinner. Gordon arrived before Phelps, and, finding a book on the table, took it up, and turned over the pages until he heard Phelps on the staircase. They began talking, and presently Gordon noticed that Phelps turned the conversation towards

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

the subject of the book. Soon he was quoting from it, exclaiming, 'I haven't looked at the book for twenty years, not for twenty years, I mean'. This story was gleefully circulated, and took its place among other Phelpsiana.

In his first term he had joined a University literary club, called the 'Mermaid', limited to sixteen members. 'The Secretary is an Oriel man, with whom I had an accidental discussion one day on Elizabethan drama. There happened to be a vacant place in the Club, which I now occupy. I am a very modest member, however, as most of them are fourth year men, reading for the Final Honour Schools.' He was re-elected to this club as a permanent member early in 1908; and on his accession to the Vice-Chancellorship in 1938 the club sent him their congratulations and good wishes. * Its President, J. R. B. Brett-Smith wrote: 'The Club has of late years been growing accustomed to the eminence of its old members, but it welcomes its first Vice-Chancellor with peculiar satisfaction and pride/

In 1903 he became a member also of an Oriel Society, the 'Chameleon'—all five friends belonged to it—and, on his first night of membership, read a paper on 'The Origins of the English Novel'. 'Formerly', said the President, in summing up, 'formerly this Society was just a pleasure meeting; now—.' Roars of laughter came from Gordon and brethren, and a mock-martyr request that the 'Chameleon' should never hesitate to throw out, for her own preservation, such a Jonah as G.S.G.

In spite of these diversions they were working hard in that Michaelmas term of 1903, and 'helping each other to avoid each other's company'. George writes: 'I have read many speeches of Demosthenes and Cicero lately until I am become a mere whip-poor-will in a morass, a thing of phrases and sentences, anything but a student of things, which everything seems to prevent my being. Education in this country, in all countries I have ever heard of, at the present day, is always some ten miles

from the right road: it is just that ten miles I can never get over. Sometimes I get on it, and sprint cross-country, but a mile sees me drop, and I awake to find myself squatting in a ditch by the old turn-pike again.'

In the spring of 1904 he took a first class in Honour Moderations. This examination over, he had a new feeling, which exhilarated him, of having a clear scheme, and a growing faculty of doing what he wanted to do. He wrote at the time to Phillimore, 'I am very well pleased to get about the only asset Mods, has to give, though now it is over my blasphemous rage against it is taking to cooler and perhaps more equitable latitudes. Of course the amenities of the Summer Term are not a factor to be neglected in investigating this diminution. Was it a subtle foresight of our Dons that placed Mods, in Hilary Term?'

In this summer term they relaxed, and there were many pleasant expeditions round Oxford. Bablock Hythe was a favourite; *The Fox and Hounds', an inn in the neighbourhood of the Berkshire Downs, attracted them on Sunday afternoons. When they were lazytheyspent an afternoon on the river or on a Sunday walk to Sandford—the ordinary delights of the undergraduates of their time.

The five friends found rooms in one house in the Broad opposite Balliol in the Michaelmas Term of that year, and there they remained until they went down. The rooms were good, and they had less than the usual reason for complaint. But sometimes they had a disagreeable interview with their landlady, Miss Collins. She was a dignified personage, and by no means intimidated by undergraduate lodgers. Her method of disposing of their complaint was to deny emphatically its justice, and to hint that she would be obliged to consult her distinguished relation, the Master of the Rolls, if it was renewed. Whether she was truly related-to Lord Collins, M.R., they never knew. But they gravely deferred to his high authority. At the same time their grievances were usually remedied.

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

One evening Gordon was entertaining to dinner in his rooms Professor Phillimore of Glasgow, who was in Oxford examining for the University Prize in Latin Verse. Normand, who was of the party, relates that Phillimore took from his pocket a printed sheet containing the English poem he had set for translation into Latin, and asked Gordon if he recognized it, or could name the author. It was A. E. Housman, and Gordon, without definitely attributing it to him, said that it might be his. Phillimore was both pleased and surprised—pleased because Gordon had not precisely defeated the problem: surprised that he had actually thought of Housman as a possible author. Evidently the piece was in Phillimore's view not typical of Housman. On that same evening he reproached Phillimore with having led him on to the ice in his own house in Glasgow. Gordon, whom he had asked to dinner, found there another guest whose name he did not catch when introduced. At dinner Phillimore asked him his opinion of the part played by the Clan Campbell in Scottish history. This was a topic on which Gordon held strong views, which he expressed: they were not favourable to the Clan. When he had spoken his mind Phillimore remarked blandly that they would interest his fellow-guest, who was a Campbell. It was the present Mac Cailean Mhor! Undeterred by this disconcerting incident Gordon shortly afterwards repeated his opinion of the Clan in the presence of a peppery old Highland gentleman, who informed him with some heat that his wife, Mary Campbell, was of that clan. This time there were *a few wigs on the green' which, however, did not prevent, a few years later, the marriage of George Gordon with Mary Campbell Biggar, the grand-daughter and namesake of the lady.

In November of 1904 he was saddened by the death of Bob Carruthers, an old school-friend to whom he had been much attached. This sharpened his distaste for academical abstractions, and especially for the Hegelian consolations still being dispensed at that time in Oxford by Edward Caird and his disciples, which

he scornfully rejected as sophisms in a letter to me about Carruthers' death.

His longing for more substantial food than Greats philosophy was probably one reason why he was induced that autumn to enter for the Stanhope Essay Prize on the *Fronde*. It was a bold decision, because he was entering the lists against the professed historians: it was also an adventurous *ditour* on the threshold of his work for Greats.

The task was not accomplished without much prodding by his friends. He continued to read the memoirs of the period, and to make notes, always protesting indignantly that he would do no more. 'There is a great deal to be done', he wrote to me, 'and I have never been able to do things automatically. A growth of habit in the regular road is what I am trying for.' Two of his published letters show under what duress the essay was written, and how at the very last moment it was lodged, unrevised, and even unread by the author—also that the prize was won—'won', as Raleigh said to Firth, 'by a pirate from Greats who had learned French for the purpose'. 'It will still be a pleasure of novelty for me to read over some parts of my Essay:' George wrote to me on the morning after he had sent in the essay, 'the last ten pages, including the conclusion, were written on Tuesday night and Wednesday, with Normand and Fletcher standing over me half the day, hounding me on, and taking round every page as it was written to the greedy typist.' His circle of devoted friends had rallied round him as if it had been a College Rugger Match.

When the summer term of 1905 began there remained a year in which to cover the work for Greats. He attended the lectures of Cook-Wilson and Greenidge: and he never failed to take an active part in W. D. Ross's philosophical discussions for the Oriel Greats candidates. 'Ross is the most infallible person I have ever met', he wrote, 'not that he is not open to discuss—he would "discuss the sun to bed" every day in the week—but his

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

knowledge is so clear and so well-ordered, and his dialectic is so ready and well-exercised.'

Philosophy and Ancient History did not specially appeal to him. For a time they held his attention, and his natural vigour and alacrity to wrestle with difficult intellectual problems was brought into play. He was always ready to give help and sympathy to anyone who came to him with a difficulty. On one occasion a scholar, senior to him, who was completely baffled by the first approaches to philosophy, sought his help, and was given some light. The poor man, as he left, was heard to say, 'How I wish I had been born a Scotsman!' But Gordon reserved the right to smile at the solutions which he was obliged to put forward for the grand question of life, thought and human progress.

'A good year's work at Greats', he wrote to me in May, 'will make my footing pretty firm for anything that may come.... I am keen: how long it will last is a question for the long Vac. It will last at least this term, and I am really working very well.' In the long vacation he wrote from Scotland to me in Savoy, 'Here I am, jumping over chairs and tables, like the German baron, in order to display my sense of humour. It is raining, I was up early, I want a cigarette and haven't allowed myself one for over three weeks.... But I am getting set, and the next ten months must see the best work in the time I've ever done yet. But it is worthy work—it is the end of pupillary academics for me—and it is the approach of the beginning of full-grown life.... I am sick of husks, which little souls run after as fine bread. But I have not found my measure. I may fall back and be glad of these same husks when I find that the girth of my spirit is smaller than I hoped. But it is something to be dissatisfied, even to *have been* dissatisfied with the husks. To get that measure there is only one method, I think. Find your principle of life, and see if your soul will hold it; when that is done, see if the world will hold it. Just now, in my duty, I see great glimpses of my principle.'

By the beginning of the October term he was back in Oxford.

ORIEL 1902—1906

*The weather is lovely, and Oxford at its very best—grey, with wonderful skies up the bend of the High, and the delicious red creepers on the old rich stone. I love the place in spite of all my anathema and restlessness.' The Michaelmas term was always his favourite. It was then that he felt most vigorous, in crisp weather like that of his own country.

This term he found his tutors, W. D. Ross and Marcus N. Tod 'affable and ingenuous', and guessed that they had been discussing his affairs, and were trying to perpetrate a donnish joke on him, suggesting that in order to save his eyesight he might find it profitable to *take more lectures*. 'My eye-brows went up like a rocket. But it was only a joke and cannot come off, as they knew.' In the following year he got a first class in *Literae Humaniores*.

In a memoir written for the journal of the Oxford Society by Canon Fox in 1942, he continues, after mentioning Gordon's Essay on *The Fronde*: 'The successful incursion into a province not strictly his own was characteristic of a versatility which never deserted him. I remember seeing him the day after the award was announced, standing at the top of Oriel Street. He was looking very much as he did when he was Vice-Chancellor. My companion asked me who he was, and I was able to tell him, though I do not think I had ever spoken to him then. But he was already a University character.' R. B. Smith also remembers his first sight of him at the scholarship examination before they came up to Oxford—'He moved so directly forward'. Normand's picture of him has more detail: 'George was at that time and always, except when the effects of the war brought him recurrent periods of illness, of a robust health and physique. He was strong and muscular. His carriage was notably erect; his frame athletic, nobly crowned by his well-shaped head with its formidable brows. When it came to a tussle with any of his friends he never came off the worse of the two. His only physical weakness **was** short-sightedness, caused by his reading, and still more

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

by the minute notes he wrote as an undergraduate. That however was a weakness which afterwards improved. His gait was characteristic: a free swing at waist and hips, springy at the ankles: the expression of energy and nervous force/ Normand makes no mention of his nose; but some of his intimates were less silent. It had been damaged in some game during his boyhood; this had broadened and enlarged it. Raleigh once remarked: 'You know, Gordon, if your nose had been a quarter of an inch longer, the little boys in the street would have fled from you.'¹ It was also, during his army years, an object of frank comment in the Mess. On these occasions he had a ready answer. He never lost the light easy swinging walk, which Normand remarks; it came to him from his father, who in his turn had doubtless inherited it from a kilted ancestor.

Pride in strength and physical fitness ran high in his father's family. The story is told that his grand-uncle, William Gordon, held a mad bull by the horns in the village of Inch in Aberdeenshire until help arrived. His uncle, George Gordon, disputed in his youth with the famous Donald Dinnie the throwing of the caber, while his younger and favourite Uncle John relates in his book, *My Six Tears with the Black watch*, his many adventures in the Egyptian Campaign.

'I have always felt', said Gordon,⁴ 'like Samuel Butler, that illness in a man is, if not actually a crime, at least a sign of incompetence.' So strongly did he consider illness to be disgraceful that he always tried to conceal it. *I have begotten giants', he wrote with pride to Florence Nixon in his later age, when he found his three sons beginning to tower above him.

His forbears for generations had been mostly farmers, and never knew the towns: and from these men, who had lived under open skies, among mountains and harvest-fields, he had inherited, with a good physique, some nobility of mind and speech, some uprightness and modesty of character: to these qualities were strangely added the restless soul and the grace of the artist.

Three

i 9 0 6 - i 9 0 8

IN the beginning of 1906 George had some conversations about his future with Sir Charles Firth, who was insistent on the necessity of his spending some time abroad. 'I dined with old Phelps on Saturday in Oriel/ he wrote in January, 'and Firth was of the party. He pulled me into a corner on a favourable opportunity, and we had half an hour's business conversation—only interrupted by Phelps' notorious laugh, and fragments of political gossip and jokes. He is decided on the question of going abroad—and there I think I am at one with him.... He confirmed Raleigh's report of the rising fortunes of the English School: that, so far as I am concerned, means increase in the teaching Staff. He also assumes that I want a Fellowship in History: because he remarked that the teachers of Modern History in Oxford had just decided, unofficially but authoritatively, that no man elected to a History Fellowship be allowed to teach the subject till he had been at least a year abroad. So I'll be complying with this beforehand.'

'It seems', he wrote to Phillimore, 'I am to be forced to make my bed with History: but as soon as I have pennies enough in my pouch I'm off to lie with Literature.' Raleigh, on the other hand, was urging him to write, and wanted to put him in touch with publishers. To one publisher he wrote 'There is a scholar of Oriel, called Gordon, who some years ago was the best and most delicate essayist of Glasgow University——'

He never forgot the friendly efforts of Walter Raleigh and C. H. Firth to establish his future. 'What stalwarts they are', he said, 'the Firths and Raleighs of this world I'

In October, 1906, W. G. Normand went to Paris to study modern history, and was joined there in December by Gordon. For a time they lived in a hotel in the rue de Vaugirard, not far

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

from the Luxembourg. In this hotel lived also a young Pole, •Oscar Mantey, with whom Normand had some previous acquaintance: he became one of their most intimate friends in Paris. He was studying law, but gave most of his time to music. He was always hard-up, and anxiously looking forward to the next remittance from his people in Lodz, but he had a fine independence and pride.

Gordon, working to a programme drawn up by C. H. Firth, had undertaken to examine the documents bearing on the diplomatic relations of England and France in the seventeenth century. For this purpose he worked at the Quai d'Orsay, and in the Bibliotheque Nationale, under the guidance of M. Be*mont. But to get access to certain of the documents he had to have a recommendation from the British Foreign Office. In obtaining this there was endless procrastination. The fault seemed to lie with the Foreign Office itself, and every effort was made by Gordon and his friends at Oxford to stir it into activity. He paid several visits to the British Embassy in Paris, where he met with nothing but evasive promises. He was reduced to desperation by this treatment, and spoke his mind freely to the minor diplomatic functionaries, who stood between him and the great men, who so effectually did nothing. It seemed astonishing that months should pass and nothing happen, when all that was necessary was the signature of a public servant, however exalted. But so it was, and in the end he left Paris without having read the papers he most needed for his work.

Thus thwarted by the ineptitude of the officials of his own country in his historical researches he gave some of his time to the Ecole des Sciences Politiques. This had been founded, soon after the war of 1870, with the patriotic purpose of establishing a centre at which the abler young Frenchmen might study realistically the political movements of their own times, both in France and abroad. Under the guidance of such men as Sorel, Boutmy and Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu it had grown and pros-

pered. The school was attended by young men ambitious of a career in the prefectorial and colonial services, in the higher fields of political journalism, and in law. But there was a large body of students from other nations, notably the U.S.A. On the benches you would see also Germans, Slavs, Chinese, Japanese and men from the French Empire. The British Isles were represented only by Normand and Gordon, and before them the last was Austen Chamberlain! Gordon followed the lectures of Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu on the current religious movements in Europe and America, and of Ch. Benoist, who, besides being a professor at the School, was a Deputy of the Right. (Their merits have been discussed in Gordon's published letters.) The form of the lectures was excellent, and for the English audience a good linguistic lesson.

Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu was a fine specimen of the learned Frenchman. His air of refinement and culture, his venerable age and graceful speech were very attractive. But the queer cosmopolitan audience was quite as interesting as the somewhat thin discourse of the professor.

Benoist, speaking one day of the constitutional history of Austro-Hungary, had been explaining the difficulties created by the amalgam of races in the Hapsburg Empire. These races he enumerated, and when he had done, an excited figure with flashing eyes, and a floating mane of black hair rose from one of the benches, protesting that he was a Slovene, and that his race, although of the highest importance, had not been mentioned. Benoist, a man of the world, well accustomed in his political life to handle interrupters, replied, 'Messieurs, I owe our friend an apology, and I assure him that I was about to pay a quite special homage to the greatness of his race. But, in future, when I deal with the races which inhabit the Empire of Austro-Hungary, I shall mention only those which do not inhabit it. That will be easier, and will not expose me to misunderstanding'. All this was delivered with grave courtesy, and effectually satisfied the Slovene.

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

The lectures of M. Scheffer on diplomatic history from 1789 gave amusement to George on account of their rotund oratory. He was a fine tall bearded hawk-like man, and would roll out in a deep sonorous voice, 'Talleyrand de Perigord, ex-eveque d'Autun, Prince de BeneVent, Vice-Grand-Electeur de l'Empire', lingering on the last syllables of PeVigord, Electeur and Empire. George would sometimes repeat his phrases with delight, as a model of French pronunciation for Englishmen.

There was a gross person, eyed by Gordon with distaste, who attended this class regularly: stout and paunchy, wearing thick eye-glasses and more jewelry than was customary for Englishmen or Frenchmen. He was reputed to be the Prussian military attache^ who made it his business to be informed about what was being taught to young Frenchmen.

The only course recorded of the lectures attended by Gordon at the Sorbonne was that on contemporary French literature by Emile Faguet—a quaint untidy figure, who held his audience, havng both matter and style.

These activities brought them into touch with some agreeable and interesting young Frenchmen. Raymond Cahu, the son of a novelist, and already the private secretary of a member of the Senate, was the one they frequented most. He had a pleasant flat on the right bank of the river, where they spent many evenings with him and his friends in good talk about French literature and politics.

They found these young Frenchmen attractively modest and candid: they were a pleasant contrast to the French students whom they observed on the benches in lecture-rooms and in caf s. 'I find the French student the most palpable smatterer*', George wrote to me, 'with a taste for women and politics. He is a strange animal, either exceedingly abstemious in drink or food, or exceedingly the reverse, and with strange capacities for failing to observe his discomfort/

He liked the social freedom of the French people, and the

1906 - 1908

equality which made social life easier, and gave it a wider scope than in England. The life of the streets and cafe, with their gaiety and liveliness, made a strong appeal to his own natural cheerfulness and good humour.

What he found most irritating was the obstructive inefficiency of minor officialdom. There was a melancholy afternoon spent in trying to send me a picture by registered post. The delays in securing attention, the innumerable questions, the contradictory instructions about packing drove him to frenzy. The inability of the police to regulate the traffic, and their unwillingness to help the public incurred his contempt and ridicule. On later visits to Paris his feelings were unchanged. Pointing once to the discs of thick green glass which mark the street crossings, he said 'tombs of dead policemen', adding, 'Cross with the Republic: it is the only safe way'.

He always had an eye for a regiment on the march, and was much impressed by the spectacle in March, 1907, of the public funeral in the Pantheon of M. Berthelot, the famous chemist, and his wife. Normand and he witnessed the march past the catafalque of the garrison of Paris, horse, foot and artillery. Gordon watched keenly the bearing of the troops and the arrangement for their concentration and dispersal. He knew that the time would come when France would again be at grips with Germany, and welcomed any evidence of the efficiency of her army.

All his criticism of French life, however, was that of the lover. He had many French friends, and always welcomed an opportunity of returning to France. Of Germany, on the other hand, he had always a rooted dislike: he mistrusted her politics, her people and her scholarship, detested her 'clanking precision and colossality', and would not even visit the country. 'Your husband', said Charles Vaughan on the occasion of a visit to me in Leeds in January, 1917, 'is one of the few who were never duped by Germany. I am the more bitter *because* I was duped.'

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

He became much interested in current French politics, reading widely and carefully in representative journals of every shade of opinion. 'I am becoming able to understand some of my neighbours whom Oxford would have led me to believe madmen, or blackguards or both': and he realized how unenlightened English periodicals were on foreign politics. He met and talked with Jules Siegfried and his two sons Andre* and Robert. His acquaintance with Andre" was renewed on later visits to Paris. With Cl[^]emenceau, the Prime Minister, he had little sympathy, and considered Briand to be the better man. Through the good offices of Raymond Cahu he obtained from time to time tickets for the debates in the Chamber of Deputies. On at least two occasions when Normand and he were in the *Chambre*, the sitting had to be suspended. Once the interruption was caused by occupants of the gallery, who scattered thousands of leaflets over the Deputies sitting below, and, rising in their seats, raised a clamour of abuse and menaces. On the other occasion the Navy estimates were under discussion. A leader of the Right, Admiral Bienaimé, had spoken in favour of increasing the fleet: a violent Deputy interrupted by asking what the fleet had done for France in 1870. No doubt this was a difficult question to answer, and the result was uproar and confusion. Such incidents did not increase the two friends' respect for the politics of the Third Republic.

Normand records an incident which illustrates Gordon's attitude in discussing British politics with their foreign acquaintance. It arose out of the House of Commons resolution, censuring Lord Milner's conduct in South Africa. They both regarded that resolution as the vindictive act of an arrogant and self-righteous majority, which the Government, in dereliction of its duty, had failed to control. It was brought into discussion by a young American with whom Gordon, Mantey and Normand were dining in a restaurant. Normand did not disguise his opinion or feelings, but Gordon said nothing. Afterwards he remonstrated with Normand, holding that the Government

1906-1908

was after all *their* Government, and, since the Members of the House of Commons represented their countrymen, they should* be supported, or at least not savagely attacked by them in the presence of foreigners.

In January, 1907, the two friends had moved from their hotel to a flat in the Boulevard Montparnasse, rented to them by a Russian lady who had gone south for the winter. There was a *bonne* for only an hour or two in the morning, so that they were obliged to keep regular hours. George mentions his early rising with pride in one of his letters to me, without disclosing that it sometimes needed a physical struggle to make sure that he got up in time. With long days before him he did not neglect the opportunity of knowing Paris familiarly. In the afternoons he explored the city on foot—the Luxembourg Gardens, where he loved to watch the children, admiring with astonishment their neatness of dress and accomplished manners: also their skill in *diabolo* which was in fashion. In spring the Bois de Boulogne drew him further afield. But he was attracted most by the old Paris—the He de la Cité and the Latin Quarter. On wet afternoons he frequented the Louvre and the Luxembourg Galleries. His interest was strong and individual: he made no use of histories of art, nor works of criticism. His views, founded on observation, were his own. There was one picture of which he would have liked to rob the Louvre, although it was not painted by one of the greatest artists: it was Solario's *La Vierge au coussin vert*.

He wrote to me in December, 1906, just after his arrival: *I have spent some time very agreeably in the Luxembourg Galleries. The statuary I think the very finest modern collection I've ever seen. And the finish, too, is a perfectly new thing. The Greeks didn't do it, and the big moderns wouldn't or couldn't. Rodin's statues seem half done, compared with many of the others: though they are obviously the most tremendous things in the place'.

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

January, 1907. 'Paris is a very beautiful place: I am only finding that out gradually. At first I was affronted at the gaudy ornamentation in their public squares and avenues: gilded railings, red and blue scrolls in pantomimic firmaments, with roly-poly angels and mathematical stars, the hideous mock-funeral of the Strasbourg erection, etc. And why in God's name should it be impossible to erect a statue to Pasteur, without putting Death and a fainting young woman on one side, a pack of dogs on another, and two cows of gigantic stature on a third, while the fourth side meant nothing at all? Was it not possible for people to recall the fact, or for an inscription to inform them, that the rather tired-looking old chap sitting on the top (the figure itself is very well done) was famous for curing hydrophobia, and did something for tuberculosis? Oh no, but the artists of the Third Republic would be damned before they would be obscure: and it must be all quite clear and logical, like the French systems of education and tramway-cars. ... Can you tell me why all the statues of French heroes were made in a gale of wind? for how else can you explain the flying robes of most of them? Look at Gambetta's for instance. ... But I find Paris very beautiful. I'm afraid that I became so engrossed in vilification that I forgot to say what in particular I enjoyed. I find the Luxembourg lovely—and what will it be like in spring?—and the Avenue de l'Observatoire is delightful. I think these two will be my favourite haunts in afternoons of fine weather.'

During these months he heard much good music in the company of his friend Mantcy, who converted him to classical music: and together with Normand they frequented the theatres. Occasionally they attended plays of Shakespeare at the Odeon. They were both a little ashamed of themselves during one performance in French of *Julius Caesar* because a loud smack when Brutus and Cassius embraced and kissed provoked their mirth. But their shame was needless. The house shared their merriment. Shakespeare seemed absurd to the French of that

1906-1908

time, and when M. de Maxe was declaiming 'Friends, Romans, Countrymen' there was general hilarity. The translation and* the acting, conscientious though it was, made Shakespeare merely funny. Gordon delighted in the crystalline accents of Sarah Bernhardt. She was accused by Frenchmen of speaking so that the English could follow: but, since at that time he could understand spoken French only by a considerable effort of concentration, he thought none the worse of her for that.

At Easter Paris suddenly filled up with British holiday-makers. They came in their thousands, and seemed to take possession of the city. They infested the Louvre in loud check knickerbockers, norfolk jackets and cloth caps. Gordon beheld the horde with profound distaste. 'Will they sing *Rule Britannia* under the dome of the Invalides?' he asked Normand, who was able to say only that he had heard them do that very thing on the pier at Boulogne.

They left Paris early in May. Gordon's efforts to obtain access to archives had made no progress, and their work had come to a natural end. Their last Sunday was spent at Versailles on the day when *the jets d'eau* were first turned on, and the customary crowds seemed to usher in the Paris season. They found the crowds more interesting than the fountains or even the palaces: Fontainebleau was not displaced in their affection by Versailles.

From Paris in March had come a letter written in French as a testimony of his proficiency. The letter was fluent, but its contents were determined by the exigencies of a rhetorical language: when he got down to facts, he cried out for his native tongue. One fact, however, emerged: 'Je suis maintenant l'Esclave de la Clarendon Press, qui d'ailleurs a bien décide* de ratifier ma nomination.' He always spoke French with some reluctance, only when he found himself in a situation which required it: and on these occasions he was complimented. He had little

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

small talk in the language: his natural style was correct and Formal, not unlike the utterances of a French Deputy.

Before leaving Oxford for Paris George had prepared for the Clarendon Press an edition of Peacham's *Compleat Gentleman*; during his time in Paris he wrote an introduction, glossary and notes for Scott's *Legend of Montrose*. Such was the modest beginning of his connection with the Oxford University Press. 'The Press', he had written to me in the previous February, 'has offered (unofficially as yet!) to retain my services as an active and consulting editor.... My written work will probably be largely concerned with the xviith century. The rest of it will be advising and consulting as to editorial projects, reading MSS. or proposals sent by aspiring *litterateurs*. I begin by editing Herbert in June. *The Legend of Montrose* thing will probably not recur. They were stuck, and had to get it done as expeditiously as possible. It was finished last night, thank the Lord! I found writing notes the most irritating and unsatisfactory of operations, and my *Introduction*^ which I had to write with an eye to youth of 16 to 18 seemed to me like so much porridge—which I've no doubt it is. And the glossary—*eheul* Luckily it has taught me the order of the letters in the alphabet, of which I found I had the shadiest notion, in spite of all my recent catalogue-hunting.' On his return from Paris he began his work for the Press, preparing among other things the edition of Grosart's text of George Herbert for *The World's Classics*.

In a letter to Phillimore from i o Holywell he wrote soon after his return: 'I am very glad to get your letter. The Press, after having used me up these last weeks, has cast me off for a month j and I am going down to Scotland tonight for a much needed holiday. I haven't really had one since last August; and I am dying for a round of golf. I expect to come back in July: but by that time you will probably have left Oxford.

'I took the chance, however, of making F. Y. Eccles's acquaintance—not very difficult, since he is my next-door neigh-

bour. He came to tea yesterday, and I liked him extremely. We knew the same places in Paris, and were able to share a good many ideas about them.' The letter suggests that Phillimore had asked George to call on Eccles; he had made the same suggestion to Steuart Miller; the three men became good friends, and met constantly while they were in Oxford together, often in Miller's rooms.

Eccles had been preparing his *Century of French Poets*, writing also for the *Quarterly* and the *Dublin*, and looking after the literary side of the *Speaker* to which Gordon contributed once or twice. In 1907-8 Eccles was lecturing and tutoring for the French and English schools. He provided Gordon with the stimulus in conversation of which he often felt the need. 'I think we are good company to each other', he said of his meetings with Miller and Eccles: 'Eccles I like immensely: what is so strange is that, in spite of his sensitiveness and fastidiousness, I feel as if I had known him for years. He is so easy to talk to: because of course he likes talking and talks so easily himself.' The accidents of life were to separate them for long intervals, but when they met their friendship and delight in each other's talk never lost its warmth. Miller relates that one summer night the three of them talked till dawn, and then, instead of going to bed, they walked the six miles to Abingdon, and awoke the porter at the Queen's, who raided the bar and larder, and got them breakfast of beer and cold ham. George said, 'I needed this'. 'What he needed', says Miller, 'was the sort of companionship of which this was an extravagance: I mean a free, equal, provocative exchange of ideas and opinions. When he was in Paris he "never felt so much alive, or so much a part of the world which works and does everything"'. In Oxford he had been shut in behind spiked gates and barred windows.'

The week-end of 20th October, 1907, was spent in the company of his two friends, Maynard Fletcher and R. B. Smith, who, on the point of leaving for India, came to pay him a farewell

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

visit in Oxford. He wrote: 'The boys are in absurdly high spirits, .We had a splendid time on Saturday: Fletcher kept saying, "I haven't enjoyed anything like this for years". It was very early when we at last sought our couches; and very late when we assembled to attack the mountains of bacon and eggs the landlady had provided. She is a very quiet person, and therefore delighted with the constant bustle and harmonious noises of our party. Smith is not yet away: he is reading the paper just now, and adjuring me to send you his respectful admirations. I hope you weren't disappointed at not getting a letter on Monday: if you had seen the style of our housekeeping you wouldn't wonder.'

In addition to his work for the Press he had been doing, in private, some reading for a Prize Fellowship offered by Magdalen College, the first to be given for English Literature. He was elected in October. He wrote to me when the news was brought to him: 'And I shall have rooms in Magdalen: it is the loveliest college in Oxford. I am in a bit of a whirl just yet, and my pipe is always going out.'

He always understood that it was principally to Walter Raleigh and A. D. Godley that he owed his election to the Magdalen Fellowship. Unlike the other candidates he had not taken the school of English Literature and Language: but these two good sponsors pressed for his election. Sir Herbert Warren, whom they persuaded, was careful to explain to him afterwards what he recognized as the truth, that he had been elected rather for his promise than his performance—*propter spem handpropter rem*. He often spoke of the friendly and encouraging kindness of his reception by the Fellows—in particular Sir Henry Miers—on his first night in the Senior Common Room as a tremulous Probationer Fellow. Before that night he had entered the College only twice. The first occasion was early in February, 1905, when he dined as the guest of Walter Raleigh. 'Dining at high table with dons', he wrote to me, 'is amusing as an experience.' That night he carried away with him a general impression

of comfort and state, friendliness and well-being. The second time, exactly a year later, was less innocent. He and his friends were summoned before the Proctors for making a noise in their rooms in Broad Street 'to the disturbance of the senior members of the University in the street'. The Senior Proctor of the time was Dr. Clement Webb, then a Fellow of Magdalen, who congratulated them humorously on the 'logical acumen of their defence', which had been conducted by George Gordon. When they met later at the Restoration Dinner in Magdalen Dr. Webb found his face familiar. He had not only had with him a proctorial interview, but had examined him in *Literae Humaniores*.

On 24th October, the day of his election, he was admitted as a Probationer Fellow by the President before dinner: on the following night at the Restoration dinner his health was proposed by the Vice-President, and he made a speech in reply.

This election to the Magdalen Fellowship was one of the happiest events of his life. Very soon he was given rooms in the New Buildings, overlooking the Grove. On the same staircase were A. L. Pedder and Dr. Cowley, who became his firm friends.

He was advised by Raleigh to enjoy himself for six months, doing nothing but his work for the Press, and was told that there was lecturing and tutoring waiting for him, as soon as he was ready for it. His first set of lectures—a general course on French Influence in English Literature—was given in the Summer Term of 1908.

In September, oppressed by an Oxford which had lost 'even that modicum of air which a malignant geography has grudgingly assigned to it', he was longing for Scottish breezes. 'But I am supposed', he wrote to me, 'to be drafting a difficult letter to a rejected author. I feel more of an exile and a reject than he will do when the letter reaches him, and it is in my best 16,000 feet above sea-level style too.... The publishing season is beginning its hollow roar; my own pen produces fitfully and with great

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

effort; and my lectures are still at the beginning. I cannot do anything to offend the Press. I owe so much to it, and for the last six months they have been wonderfully patient, while I was learning my business as a tutor, and composing lectures. Just think! The Shakespeare book is only being finished now; it has been so constantly interrupted by other academical things. And it was advertised for April.' This book was a new Shakespeare for schools which the Press had asked him to edit. It called forth in 1910 this letter from Raleigh. 'Quite by accident, for the dress and purpose repelled me, I took up your three plays, and had a read at them. I was delighted with them. The Prefaces are first-rate reading. I am really ashamed that they should be in Eton collar and jacket while the same thing about Johnson is dressed like a Lord Mayor. It makes me feel a snob.... But really your essays are an independent book.'

George enjoyed this early experience at the Clarendon Press, and considered that he owed much to it. 'I shall always be proud', he wrote, 'to have made my second graduation in the Secretary's Room, and to have received the friendship, and sometimes the approbation of Charles Cannan.'

Four

1908-1913

ONE day early in the Michaelmas Term of 1908 George was gripped in the street by the old Provost of Oriel, C. L. Shadwell, who asked him when he was going to 'change his state'. 'No peace you see', he wrote to me, 'for a young man who has formed good resolutions: his friends, old and young, hurry him on to their accomplishment.'

By the following spring we were in search of a house. He wrote to me in Scotland: *Oh, I assure you I have the eye of a middle-aged parish councillor for plumber-work and fire-places. I have even learned the points of the compass here in this little town of ours, and recalled to my mind the precise behaviour of the sun in his day's march. I hope someone will present me with a set of gardening tools: I dote so on gardening.'

We were married on 29th June, 1909. He brought to his marriage his gift for friendship, and all his gaiety and loyalty. His view of a happy marriage was as characteristic as his way of describing it: 'A successful marriage starts in the way it means to go on, takes all its obstacles light-heartedly, with a couple of inches to spare, and ends on its toes, still smiling.'

The liveliness, gaiety and acuteness of his mind would seem to be at variance with the legend of his absent-mindedness, and his apparent failure to observe obvious every-day details. The legend was true enough, although he protested against it with pretended indignation. There was a little picture painted on wood which he had sent me from Paris three years before. One morning at breakfast, some months after our marriage, he said in an aggrieved voice: 'I have always felt rather hurt at your not hanging that picture I sent you.' I had only to point to the wall on his left where the picture had hung since we set up house. But he was much quicker than most to observe what seemed to

LIFE OF GEORGE 8. GORDON

him worth observing. The truth is that his interest was in human beings. Of men, women and children he was a most acute observer, as quick to recognize their good qualities as their foibles and follies. If a person interested him no action, nor chance remark, nor fleeting expression escaped his attention.

If life had drawn him in such a direction he might have been a successful comic actor. As it was, his gift of hitting off an affectation by a parody, or his sketches of an impersonation added much to the fun of his friends and his household. He appeared one morning with a boot-lace ostentatiously tied round his neck in place of a tie. My comment, which he expected, was not slow in coming. 'I observed this latest fashion in the Latin Quarter in Paris', was his reply, 'and resolved not to be behind the times.' His most impressive impersonation, which he consented to do only on rare occasions, was that of a blind beggar as a sinister and menacing misanthrope, which made onlookers shiver and laugh in the same moment.

He had taken on the editorship of the *Oxford Magazine* in the summer term previous to his marriage: and in October he had this letter from A. D. Godley: 'I am glad to think your organ will still provide an outlet for scurrility when advisable. It seems likely that life and Curzon may furnish opportunities. And I hope the young and ardent will hurl themselves into the battle, and not consider these wranglings as unworthy of their consideration as they too often do. As for the Mag. itself, last term it said what it thought in a way that recalled its best tradition. I hope you were properly congratulated on the term's performance: anyhow I offer you this belated tribute. It was very comforting to those who were surfeited with a diet of eulogy (no doubt well-deserved) and official reticence. Go on and prosper.' The Godleys were among our best friends in the early years of our marriage. George, always valued this staunch and sterling friendship, and missed constantly after his death the rich and humorous melancholy of A. D. Godley.

1908-1913

In the late autumn of this year one of the great games was the collection of examples of * Jargon' for coming articles in the *Oxford Magazine*. Chapman and Gordon led this campaign, but other friends joined them in the search. The journals and newspapers offered a fruitful field. This game of baiting 'Jargon' had begun nearly ten years earlier in Phillimore's study at Glasgow. * "In the case of", "in connection with", "in view of", "the leading factor in the situation" etc. etc., we had them all on the floor', says Steuart Miller, 'as if we were chasing rats out of a haystack, and we went for them like young terriers. At Glasgow Phillimore had egged us on, but George needed no encouragement: he already had a nose for such rats. By then his style was more or less formed; it was, as Phillimore said, "a secret they have in Falkirk".'

The Jargon articles appeared in 1910 during Gordon's editorship of the *Magazine*. He always intended to make an essay out of them. Bruce Richmond, the editor of *The Times Literary Supplement*, called out for it: 'Rumour tells me that you have been writing on "Jargon". Wouldn't some of that grace our front page?' It was one of the many things that he never had time to 'blow into life'. The purpose of these articles was to ridicule abuses of the language, and promote the plain direct expression of thought and ideas. From 3rd February, when the campaign began, they continued throughout the year, exciting correspondence, controversy and collection of examples—which was their aim, 'for, as you know', he said, 'the more a thing is collected, the rarer it becomes'.

In December of that year he went to Glasgow to read a paper to the Alexandrian Society in Glasgow: the subject was 'The Trojans in Britain'. This passage from a letter to me shows the accustomed stress under which the paper was written: 'I went to bed when I got to Glasgow, had lunch, worked at my paper until 5.30, and reached Phillimore's in good time. I wrote 18 pages between 2 and 5.30: and good ones too. The

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

paper was perfectly finished and complete, and I think gave a great deal of pleasure and surprise to the audience. Nobody had the faintest idea what it would be about: everything was new to them: and they all thought my appeal for a new legendary ist Chapter in English histories excellent' The paper was rehandled and published in 1922.

In these years before the war Gordon's articles and leaders in *The Times Literary Supplement* began to appear regularly: the first was in 1911. His connection with this journal and his friendship with the editor, Bruce L. Richmond, were described after his return to Oxford in 1922 by a wit of the Merton Common Room, who called its readers 'The Dupes of Richmond and Gordon'. These articles were often written for some special occasion, sometimes at short notice: but with ample notice, with his material ready and his plan made, there were times when he could not bring himself to write. His pen refused to itch. He would then turn aside to some irrelevant reading until the eleventh hour—11.45 as he would say—when, inspired, he wrote at fever pace. He has been known to write the last pages of an article with a hansom waiting at the door to take the MS. to the train, which was being met at Paddington by a harassed messenger from Printing House Square. His reward from a long-suffering editor would come next day: 'Just a line to thank you. Better (late) than anything by anybody else—a long sight better. Hooray. Yrs. B.L.R.' Or, to his great pleasure, it might be a card, or a telegram with the magic word 'Bull's-eye'.

He required this external pressure of an engagement to compose with rapidity. His natural pace for finished writing was slow. When he was writing in solitude with no impact of urgency his temperature fell, and it was an effort to bring his matter to a focus, and to the point of expression that satisfied him. He had to "make his brain sweat". He had rich experience of what he once called the pains and ideals, the woes and jublations of the craft of letters.

1908-1913

As a young tutor he quickly established easy and friendly relations with his pupils. Pretentiousness and half-knowledge soon disappeared in his presence. If one of his men, in reading his essay, made a practice of referring glibly to works with which he had no first-hand acquaintance he would have him say as he read: 'In——(which I have read) or (which I have not read) . . .' It ended in a laugh, and they learned to conform to his standards. He himself as an undergraduate had never been readily drawn into solemn discussions about the problems of being and life. He dismissed confessions of doubts with sturdy advice against confusing inexperienced intellectual speculation with the real experience of life. As a tutor he would control any passion for self-confession in his pupils by bringing them back with easy good-humour to Chaucer and Shakespeare.

One of his early pupils, Professor W. D. Thomas, recalls these evenings of over thirty years ago, when he used to take his essay to him in his rooms in the New Buildings at Magdalen from 8 to 10 after dinner. 'He would listen to my essay, then he would talk, about any and every thing in his mind. It might begin with something in my essay, or some point in a lecture he had given or was to give, and round it his mind played with complete freedom. It was just what I needed, besides being in itself interesting, for he was a supremely good talker. He excited my mind, and working at a course for schools became not so much a discipline as an exciting expansion of interest. Books and people, words and doings became phases of each other, and he made me share the vigour of his enjoyment of them. There was nothing mean nor half-way in this enjoyment even when it was of something foolish. He would catch whatever it was into a phrase—and there it was for our pleasure. With a "You know", or "Isn't it?" or "Eh?" he flattered me into a sense of participation in his creation. Sanity and wit went hand in hand, and only the *cliché* or dull response was met with a frown, I

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

find it impossible to isolate the essence of his skill. I only know that he was for me a superlative tutor. Rarely did he seem to seek to inform, but always he quickened, and stimulated and humanised, and it was the intimate contact with his rich humane mind that mattered'.

Happiness has no annals, and, since he was seldom absent from his family in these years before the war, except for a short visit to Italy, there are few letters to colour my memory of them. The impression left is of good talk, much laughter, humour and absurdities, against a background of hard work and many schemes for the future. I remember one evening in particular which he spent in uproarious laughter over a ridiculous book, entitled *What a Life*, by E. V. Lucas and George Morrow, who had made a story out of Whiteley's Catalogue, retaining the original illustrations. His laughter was of the sort which he has himself described: 'expanding to all the faculties till the whole man is involved and given over to mirth'. It was a delight to watch him.

Tom Seccombe came on a visit: he was asleep one afternoon in a chair by the study fire: after a time George gave him a Falstaffian poke, saying 'Come along, you old Cyclops, and have a walk'. He was horrified a minute later when he remembered that Seccombe had a blind eye. We had also a visit, not many months after the birth of our eldest boy, from E. M. Forster. On the day of his departure we were leaving home to pay a visit to the parents of R. B. Smith at Wimbledon. Forster, whose train left later than ours, observed us from the door of our house as cot, bath, nurse and baby were piled into our cab. We learned later that he had written to R.B.S.: 'I have just seen the Gordons off: it was a scene of nomadic splendour.' Twenty years later, when my husband was replying for the guests at a dinner in King's College, Cambridge, he took delight in twitting Forster, who was present, on this penetrating description of the domestic scene.

1908-1913

In 1912 there was an amusing visit from H. Belloc on the occasion of his 'rousing' lecture on Rabelais. Belloc had written 'Yes, I will tackle Rabelais for you. I have at least read him, which is more than I can say for most of the people on whom I lecture.' Belloc delighted everyone by his lecture and his presence. George contrived what he had long hoped for—the first meeting between Raleigh and Belloc—at lunch in Magdalen. Its success was never in any doubt.

Belloc: 'Here am I, scribble, scribble, scribble: and it takes a devil of a lot of scribbling to make £2,000 a year.'

Raleigh: 'But need you make £2,000 a year?'

Belloc: 'My dear fellow, I live at the *rate* of £2,000 a year. Would you have me run into debt?'

Belloc left behind him as a rich memory of his visit some of his favourite port and a song that he had made. The verses which George wrote for the occasion and presented to Belloc appear in his published *Letters*. Belloc replied: 'Thank you particularly for the verses which I adore, and will cut out and paste, instead of keeping them in my pocket-book, which is the second or inferior form of worship on my part.'

George took great pleasure and interest in the early sayings and doings of his children. He felt 'the pride and glory of authorship: and what works they are, in which one turns over a new leaf every five seconds for ever'. They were his friends and equals; and he was the source of their most absurd games, and the author of an interminable story, which held them enraptured every evening after tea. He was the centre of their universe: and if he was away they would keep looking into his study in the hope that he might be back. During the war they kept up a regular correspondence with him of which this **letter, written by** his eldest boy, gives the tone.

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

'Dere funy daddy, macer of non-suns,

You are a ndrty prim-evell beest becos you did not rite to
me. I hop you are safe.

With luv from Mic'

It was accompanied by an order to the Colonel of the Battalion:

'Give Daddy 10 days leave.'

When he came on leave there was always a wild game, which
they called 'rumpling and stiltsking'.

These two short mock-ballads which date from those years
are the only letters to his parents which survive. His youngest
sister Euphemia has been able to repeat them from memory.

To his Mother:

'I canna write
This Sunday night
My pen it is too dry
Wi writin' notes
Frae John o' Groats
Tae Winchelsea and Rye
But never doubt
Whate'er fall out
The blink that's in the sky
Is not more true
To hame and you
Than GSG. Goodbye!'

To his Father:

'My faither sits in the far North
Beyond the Tweed and Tyne,
And I maun write him a letter this nicht
Wi' this richt hand o' mine.

1 9 0 8 - 1 9 1 3

**Then up and spak' the young guidwife
Sat in the ingle neuk**

**⁴ Ye hae written awa* frae dusk tae daw
Yere haun' it's but a cleuk.**

(He reproaches her in two lines that she will not fill his pen.)

**Fie na! Fie na! The young wife cries
Ginmornin' I'll fill ten!'**

Five

1913-1919

IN the early summer of 1913 Gordon was invited by the University of Leeds to the Chair of English Literature, previously held by Charles Vaughan. Reluctant to leave Oxford, he hesitated, but in the end decided to go. He was convinced that it was wholesome and exhilarating for lecturers and dons to have experience of Universities other than Oxford. He had never cause to regret his decision. He was entirely happy in his work, in his colleagues and in his students, whom he found interested and keen.

He began work at Leeds in the October term, and was at once confronted with a new kind of audience, highly critical, and very ready to display their feelings. But his own experience as a student in Glasgow had prepared him for such audiences. Soon after going to Oriel he had written to J. S. Phillimore: 'Some slight occasional signs of interested approval or disapproval, vocal or pedestrian, would probably paralyse the don at first, but would give him just the start he wants.' Elsewhere he said 'That well-bred indifference of the Oxford audience is the most killing thing I know to any latitude and glory of speech'. Since that time, however, he had grown accustomed to the polite impassiveness of the undergraduate audiences: but the change to Leeds was bracing.

His Inaugural Lecture on Shakespeare was given in November of that year: and his gift as a speaker was soon discovered. In January, 1914, he proposed the Toast of the Immortal Memory at the dinner of the Caledonian Club, which was always an important occasion in the city. Many of his friendships in Leeds dated from that evening.

We had found a house in Far Headingley—on the verge of the outskirts of Leeds. The keen airs which blew from the sur-

1913-1919

rounding moors were stimulating and invigorating. He was still writing regularly for the *Literary Supplement*. *Johnson and the Provincials* appeared in December, 1913; his *Shakespeare Redivivus* in March, 1914.

'This is ripping!' wrote Bruce Richmond; 'I make it about 5,200 words—Can you get it down to just about 4,000?.. If we can produce two or three nailing Supplements during these three critical weeks, we shall do well—and I long to begin on Thursday next with W. S. *Redivivus*. Don't cut the woman at the end—nor p. 7—nor—I don't know how you're going to do it, it's all so good. Can you let me have it by Monday night? It *shall* be met—even if it has to be done in person by

Yours gratefully

B. L. Richmond

P.S. It's brutal to ask you to cut so much; but if it's 5,000 it strays over onto page 3, and I want to keep it to 2 pages. Damn linear measure!'

Some days later: 'I'm glad you didn't think *Shakespeare Revidius* (as an old lady called it yesterday) was spoiled by the tinkering. It was A 1—and it may interest you to know that 44,000 people paid id. for it. Please let me have some more....'

He was full of plans for books: the stage was set for happy and productive years. The war intervened. His decision to enter the army was made deliberately and ungrudgingly. There were no heart-searchings nor hesitation in his choice. One thing is certain: as an onlooker, during the war, he would have written no books.

L'homme n'ecrit rien sur le sable
A Theure ou passe l'aquilon.

A few months before the outbreak of the last war he had

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

joined the Leeds University O.T.C.—doubtless with some premonition. He had, however, been able to do only a very little training. He joined the Corps in camp in the beginning of August, and towards the end of that month, feeling very self-conscious in his new uniform, 'like a blooming canary' as he described himself, he was commissioned to the 2/6th Battalion of the West Yorkshire Regiment, which had its headquarters at Bellevue Barracks in Bradford. E. C. Gregory, who had been recently commissioned to the same battalion and who later became his close friend, recalls vividly his first appearance. The young officers of the new battalion watched him from the window of the Officers' Mess as he crossed the parade-ground. Every eye observed the newcomer, and they missed no detail—his very new Sam Browne belt, his jaunty step, the carriage of his tall slim figure with a slightly swinging motion. There were a few ribald comments on the abundant growth of his moustache. But they felt, from the moment he entered the Mess, that his presence could not be ignored. They remarked the peculiar penetration of his gaze, and his rich low-toned voice with a flavour of Scotch in it.

'We were mostly local business men', writes E. C. Gregory, 'or else youths tossed straight from school into the Army, and the provincial Bradford atmosphere was strong. Here was a man who, rumour had it, was a Professor of English Literature at Leeds University, and who, before that, had made his reputation at Oxford. He was a visitor from another world: and we had vague suspicions about him. But these soon disappeared when we learned that he was ready to shed the mantle of scholarship, and play any part other than that of a Professor. That endeared him to us, and made him one of ourselves. I myself still retained a kind of hero-worship. I had always wanted to be a scholar or a writer* I had never desired the business career into which I had been-precipitated by my family. So I used to observe him out of the corner of my eye. I would notice how he

held a book and turned its pages. There was the touch of one used to reading, one who lived among books and respected literature.'

His friendship with E. C. Gregory remained unbroken until his death. Gregory was the last person outside his own family to have talk with him. * Peter never bothers me,' he said, *I like to have him in the room.' It was George himself, who, for some trivial reason, had named him Peter, and the name was universally adopted.

He was gazetted Captain at the beginning of December: and Christmas saw the battalion back from their training camp in Bellevue Barracks. The men had a memorable and successful Christmas party of which the outstanding entertainment was a pantomime, *The Bad Baron of Potsdam*. It consisted of two long scenes with songs, dances and highly topical dialogue: it was written by Captain Gordon, and performed by the officers of the battalion. The opening soliloquy and final song are quoted:

THE BAD BARON OF POTSDAM

SCENE I

THE COURT AT POTSDAM

Enter THE BARON, *solus*

One moment from the sport
 And chatter of those magpies of the court;
 Here shall I walk alone where none can see,
 And contemplate my own divinity,—
 For there's no doubt, and so I tell Herr Gott,
 This world without me, all would go to pot.
 - There was a time—but that is long ago—
 When France and England ran this mortal show,
 And Billy Potsdam ate his sausage quietly,
 And tried to learn to go about politely,

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

Those days, thank Gott and me, thank me and Gott,
Are dead and done with,—gone beneath the sod,
And all the world, from Potsdam to Peru,
Patiently licks my patent leather shoe:
All except England of the swollen head,
And she, God damn her, pulls my leg instead.
But I will find a way—the day shall come—
Thanks to my Servia and my Belgium;
My little niece and nephew, unsuspecting
Shall have the sort of end that's called affecting,
And from their death shall spring—so help me Prussia!—
The end of bloody England, France, and Russia.

FINALE

Chorus and Dance, to the tune of 'Shevo Shevi' (Each verse to be sung as a solo, some character stepping forward for the purpose, and the whole company joining in the choruses. All dance to certain steps throughout the song.)

1. O we have a song to sing to you *twice*
 Shevo, Shevo,
 O we have a song to sing to you
 About a battalion that's just come true,
 Shevo, Shevi, Shevikitivi, Shevo, Shevo.
2. A younger branch of the 6th West Yorks,
 But the young one grows as the old one talks
 Shevo, Shevi, &c *Repeat, after the manner of the first verse.*
3. And first, we've got a Colonel fine,
 The finest Colonel of the line,
 Shevo, Shevi, &c.

1913-1919

4. And what about Quartermaster Sim,
There's nothing in his stores but him,
Shevo, Shevi, &c.

8. Then here's our love to our brothers at York,
We are the wine and they are the cork,
Shevo, Shevi, &c.

9. Now when you go home and kiss your wife,
You'll tell her you've had the night of your life,
Shevo, Shevi, &c.

FINIS

The 2/6th West Yorks, the battalion that had 'just come true' was composed of a fine lot of recruits—good, tough Yorkshiremen, who endured with much patience and good humour the long months of training and moving from camp to camp which fell to their lot before their turn came to go to France.

As the war went on the battalion quickly reached unity, and a spirit of good comradeship developed. The characteristics of each officer and man were accentuated as the habits of their peace-time existence fell away, and they were judged for what they were in that communal life rather than for their achievements in civil life. Gordon, now in command of a company, showed himself to be a good officer. He was obviously giving expression to a side of his nature which had till then had no outlet: he was attracted by the open-air life of the army with all its possibilities of adventure: he enjoyed the *camaraderie* of the men and the ceaseless activity of barrack and tent existence. 'The book-worm, indeed,' he said after the war, 'is almost the only kind of creeping thing which I cannot remember meeting

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

during my military life.' The streak of primitive man which his friends claimed for him found some response in this new rhythm of life, and he shed easily enough the restraints of civilian surroundings. 'Some of his civilian training', says Gregory, 'was extremely useful to him: his lectures, for example, were masterpieces, and his natural liking and inherent respect for the soldiers as individuals made it easy for him to master the art of training them. He liked their rugged simplicity, and understood their way of life. I always noticed this instinct for understanding the common man and realizing his difficulties: it was one of his most memorable qualities—a sensitiveness that resulted from association with literary and artistic people: he was in every way a real teacher, interested in the problems of teaching, although he would have disclaimed this with the modesty of the scholar who carries his learning lightly* He instructed his men in tactics and in the general training of war with a simplicity and vividness that was immediately successful. He was never an imitator of the regular army officer, nor indeed of anyone else: he was for that too individual a character: but he was a splendid leader, and the officers and men under him adored him.'

At Thoresby Park, where they were in camp in the autumn of 1915, George had a short visit from his father, who put up at a nearby inn. He describes the visit in this letter to me. 'My father and I had a grand time. I met him at Retford, and brought him on. All Saturday and Sunday we strolled slowly about the countryside, walking out both evenings to the Hop Pole at Ollerton, where we dined. It was delightful—he was so young and old in one, and so touched by any little thought for him. We felt, when we parted, as if we had been weeks together. He was happy to find me looking better and stronger than ever he had seen me, and will report to Falkirk, to my mother's great relief. He insisted on my riding over on Sunday to see how I rode—and he was full of compliments on my seat etc. etc.! We put Benedictine up at a farmhouse, and before I rode home he helped

1913-1919

me to saddle and bridle hee, delighting in his old familiarity with horses and harness.

'He is looking very well, and talked much of you ... he was full of your kindness and attention to him, and of fears that he had taken up too much of your time. He is much impressed by the old-fashioned gravity of Tony, the femininity of Janet, and the lusty manhood of John. And the house! Haud your tongue!'

George had first learned to ride in 1914, and afterwards enjoyed this exercise more than any other. One of the great attractions which the New Forest had for him in the vacations from 1935 to 1939 was the easy opportunity it offered him for riding. 'He easily became a first-class horseman', writes Captain Gregory, 'and he had a real affection for his small white mare, which he rode with a beautiful rhythmical sense of balance. She was the only white mount in the battalion, and Gordon on her back became one of the characteristic sights on the parade ground in tactical exercises, or on summer evenings when some of us used to ride out together to some hotel for dinner. These excursions on horseback were one of his great pleasures: it was a good thing that there was this diversion because for many military reasons our Division (the 62nd Division which made such a reputation for itself afterwards at Cambrai in 1917, and, towards the end of the war, in the neighbourhood of Rheims) was retained for over two years in this country: otherwise we should have grown very stale and weary: even as it was we had our bad periods. Our patience was sadly tested by thirteen changes of scene during our retention at home; at one time as far north as the dismal outskirts of Newcastle, at another on Salisbury Plain in the spring-time with a background of Stonehenge, and all the villages of the Avon Valley rich in blossom; then quick migrations to Doncaster and York, to the Dukeries in flaming midsummer, to the Broads and other places, with the last five months at Bedford before departure to France.'

LIFE OF GEORGE 3. GORDON

Not long after George had joined the battalion a friendship sprang up between him and his Commanding Officer, Colonel J. H. Hastings, who placed great reliance on his judgment and wisdom. The 'Old Man', as they called him, was much liked and respected, but on occasion he revealed himself as a martinet. Long after the war he visited us twice at Magdalen, and there was much talk of old* times.

When the battalion was on Salisbury Plain in 1916 an incident occurred which was characteristic of both men. My husband relates it in one of his letters to me. 'We had rather a tiring day on Thursday—from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., and never off our feet or (as it might be) our horses. I had to take charge of Battalion Headquarters in the Field from 2 to 10 for the C O., and got on all right. He Was acting as an imaginary Brigadier. In the earlier part of the day I had a bit of a blow-up with him for interfering with my company during operations. I had given certain orders for a move, and when I was away he came riding up, in his usual way, interfering with everything and everybody, and told them they couldn't do anything if they took that route—they must take such and such a route. Of course my subalterns had to obey him, with the result that my operations were, a failure, and it took me | of an hour to find my company. I am afraid I lost my temper, and rode up to him, and asked if it was by his orders that the Coy. had done what it did. He said "Yes," and that they had made a mess of the whole thing etc. I then told him that he had prevented them from doing the one thing which would have succeeded, and that I could not be responsible for anything if my command was taken from me, and counter orders issued to my Coy. in the middle of operations—not only without my knowledge, but without any attempt on the part of the superior authority issuing the orders to acquaint me with them after they had been issued. He grew purple with indignation at this—and astonishmenvnever having been talked to in this way before: and jumping on his horse, galloped back to camp

like a madman—I doing the same in the opposite direction to my Company.

'There was much smiling in the Mess when it got to be known, for we have suffered terribly from this habit of his. He was a bit stiff and formal for the rest of the day, but stood me a whisky and soda when we got in at 10, and is now quite recovered. I think it may have done some good/

One of Gordon's prized relics was his certificate of attendance on a course of instruction in Machine Gunnery and Musketry at the School in Hayling Island in the summer of 1916, and of having qualified as a First-Class Instructor (Distinguished). Nobody but him will ever know what that Distinction cost him. Shortly before this course he had written from Larkhill Camp, Salisbury Plain: 'All this week I have been detached from the company on a Lewis Machine Gun Course—9-1 with a 10 minutes break, and 2.30-5, with arrears of Coy. work in the evening. This is strenuous, especially for me, to whom 6½ hours of almost continuous instruction in mechanics would have seemed at one time a nightmare. As things are, by intense application during the exposition, I do as well in the tests as anybody else, and nobody suspects that I am really lacking in the sense. You wouldn't believe it was me if you heard me talking of "cam-slots" and "plungers" and "hinge-pins" and "seres" and "bents" and "pawls".' 'He had a natural dislike of everything mechanical', says Gregory, 'and yet, once he applied himself to mastering details such as the rifle, the different kinds of machine-guns, and the Stokes guns, he excelled, and took distinctions at the Schools where he attended for training.'

For some months before his battalion went to France he was seconded to M I 7b at the War Office for work on the Intelligence Staff. It was a grateful interlude, since he, like all other officers and men in the battalion, was chafing at the prolonged training and interminable moves. 'Gloom fell upon the battalion', writes Captain Gregory, 'and especially upon his immediate

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

friends: his removal meant the disappearance of a debonair personality who took life gaily, and was always the heart and soul of any Mess-party or any entertainment or other army function. We felt that we had lost one who had many accomplishments—from songs that he accompanied himself on the piano, sung in his inimitable way that always brought the house down, to other frolics in the Mess and outside.'

His intense individuality too led to many stories, which were, it is true, exaggerated, but showed how much he was regarded. His brother officers had not been slow to discover his capacity for sleep. It amused them to watch him, while they were about their physical jerks in the morning, slowly and methodically conducting his ablutions outside his tent door. He always held the record for the time it took him to complete his toilet. * Later in civilian life', continues Gregory, 'this curious habit was maintained: he seemed to arise like any other person, but he would take about two hours to get ready. This was the dawdling time of his day, with the result that he was invariably late for breakfast and invariably indignant that the early comers had claimed the best food. His attitude of righteous indignation was a constant amusement to us.'

It was a popular sport in the Mess to urge on a wrestling match between Gregory and Gordon. Gregory was of large build, and had put on during his life in the army considerable weight. Gordon, in spite of his slight figure, was muscular and tough, so that they turned out to be well matched. On one occasion in their billets in one of the tall old houses in York with a long winding staircase they began one of their battles, and rolled down the stairs right to the bottom, where they lay panting, still locked in each other's grip. As Gregory entered the Mess one day he heard Gordon's voice: 'There comes the man who used to be a pale Wordsworthian, and is now like Falstaff.'

Another of their foolish pranks was to try on his hat, which, being of an unusual size, would sink down well over their ears:

1913-1919

he would then taunt them with the smallness of their brains, trying on in turn the hats of all his brother-officers which perched in comical fashion on his head like small turrets on an impressive rock. He seemed to have the spirit of a schoolboy, and entered with zest into all the practical joking of the Mess.

'Occasionally', says Gregory, 'we had minor disagreements. We had a holiday once on Good Friday, and I had arranged to pay the men in my company early, so that they could get clear of camp as soon as possible. I was in the middle of paying out when Gordon appeared in the entrance, glowering in anger: he up-braided me for stealing a march on the other companies. Obviously his company had become aware of what was happening, and had protested at not having been shown the same consideration. Since he had not thought of making a similar arrangement for his company he was determined to put me in the wrong, and angry words passed between us. However the tempest was soon over, and we were as friendly as ever later in the day. At times even inanimate objects would excite his rage. I have seen him kick a table against which he had knocked his knee. I remember his impatience with a book which had fallen several times from a shelf; having picked it up each time, he finally hurled it into the corner with a growl. In later years the discipline of his work considerably modified and restrained these characteristics/

From the War Office he wrote to me in November, 1916: 'My work is not going so badly, and I am beginning to write something in the old way—though, as you observed, with more muscle to it, and more from the shoulder ... I, on the contrary, am a boaster and braggart. About my writing (having, deep down, a fundamental disdain of such pursuits) I find it necessary to swagger—or did. The swagger was for the sword which I had never worn. My swagger now is for the sword which I have worn, but, God help me, never used.'

It was during these months that he wrote, in the course of his

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

official duties, *The Retreat from Mons*, which was published in 1917 when he was in France.

At the beginning of January, 1917, he learned that the battalion was going out. He rejoined it on 6th January, as they were about to embark. I heard the detailed story of his departure only recently from Captain Gregory, who wrote, after the war, the history of the Battalion. 'His return to the battalion was typical of the man. We were all on the point of departure for France, standing by in Bedford for the order to move, when Gordon appeared, and reported to the Colonel for duty. It was discovered that not only had he left the War Office without authority, and even without notice, but that he could not take over his old company until the permission had been given to rejoin. The authorities, indeed, were quite enraged by his arbitrary action, and it took all the tactfulness of the Colonel to obtain his transfer. There was an interval, during our crossing to France, and proceeding to our base there, when he had no official standing, and was with his company without authority to command it. It was an act of rebellion, and he had not counted the consequences. He had heard that his old unit was going abroad, and he did not intend to be left at home: that was his justification. I emphasize this particular incident because it shows his natural intolerance of discipline, or rather what seemed to him unnecessary discipline. During his military career this trait constantly blazed out in his character. His eyes would flash, and he would deliver ultimatums to the Colonel, or even to a General, if he thought that he or anybody else was being subjected to unnecessary or foolish rules and regulations which interfered with liberty. His friends all had their moments of nervousness lest one day he should speak too plainly, and have to bear the consequences. I noticed this characteristic all through my subsequent friendship with him: he hated the red tape of life, and would impetuously cut it. It was in life the equivalent of pedantry in scholarship.'

His own account of their activities in France is already published in his *Letters*. It was the coldest winter of the war but there was no grumbling. 'The men are so jolly about it, and so gloriously glad that at last they are to be recognized as fighting men.' Their first halt near Le Havre was under canvas amidst snow: it took them forty hours in cattle-trucks and broken-down compartments with no protection against icy winds to reach Doullens. Gradually they moved into the front line near Beaumont Hamel, then a heap of rubble in British hands. Captain Gregory writes: 'Gordon, with his knowledge of French, was in his element, and thrilled to be once more in a country that he had known so well in youth. He got on well with the villagers, and his company mess quickly showed signs of their ability to barter with them: rare dishes appeared on their menu, and it was an experience to be invited by them to a meal.'

It was an exciting point in the war, as the Germans decided to retreat to their Hindenberg line, so as to shorten it by cutting out the Somme salient. The 62nd division was moving quickly forward in order to keep in touch and harry the retreating Germans: they advanced through village after village, all destroyed by the enemy, with huge craters at all cross-roads, and all trees ruthlessly destroyed.

He mentions constantly in letters the sporting good humour of all ranks about risks and discomforts, and their pleasure at being considered well enough trained to start in at once on their job. 'The water one dares to wash and shave in is frozen,' he writes, 'the butter and bread are frozen, my moustache is frozen, I cannot be sure that I have hands and feet. But somehow we are very cheerful, and make the best of everything.'

Many years later, in talking of this time, he complained that most writers of war-books ignored the innocent longing of soldiers to see a woman, and talked only of grosser forms. 'It was nevertheless', he said, 'vastly more general than the other. I remember when rail-head was pushed to Achiet-le-Grand, and

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

some nurses arrived in their staggeringly white uniforms, men came from all directions without a thought of what is called "sex", merely to look at them and hear their voices.'

In April there was a new offensive, and letters were short and rare. 'We are in the swim of things, and I am glad to say thing? are really swimming. I am pretty well hardened for anything now. This weather makes fighting jollier, thank Heaven, and if it has ears and can hear us it will stay.'

His friend Captain Gregory and he were wounded on the same day in May, 1917, in the first attack on Bullecourt, that ill-fated village, with its bristling defences, which broke many British divisions before it ultimately fell. As Gregory, who had been wounded in the foot, was being carried into the first-aid dressing station he heard the deep resonant voice of G.S.G., who was having his neck and hand attended to by the Medical Officer. They went down the line together to Wimereux, both hoping that they might not be separated. It all turned on weight. Gordon was well over eleven stone, heavier than he had ever been: but Gregory was heavier. The stretcher-bearers lifted him, looked at each other, and put him on the ground floor. Gordon went a floor higher, and ended at the First Southern General Hospital in Birmingham. Gregory was sent to London.

About a week after his admission to hospital Gordon began to run a high temperature with headaches, and it was presently discovered that trench fever had been added to his other ills. He had a month of high fever before it was possible to transfer him nearer home to the 2nd Northern General Hospital in Leeds.

This letter came from his C O., Colonel Hastings:

B.E.F. 6 May, 1917

Dear Mrs. Gordon,

I am grieved to say that Capt. Gordon was wounded on the 3rd inst.: he wrote me himself from the field of battle

1913-1919

telling me about it. One wound is in the neck, the other in the left hand _____

We were attacking a very strongly fortified village, and B. Company was to capture and hold the first trenches, which were on the near edge of the village. The companies had first to get through the barbed wire, and it was just as he neared the wire that your husband was hit....

I need not say how very greatly we all, every Officer, N.C.O. and man in the Battalion regret these wounds, and hope that they may go well.

We were all filled with admiration and respect for 'Gordon*' when he insisted on relinquishing a comfortable, honourable and congenial appointment at the War Office, to come out here to the discomforts, hardships and risks, which go with fighting his Country's battles: but out here he has shown himself the brave soldier one would have expected, and he has the love and confidence of all his men and of us all. . . .

Believe me,

Yours very sincerely,

JOHN H. HASTINGS

G.S.G. had the honour of being mentioned in despatches.

For many years after the war Gordon made a practice of meeting, and spending a long week-end with a small group of officers of his old battalion. Gregory was always of the party. These reunions took place in various parts of the country: they called it their 'rowdy' week-end. He mentioned one of these week-ends in his *Letters* \ on that occasion it was spent in the Lake District: they met also several times at the 'Spreadeagle*' at Thame. John Fothergill writes of it in his *Innkeeper's Diary*: 'Professor Gordon, leaving Poetry, urbanity and other L.C.'s at Oxford comes here annually for three days, and lives quite another life with war cronies, Peter Gregory and Behrens from

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

Bradford, who treat him quite without respect. Gordon has the most taking and intelligent smile I know——*

In the beginning of September he was posted once more to M I 7b at the War Office. But before taking up his duties he had a fortnight's leave, which we spent on a memorable tramp in the Appin Country. The most important item in his knapsack was *Kidnapped*. This must have been about the fifth time of reading: he had always hoped to read it on the ground. It came out at every halt; he nodded over it in country inns in the evenings, and was entirely happy.

His first task at the War Office, apart from routine, was to make one or two minor additions to the *Retreat from Mons*, which was republished by Constable (the first edition was American) under the title *Mons and the Retreat*. During this time the bouts of fever kept recurring: his nickname for the disease was 'Old T.F.'. At first he was sharing a flat in Buckingham Street with his friend Geoffrey Hutchinson, but they moved soon to another very delightful one in Adam Street. 'We moved yesterday, and I am dying to show you our new flat. It is glorious—with a view right over the Thames from Cleopatra's Needle, which seems to stand in our front garden, right down the river to Westminster Bridge and the Houses of Parliament, And I have a little white bedroom, with little drawers and cupboards so virginal and sweet 17-ish. I feel myself acutely for what I am, a mere coarse man. Our furnishings are slender as yet, but suitable: and, best of all, there is three times more air than there was at the old place.

'I have been busier than ever with an accursed Resume* of Operations: for the very simple reason that it is too big a job to be done in the time by anyone who has a taste for doing a job well.'

It was during these months that he wrote *The Universities And The War*, and *Origins of The War*. 'Sent for by D.S.I. (Director of Special Intelligence), and congratulated on my

1913-1919

article "The Origins of The War". Onslow had passed it on simply with my name, to which he retorted "Who is Capt. G. S. Gordon?" Onslow retaliated with, "See 'Who's Who', p. -, 1917." Result "Send him round". We talked it over, and I agreed to modify a statement about Serbia which was his only criticism. All to the good. There is nothing more difficult in the W.O. or indeed in the Army than to be found out.'

We were together in the flat in Adam Street for the last summer of the war. The owner of the flat, Ernest Hutchinson, the elder brother of Geoffrey, was a patron of dramatic art, and had a large acquaintance among actors and actresses. These young people had a practice of telephoning all day long. One day, made desperate by frequent interruptions, George removed the receiver. This was of no use: a piercing siren came over the telephone from the exchange, and the receiver was hastily replaced. A young actress later reported to E. Hutchinson that she had rung up the flat one day, and had been answered by 'that cross man who is writing history'. He had a profound distaste for the telephone and the internal combustion engine: he never ceased to resent 'the bonny petrol pumps' which decorate our country roads. Looking back with envy on life in the seventeenth century he wrote, 'Nature, on the whole, still seemed cleverer than Man. The rivers which Walton celebrates were unpolluted, and there were salmon in the Thames. His milkmaids sing the ballads which we collect, and in the milk they carry there is as yet no water. No one is rich in Walton, and no one is discontented, nor is there anything faster in his pages than a trotting horse. This sounds, you may say, extremely slow. It is, thank God, and if speed is your object you must turn to something else; *The Compleat Angler* is not for you.' Yet he seemed to find no inconsistency in his free use of both telephones and cars. He would condemn speeding; but his sons, when driving him, would often hear a voice from behind, as he looked up for a moment from his book, 'Can't you pass the fellow?' He never

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

lost this habit of sitting, absorbed in a book, in the **back** of **the** car, and often caused amusement to his family and friends by adopting an attitude of half humorous indignation if they failed to call his attention to places of particular beauty. His friends would play tricks on him, driving him over the same road and through the same villages several times without his remarking anything unusual. In the autumn of 1940 he went off for a short holiday before the beginning of the Michaelmas Term to Exmoor in company with his second son and Gregory. Each day they would drive out to some suitable point on the moor to walk, or lie and picnic in the sun. He loved these expeditions, and was much attracted by the moor, which he had not previously visited. On several occasions they followed the same route through Brendon and Oare, left the car at Oareford, and walked up the Oare Water valley. On the last day of the holiday, however, they took a longer route by Dunkery Beacon, dropping down into the Oare Water valley by a steep road at the end farthest from Oareford. George's companions, to their delight, were bitterly reprimanded for having postponed to the last day a visit to this spot which so far excelled in beauty anything they had seen.

In October, 1918, he was asked by the Committee of Imperial Defence to work on the official Military History of the War. He objected at first on the grounds of his other commitments, but eventually agreed to undertake one volume. This undertaking was the occasion for his visit to the Gallipoli Peninsula in 1919.

The Armistice found him in Arras, where he had been sent shortly before, on business connected with his work. The rest of that year was spent in clearing up the offices at Adastral House, headquarters of M I 7b, and in writing a short history of the section. He began his work at the Record Office in the beginning of 1919. He was also making an effort to wind up his work on the *Nine Plays of Shakespeare* for the Clarendon Press,

1913-1919

work which had been laid away in 1914. 'I have overcome my first repugnance, and mastered the first stages of the bundles of proof.... Things march—not passionately but regimentally—3 miles per hour with a ten minutes halt.'

It was decided in May that he should set out for the Gallipoli Peninsula, for the purpose of studying the ground: but for various reasons it was 19th June—the worst time of the year for the climate of the peninsula—before he left with Captain J. J. Beli as his companion.

The journey, his impressions, his contacts and all the rags and ashes of the recent war have been fully described by him in his published letters. He was possessed and exhilarated by the novelty of the journey, and the beauties and antiquities of the Near East but, as usual, human beings held his interest most—the women in Paris, 'who move with a kind of prize-hen action like Dame Pertelote in Chaucer—as if they were plumaged, as in Chantecler'—the taxi-drivers, 'all tearing along and appearing to miss each other and pedestrians by some Gallic miracle'. In Turin he was 'struck by the number of male Phoenician types. They looked like strange birds as they bent over their food: and went straight into an early beach-landing on the Mediterranean, buying tin and hides for shining gold pieces'. On the way to Chanak in SS. *Hunt spill* he watched the troops—the Black Watch, 'thae Argylls', the Royal Scottish Fusiliers. 'Their evident assumption that nobody is likely to be ass enough to meddle with them is implicitly respected.' At Chanak he took delight in the ferry-man, old Bill the Turk, *with his politic, taciturn, throaty mumble, which may mean anything, but is intended, at any rate, to keep in with his masters, and be no obstacle to trade, whatever his matted old Turkish thoughts may be—and the Senegalese, 'great, hideousgrinning children'.

They left the peninsula, having finished their work, and sailed from Chanak on 31st July. Both Captain Bell and he had been attacked by the sand-fly, and were suffering from fever.

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

They reached Taranto on 3rd August, and went to get their warrants for the journey home, and an authorization to travel independently by *rapide*, as they had gone out. This was refused on the grounds that a new order had been issued, limiting the classes of officers who might travel in that way. As their case was not specifically provided for in that order, they were refused the authorization, and their protests were disregarded. They were obliged to travel by troop train; and neither of them was in a condition to stand the fatigue and discomforts of such a seven days' journey. Captain Bell fell by the way, and went into hospital. George managed to reach London, and went into hospital there, unable to reach home. This act of petty officialdom cost him nearly two years of ill-health, and wrecked his hopes of being able to accomplish what he had planned before resuming his professional duties in Leeds. His letters on the outward journey had been rich in vivid pictures. Of the return journey he remembered only one incident. They had contrived to buy a bottle of beer. There were eight of them in the carriage and nobody had anything which could open the bottle. He undertook the great experiment of knocking off the top, and accomplished it successfully, under the scrutiny of eight anxious pairs of eyes.

Six

1919-1922

THE years after his return to Leeds were full of activity. By 1920 he had almost recovered his health, except for occasional recurrences of fever, and he was deep in plans for the development and improvement of the English School. His lectures for final year students were well attended. The number of graduate and undergraduate students attending courses in his Department increased from 116 to 263. He created a new and prosperous Honours School, encouraging and helping those reading in it to work independently. It grew rapidly until it became the largest Honours School in English Literature outside Oxford, the number of those reading in it increasing from seven to sixty-nine. This, it was considered, was due to his personality, and to his constant interest in the work and fortunes of the English School. An increase of staff became an urgent necessity. G. H. Cowling, now a Professor in the University of Melbourne, was already on the English staff. Gordon chose his new colleagues well, and soon led a strong team. Two of his old pupils in Oxford were the first to come as lecturers—R. Knox, now a Professor in Toronto, and Herbert Davis, who became, a few years ago, President of Smith College in the U.S.A. They were presently joined by J. R. R. Tolkien as a Reader in English Language: he now holds the Chair of Anglo-Saxon in the University of Oxford. E. V. Gordon, who also came as a lecturer in English Language, later became Professor in that subject in Leeds. It was a very happy community;—'not so much a staff, said G. S. G., 'as a Club!' And the work went well.

He was gradually drawn into University business: it was discovered that he spoke well at meetings, and got on well with his colleagues. He became the representative of the Faculty of Arts on the Council, Dean of the Faculty, and President of the

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

Leeds Branch of the Association of University Teachers. He was sometimes called upon to present for Honorary Degrees. He had presented Emil Verhaeren in 1914: after the war Lord Haig and Sir Bruce Richmond were among the Honorary graduates whom he presented.

In an attempt to encourage research among members of the staff he entered into collaboration with his friend Professor Paul Barbier, and together they approached the Council of the University to obtain an allocation of funds to finance a Journal in which such research could be published. This need was met by the *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical Society*, These are printed in two sections: I. Literary and Historical; II. Scientific. Professor Barbier tells me that the first section published its Volume vi, part 1, in January, 1944, and that all the contents of the *Proceedings* are contributed by members of the staff of Leeds University.

In addition to this they inaugurated a Colloquium of members of the staff interested in Historical, Philological and Literary subjects: this Colloquium still prospers, and is well established.

'This has been a record in sessions', he wrote in 1920, '* I hoped to get on with War History, but I find that the modern University demands 6 days body and soul.' Gradually it became clear that he could not continue his work on the History of the Gallipoli campaign: he gave it up with reluctance.

In 1920, after his return to Leeds he became Commanding Officer of the University O. T. C., and on 29th October in that year gave an Address to the Corps. He was not by nature inclined to bitterness; but, between the two wars, the classes of people who aroused in him this feeling were the pacifists and the *embusquis*. *The wild passion of the pacifist is the material of war as much as any other wild passion. You know as well as I do that it is not soldiers who bring about wars. It is civilians: and, as a rule, civilians whom no conscription boards can get hold of, to make them fight. Next time, if the crisis ever comes, I hope

we shall see to these civilians, and deal faithfully with them. In my opinion the late war was largely brought about in this country, by the citizens who refused to see it coming and let us prepare for it. Many of them deceived themselves, and deceived the nation, and I had thought that they would be satisfied with having escaped impeachment—none of them served!—and that we should never hear their voice again. On the contrary, they are up once more, piping, piping the same old notes of peace and good-will; publishing long letters begging Germany to shake hands with them, and forgive us for having beaten them. A great many young men owe their death to these fellows; but of this they seem equally unaware. I was one of those who admired and enjoyed Mr. Galsworthy's *Foundations*, as he read it to us the other night; but I could not help recalling that Mr. Galsworthy was one of that party of writers in England who most loudly declared that Germany was our friend, and that all readiness for war was militarism. I do not know if Mr. Galsworthy repents of these views, but I observe he is not above making play with trench life in the setting of the piece.'

In the following year he wrote to Florence Nixon: 'I look at our sleek young writers and academics who were, so many of them, so much too valuable to be allowed out of the country. If you will look at the dates of the works of the men of letters, up to 40, now most strenuously proclaiming themselves you will be surprised to find how many of them were produced and published during the war. The men who were otherwise occupied are only now beginning to recover from exhaustion and the nausea of re-rooting.'

There had been good soldiers among our War Poets: but Poetry, he said, had sheltered many others better acquainted with the book-market than with either soldiering or civics.

In Leeds he had also many friends outside the circle of the University. He was sometimes amused to discover their genuine assumption that, if a man chose an academic career, he did so only

because he realized that he was not capable of success in a more lucrative way of life. A good friend of his, a highly qualified and successful Chartered Accountant once said to him in all goodwill and seriousness, 'You know, Gordon, you made a great mistake in becoming a Professor: a man with your wits would have done very well for himself in a business career.' He would relate with delight a conversation we once overheard on the top of a Leeds tramcar. A man sitting in front of us was showing a friend the sights of the city. As the tramcar passed the end of College Road, he jerked a contemptuous thumb in its direction, saying, 'Along there is the University: a poor show, a very poor show! Will you believe it, there isn't a man among them making over £1,000 a year'.

'He was a trimmer of many boats as well as his own', wrote one of his friends, and spoke the truth. Such craft seldom take occasion to salute the port where they are fitted out, but there are exceptions, and one tribute will be quoted here because it shows Gordon as the professor off the platform, busy in the workshop instructing apprentice hands by showing them how to shape their material or by inviting them (the last stage of creative teaching) to work with the master in assembling or shaping his.

Geoffrey Woledge, now Librarian of the British Library of Political and Economic Science, was one of Gordon's Honours students in Leeds between 1920 and 1922. He was a student assistant in the University Library, and was greatly influenced by his encouragement and guidance.

'On 9th March, 1920,' writes Woledge, 'I called on him by arrangement in his room. He stood, tall, friendly and at ease, with his back to the fire-place, looked through the list of books I had been reading, and advised me, characteristically, to read some of *The Canterbury Tales*, as well as *The Prologue*, and the criticism of Dryden and Johnson.'

In August, 1921, when Gordon was in Scotland, separated from his books, he wrote:

My dear Woledge,

Could you do me a favour? I **am** being importuned by **the** Leeds Repertory Society to give **a** lecture, introductory to their efforts, early in October—I imagine in the University; and it has occurred to me that a possibly interesting topic would be the history of some of the attempts in the past to provide Yorkshire audiences with **a** succession of good plays by established companies: I don't know how much there is in it beyond Tate Wilkinson's attempts, recorded by himself. These records I once read, but have forgotten their precise date and scope. Could you look him up if you can get him, and see also what other bibliographical references there are to the subject?

Anything you can do in the matter I shall take very **kindly**. . .

These researches encouraged in his pupil a taste for local history which remained with him: they were acknowledged a week later in this letter from his professor: 'I am immensely obliged to you for the trouble you have taken over the Bibliography of the Leeds Theatres. It will be of great service to me, for the time I can spend on the matter at this moment is severely limited. I will do what I can with the London Library till my return, and then have a peep into the other quarters you indicate. I think some account of the matter would be interesting, and not only to Leeds people, who are easily attracted by the subject of themselves.

'I have heard some of the older inhabitants of Leeds speak highly of Wilson Barrett's management: and possibly something may be obtained from their recollections. But in the end, of course, the files of the local press are *ipse ille*. Some day I **may** find **a** week to go through them.'

'I saw him frequently,' writes Woledge. 'I **was** intoxicated by the discovery of the apparatus of scholarship, and busy with

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

the investigation of minute points which were less important than I thought them, and he was always interested.'

In one of his letters to Woledge George wrote: 'You have scholarship in your hand, if you won't clutch it too tightly, and exhaust yourself before you are grown. Now we don't get a scholar in Leeds beyond one per decade, and hardly that. So that, you see, you are a windfall. I have no doubt that you will teach yourself far more than we can teach you: and that again is so pleasant.'

This shows George's notion of his work—to teach his pupils to teach themselves.

When Woledge began work on a dissertation on Campion's lyrical technique he gave the undertaking his blessing: 'You have eaten, I am glad to think, "strange food". Let me see it when you have gone a little way into it.' Shortly afterwards he wrote again: 'Your Campion reading sounds hearty and determined. Prosody-cum-Music has always bewildered me like The Higher Mathematics.'

Woledge remarks that his professor sometimes affected a Socratic ignorance of things outside his special province, but never failed to refer his pupils to the appropriate sources. But this ignorance was not always a Socratic affectation. George had the bibliographical sense in a very high degree at a very early age. He did not fill his mind with the 'literature of the subject', because he knew where to find easily the information he wanted among the learned works which filled his shelves. In his lectures and conversation he sometimes expressed disdain for the 'literature of the subject'. 'Let us throw it overboard:' he would say, 'it will enormously lighten the craft, and perhaps allow me to get along with what is left.' He was intent on giving to his hearers the effect of the direct impact of an author's mind on his own. He realized increasingly, however,—and particularly in Leeds—the necessity of the power of organizing study and reading, especially for those who approached literature from the linguistic

1919—1922.

or historical side. It was the desire to impart bibliographical competence to his students, which drove him to take an active part in improving the conditions and equipment of the English section of the Leeds University Library. In 1921, considerably augmented by well-considered purchases from second-hand catalogues, the English section was rearranged, recatalogued, and suitably housed in a new 'English Library'.

But it was his personality, with his constant friendliness, spontaneity and accessibility which had the greatest influence on his students. He could turn aside from the administrative cares with which he was heavily burdened to listen to their doubts and plans, and give advice which was none the less valuable for being informal.

'One day at the end of the summer term of 1920, he arranged to see me in the English Library;' writes Woledge, 'another of his honours students was there, and took the opportunity to ask him what she should do about her dissertation: he had approved one subject; now she thought she would like to change to another; but would that really suit her? At last she was satisfied and went. Gordon turned to me with a smile and said " *Varium et mutabile semper* " : spoken as man to man and as scholar to scholar, it was infinitely flattering.

'On another occasion, I buttonholed him with another student on the doorstep of Woodhouse Lodge. With his quick way of despatching business, he stood there to answer our questions without delay; he smilingly rebuked her for calling a lecture a "lee", and appealed to me for support. I said "I'm afraid I always say *lec*) and when you're not there I call you Professor Gordon" "Oh, that's quite wrong", said Gordon. "W. P. Ker, who was the greatest authority on professorial etiquette, would never let himself be called Professor; at the head of the English course in the University College Calendar, the names always stood: Mr. Ker, Dr. Chambers." Needless to say, his stand against what the best people regard as German or Scottish barbarism

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

was ineffectual, though after that I always addressed him as "Mr. Gordon".'

Gordon was engaged in extending the scope of the English School, and in trying to persuade his students that English literature had other uses than the passing of examinations. As a manifesto rather perhaps than for utilitarian purposes, he issued in October, 1920, a departmental prospectus containing, as well as the regulations and courses, some more general pages. In a final exhortation he wrote: 'The teaching of the Department is directed, not to any examination, but to the free consideration of certain subjects. It is an administrative coincidence that at certain times of the year examinations are held in these subjects.'

The University journal quickly appreciated the last sentence of this manifesto, and reissued a cartoon previously entitled 'Professor Gordon realizing the inadequacy of examinations' with the new title 'An Administrative Coincidence'.

In the summer of 1922, the Department moved to larger and more convenient quarters, which were renamed 'English House': Gordon wrote to Woledge: 'It is kind of you to speak about my going as you do; I shall hope that I only make room for a better man ... it is particularly hard to go just as the Department achieves a House: I have dreamt of such a House for 3 years} and with luck I shall sit for a fortnight in its best room with Constables on the walls. In Oct. 1919 our only domestic footing in the University was a box-room.'

Seven

1922-1928

WALTER RALEIGH died in May, 1922, of a fever contracted in the Near East, and in July, Gordon was elected to succeed him as Merton Professor of English Literature in Oxford. In August he wrote to his old pupil Professor W. D. Thomas in reply to his letter of congratulation: 'I do thank you very warmly, and though a month after date, I assure you that my thanks have not cooled, for your good wishes and friendship. You, of course, are more than a friend: you are that almost masonic thing, an old pupil. I'm glad you have such comfortable memories of what to me was a very pleasant time.

'I miss Raleigh horribly, and shall miss him more when I go back to Oxford....

' When it comes to the point I have mixed feelings about leaving Leeds. I have been extraordinarily happy there, and was just getting my show on to velvet: an admirable little staff, and at last an adequate English library, and English House (with Common Room and what not)—all very commodious and complete. I should like to have enjoyed it for 5 years or so. But there was no choice.

*Now ;,as you say, we have some chance of meeting. Do you ever look in on your early haunts at Oxford? If you do, don't forget to parade (gum-boots and pyjamas will do) in front of my tent

He once said that he thought the article he wrote on Walter Raleigh in June after his death, and the essay (yet to be published) on J. S. Phillimore, were two of his best pieces of work. The Raleigh article was written at short notice in the midst of conflicting duties: for the other, the memoir of Phillimore, he had comparative leisure, and revised it during his last illness. They have one thing in common—the affection and admiration in which the author held his subjects.

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

In the first term of his new Professorship he lived in Merton • College, as it had not been possible to find a suitable house in time. This he always regarded as a happy accident, so much did he enjoy the friendly society and stimulating talk of the Merton Common Room.

It was a well-filled Michaelmas Term. He wrote twelve new lectures on Shakespeare and his first Warton Lecture, *Shelley and the Oppressors of Mankind*, amid the bustle of settling in a new Chair, renewing old friendships, and forming new ones. &is Inaugural Lecture, *The Discipline of Letters*, was delivered before the University on 9th May, 1923.

By January we had begun to live in our Oxford house—a very charming one in Chadlington Road. George thought that his library, with a balcony on the garden, and a wonderful uninterrupted view of the river meadows, was the best room of all. For the first and only time in his life it was possible for him to have all his books in one room. Chadlington Road was the road nearest to the river—a kind of backwater with a happy village life of its own. Our neighbours were H. Dowson and his wife, the actress Rosina Filippi. He was the *doyen* of the village. Our children looked upon him as a friendly Jove. If they made a play his garret was raided for banjos, head-dresses, tights and other theatrical accessories. He would ask them to dinner, singly, en tete a tete, and come to us later, rocking with laughter, to report their conversation.

It was there that J. B. Priestley and his wife first came to see us. They were living at Church Hanborough near Oxford: the dairy belonging to their house had become his study, where he was writing *The Good Companions* to the puzzlement of the villagers, who, as they listened to his typewriter, concluded that he must be a writer of begging letters.

In Leeds Gordon had started for his more advanced students a seminar or discussion class, which was popular and successful. On his return to Oxford he continued the discussion class inaugur-

, 1922 - 1928

ated by Walter Raleigh. C. S. Lewis, who was a member of this class, writes of it: 'One of the pleasantest institutions in the English School as I first knew it was Gordon's weekly Discussion Class. Each tutor could send only one or two of his pupils to it, so we liked to regard ourselves as a *corps d'Mite*. It was held sometimes in a Committee Room and sometimes in Gordon's house, and it was there that I first met NevilJ Coghill. I don't remember the names of most of the others, though their faces, indeed the whole scene, come back to me very clearly: specially Gordon himself, leonine and tolerant, at the head of the table, looking very much less alert than he actually was. It was work that exactly suited him—to seem to be doing nothing and yet actually to guide the whole debate. He said surprisingly little: it was only afterwards one realized how his *exiguum clinamen* had, at several points, headed us all off from some blind alley, or how a few unemphatic words of apparent agreement had turned a half truth into a whole one and tacitly suppressed an error. It never crossed our minds that the papers we read and the arguments we had about them could be less interesting, novel and momentous to him than they were to us. This was partly, no doubt, because he had a real sympathy with youth: still more, as I now realize, because he was doing his job so well that we never saw it was a "job" at all. It was doubtless his suggestion that inspired us to keep our Minutes in verse. Some of them (notably Coghills, in the style of Chaucer) I re-read recently and thought them good.'

In the summer of 1923 we paid one of our customary visits to the Normands at Killin. It was a gay party, and the dance was led by George and his hostess Gertrude Normand. They kept up a continuous play of repartee. She had discovered on a previous visit that he disliked carrying a picnic-basket. It made him feel, he said, like little Red Riding Hood. The basket was tactfully replaced by a knapsack, but the nickname stuck. At the end of our visit that year he was unusually reluctant to leave

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

the Highlands: irt the train on our way South he pointed gloomily to the Perthshire hills towering in mist, and said: 'Look at them! no engagements for the winter.'

Gertrude Normand died in the autumn; Normand had a bad winter of ill-health, brought on by the shock of her death, and this led to our journey to the South of France in the spring of 1924. We were a party of four—W. G. Normand, R. W. Chapman and ourselves. We were in search of sun and found it at the Pont du Gard in Provence. The finest afternoons were spent in hot sunshine on the flat stones by the edge of the river Gardon. The three friends called it their 'bakery'. In the evenings there were walks through the thyme-scented scrub to walled villages in the hills. We had an amusing visit one day from Mr. Montague of Oriel who came over from Avignon to lunch with us. He was able to tell us the exact length of the Roman Aqueduct, having measured the blocks of stone with his umbrella on the way to the inn. Sometimes we made long expeditions—to Aries and the sinister mediaeval keep, Les Baux, to Avignon and Nîmes. On these occasions we were driven by a wild French youth whom we called *Upolisson*. On taking his seat at the wheel he would turn his cap so that the peak pointed backwards, and go off at a break-neck pace, turning his head constantly to shout remarks at us.

In the beginning of September of that year Gordon went to Norway to lecture for the Anglo-Norse Society. It was a very pleasant tour. He had audiences after his own heart—intelligent and enthusiastic: they took every point and every shade of expression, and it was clear to him that the Norwegians have the same sense of humour as the English. His deliberate Scottish voice stood him in good stead: it delighted his hearers to be able to catch every word, and he was told that it was like music to hear good English so beautifully spoken. He found among the Norwegians great kindness and almost overwhelming hospitality. He was astonished by their tireless conviviality: their

1922-1928

suppers and speeches would last into the early hours of the morning.

From Bergen, Stavanger and Kristiania he went on to Stockholm—'a magnificent place oozing with money and grandeur'—and from there to Lund and Gothenburg, ending up at Copenhagen. From there he wrote—'It has been, with all its interest and enjoyment, three weeks' very hard work. I wouldn't for anything have missed it; but travelling, lecturing, sight-seeing and dispensing personal charm to a constantly new batch of hospitable people is not exactly a siesta. I am rather proud to have carried it all out punctually and satisfactorily from first to last without a hitch; and with salvoes of *au revoirs* from each of my halting-places! At Stockholm he received a telegram from Kristiania announcing that he had been elected a member of the Anglo-Norse Johnson Society.

The lectures on Shakespeare which he had delivered in Scandinavia were amplified and rehandled for a course which he gave in Oxford on his return. He often recalled with amusement a remark which he overheard as he was leaving the lecture-room at the end of his lecture on the *Women of Shakespeare*. A young American, seated near the door said to his neighbour 'Gee! This guy is some feminist'. During the same course, after his lecture on Falstaff, a young woman undergraduate wrote to him, protesting with some vigour against the opinion he had expressed that no woman could appreciate Falstaff. This was his reply.

10 Chadlington Road
Oxford 18 Oct. 1924

Dear Miss Lambert,

You have convinced me that one woman can and does appreciate Falstaff, and I will make public acknowledgment of it on Monday.

I am glad indeed to have been provocative and absolute,

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

since it produced such a jolly letter in three hours: but aren't you a very admirable exception? On this I have still to be converted.

Yours is the only letter!

Yours sincerely,
George Gordon

The Committee of the Society for Pure English, founded ten years earlier by Robert Bridges, had by 1923 lost several of its members, and in that year W. H. Stevenson and Kenneth Sisam joined it in their place. A little later in the year, when W. P. Ker died, he was replaced on this Committee by Gordon.

In the previous year a group of American Professors had addressed an invitation to Sir Arthur (afterwards Lord) Balfour, Sir Henry Newbolt and Mr. Robert Bridges to join in a scheme for the 'initiation of a concerted effort throughout the English-speaking world to maintain the traditions and foster the development of our common tongue'. To this the Committee of the Society of Pure English replied in general terms: but Newbolt's draft letter to convey more detailed views to the American Committee was not adopted, probably because Robert Bridges dissented. At his instance, in 1923, the American Committee was asked to accept the S.P.E. as representing the international movement in England 'until some other agency shall be created'. He hoped that the S.P.E. could take on the whole work, co-operating with the British Academy. Newbolt wanted a new English organization in which the Royal Society of Literature would also have a part; and Bridges saw 'his private Academy' threatened with friendly engulfment.

'I recollect a meeting at Corpus in November 1923 which Newbolt attended', says Kenneth Sisam, 'at which it became clear that he was interested in constitution building, while Bridges didn't want to be fettered by a constitution, and maintained that, as the S.P.E. alone was active in the work, it ought

1922-1928

to have a free hand in policy. In this he was sturdily supported by the other members of the Committee. **In 1924** Bridges almost carried through his own plan, but Newbolt could not , agree.'

The following letter from Gordon to Newbolt was written while the difference with him was still being explored informally. It was recently found among his papers, marked in his hand 'Not sent'. It is probable that he decided not to send it because he **saw** no hope of any good result.

15 Dec. 1924

10 Chadlington Road, Oxford

Dear Sir Henry,

I have corresponded with Sisam, and had some communication with Mr. Bridgesj but we have not yet met to consider your Draft Agreement. I am writing, therefore, only for myself.

I will be frank and confess that my inclination has always been for an S.P.E. on its present lines of almost village simplicity, reaching its audiences through its own supporters, here and in America and in the Dominions, unhampered by the pomp and machinery of a Central, Metropolitan, or International Committee, however representative and distinguished. This may be unadventurous and short-sighted of me j but there it is. I have no great faith in central organization as such. War and politics apart, the best things in England have been done without it. The S.P.E. is healthy; it pays its way: it has a character of its own; and it had almost no machinery. Could anything be better?

I am afraid these will sound in your ears like the sentiments of Stow-in-the-Wold or Moreton-in-Marsh.

I have had personally no share in the London and Anglo-American negotiations, and should have **been reluctant to take part in** them if **I** had, by any **unlikelihood}** **been asked** to do so. The issue of such negotiations **would have seemed**

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

to me fated: a good deal of politics, a great deal of talk, an
*imposing machinery, many committees and some conferences,
and the English language where it was. Mr Bridges was
more hopeful of what might be done that wayj but I gather
that he is now less confident, and favours a simpler procedure.
Sisam, I fancy, is of much the same mind, though he might—
does, in fact,—put it differently. *The new Agreement',
he says, 'seems in effect to reject the two emendations which
at our last meeting we considered essential in the interests of
the S.P.E.'

So much I thought myself bound to reply to your letter
of the 12th: but of course we must meet and consider the
Draft Agreement with the deliberation it deserves, and
make up our minds what course seems best in the interests
of English.

Yours sincerely,
George Gordon

The S.P.E. Committee decided in 1925 to withdraw from
the general English Committee, and, as the letter prophesied,
after a great deal of talk, many committees and some conferences,
the project died.

Gordon continued to serve on the Committee: he became
Chairman after the death of Robert Bridges. By his invitation,
from 14th July, 1929, onwards, Magdalen became the regular
meeting place. These were very happy social occasions. R. B.
would never countenance any change in the fare at lunch: it
was invariably chicken, apple tart and cheese with claret. Later,
when he was losing strength, he suggested champagne!

The year 1925 was a sorrowful one. George's father died in
February, his mother in December., He was a devoted son and
felt their loss keenly. His visits to them had been an essential
part of his life. During *his* undergraduate years he had written
to me of his rather: *He is so grand and strong and affectionate

1922-1928

and honest. If he had had my chance I don't know what he couldn't have done.' In this he did not exaggerate. There **was**, no man more loved and trusted in Stirlingshire, and there were many who sought his help in difficulty. He had retired in 1909 from his office of Deputy Chief-Constable of Stirlingshire and Superintendent of the Eastern District, retaining only that of Procurator-Fiscal.

His mother was gay of temperament, and wise and witty, particularly pungent when she spoke in her native Kincardineshire tongue. She would at times impersonate the fisher-wives hailing each other. One had a new apron, 'lilac-like wi' a yalla floorie': eh! its bannie'. It was doubtless from her that George inherited this gift. When she gave a present to anyone within her family she would say: 'There's something for you that winna speak to you': and her last words as we took farewell at the end of a visit were always: 'Haste ye back.'

George's eldest sister, whose whimsical humour was a constant delight to him, had on one occasion before our marriage made, in order to tease me, some disparaging remark about the Gordon men, which I reported. His answer was: 'I liked Lizzie's remark about "the Gordon men", and have heard her make it before. Let me admit that there is a good deal of truth in it but that I owe some amelioration of the Gordon disposition to my mother.' Of the remark itself I have only an approximate recollection. The Gordon men were compared, I think, to rocks with their heads in the clouds. George was not, like so many intellectuals, a thing without roots. He was conscious of his origins. He knew that he derived from his family life at Falkirk, and that his roots were in the good soil of Kincardine and Aberdeenshire. Like those of his countrymen who have not lost it in the cities he had a strong sense of ancestry, and a consciousness of obligation to his parents. After their death he remained strongly united with his brother and three sisters.

Although two-thirds of his life were spent happily in England

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

George was a loyal Scot and loved his country. His Scottish birth and habit of mind were organic to his life, not episodic. 'What Scot ever lived\ he wrote in his youth, 'who could put his hand on his heart and say that he had never nourished a grudge against the English?*' As Oxford made comfortable room for him and as he, in turn, conformed to English institutions, he came to be very happy there. In 1913, as he was leaving Oxford for Leeds with some reluctance, he had written to Steuart Miller: 'I used to loathe Oxford at times, and swear at it always, but in the last few years I had contrived to be content with it and often enjoyed it without recrimination.' 'In the end', says Steuart Miller, 'he was, I suppose, happier there than he could have been anywhere else—happy and successful. But if he was a Scot adapting himself, he was still a Scot, with his Scottish origin as the unobtrusive frame and background from which his personality emerged into the foreground of Oxford; and indeed that was one reason for his success. He did not suppress his Scottish qualities or grow a hedge to screen them like some shrinking fellows we know of: in adapting them he expressed them. Scotland survived in him, and showed in his accessibility, his friendly understanding of the humbler people he had to deal with, his humorous sense of reality, his capacity for affairs.

'When he describes the——s flocking off to Assisi (or is it Siena?) as explorers, and finding instead that they make a common-room, he is writing (to Phillimore in 1911) with an amused detachment from the tribe of dons. Later, in conducting the affairs of the College he could ease friction and compose differences the more easily just because the quarrels were, at bottom, no affair of his... And to the end he enjoyed the relief of lapsing into his native element.'

George had the Scottish habit of mind which treats life as a game to be played successfully. The game became in him an art—the art of living. He was not the type that is known in England as the 'dour Scot'. The mixture of Highland and

Lowland stock produces a combination, understood in Scotland, but puzzling to the English. It does not fit their conception of a Scot. A man springing from such a stock has the tenacity and national quality of the Lowlander, but he adds to it high spirits, conviviality and love of talk. The Englishman tries sometimes to explain this by calling it bohemianism: but bohemianism does not grow in Scotland. Certainly George favoured neither the appearance nor the affectations of those recruited under that frowsy banner.

He rarely missed his yearly visit to Scotland, which took place in the late summer or early autumn when the moors and hills had reached their finest moment. Like his two friends Normand and Chapman he was a tireless walker. He was naturally sensitive to the beauty of a landscape, but did not as a rule notice its features unless his attention was called to them. When he was pleasantly absorbed in the business of walking, he disliked interruptions and irrelevance. On one occasion as we were nearing Dalmally at the end of a day's tramp I was tactless enough to exclaim at the beauty of the evening light on the hills. 'I refuse to look at another damned mountain to-day', was his reply. His vehemence at that moment owed something, I think, to the blister on his heel which was beginning to give him trouble. It required two days' rest in Oban: and a day later, on our way through the Pass of Glencoe, it brought upon us a mishap which I have not forgotten. He had taken off his shoe to ease his heel* as we sat having lunch near the edge of a steep gully. Presently a sudden movement of his sent the shoe hurtling to the bottom. There was no choice: it took me nearly two hours to retrieve the shoe.

It was noticeable that, after the last war, he observed country with the eye of a soldier. In one of his letters written on his way out to Gallipoli he says: 'We passed through some splendid defensible country to the S.E. of Paris—a great wooded height ranging round the plain and everywhere steep descents of woods,

mixed with fine stretches for manoeuvre. We suspected this, or part of it, to have been country our men got to before the turn to the Marne in 1914.' I constantly noticed this attitude in our country walks.

From the death of his parents onwards his time in Scotland was usually spent in visits to Normand. After the Killin visit in 1923 there were many others—to Nethy Bridge in the Cairngorn country, to Hobsburn and Yetholm in the Borders, to Rathburn near Longformacus. As he was leaving in August for one of these visits he wrote: 'I am setting out for my native country not entirely unprepared for those rainy days of which even Scotland sometimes furnishes examples: days when only fishermen rejoice, and the golfer stands drearily at the window. I have a few books in my baggage. They are old and well-tried favourites, as familiar as my oldest and most disgraceful tweeds or my antiquated cleek (make of 1898) at which my friends express derision. I have an ancient *Kidnapped* with me, stained with Appin rain, and blistered by blazing days above Ballachulish—*Waverley* and *Redgauntlet* also, in that excellent 1832 edition, a book of Scottish ballads, and to keep Reason on her throne and remind myself of the English partnership, of the balance of the two nations, an old pocket copy of Boswell's *Johnson*. Two omnibus volumes, representing more modern times, accompany this picked party—you know them already, Anstey and the *Week-end*—and I ask you if for the purposes of a properly constituted holiday I am not admirably furnished?'

Much of the time on those holidays was spent in walking and climbing. George was quite competent with a map: but, if another person was willing to undertake the work, he was content to leave it to him. In the company of Normand one was secure. We might walk for hours over pastures, moors, hills and streams with the certainty of rejoining a high-road within a few yards of the point at which we were aiming.

In the evenings, on later visits, as the young people grew

1922-1928

up, they used to gather in a room by themselves, leaving the older people undisturbed to their books and talk. George would join the older party after dinner, but before long his habit was to leave them for the other room. There immediately the sounds of laughter and talk increased: and if a rag began he was certainly at the bottom of it. Lord Normand writes: 'In the early days of the war two of the young friends of these holiday visits, then in uniform, called on him at Magdalen one Sunday afternoon. Among other callers were dignitaries of Church and State. To these the Vice-Chancellor bade goodbye within his own house. But he accompanied the young soldier and sailor, when they left, across the Quad to the porter's lodge, and into the street. They were never to see him again, but neither of them will ever forget him and his friendship, nor this act of kindness.'

Gordon had his first broadcasting experience at the end of September, 1925. His subject was the humour of Shakespeare. His voice proved to have the right pitch for broadcasting, and lost none of its individual quality. 'I was very nervous till I got two sentences out', he wrote—'when I forgot the instrument, and the vastness of the invisible audience, and the muted horrors of the padded chamber.' In December he gave a talk on Charles Lamb: that was still more difficult. 'Shakespeare, after all is a public institution, but Lamb is a family friend.' Then followed in the next year a series of talks on *Companionable Books*—*Pepys*, *Walton's Compleat Angler*, *Boswell's Johnson*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Cowper's Letters* and *Eothen*. These were later revised and published by Chatto and Windus. After giving this series he talked from time to time on the wireless on various subjects: his lecture on Robert Bridges was the last, except for a short broadcast to the U.S.A. in March, 1941, on the British Universities.

To hear him talk of a book he loved was to find oneself on the way to reading or rediscovering it. It gave him pleasure to be told that as a result of his talks on *Companionable Books* a

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

Club waiter and his wife were eagerly reading Lamb's Essays, Letters and Life.

In 1937 he was elected a member of the Advisory Council of the B.B.C., and Chairman of their Committee on Spoken English. He wrote to me on 9th December in that year 'My chairmanship of the B.B.C. Spoken English Committee established a record, for which I was fervently thanked. These meetings used to take 3 hours, and I had got through everything in 1½ hours. So that's that'. This was not an unusual experience when he was in the Chair at a meeting. He had a way of cutting through a difficulty by some wise and humorous remark which prevented lengthy discussion without prejudice to the business of the meeting.

The vacation of 1926 was spent in Brittany. We had forty days of sun and sea on the beach at Locudy. Our eldest boy, Tony, made friends at once with 'le General', whom he accompanied on fishing expeditions. As the General spoke no English and Tony little French, we always wondered, seeing them deep in consultation, what their common language was. John was the delight of all the fishermen, and was hailed in the morning like the sun: 'He, mon petit blond!' On the eve of our departure the children went round the village to make their farewells: we found to our consternation that they had been offered, and had accepted * *petit verve* at every house of call: and the captain of the life-boat, who had been decorated for valour, cut his ribbon in four, and gave them each a piece—the largest to Janet, who was his favourite. The *Entente Cordiale* was complete. 'Locudy', wrote George on his return to Oxford, 'will be found printed on my heart when I hang myself, one drizzly November afternoon, on a willow by the Cher.'

In October, 1928, the Book Society was on the point of launching its scheme, and invited Gordon to serve on the Committee. He continued to work for it during twelve years, finally as Chairman of the Committee. He enjoyed these meetings

1922-1928

which were for him an escape from the decorous routine of his ordinary way of life. His intimates knew that the high dignity of his public appearances had its roots in high spirits and gaiety, 'I told the docto*', he wrote once in a humorous letter to me, 'that I had suffered from repression all my life: that I often wanted to yodel, e.g. at meetings at which I was in the chair, or on even more solemn occasions, if such there be: that your heart had been permanently affected by your inability to know, in public, what I would do next.' He once said, during his term as Vice-Chancellor, that when walking in procession, preceded by the *Bedelli* on his way to University meetings and functions, he was sometimes overtaken by an almost irresistible temptation to slip up a by-street, and wondered how far they would go before discovering that he was missing. A month after his term had begun he said 'Another big Degree Ceremony this afternoon; but I've got hold of it now, and was actually at leisure to observe the humours of the scene'. Even a College bursarial committee could on occasion offer him comedy: he once sketched the design of a play—which was never put on paper—in which the Bursar of the time figured as a principal character. It was called *The £100 Look*. His dignity was as much a part of his nature as his love of fun, and had no trace of pomposity.

In his mature life the Book Society Committee Meetings provided another school not only of letters but of goodwill and amity. His colleagues profited by his swift appreciation of new talent and found him always ready to encourage and help an author in the making. His distaste for half-truths and sham knowledge was as visible in his judgment of a book as in his work as a teacher of literature. He usually read and reviewed for the Book Society the more erudite and scholarly books: and, in «harp contrast to this, there was a tradition that he was the expert on murder-stories and books of adventure—a contrast which was very characteristic of him. If his mind was blunted by fatigue and what he called 'the brute necessity of refreshment' his cure

for this condition was a good—it had to be good—spy-story or detective novel.

"The old master-pieces and ancestral favourites', he wrote, *—the plays of Shakespeare and the Waverley Novels, *Dm Quixote* and the *Vicar*, Elia and honest Izaak, the world of Dickens—are not shaken from their place in the chimney-corner of our leisure when the door opens to admit the fresh arrivals and new-comers of our time.... The literary waters of our own time have a natural claim to be explored, and most people need a chart to show the headlands.' My friendships among old books, so far from being weakened by my researches among the new, have been invigorated by them, and have drawn fresh nourishment from the living.'

Edmund Blunden, a member of the Committee, observed him in these surroundings, and has the right to speak: 'It was G.S.G. who originally gave me the invitation to join the Committee of the Book Society, and I am all the more pleased that you should wish me to send you a reminiscence or two of him in that setting.

'It always seemed to me that he was truly happy in the company and the work of that Committee, and (it would be forgiven if I whisper it in Oxford) as one released from the class room. Not that he left behind him his invincible touch of scholarly eminence and grace of mind. He would by nature bring these to any book that we might be discussing, however poor its claims. His briefest judgments were expressed with the same easy choice of words and shape of sentence which distinguished his Lectures elsewhere, and these judgments were often of the greatest help to others present, who hardly knew what ought to be done with some item of obvious pretension but underneath dissatisfying. Indeed I felt that his direction was our main strength even before he actually took the chair, and of course he had the gift of reducing any troublesome conflicts of opinion among us to a workable, acceptable decision by some happy piece of perception and good

humour. We might tend to become vague and circumlocutory, he knew when to clear things up with a friendly simplification.

To my part (and I expect all felt this) I rejoiced to see him' arrive in the room, at once bringing the assurance of a successful discussion, and of some comments on life and letters which would enrich it. *How* did he unite such a quality of the study with such a "folks of this world" way? All I know is, he did; and one might have supposed from the completeness of his attention to the business that he had no other affairs—except when he produced his immense Almanack to see whether he could manage the next proposed date and hour.

*I must mention that on one occasion G.S.G. and I were not punctual. We met at Oxford station, and he had in mind not only the Meeting of the day, but his purpose of preparing a lecture on Robert Bridges. He was comparing the central position in literature of R.B. with the eccentric one of G. M. Hopkins, it being the time when many were saying rude things about Bridges on the wrong assumption that he had not done his best for his friend's works. We talked away, and found to our surprise that our carriage (it was a non-stop train) had been standing a good while at Reading station. It was the one which was "slipped" at Reading! All the same, as soon as we were on the train to town again, the talk went ahead, and I am glad that none of the extreme devotees of Hopkins was there to be horrified by an occasional irreverence towards him.

'He always laughed at me on the ground that I always did something nobody else would—a make-believe, to cheer me up. For instance, at the end of a meeting he would say, "Can I give you a lift to Paddington?" I might say, "It would have been fine, but I am going to Chatham". "Chatham! Now who but Bhmden would possibly be going to Chatham?" etc. Hewas just as kind to all of us, making dry and merry and affectionate allusions to our habits and our hats, our critical peculiarities and our hobbies.

LIFE OF GEORGE 8. GORDON

'To go away from the Book Society, I have a picture in my mind of him in the Bodleian Library deciphering the early letters of Shelley, and remarking upon the extraordinary world produced by Godwin's principles in which Shelley and Mary in their youth were for a time existing. He was the man to speak about that fantasy. He knew it for what it was, and could look at it without bewilderment and without condemnation. I felt as he was eyeing the frightfully difficult scrawl of the MSS. that he was also seeing something much more than those pen-marks. It was his gift of looking through words into the life of man.—And the moment was amusing, for a very young woman at an adjacent seat was very cross. We were disturbing her in her own thesis! I think the Vice-Chancellor much enjoyed the indignation she communicated to such undisciplined users of the Library.'

The latter part of Edmund Blunden's reminiscences refer to a piece of work undertaken by G.S.G. in 1933. Some unpublished Shelley letters had just been discovered, tied up in a parcel, in an attic of Norton House, the home of Thomas Jefferson Hogg, the friend and biographer of the poet. His descendant, Captain R. J. J. Hogg, was willing to have them published, and the work was offered to G. S. G. As usual, busy though he was, he found the offer irresistible: it promised the kind of literary adventure that he loved. It proved however to be a much greater task than he had contemplated on account of the extreme illegibility of the letters and the amount of annotation required. But the work fascinated him, and from the time of the discovery every vacation found him absorbed in it. He would lay it aside when term began, and pick up the loose-waving threads with a sigh in the next vacation. At the time of his death it was almost finished. A month or two of leisure would, he said, have completed it. It is hoped that it may yet be published.

It has been said that the number of dining clubs to which

1922-1928

Gordon belonged has never been disclosed; they were indeed numerous, and he took great pleasure in all of them.

The first of these was the 'Conversation Club' in Leeds, an old-established Society, which had preserved all the old ways. The members dined in each other's houses in turn, and the host of the evening had some topic ready for discussion. The formal procedure for the evening was laid down on a printed card. The hour for carriages was fixed: also the hour at which tea should be served before they dispersed.

In November, 1925, Gordon received from the Dean of Christ Church a letter announcing that 'the crowning honour of his life' had just been conferred on him. He had been elected to '*The Club*', the oldest graduates' club in Oxford, founded in 1790. No man could be elected to this club without a unanimous vote, and members wondered later how they had ever passed the test. '*The Club*' met on four Thursdays in each term, and no engagement w& allowed to take precedence of these dinners. During his last illness, when he could no longer attend the meetings, the host of the evening never failed to write to tell him how much he had been missed. One evening about 1938 or 1939, when four of the members were returning from a late dinner, they could not induce the car, which had been parked in the High Street, to start. All of them tried their hands; but the result was only a dull squeak from the starter. They looked under the bonnet, they tried pushing the car, they did all the things which 'the learned' do under such conditions; but the car stood her ground. 'Then', relates Robert McElroy, who was one of the four, 'a little group of undergraduates hove in sight. They had recently been forbidden to operate cars in Oxford; but Gordon hailed them. They approached, saluted the Vice-Chancellor, as is their wont, and courteously asked what was wrong. "Diagnosis incomplete," was his reply, "we have tried everything we know." One undergraduate looked into the bonnet, touched a wire, and called to another who was at the

wheel, "Let her go" and she went. As we climbed into the car • and drove homewards Gordon remarked, "And we have forbidden *them* to operate cars in Oxford!" ' '

He belonged also to the *Ad Eundem* Club, which dined alternately in Oxford and Cambridge: another of his Oxford dining clubs was the *Society*.

There was an amusing informal Lunch Club of which he was a member. On one occasion the Lunch Club met for breakfast at an early hour, hired a bus, and drove to the Derby. During the morning the police called at the College, hoping to find in the President a sedate and reliable witness for someone who had been innocently involved in a minor car accident on his way home the previous evening from dining in Magdalen. They were taken aback to learn from the College porter that the President was off to the Derby—the only time in his life that he attended a Race Meeting.

On 17th February, 1931, he had the honour to be elected to *The Cluby* founded in 1764 by Sir Joshua Reynolds and Dr. Johnson, whose members originally met, for supper only, at the Turk's Head in Gerrard Street, 'one evening in every week, at seven, and generally continued their conversation till a pretty late hour'. He was always well pleased when he could contrive that some business meeting in London should coincide with a dinner of *The Club*.

I have heard him tell this story of a Dining Club at which he was present when a certain name was proposed for membership. The person in question was a most excellent man, sound, trustworthy and universally esteemed. Yet why was it that a hesitation was apparent, that the proposal did not meet with that instant assent which such wholly estimable qualities seemed to merit? At last a senior member spoke: 'No,' he said, 'No. I have the greatest regard for Xj he would make an admirable trustee for anything; and I hope, in fact, to secure him as one of my executors. But there is a fatal pjection to his becoming a

1922-1928

member of this Club, or indeed of any other Dining Club that understands its business. *He is the same after Dinner as before?* It was like a flash of light. They agreed; and he was not elected.

The last of his Oxford Dining Clubs was the Alembic Society, of which almost all the other members were scientists. On the first evening when he dined as a guest of this Society he amused, and possibly a little bewildered his hosts by telling them that sometimes in an idle moment he would pick up those abstracts of scientific dissertations which Universities periodically publish. 'I look at the chemical synopsis', he said, 'at the changes, absorptions and reactions recorded there, and find myself from sheer feebleness of information falling back on my literary habits and dramatising them. When I read, for example, that "Tetra-hydroprotoberberine was oxydised by alcoholic iodine in the presence of sodium acetate", I imagine this Marlowesque North African heroine with the glorious name—Tetra-hydro-protoberberine, almost in itself a perfect line—I imagine this lady, evidently a virtuous water-drinker, a primitive Rechabite of the first order, actually oxydised by her rival, the debauched and gin-drinking Iodine, and this, let it be noted, in the very presence of Sodium Acetate, the male bully, the cynic, the cankered villain of the piece. It is a childish game, which I would so gladly exchange for scientific knowledge.'

He was happy in the company of scientists; he found them friendly, and good people to have on his side when he wanted anything done. 'They have such an engaging Way', he once said, 'when the literary people are hedging, of blurting out the truth. I remember a University Committee which was charged with the duty of choosing a professor. It was a literary Professorship, and the name of a poet had been suggested for it. The Committee was worried and suspicious. A Professor with wings! A Professor, after all, has to run a Department. Across these silent reflections broke the voice of one of the scientific members. He sighed and said, "I suppose we have to face the fact that a good

many people seem to think poetry important". It was all that was wanted. We laughed and chose the poet.'

It was his constant regret that science had no part in his education. He said to his friend R. B. Smith not long before their graduation: 'Supposing you and I were the only two people alive on earth, and people arrived from another planet, and asked us how all these things around us worked—the gas—the water—the drains—the weapons—the ships—we couldn't answer a single question. They would never believe that we were the most highly educated of our generation. They would be sure we were the most ignorant.' The remark came out of a silence, and was evidently something he had been thinking about.

This was one educational reform which he had at heart: he often said that he hoped to see it well launched before he retired from these things and took to gardening, like the Scottish King who 'declined upon horticulture'.

He thought that it was right that the basis of teaching in schools should be the Classics: Greek, Latin and English. His scientific colleagues had assured him that, given natural ability for science, the undergraduate who went furthest was the one who had received at school the best literary or classical education.

In an address delivered at University College, London, in 1932 he exposes his views: 'There is one change to which I look forward in the freer atmosphere of our time, and with the disappearance, I hope for ever, of that old, unworthy, and now antiquated suspicion which used to separate the Arts and Sciences. I hope that in another generation we shall see the fundamental teaching of natural science become part of the common texture of every educated mind. I think this could now be attempted without serious encroachment on the literary studies in which I am interested and on which I was brought up. The sooner it is done the better, and the better not only for citizenship, but, I firmly believe, for literature also. I speak with some feeling about this, because I have long been aware that I am a very ill-

1922-1928

educated person: for I should always so describe a man who, like myself, knew really nothing of the constitution or laws of the natural world, and had never been introduced to even the elements of any experimental science. To have missed such things is not only to have missed a great experience, but, as I feel every day, it is to have been condemned to a kind of exile, it is to find oneself, to a great and increasing extent, a stranger in the modern world. Human beings apart, about whom I do claim to know something, even when they are scientists, there is practically nothing in the world of nature or of scientific contrivance which, left to myself, I could explain. Electricity, wireless, and the rest will remain for ever magic to me. I know that the "anger of God" is not an adequate explanation of thunder, but I should be hard put to it without reference books to supply a better reason. I was early in life persuaded that the earth is round, but I cannot now exactly remember why. If the sun rose tomorrow in the west, I am one of a considerable body of men of my generation, very largely represented in the University of Oxford, who would notice nothing very peculiar.

'This helplessness and lack of observation has, no doubt, its comic and even likeable side. There is a well-known Oxford story of a late distinguished Dean of Carlisle, a celebrated philosopher in his day, who, cycling on a hill near Oxford, punctured a tyre, and was observed by his more alert companion to be inflating the *other* tyre. When this was pointed out to him he asked quite honestly, "But do they not communicate?" The story of the Bishop and the thunderstorm is a good deal more recent, but reflects a similar and highly typical incapacity, in a man of the older generation, to handle or even to recognize, the scientific appliances of daily life. I quote from the evening newspaper in which I read it five years ago. It is called "How the Bishop slept", and proceeds: "How a Bishop slept one night in peril during a thunderstorm was related by Captain Sir Arthur Clark at the annual meeting of the Shipwrecked Fishermen and

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

Mariners Royal Benevolent Society. When the Bishop was asked next morning how he had slept, he replied: 'Very well, except at first. Something kept knocking against the side of the ship. I looked out of my port-hole and found a wire with a lump of metal at the end, and so I brought it in and slept with it under my pillow.' " Need I say that the obscure metallic object with which the Bishop thus came to terms was the lightning conductor?'

Gordon knew well as he spoke that his own situation was not unlike that of the Dean and the Bishop.

Eight

1928-1938

WHEN George Gordon returned to Oxford from Leeds in 1922 he hoped to be able to carry on his professional work with more leisure for writing. 'I'm sorry you're having so much administration', he wrote to his old pupil Professor Thomas. 'The same thing happened to me in Leeds. I found it enjoyable in itself; but an unfair addition to the illiterate years of the war. We all must have leisure to read and write.* But administration and University business pursued him, and very soon he found himself once more involved in it. 'Instead of being left a man of letters', he wrote, 'I am now a disgusting mixture of writer and broker.'

His literary friends protested in vain. Robert Bridges demanded to be appointed Physician extraordinary to the Professor of English, so that he might oblige him to take his name off all University Committees, and desist thereafter from attending them. Doubtless he might have evaded this kind of life if he had shown more resistance: but he seemed to be inevitably drawn towards the business of life, and the contact with men and their affairs. He lived in an age which made it impossible for a man of his temperament to shut out the world and choose seclusion.

His choice was finally made when in 1928 a small deputation of the Fellows of Magdalen called on him to ask if he would allow his name to be considered for the Presidentship in succession to Sir Herbert Warren, who was retiring. He was taken entirely by surprise, but his answer was unhesitating. He loved the College, and if he were elected would be proud and honoured to become its President. He was elected on 17th November, and received for a second time into the 'kindly magnificence of Magdalen'.

On the day of his election, among those who called to con-

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

gratulate him were his American friends, Robert McElroy and Abraham Flexner. They told him that they were uncertain how they should now address him. His reply was characteristic: 'My name is still Gordon.' 'And it remained', says Robert McElroy, 'still Gordon, even after he had become Vice-Chancellor: for his habitual friendliness never altered in the least. He remained to the end a simple gentleman. It was said of a famous American Statesman, with that same endearing quality, that when St. Peter measured him for his crown, the size proved to be the same as had been that of his old felt hat.' He did not apparently even change his tie, for it was remarked by an evening paper that he was the first President to wear a blue spotted tie!

'My transition was sudden', he wrote. 'One day I was lecturing on the Arts of Poetry, and attending a Merton College Committee. The next I was a Professor no longer, a Fellow of Merton no more. Still another day, and I was taking the chair at a Magdalen Servants' Committee, and feeling rather as if I were acting in a charade—with every member of the committee, from the Vice-President and the Bursar down, behaving as if my presence there was the most natural thing in the world. My new colleagues have faithfully maintained that air and attitude—at what cost to themselves I shall never know—but with enormous advantage to me! Besides electing me, they have given me such help in work which was absolutely new to me, and have shown me such kindness and consideration as can never, I think, have been exceeded in any College.'

His old colleagues at Merton sent him this message:

G. S. Gordon

Hominem • Amplissimum

Ad Ampliora • Scilicet . Sublatum .

Desideraturi . Salutamus .

Alumni . Mertonenses .

1928-1938

On 4th May in the following year he was made an Honorary Fellow of Merton.

It is a traditional joke in Oxford among tutors, lecturers and professors to regard Heads of Houses as a singular order of beings, who at their best are ornamental, and who neither think nor work. Gordon, as a professor, had shared this out-of-date joke. When his predecessor, Sir Herbert Warren, gave him his blessing, and wished him joy, he added the sinister warning that during his long years as President he had found that each year he had less leisure. 'The joy', remarked the new President, 'seems heavily taxed.' He was, however, undaunted, and worked out his situation for himself, after the Socratic Dialogue of A. D. Godley, *Fragment Concerning Professors*.

'A Professor alone is able to teach, because he alone knows: whereas a Tutor only thinks: and very often he cannot even do that.'

'The awful question why men are made Professors', says Gordon, 'is then launched. (He does not ask why men are made Heads—that is a question too domestic and inscrutable.)'

'But why,' says Godley's Philoxylus-to Socrates, 'why is a man chosen to be a Professor? And do not say that it is because he does some easy thing, such as being a Cambridge man, or a Tariff Reformer. For you and I, I believe, consider that it is a difficult thing to become a Professor—even though it may be an easy thing to be one.'

'Thus spoke Godley', says Gordon, 'and hit the mark! As to Headships, however, I should put it just the other way. I have found it singularly easy to *become a* Head (because one did nothing at all about it) but by no means an easy thing to *be* one.'

An eminent speaker, who, like Gordon, was connected with three separate colleges, once elaborated in a speech his attachments to them. He began, naturally enough, by calling the first his mother, the second he characterized, less prudently, as his wife. His audience waited breathlessly for the third, which was

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

Magdalen. It came with resounding effect: she was his Mistress, Without labouring this relationship, one recognizes its truth. For Gordon himself, when telephones were ringing, when meetings and speeches crowded on each other's heels, she was the 'craving creature' which was Halifax's description of Charles IPs women. But in quieter moments his heart belonged to her eternal beauty and charm, and to her great traditions. 'My marriage contract with Magdalen', he said not long after his election, 'is for better or worse: we hope for better. I felt from the day of my admission the magic of that attachment, the mixture of romantic and yet domestic beauty, which makes men lovers of Magdalen for life. I should hardly be the same man if I were now to be deprived of it.' It was a very genuine and deeply rooted affection. In the last autumn of his life, on the few occasions when he was able to go into Addison's Walk, he spoke constantly of its penetrating loveliness.

From the moment of his election in November the College workmen were hard at work modernizing and beautifying the Lodgings. They finished their work early in February, drank the health of the new President, and went out. In a few days we were installed, and soon afterwards there was a house-warming, to which came all the Fellows and their wives. The fire in the great stone chimney of the Founder's Room was lit for the first time by the Bursar, Mr. Cyril Carter, who had directed with great interest all the improvements. And thus were launched the full happy years of his Presidency at Magdalen.

A year before his election he had given the *Andrew Lang* Lecture at St. Andrews, the first lecture of the new foundation. Immediately after he became President he went to Edinburgh to fulfil an old engagement to deliver before the Walter Scott Club their annual lecture on Scott. Two years later, when his old University in Glasgow conferred on him the Honorary Degree of L.L.D., he gave an oration on John Gibson Lockhart: and in 1932, in the City Hall of Glasgow he delivered the Scott

1928-1938

Centenary Oration. Scott had made a strong appeal to him ever since his boyhood: he re-read the *Waverley Novels* in the months of his illness. He was, as he said, very near the heart of Scotland, and the hearth-stone of Scott.

On his journey to Glasgow to give the Centenary Oration he had hoped to be able to put the finishing touches to his discourse in the train: but the journey was noisy and interrupted, and he was unable to get anything done. On our arrival he asked his hostess, Lady Stirling Maxwell, if he might be excused from appearing at dinner and have a few sandwiches in his room. He spent three hours on his lecture and was content: he had 'combed its beard*. It was a characteristic situation.

On several occasions, in various places, it fell to him to propose the Toast on St. Andrew's Night. The following passage comes from his informal speech on that night in 1930 at the Dinner of the Caledonian Club in Oxford.

'The toast which I have the unexpected honour to propose—why unexpected, you must ask your President—is a toast which, in common justice to it, demands oratory, and wit and fire. I come before you, I am afraid, unprovided with these things—though the fire is kindling—having heard only this morning that any speech was expected of me, and having spent the whole of the day since in wearily attending a succession of those academic Boards and Committees of which most of you yet happily know nothing. From that tiresome experience I am gradually reviving—as who would not revive?—under the inspiring influence of this goodly and gallant company, of our Highland music, and—to an extent which need not now, perhaps, be accurately analysed—under the influence, also, of this most excellent national liquor. But I have not reached—nor, unfortunately for my speech, have you—that period of the evening known to every Highlander, and even in their humble degree to the mere men of the Plains—that period of our revels when

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

eloquence springs impromptu, and almost every utterance seems wit.

*You must take me therefore, as I find myself—unprepared, and not even properly dressed—yet delighted for all that to be a member of this honourable and convivial company, and on the permanent muster-roll of the Club.

'The University Caledonian Club, like all spirited organizations, has had its ups and downs. At least twice in its history (one can't of course think why) it has been closed by the Proctors, and even to-night, I fancy, a curious observer might note, hovering outside, in a clumsy attempt at inconspicuousness, a detachment of those agents of University discipline at whom it is advisable not to bark.

'There was a time, also, some 6 or 7 years ago, when the Club was in some danger of losing its distinctive character, and of being confounded with that type of Caledonian Club which meets to tell pawky stories of what the Aberdonian said, and to celebrate what for *our* purpose is the irrelevant genius of Robbie Burns. We were actually threatened at one time with the *Cottar's Saturday Night* and *Wee MacGregor*. From that danger, and I hope also from Proctorial malignity, the Club has made a fine recovery, and is once more the *Highland Caledonian Club* it was meant to be: stern—not so very—nor unduly wild.

'I don't know if there are any Englishmen present: I hope there are some, and that they feel the privilege of being admitted. We on our part, while conscious of their racial inferiority, will treat them, I Jhope, with every courtesy, and make their lot seem as easy for them as the innocent mistake they have made (I mean in being Englishmen) will allow. The tactful procedure which I have outlined has not always been followed by members of this Club. One night, after a meeting of the Caledonian Club, one of its members invaded the rooms of his tutor, H. A. L. Fisher, and said: "Has it ever occurred to you, Fisher, **what**

1928-1938

a——y thing it is to be an Englishman?" "I see your point", replied Fisher; "now don't you think you had better get to bed?".

'We celebrate, naturally, a day after date. It was St. Andrew's Day yesterday* I don't know if other Colleges were equally observant, but'at Magdalen, last night, we enjoyed at High Table a dish of Haggis: not procured, like the superior specimen we have eaten to-night, from the fatherland, the *Patria* of the Haggis, but made by the College cook, and a very creditable imitation. I watched my colleagues narrowly, and of a company of 28 observed, I regret to say, when the noble dish was offered them, only four brave spirits, four gentlemen adventurers. Some of the faint-hearted ones, conscious of being in the majority, ventured the usual remarks about barbaric food: but, I thought, with more restraint than usual. One Fellow of the College did indeed observe that he supposed (looking at the haggis in front of him) that this was how we used to disguise the thing when we were eating our enemies. But such badinage we may, I believe, disregard.

'I have from my brother, who served with the Seaforthsin the war, this story of heroic courtesy. On St. Andrew's Night in 1917 in the neighbourhood of Bagdad, the Divisional Commander honoured the Mess of the 1st Bn. the Seaforth Highlanders by dining with them. The Mess cook had excelled himself by conjuring up, against all the odds, an almost real haggis. When a plateful of this was placed "rich and reekin" before the General, he was asked by the Colonel if he would have whisky with it. The General, ready to share for one night all the savage customs of the Scots, raised the whisky bottle and poured it over his haggis! An involuntary intake of breath from all the officers was the only indication that anything unusual had taken place: and then, casually, as the conversation flowed on, each officer poured the whisky over his haggis. Major-General Bonaby de Vere Fane probably thought that night that haggis was an over-rated dish.

'I have spoken of Haggis. Let us speak of Bagpipes. I don't know how it is in other colleges, but I am glad to say I have never known a term when the bagpipes might not be heard in Magdalen. I heard it this afterntoon from a corner room in our latest buildings, as I was on my way at 2 p.m. to one of my many meetings. The Dean of the College, however, though a Scot,—by some defect or ear or soul—seems to dislike this noble music—the first music in the world to lead a man into battle or to the grave.

*I believe we are not the only exiles who are celebrating their nation in Oxford to-night. In the pretentious neo-Gothic establishment along the street—one of the worst of the inspirations of Ruskin—I refer to the Randolph Hotel—certain wild men, who call themselves Hibernians, are now indulging in national orgies which I do not feel called upon to imagine, much less describe: not only Oxford Hibernians, but fellow shillelagh-men from Cambridge. The police force of the City have been duly warned; (this explains material now lining this side of Cornmarket). They expect that Caledonians coming from the Club, and Hibernians, (not clad, I hope, in the disgusting saffron article which they dare to call a kilt) may meet towards 11.30 or so. I suggest that we disappoint them, more especially as some members of this Club, to my knowledge, have already glutted themselves on policemen's helmets at an earlier date in last month.

'Let our joys be unconfined but also self-contained, and let us set the stamp of assurance on them by drinking

"The Club."

It is my clear recollection that the almost indecipherable notes for this speech were indeed put together hastily between meetings on the day of the Dinner: also, that the Proctors, over-anxious to avert a dash between the Caledonians and the Hibernians, did actually enter the Club that evening to press for an

{ } The Dinner is Domestic - that is, ^{right}
 * Tending little & exaggerated literary
homeworship
 eg. Johnson Club
 Not center v. being
 Religious Service in Mill Lane

There is a
 ...

= Threatened v. a kind of Positivistic
Calamity - deification of God
Man
 = it synchronises, I fear, v. ...
 our ordinary ecclesiastical religion
 a great change ...
 = { Pepys (I think, fortunate, been ...
 & by Diary ...
 } Hope will remain a domestic
affair!
the remains in St. Olave

We have one local, at this table, ^{just}
Pepys ult. have liked - "large
nobly" ...)

(When we return to rest, Heaven like
good Pepysians, "be renewed" about
"the tribe", I hope we shall
see you - or once happen to him
after a very many years - See our
follow our studies ...)

⑥ Pepys now ... one of the best men of all times

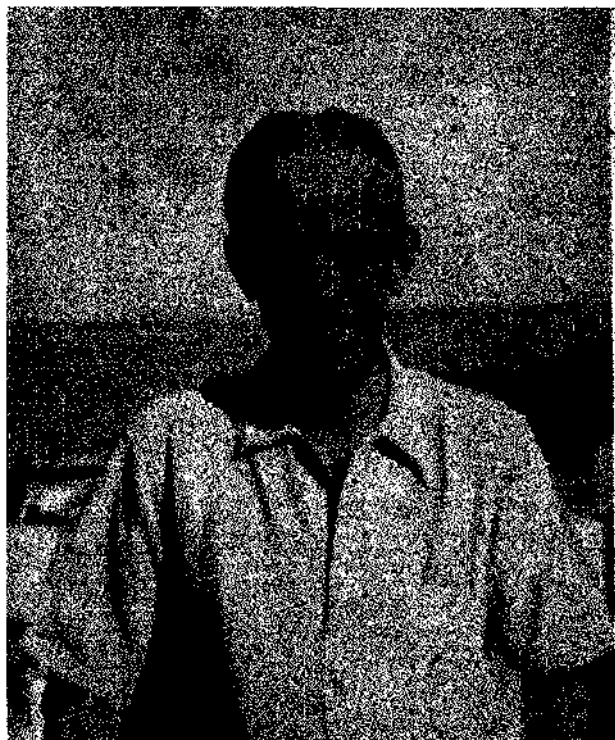
His great
reputation
is based
on the fact
that he was the first
to write the history
of the city of London

- Not so burlesque, as it will appear
 - Harsh must be his time and place or
at St Pauls

Latin, French, Spanish - God
that one more of providence than
any other man of his time

- Had written a Roman history - it is not known
> Known by him when he was up to him
> Had it in his mind to write the history
> "To be ... to be"

Facsimile of a page of notes for a speech made at
 Magdalene College, Cambridge, in 1929, on the
 occasion of the annual celebration of the birthday
 of Samuel Pepys



Spain, 1935

1928-1938

early dispersal. Next morning, heavily embroidered, the story ran that the President of Magdalen had been *propped*,

It was supposed by some that the effortless elegance of George Gordon's public speaking came to him as a "gift of nature with no preparation. This is erroneous. It is true that an impromptu speech on an informal occasion cost him little effort. He enjoyed it, and it did not interfere with the free enjoyment of his evening: many a good dinner, he thought, had been spoilt by speeches. 'Your Dinner', he wrote to a friend; 'it's an attractive idea that: but wouldn't it degenerate into speeches? We belong to a race that talks so much better when it has *not* been convened.'

On important occasions, however, when he was formally appointed to make a speech, he took much trouble in preparing it, and made it as good as he could. His MS. might be an almost illegible maze of interpolations and erasures, but the small bundle of notes and headings from which he finally spoke was always a model of neatness and clarity: even then, much of what he said occurred to him as he was speaking.

On the day of Phillimore's semi-jubilee at Glasgow in 1925, when his portrait was presented to the University, Steuart Miller called for the Phillimores and Gordon, who was staying with them, ten minutes before the ceremony was due to begin. He heard as he waited in Phillimore's study, a tramping back and forward overhead. It was Gordon finishing the preparation of his address—or rather, he supposed, rehearsing it, so that it should sound like a speech and not like an essay—which it did.

After his election to Magdalen he was called upon more and more frequently to speak at various functions—not only in Oxford, but in London, Cambridge, York, Liverpool, Scotland, Wales, etc. For a man who took trouble, and had many other things to do, it was at times a serious task. He would sometimes complain that he seemed to be always on his feet, and wish that he belonged to a silenter service. 'I suppose', he said, 'that if people spoke in public only about what they had really

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

studied the hush that would come upon the world would be almost deathly.' It fell out in 1932 that within three weeks he either proposed or replied four times to the toast of *Floreat Magdalena*—at a dinner to the College servants, at another to the Tenant Farmers, at the College Gaudy, and at 'that delightful dinner in London, the dinner of the Magdalen Association'. It was not surprising that he should occasionally long for the day 'when we shall simply rise and drink our Toasts, then resume without other interruption our chat about trade-revival'.

Between the years 1930 and 1933 he delivered as Professor of Rhetoric a series of popular lectures at Gresham College in London: he had an audience to his mind, and many of its members, eager for information and discussion, wrote letters to him after the lectures. Among these was one which he always remembered: it came from a manufacturer of braces, and was accompanied by a pair, in black silk, 'the best that this country can produce*. He treasured—and wore—this tribute.

Although no longer a Professor after 1928, he always welcomed an opportunity of reviving the relationship with his old calling. An invitation to lecture was often accepted only under pressure, because he knew that it would have been wiser to refuse. But his inclination was on the side of acceptance. Talking and lecturing were for him, I think, a more natural way of expressing his thoughts and ideas than writing in solitude. The contact with his friends and with audiences worked on his companionable nature, and stimulated his mind.

In addition to the Scottish Addresses and the lectures at Gresham College there were many others. He lectured more than once at the Royal Institution: his second Warton Lecture, *Virgil in English Poetry* was given before the British Academy in 1930: the Sir George Watson Lectures on *Anglo-American Literary Relations* date from 1931, and also the Rede Lecture at Cambridge. The following year he lectured at the Tylor Institute on Saint-Evremond, and in 1933 he gave the **Clark**

1928-1938

Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge. He held at Oxford from 1933-38 the Chair of Professor of Poetry: his Inaugural Lecture, *Poetry and the Moderns*[^] was delivered in December, 1934. Some days after the lecture he wrote to his friend Malcolm Robertson at Winchester:

'What a chap you are, to waste your precious holiday attending my Lecture! I wish I had not been officially drawn in the tail of the Vice-Chancellor afterwards; I so much wished to have a word with you, and other friends (but few such *old* friends) whom I saw about. As to your visit earlier in the day, you will readily believe—knowing something, I think, of my habits—that I was then at leisure to *No Atan*\ I have the unfortunate trick of not boiling up on my theme till the matter has become urgent, and then I goat it like 6 men. But till the crisis approaches, I chew the cud in a state of uneasy inertia....'

His lecture on the *Lives of Authors* is printed in the Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature for 1938. On two occasions he lectured at the Sorbonne. On the first I was present, and have a clear memory of his enjoyment of the imposing amphitheatre and large audience, which seemed to react on him so that he had almost the air of conversing with his listeners. The second was in December, 1937. The lecture, I am told by H. Granville-Barker, was about the delay of the English Renaissance, due under More and Colet and the rest, and stifled by Henry VIII, then coming later to birth in a cruder form under Elizabeth. He wrote to me from Paris the next day: 'The lecture was, I am told, "a distinguished success", \$0 that's all right. I had to work pretty hard to get it into shape, and had far too little time. An immense audience: about 1000! and they missed nothing. Maurois was in the Chair, and made himself very pleasant in introducing me. I dined with the G.Bs before the lecture (Maurois and an American lady also there): they live in great state—but very nice and natural/

Robert McElroy tells this story: 'A friend, an American

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

literary man, once came into my room in Rhodes House, having just returned from a visit to London. "I was passing through a building near the Abbey", he said, "and heard the voice of a lecturer who was speaking in one of the rooms. I ventured in, and heard the most perfect lecture of all my experience, and I have heard most of America's best, and some of England's best. The voice and manner of the speaker were perfect, and the content of the lecture brilliant." It took only a few moments of questioning to identify the lecturer. He had heard George Gordon of Oxford.'

The inner mysteries of College business are known only to those who share them, but sometimes a window is opened, and the President's method of dealing with a controversial crisis is revealed. His letter to *The Times* of 20th May, 1932, illustrates this:

Selborne Beeches
Felling in the Long Lythe
Statement by the President of Magdalen
To the Editor of *The Times*

Sir,

In your issue of May 16 you printed a disturbing account from Selborne of the tree-fellings now in progress in the Long Lythe, and of the indignation which they had excited among the Selborne villagers. These fellings, it was stated quite truly, had been ordered by the authorities of Magdalen College, who were described, not as the owners of the land and trees in question, but as holding 'the manorial rights'. This sounds like oppression at once, as the tree-felling, unexplained, sounds like vandalism.

The facts are that the Long Lythe is the freehold property of the College, subject only to a foot-path right of way: that the trees are situated on the farm of one of our College tenants; and that the fellings are being carried out, not on the casual and un-instructed initiative of the College, but in the interest of the

1928-1938

woods themselves, on the direct and definite advice of the University School of Forestry. Some time ago the College decided to have an expert report, from the forestry point of view, on all its woodland property, and the Selborne woodlands were surveyed and reported on with the rest.

The felling complained of is in accordance with a detailed plan drawn up, after the most careful examination, by Mr. Ray Bourne, one of the principal members of the Forestry School staff, and no tree has been or will be felled which he did not mark. He reported that as a whole the beeches on the Short and Long Lythe were overmature; that a large number were old and unsound, and falling one by one; that if the beech were to be perpetuated 'regeneration fellings' would for some time be periodically necessary; and that the first and most extensive of these fellings could not with safety be any longer deferred. He has told us since with what reluctance he came to this decision. *Frankly, it went to my heart to mark some of the trees, but it obviously had to be done.' He urged the College to take a long view, and to consider rather the future of the woods than contemporary susceptibilities.

It has been observed that some sound trees are being felled along with the unsound, and this is perfectly true. The steep slopes of the Lythe make timber extraction so difficult and uneconomic that a reasonable number of sound trees had to be included to pay expenses and to provide (what seemed fair) a sufficient sum to cover the cost of preserving the other much more extensive and, it should be added, much more generally visible portions of the Selborne woods which cannot be self-supporting and which are a charge on the College. The trees have been selected from those which would in any case have been included in the next regeneration felling, say, 10 years hence. We have looked in this matter at the Selborne woods as a whole. The modest return on the present fellings on the eight acres of the Lythe will, in fact, do no more than meet the expenses of

preserving the 260 acres of Selborne woodlands for which we are responsible during the next 10 years.

In such future fellings as may be necessary during the next three decades to ensure the development of the young growth it can be taken as certain that no more big trees will be cut than that development demands. The temporary gaps and unsightliness which are inevitable when old timber comes down we regret as much as anyone. They are most felt, of course, by the inhabitants of Selborne who use the path along the Lythe. From the top of the zigzag, the ordinary rendezvous of visitors to Selborne and the only point, apart from the slopes of the valley itself, from which the Lythe woods can be seen, the effect of the present fellings will be hardly noticeable. Even that effect itself, so unpleasant at the moment, and at close quarters, will pass, we are assured, much sooner than has been suggested in your columns. Mr. Ray Bourne, indeed, goes so far as to say that—'in a few years' time when the felling debris has decayed, the remaining trees have spread their branches, and the ground is locally covered with seedlings, the place will present a picture as beautiful as in the past.'

There is a sentence in your correspondent's report on which I must comment. 'Selborne Hill', he writes, 'was a short time ago taken over by the National Trust, but Magdalen College still retains the trees....' This is the only reference which I have seen in this controversy, and a peculiarly ungrateful one, to the fact that on March 8 last, after negotiations which long preceded these clamours, the College voluntarily presented Selborne Hill and Selborne Hanger to the nation. During the past few years the College has spent about £700 in buying up the wood rights on the Hill and Hanger expressly to preserve this beauty spot, and has only withheld these timber rights from its gift to the National Trust because it is precluded by law from alienating them. The terms of the gift, however, are such as effectually to exclude any idea of realizing from the woods in

June 24

My dear Bob,

- What a chat you are,
to waste your precious
leisure, attending my
lectures! I wish I had a
few official. Men in
the hall of the 110 (Lancaster
afterwards). I is much
wishes to be a kind with
you, & the friends (but
few such old friends) whom
I saw about. As to
your visit earlier in the
day, you will certainly

Facsimile of a letter to Malcolm Robertson

Wrote to - Miss Robinson, who was, I think, your
- other - manager.

Yes, come
I love you

believe -- knowing something,
I think of my habits --
but I was then at leisure
to "No Man"! I have
the unfortunate luck of
not being up on my
thame till the matter is
become urgent, when I
find it like to mean
(But the crisis approaches,
I shall be and in a state
of uneasy motion.

You look fit & j. m.,
or can a friend distribute
to the front seats - of which
I hope 3 at least were
sent at your disposal!!
Then remember me to

1928-1938

question the purchase price of these rights, and the College was well content to make that sacrifice.

It was announced by your correspondent that the villagers of Selborne were preparing a petition of protest, which on completion was to be sent direct to me. This petition I have now received, and the present communication may be taken as in part my answer to it. It was accompanied by a letter from Mr. G. Maxwell, described very justly in your columns as one of the oldest and most respected inhabitants of Selborne, and, in fact, for many years a most valued coadjutor of the College in all local woodland matters. His letter contained this sentence: 'Up to now it has always been the pride of the College to preserve the beauties of our famous and noted village.' It has been, and, as I hope to have shown, it still is.

I am, Sir, Yours etc.

George Gordon

The President's Lodgings, Magdalen College,
Oxford, May 19th.

It was not his practice to write letters to the press: only defence of the reputation of his College could have inspired it.

Dr. Chapman gives me this further illustration of his gift for saving a situation: 'On one occasion the local authority projected an improvement—of drainage or the like—which should traverse the Magdalen walks and was not likely to promote their improvement. It was represented that the City had powers which they would not hesitate to use; and defeatism showed its head. But George, who always took fire at any threat to the amenities, turned to his telephone, and summoned the appropriate official to an interview. To him he explained that the matter was not one of routine; that the editor of *The Times* was a Magdalen man; that (busy as he was) he would if necessary give a week to the ventilation of his grievance. An alternative route for the improvement was quickly prepared.'

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

Before a College meeting he always made himself master of the business, and thus prepared, went to it with an open mind. 'At the proper moment', writes Canon Fox, 'he gave his view and his reasons for it. He was scrupulous, however, in not pressing his views upon his colleagues, and they responded on their part by an unwillingness to disagree with one who was not only their President but a most careful upholder of their constitution. In the ten years before the war many changes were effected with very little friction, and this was largely due to the President.'

In ordinary life his practice was the same. He did not readily, even within his family, force his views upon others, but was content to express them, and leave the rest to their judgment. The following passage comes from a letter written to one of his sons: 'My only fear is that you might be over-stubborn and wreck a promising deal. Of course I see very well the force of what you say, and wouldn't wish to minimise it. But there is a point in negotiations, not so easily recognized without experience, when one should concede something. I hope your own judgment may detect it when the time comes.'

In 1934 he was elected a Fellow of Eton, and on one or two occasions exercised his privilege of spending a night in the Fellows' Rooms in College. He enjoyed having his youngest boy, a Colleger, with some of his friends, to have meals with him there.

In the first Eights Week after his election at Magdalen the College Eights were on the downward grade: the situation distressed him. As we were on our way up in the crowd from the barge, he overheard a clergyman behind him, who had evidently never seen him nor known anything of him, say in a loud voice: 'I expect this new President has his nose in his books, and doesn't care about the boats.' He was stung by the injustice and falsity of the remark. In a few years, however, with his direct encouragement, the First Eight was head of the river, while the other boats had also reached prosperous positions. It was no doubt a

memfry of the insult which made him say during these more successful years: 'It has been proved in Eights that, even in my Presidency, the College can still row.'

It was a tradition of the College that the President should address Freshmen in the Hall on the first Sunday of the Michaelmas Term. These informal talks, I am told, were much appreciated: but he made no notes for them, and there are no records. I am aware, however, that he sometimes gave them advice about managing their money, telling them that it was as foolish to disregard money as to place too much importance on it. Coming from a man who had almost no interest in money, this advice was impressive. He regarded coinage, indeed, as rather an absurd joke: his attitude towards his own money was not unlike that of his now two-year-old grand-daughter, who delights in having a pocketful of pennies, so that she may hand them out to amused and friendly American soldiers. He was, however, a most faithful guardian of money other than his own. In public he would say: 'I do not advocate the scorn of money. There is not one of us who at the present day can afford to scorn it, and if someone ever comes to you and suggests that the work you are doing for him is so interesting in itself that you should be above considerations of salary, I say: "Suspect that man!" No, I prefer the method of Robinson Crusoe. The words of that British moralist come from one of those immortal chapters which describe his visits to the Wreck. He found on one of those visits a heap of coins, pieces of eight. And "I smiled to myself", he says, "at the sight of this money. 'O drug!' said I aloud, 'what art thou good for? Thou art not worth to me—no, not the taking off the ground; one of these knives is worth all this heap; I have no manner of use for thee j e'en remain where thou art, and go to the bottom as a creature whose life is not worth saving.'—However, upon second thoughts, I took it away"'. Gordon's copy of *Robinson Crusoe* bears against this passage the marginal note: 'He might have been an author'.

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

It is the custom at Oxford on the last day of term for the Head of the College to go into Hall with the Tutors, and to have every undergraduate come up before him, to receive a verbal report of the man, make some suitable remark by way of praise or blame, and so let him go off for the Vacation. This ceremony is called Collections. 'I always sat through Collections at Magdalen', says Canon Fox, 'though it took the whole of a long morning, because I delighted so very much in hearing the President's observations. He could not of course know much of the men at first hand, but he had a remarkable gift for knocking the nail on the head hard and often. I remember reporting on a young man who was rather laboriously reading Theology, and I said that his tutor gave him a satisfactory report, and that Professor G. R. Driver had very kindly been teaching him the elements of Hebrew. "Ah—", the President said very genially, "so you've been exploiting the reluctant *savant*?* Sometimes, however, he could be properly indignant, and perhaps more impressive still by being obviously bored with an undergraduate who was not doing anything much.... But he was always too kind to us. It was a delight in the middle of the morning when the Collections were suspended for a few minutes, and the President whipped out a cigarette, and entertained us with talk about something far removed from the business in hand.' .

He had a habit, during meetings, of making hieroglyphs or even slight sketches on his blotting-paper. On one occasion during Collections, after hearing the report of a tutor on an undergraduate, Gordon asked the young man 'Well, does that seem to you a fair portrait?' 'I am sorry, sir,' he replied with an eye on the President's blotting-paper, 'I could not quite make out what you were drawing'.

To Canon Fox, formerly Dean of Divinity in the College, I owe also this picture of the Chorister Trials which are held at Magdalen two or three times every year in order to get new Choristers. About a dozen little boys of nine or ten years old

present themselves from all parts of England and Wales and from every sort of environment. 'The Trial is held in the Practice Room, which is a room about sixteen feet square. Against one wall is the Organist with the piano in front of him. Opposite, on a hard bench, six of the candidates are seated, usually remarkably self-possessed and on the whole enjoying themselves. With their backs to the side walls a few dons act as judges. The President was seldom absent, though it must be confessed that the proceedings were somewhat tedious and always long. In addition to securing two or three good choristers there was always a certain ceremony to be gone through. Each candidate read a few verses from the sixty-eighth Psalm; it was curious to hear little boys having a try at "runagates", and hardly ever did one of them succeed in saying "scarceness" in the same way that the grown-ups do. After this each boy read off a list of selected words. The President was always very attentive to this. Then followed the elementary musical tests, and each boy sang a solo of his own choosing, often "Wherethe bee sucks" or "Where e'er she walks". By the end of these "auditions" (a word which the President used with amused contempt) the typed lists of candidates with which we had all been provided were covered with hieroglyphics, the President's most of all. His comments were often pithy, and in the discussion as to whom it would be best to elect he often said the decisive word. He had noticed what others had failed to notice. And now came the tricky part of the business. The candidates and their parents* generally their mothers, had been waiting in the New Common Room all the morning, provided with sandwiches and sherry and lemonade, and were by the end of the election all on edge. It was the duty of the Dean of Divinity to announce the successful candidates, and ask that they and their parents should go and see the President. Upon this almost all the unsuccessful candidates and their mothers burst into tears, and he hurried away. But what a contrast in the Practice Room where the President

received the Choristers Elect! He seemed to know just what approach to make to each parent individually, and how much notice to take of each little boy: he could be formal or informal, grand or (almost) jolly, but at any rate each little party went away feeling that the new chorister, when he came, would have at least one friend at Magdalen College.'

He was always sympathetic towards the frolics of undergraduates, and, when they had earned it, liked to see them have their fun. On the occasion of a College bump supper there was some concern among the brighter spirits because the bonfire was dying: all available fodder had already been consumed. It occurred to one man that he had seen a large pile of old music in the Practice Room, and he rushed to get it. As he made his way back across the Quad towards the bonfire, carrying an enormous pile of music, his progress was watched with delight by the President. Each time he met a friend, his bundle was laid down, so that he might shake hands: each time he picked up a little less: most of the music never reached the fire.

The President once described the undergraduates as 'a society of young men, most of whom belong to the leisured rather than the criminal classes, and none of whom really mean any harm'. Later, when war came, his views concerning their industry and their seriousness were to be considerably changed.

Although he had been through all the grades as a lecturer, tutor and professor, his attitude to the young men and his outlook on life had never a trace of donnishness. His heart went out to the obviously competent and intelligent boy, who was asked in an academic interview what books he read. 'Books', said the candidate with charming candour, 'I'm afraid I haven't much time for them. There is so much to be done.'

He appreciated also the reply given by one of his men who was being interviewed for a Colonial Administrative appointment. He was asked: 'If a riot occurred what would you do?' 'I should go out', said the young man, 'and quell it.'

1928-1938

The President was always proud of members of the College who gained academical, political or other distinction: but he was no less proud of the young explorers who put on the map Mount Waynflete (in the Spitsbergen expedition), Mount Magdalen and a river in Abyssinia. He once amused himself and his family by drawing up, in anticipation of future discoveries, a list of physical features, naming them after various personalities in the College.

A break-down in health was averted in the spring of 1934 only by a restful visit in the Easter vacation to his friend Colonel C. H. Wilkinson at Milford-on-Sea. His host's doctor was the first to diagnose the real complaint—extreme low blood-pressure, for which rest was the cure. Characteristically, George turned the gradual rise in his blood-pressure into a game; and bets were laid each day on the number of points gained, as it rose from below 100 to 120. 'On my pointing out to the doctor that the life I was leading, with stout twice a day etc., was beginning to affect my shape, he replied that a certain roundness below the waist was part of the cure, and that I should congratulate myself on it. Later, when fully restored, I might get rid of it, and resume the elegant flatness of line, which accords, he agreed, with my youthful figure. What do you think of that? "But what will my wife say to me?" I said. This (I regret to inform you) he regarded as unimportant—the flippancy of a layman!' He returned to Oxford a week after the beginning of term, ready for work. He had promised his doctor to resign from various offices. He resigned in 1935 from the Hebdomadal Council on which he served since 1928, but two years later was again appointed to it by the Chancellor in preparation for his term as Vice-Chancellor. Also on taking up these duties he resigned in **1938** his honorary Command of the Infantry Unit of the University Contingent of the O.T.C., which he had held with the rank of Major.

By the spring of the following year he was once more in poor

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

health—'run down to the last ounce without compression enough to drive the engine'. The situation was brought to a climax when he fainted one day while lecturing on the poet Hopkins. He was advised to take a complete rest; and the College gave him leave of absence for the Michaelmas Term: this, with the long vacation which preceded it, gave him a handsome opportunity of recovering his health. The early part of the vacation was spent in the Isle of Wight, and in September he paid his usual visit to Normand in Scotland.

There was some discussion, during a short visit to Chevening, about where the term's leave should be spent. Rudyard Kipling, who was among the guests, insisted on the south of Spain, and followed up his opinion with letters of good advice. He recommended a small unspoiled hotel some few miles from Malaga. We took his advice, and found quarters in Torremolinos, a fishing village six miles west of Malaga.

At the end of September, having chosen to go by sea, we sailed from Southampton: as the boat began to move down Southampton Water George exclaimed in radiant incredulity 'We've done it'. His passionate desire was to cut himself off for these months from Oxford and his ordinary life. We found the approaches to Torremolinos enchanting. It was strange, remote and drowned in sunshine. As we reached our inn, and mounted the steps of the verandah, a lady rose and addressed us: 'The landlord has gone to-day to see the bull-fight in Malaga, and has asked me to give you tea. I think you know my brother, the Master of Balliol!'

The hotel stood on a bluff: it had been formerly a fortress, and the officers' quarters had been converted into small flats, one of which we occupied. At the foot was a diving platform, * which cut out the insanitary beaches of the Mediterranean. There we swam constantly every day: and the first time was before breakfast. Apart from this there was little need **for** exercise beyond an occasional round of golf on a comic **Spanish**

1928-1938

course, **or** a short walk at sunset. We were joined in the beginning of December by Peter Gregory.

We were learning Spanish, and George had acquired enough to read newspapers, unfortunately for his peace of mind; for Italy was engaged in murdering Abyssinia, while England and France were discussing Sanctions.

The only long expedition we made was to Granada, in the company of the Scott-Browns, a London surgeon and his wife, who were at Torremolinos for a good part of our stay, and with whom we formed a friendship which was renewed in England. George was captured by the beauty of the Alhambra: but the life of our village interested him more than anything else. He would stop to watch the sardine-fishermen hauling in their nets, attracted by their mournful Moorish songs; the flocks of turkeys, driven like sheep along the highroads; the fat gardener, reading the newspaper aloud to his men, who could neither read nor write; the overlaid donkeys, waiting patiently outside the village inn, so aptly called 'El Delirio'; the minute black pigs, one of which he nicknamed Ivan the Terrible. He was on easy friendly terms with the maid who looked after our flat. As she swept and polished all day long with the utmost cheerfulness she sang a heart-rending song about an orphan: 'No tengo padre; no tengo madre.' George had long and laboured conversations with her which broke up in laughter.

We returned to England in mid-January, sun-soaked and ready to face the fog. George, completely restored to health, was glad to have ceased to interest the doctor. He wrote to a friend at the end of Hilary Term: 'We have hardly felt the term a strain at all, much as has happened in it: such is the virtue of a term off and a Spanish holiday! And here we are watching the budding and chirping of spring! We can hardly believe it.'

During his absence the Vice-President, **Mr. J. M. Thompson**, **had acted for him**: George always considered **that he owed him**

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

a great debt of gratitude for his contribution to this timely and successful holiday.

To his eldest boy, who had gone out the previous year to the Gold Coast, he wrote in March:

'Term is just over, and I have the leisure—which I had promised myself for some weeks—to write to you.

'Your recent letters have been a great comfort and relief to us. Not that you haven't been admirably philosophical throughout, extracting humour from stones, jokes from the mountain torrents etc. etc. (see *As You Like / **). . . . Here things go well: though at the moment Europe is in the thick of a first-class Franco-German crisis. First of all your mother and I are in wonderful health/and after only 10 weeks of winter (in which we haven't so much as caught a cold) are beginning to feel the first cheerfulness of spring_____

'I am summoned for dinner. I wish I could share it with you—including the beer! Meanwhile I am playing weekly at Frilford, and hope to have a game worth your competing with (perhaps a bisc or two) when you come home.'

Tony came home on leave in mid-winter, and in April, 1937, had this second letter from this father:

'Your first letter from the Gold Coast was hailed with gusto. Not that we didn't seize on your other letters too, and enjoy every story from the redundant oysters to Mr. Tod(d). But to know how and where you were to spend your time for the next three months was something we badly wanted.

'It was a knock, at first, to hear that you were starting straight away on trek—and especially that, by the accident of what's his name's illness, you weresetting out alone. I hope that won't last long. You point out the advantages of trekking in the dry season—a new experience for you—and I most earnestly hope that this *does* remove the worst hardships....

1928-1938

'... Since you left we have won the Boatrace (and with 2 Magdalen men in the crew). That is one solid satisfaction..

'I was sorry we lost so heavily in the Athletics, but every event except the putting was well contested, and we were not disgraced.

'You missed, by going when you did, a spell of the most dismal weather I can remember. Now the sun is trying to earn his keep, and there are signs of an amiable late spring. Your mother and I, having experienced what the sun can really do, sigh a little for southern climes; but we must have patience.

'E. V. Lucas told me last night a story which was new to me, though others seemed to know it. A visitor of the prison where Horatio Bottomley was doing his time came on him hard at work sewing mail bags. "Sewing?", he said. "No," said H.B., "reaping."

⁴We miss you dreadfully, my dear Tony, and it was all we could do to let you go. But the memory of your leave is a very happy one, and we comfort ourselves with that....'

In this year the University of Leeds conferred upon Gordon the Degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*. He was presented by Professor Hamilton Thompson as one who for some years 'dwelt and taught among us to the happiness of us all*. He mentions this event in another letter to his eldest boy—a series of letters which were unattainable at the time when his Letters were published, and which have only now reached this country.

Magdalen College, Oxford

23-8-37

My dear Tony,

I am in Oxford, acting as Pro-Vice-Chancellor for three weeks in the dead season, and your mother, Janet and **George** are at **Burley** in the **New Forest**. I go **down for week-ends**,

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

and, as the weather is perfect, I tear myself away on Monday mornings with some reluctance. Oxford is warm and *theoretically* the weather here is all it should be: unfortunately no air has been provided, and the desire to breathe has not yet been eradicated from our frail and erring human substance. I blame the City Council as usual: why go through the farce of providing water, heating, light and transport, and omit air?

All is well: I have never seen your mother as brown, and she is in love with the Forest. Your old car is doing magnificent service, and George, who drives it, couldn't look prouder or more resolutely un-selfconscious if he were managing a Daimler.

Your news is always greedily awaited. I have just read your last, as you were setting out on trek, and have forwarded it to your mother, who will pounce on it to-morrow morning. If you are truthful, and not just strumming the optimistic note for parental ears, you have had a much more reasonable, civilized and interesting time this tour than ever before. We are greatly relieved to think it is so, and I wish you a successful trek.

I wrote you a longish letter some little time ago, which I hope you received. I forget if I told you in it that I was going to Leeds to get an Honorary Degree (D.Litt.). I saw a lot of old friends there, many of whom asked most kindly about you.

Rupert Smith and his family are now all repatriated, and looking about for somewhere to settle. It will be very pleasant having his company from time to time, and should improve my golf. He is just like the R.B.S. I first knew. He is keenly interested in you and all your doings and prospects.

The world is rapidly becoming a series of organized mad-houses. Humiliating as it may sometimes seem that this country should keep resolutely to the back-waters of sanity,

1928 - 1938

I hope we shall go on with that policy for some time yet. No harm in being out of the swim when your fellow-bathers would be crocodiles. In two years time we should be strong enough to put on our old policeman's uniform, and resume our traditional talk of saying: 'Now then, what's all this 'ere?*' But what a funny two years they're going to be, I'm afraid. We shall have the solution of the Spanish conundrum by that time.

My thoughts and plans about myself are rather grimly governed by the fact that I am to be Vice-Chancellor in a year's time. It's one of the hardest-worked jobs in the country. However it would be cowardly to shirk, and no doubt there are compensations in being able to say 'Scram' to the whole University. Your mother has the same misgivings, but when it comes to the bit will get some fun out of being Hostess-in-Chief.

My best love, my dear Tony, and take care of yourself.

Your loving
Father

7 Oct. 1937

My dear Tony,

Did you get my *grandis et verbosa epistdlal* I should be sorry to think that so much gossip, so many admirable sentiments, and so many epigrams were lost.

Your letters are the most eagerly awaited event in our simple household—especially when your mother and I are here alone, and undisturbed by the cavorting of the family. We are alone now—George back at Eton, John in the City, Janet at the Isle of Dogs—and the machinery of the October term is beginning to clank and grumble. I suppose we should all grow mouldy but for the successive waves of young men and the jolt they give to everything. All I dislike is the infernal amount of machine-minding, and the impossibility, almost,

LIFE OF GEORGE 3. GORDON

without being stigmatized as a recluse, of getting 3 hours on end uninterrupted.

I hope your life is still proceeding on fairly rational lines: that you still have your District: are standing up to the climate: and have kept your weight. I for my part have just had a shock: there is no doubt at all that my waist-line is a couple of inches more than it was a year ago! Till then it had never changed and was as lean and hollow as a boy's: but now—I am really worried. What will Gregory say—how loud will he laugh? It is high time you were home to put me through a course of training on strict Mr. Thomas lines. I will buy him a new bowler (and you too, if you want one), if you can bring me to normal.

Let me know if there is anything I can do about your affairs here, either immediate or for the future.. ..

At the end of the year, in his tenth year as President, he wrote: 'We fix one year as the probation period of a Fellow, so perhaps 10 years may seem long enough for a President. If I emerge, as I hope to do, with the credit of the College unimpaired—with its standing in the University and in the world outside as high as it ought to be, as I think it is now, in the competition of mind and body, and in all the manners that make man—I shall be content.

'The time-rhythm of an Oxford College, and of Magdalen more than most, has nothing brisk or bustling, or fussy, or choppy about it, but rather the long slow swell as of deep waters at peace. Its units are centuries, and it seems to partake in its degree—so far as human institutions do so—of some rhythm of eternity. Something of this illusion of the eternal, something of that ancient breadth and security and peace, of that disinterested and unhurrying spirit which the College seems to symbolize, is the everlasting anchorage of our rich and happy memories.'

With the City of Oxford he maintained friendly relations:

1928-1938

he spoke on several occasions at City dinners. 'I cheered up **the** citizens of Oxford at their dinner on Thursday last', he wrote me on 19th November, 1938, *and I took the chance of breaking ground about the traffic problem. I found my remarks on that well received.' He always regretted the publicity to which Oxford was exposed—a disadvantage which Cambridge has had the good fortune to escape. The activities of the City of Oxford Publicity Board in 1935 disturbed him. They seemed likely to intensify all the innovations from which Oxford had already suffered so much. One of their stated objects was * *to attract further inquiries and stimulate the flow of visitors, conferences and permanent residents*—*

'Although admittedly', continues the appeal, 'every firm does not benefit by direct business with visitors, it is undeniable that a larger and more constant flow of visitors would mean more money coming into the city, and therefore more business ultimately for all traders.'

His underlining and marginal marking in his copy of the pamphlet issued by the Publicity Board leave no doubt about his views. The only proposal which had his approval was that which aimed at improving the amenities of the City 'by the minimization of noise, litter, and traffic congestion'. On that point he was entirely at one with the promoters of the movement. It may be considered by some that he was denying progress: but that would be an injustice, *This is a rapid age', he said, 'and the University must—not exactly keep step, but catch the rhythm—feel the pulse of the age.' But he certainly thought it was a misfortune that the seat of an ancient University should have the sorry fate of being chosen as a centre of industrial and tourist development. He never ceased to regret the peace of Oxford as he had first known it. It is clear that he was torn between his natural taste for the peaceful unbustling life of earlier centuries and his real but reluctant admiration for the accomplishment of science.. 'We are conscious*', he wrote, 'standing among the scientific

wonders of our day, that while we have gained in power, we have lost in art, and most notably, perhaps, in the chief art of all. Human power is enormous, but in the chaos of new contrivances we have somehow contrived to lose the art of living.'

He considered that it was publicity alone which gave such undue prominence to the flippant Motion carried at the Union in February, 1933. 'This House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country.' Three years after this juvenile absurdity he wrote to R. B. Smith: 'Meanwhile we are informed by the Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge that 9 out of 10 undergraduates at that seminary would rather go to prison than go to war! This puts in the shade our little twopenny-halfpenny "King and Country" Motion at the Union.' He knew better than most the insignificance of such youthfully seditious pronouncements, inspired by the desire to be shockingly original. 'The innocent creaking of our domestic machinery in Oxford', he wrote, 'continues to attract the public Press, and every little reporter is encouraged by London to send up his daily 10/6 worth of folly or deliberate misrepresentation. Actually—and this is true of all the "incidents" so sedulously fomented and exaggerated by our public commentators, not even excluding the famous Union Motion—none of these events have at any time interested or concerned more than 3 or 4 per cent, of the University, and the ordinary undergraduate knows nothing of it until he reads it in the evening paper.'

The essential difference between Oxford and Cambridge was a subject on which he had reflected much, and he left among his papers a considerable collection of interesting comments on it. ⁴¹ had always meant to write something consecutive on this eternally attractive subject, and more particularly on the puzzling and persistent differences between the Oxford and Cambridge man. It was to have been one of those elegant little essays in which Cambridge so readily allows our superiority, even to the point of suggesting that the production of such elegancies is,

1928-1938

compared with themselves, our principal and distinguishing talent.' He broaches the question why more of our own great poets were Cambridge men. *That Cambridge has produced more poets than Oxford is only true in this sense that many more poets have resided at Cambridge than at Oxford. But the difference in number and importance is so great as to suggest that it cannot be accidental. I believe that it is not accidental, and that Cambridge (as I should prefer to put it) has killed, maimed or silenced fewer poets than Oxford. The obvious and glaring inhumanity of the intellectual exercises for centuries most in fashion at Cambridge, has been the salvation of their poets, who have been repelled at first sight, not tempted aside by delusive promises. But Oxford, from a very early time, has been ambitious of culture, influence, catholicity, and eager to legislate for the whole of life. The greater richness of the intellectual bait she has to offer has diverted, I believe, many an incipient poet from his proper solitude and art. The possible Spenser becomes a bishop, the possible Milton a leader of movements, a social illuminant and reformer.'

In 1937 one of those paragraphs on Oxford politics, which appeared sporadically in the London evening newspapers, made the surprising statement that the President of Magdalen if not *red* was at least pink. It was a foolish statement to make about a man so conservative by instinct and so strongly attached to tradition as George was known to be. He felt, however, that such irresponsible misrepresentation of him as President of Magdalen ought to be corrected and chastised: he therefore exacted an apology from the editor, and let the matter drop.

Fate seemed to have decreed that he should never visit the U.S.A. Three separate visits were contemplated, but not one was realized. The first of these was in 1918: this tour was cancelled by the War Office as he was on the point of sailing. In 1923 he was invited to attend an Anglo-American English Conference: on that occasion he was not free to leave Oxford.

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

The third of the proposed visits, a lecturing tour, arranged for the long vacation of 1933, was prevented by the economic crisis in America. *When dollars fail—biiF! Culture must wait¹, he wrote in abetter to a friend in America.

It is much to be regretted that he never went. He had relations there, and many good American friends. 'Perhaps he might have enjoyed a little being an ambassador', writes his friend, Miller, *—and what a good ambassador (at Washington) he would have made!'

He read widely in American literature, and it had his constant and sympathetic interest. His lectures on *Anglo-American Literary Relations*, delivered in 1931, were edited after his death by Dr. Chapman and published in 1942. But after 1931 he had pursued his reading in this subject, following the course of the emancipation of American literature, and admiring its native strength and growing power. 'No one who knew George Gordon', writes Dr. Chapman, 'will doubt the voracity of his appetite or the strength of his digestion. In the American literature of the age which these lectures mainly treat, his chosen authors were Whitman, Melville and Mark Twain. No one who ever heard him talk about 20th century American literature will doubt the range of his reading, or the depth of his sympathy with its specifically American qualities.'

He continued to collect Americana, looking forward to a time when he might have leisure to express his mind in a more ample study in the light of his later work on the subject.

During the last fifteen years of his life, as leisure and opportunity for reading grew more and more rare, he formed the habit, if the business of the day permitted it, of reading during his morning toilet. 'His dressing in the morning', writes Peter Gregory, 'was a prolonged ritual. He had very fixed ideas on the sequence of his toilet, and, if I had been a caricaturist, I should have done him shaving in a characteristic attitude.' When reading was added to this ritual, his breakfast had to wait. The books

1928-1938

which drifted to his dressing-room for these stolen hours were soon marked in the margin after his custom. One volume of Menander belonging to the College Library, bore such extensive markings that he retained the copy, and gave another to the library. Several books belonging to the London Library had the same fate.

I have always thought that the climate of Oxford and the low blood pressure from which he suffered in his latter years contributed much to this reluctant start in the morning. When we were in Scotland or abroad, particularly in Paris, he was much more vigorous in the early morning. Canon Fox recalls an occasion on which, accompanied by the principal officers of the College, he went to Wain fleet. Their business was to attempt to settle a conflict of opinion between the College and the local authorities concerning the Founder's school at Wain-fleet, which in spite of his incredible patience and discretion, did not meet with much success. 'I shall not forget', writes Canon Fox, 'the amusement with which the President took the head of the table at breakfast (we were staying at the Lumley Arms at Skegness), and expressed his surprise at finding himself and all of us there. The bracing air had affected him, he thought, and we were all extremely cheerful, and to the other guests at the hotel who were mostly business men from Nottingham, we must have appeared very odd.'

At home, his late entry into the dining-room in the morning was a skilful piece of comedy. Those who had already breakfasted were at once put in the wrong, and made to feel that he was the injured person. 'Was the coffee not yet made? Where were the dishes?' and invariably, as he touched the hot-plate by accident: 'Damn that hot-plate!' One morning, during a visit to Lord Normand in Scotland, he demanded his coffee in an aggrieved tone, though he had at the time his cup, already filled, in his hand.

On one occasion he happened to enter the room as his family

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

was engaged in a lively impersonation of his usual morning routine, damning the hot-plate, and pretending to look for the dishes. He was the first to laugh.

If he was finishing a letter or some business he was frequently a few minutes late for dinner, and this passed unremarked. But if, for any reason, I entered the dining room later than he did, I found, ranged round my place in a semicircle, all the available clocks and watches. On one occasion, indeed, a large heavy Regency clock held pride of place in the centre: my protests on this occasion were so forcible that this ponderous item was afterwards omitted.

His intimates will recognize this humorous trick of covering a fault of his own by turning the tables on another person. Nothing delighted him more than when one fell into the trap and tried to defend oneself. This note, written to him by Mrs. Robert Bridges illustrated this constant habit:

Chilswell Io.x.34

Dear George,

We too much enjoyed your visit. I don't forget my last sight you both: you starting to run, and shouting out in the most bullying tone at your command, 'Come on!' to Mary, who had been patiently waiting 5 minutes for you!

I laugh to myself when I recall it, tho' my telling of it is not amusing....

He had, I think, only one anti-social habit which he never lost. If he saw anyone within his family interested in a book he had an instant impulse to read that particular book. On one occasion, not long after our marriage, I had got half-way through a novel by Henry James: I found, when I laid it down, that he had picked it up and begun to read it. It was a paper-bound volume, and the difficulty was solved by cutting the book down the middle of the back. In later years, his children, as they grew aware of this habit, were careful to carry their books *ajx>ut* with

1928-1938

them for safety. He would say, if he got possession of another person's book: 'I will give you this in a quarter of an hour*'. But this time was invariably prolonged until he had finished the book.

In an assembly, especially if he had been persuaded to go against his will, my husband had a way of commenting on his surroundings in a whisper which only he considered to be inaudible. This practice, however amusing his comments were, often caused me embarrassment. It was noticed also by others. ⁴ A friend of mine', says Peter Gregory, 'sitting next to Gordon at a meeting when he was in the Chair, was refreshingly surprised when the Chairman remarked to him in a whisper which could be heard by all around him, that the man then addressing the meeting was an awful bore, and was bound to go on interminably. The speaker was a famous educationist! This hoarse whisper, screened by his hand, was a constant joy to his friends. He could never be convinced that he wasn't being entirely discreet and confidential.'

The title, 'educationist', readily aroused his suspicion: it suggested to his mind pedantry, pomp and conferences. 'When, as seldom happens, though perhaps not seldom enough,' he said, 'I read our modern educationists, I cannot help remembering the poor girl in Daudet, *thzjeunefille trop romanesque* (too imaginative by half), who always at school obtained the prize for imagination, and died of it at last. It was a French school, and in France, in education as in politics and sport, they can see only one thing at a time.

'I have never felt that very much is gained in the ordinary business of life, by calling human nature psychology, and handing it over to specialists: I have observed also that those of my acquaintance who are occasionally addressed by this title of educationist seem anxious, as a rule, to be considered in some other light. I should suppose it, indeed, to be as difficult in these days for two educationists to meet without laughing, as it was

in Rome for Cato's priests. To tell you the truth, I have never really discovered what an educationist is—the title would appear to be as doubtful as the subject-matter.'

The allusions and *sitruiles* which were latent in his talk were not usually of literary origin. They came straight from life, and proved his powers of observation. In places where men and women were found at their work or taking their pleasure, nothing that had any dramatic quality escaped him. All his life he loved a music-hall or a circus, and if the clown, after the manner of his kind, stopped before him and addressed him, he was quite unembarrassed and ready to exchange repartee. It was not easy to draw him away from a street incident. A cabman disputing with his fare; litigants leaving the Palais de Justice in Paris, and renewing their quarrels in the street; a shepherd in the Cheviots working his dog; a couple of miners discussing how they would spend their gala day; a boy intent on preparing his tackle for a day's sport; bare-footed children dancing to the bag-pipes on the Castle Square in Edinburgh—these were the things that engaged his rapt attention.

With simple people he was always at ease. He had a ready friendly word and a joke for the railway porter and the taxi-driver who helped him to catch his train to London, for the old man at the corner of Longwall who sold him his evening paper, and others whom he met in everyday life. There are many in this city who remember him with affection because he never failed to greet them in the street. Our old parlourmaid, Mailing, wrote me that she would 'always feel proud to have served him'. On our visits to Paris he invariably received a very warm welcome from the red-haired waitress at the Petit-Riche where we often dined: Francaise was, I think, her name. The meal was served to the accompaniment of spirited conversation and good-humoured banter.

The story is already known of the day he spent in a railway carriage in brisk and amusing talk with bookies on their way

1928-1938

to a race-meeting. On being asked what his line was, he had told them that he was travelling in spare parts. That evening when he related his escapade I had protested 'How could you?' 'Would you have had me spoil the day by telling them that I was a professor?*' was his reply.

One of the Christmas events at Magdalen was the College Servants' party, which he always attended, and there was never any doubt about his welcome. His speech was the event of the half-yearly Audit Dinner; and as the fun grew, the tenant farmers would call for a second, or even a third. A friend of his, a young boy, who went to see him off at the end of a holiday in the Highlands, reported afterwards: 'Mr. Gordon is a wonderful man: he can be funny even in a railway train.'

Boredom was foreign to his nature, although he was easily exasperated by stupidity and dullness. He did not know the blankness of mind and vacuity of thought which is the essence of boredom. He was particularly courteous to the aged. I have often seen him at a social function monopolized, and patiently absorbed in conversation with some great man in his decline telling him lengthy stories about his boyhood. I will confess that sometimes as a hostess I regretted this characteristic absorption, while secretly admiring it. He was a good host and took pleasure in hospitality: at his end of the table there was always laughter or eager discussion. One knew that he had provoked it, but he had no air of having done so.

It is not easy to recapture the manner or essence of his talk, or to express the quality of his wit and humour. He always tossed the ball to another, expecting an interchange, and if none came, he was content to be silent. But, when others freely contributed their minds, his response was immediate. He would readily fall in with a mood of serious and sincere reflection, taking up the discussion with the purpose of bringing out of it some clear conclusion. Rambling, vague, inconsequent talk made him desperate. He would end it by a curt intervention or more often

by merely going away. Those who knew him well were familiar with the signs that he was restraining a sharp retort. 'One trait I early noticed', says Normand, 'was a slight movement of his lips when anyone said anything silly. He drew in the two sides of his mouth, so that the curves of his lips came centrewards. He always retained this habit, and I have often noticed the warning of the pursed lip.'

His wit and humour were the wit and humour of ideas. It was mainly playful or ironical without sting or malice. He did not practice verbal witticisms: only occasionally, in an informal address, did he allow himself a play of words. I can remember on a Ladies' Night at the Vintners' Company Dinner his professing surprise in a Toast that the Company's Hall should be situated in Thames Street: would not Vine Street have been more appropriate? His hosts admitted that he was the first to make this suggestion. At the time of the economic crisis when there was difficulty in placing undergraduates in jobs he remarked 'One can't see the trees for the unemployed foresters'.

He had a vein of humour in talk which imputed to his partner in it an opinion which was near enough to his true opinion to be difficult to repudiate bluntly, but which was a specious and provocative travesty of it. It was a game which H. W. Garrod and he sometimes played for their own diversion—a game in which they were well matched. He spoke at deliberate speed, and handsomely, as they still say in the Navy—without interrupting or thrusting in to make a point. 'Life', he said, 'is not run by clever talk—is, on the contrary, often impeded by it.'

He had an aptitude for fitting a nickname or epithet to a character or a thing: and his intuitive judgment of character or of a situation was as swift and startling as his judgment of books and was expressed in the same vivid fashion. 'That young man', he said of an undergraduate who had been talking to him at dinner one night, 'will either be Prime Minister or be hanged.* Sir Michael Sadler was 'the sort of gentleman every schoolboy

would be proud to be nephew to on Speeth Day' He quoted on one occasion Tolstoy's remark: 'Ah, God willing, what I am going to write will be very important!' and added, 'just like the Moderns: only they would omit the reference to God.' He picked up once a little book of poems, bearing the title *Over and Othersj* and as he put it down remarked quietly 'At any rate it is soon over'. As an undergraduate he had laughed with his friends over the last sentence of a *Life of Marlowe* by Sir Adolphus Ward: 'No comment is needed on such a life with such an end.' In later years, still rejoicing in Sir Adolphus, he said 'Adolphus Ward's theory of style was that thought should always be clothed in pure wool'. 'It is no good', he once remarked, 'when the waters rise, for the Dean to appear like Neptune, smite his trident, and expect a calm. Being a Dean is much more like surf-bathing: at the best he can only ride on the breaking wave of anarchy.'

The gift was natural to him: in his boyhood he would delight his family by impersonations and pungent descriptions' of the worthies of his native town. He could by a slight twist or exaggeration bring out the absurdity of something done or said, but did not use these powers beyond the limits of good-humoured raillery. On one occasion our car was stopped on a lonely road in the South of France in the late evening by the French Traffic Police. I felt the apprehensive shiver produced by any contact with the police in a foreign country. However, the only trouble was that our lights were not screened in conformity with the new French regulations. I explained that we were British and was met with smiles. 'Ah! des Etrangers: vous pouvez continuer de rouler.' As we moved away, I said thoughtlessly in my relief: 'Well, they were quite civil: but then we were very civil to them.' There was a shout of laughter from George behind, and for the rest of the trip the phrase was quoted at me on every possible occasion.

He was in Scotland for the last time in September, 1938. On his way to Baldovan to visit Lord Normand he spent a few days

with Mr. and Mrs. James Maclehose at Lamington. He wrote to me at Bridge of Allan where I was on a visit to my people. 'I thoroughly enjoyed my stay at Lamington and the expeditions they planned. On the Friday we motored to Castle Milk, near Glasgow, and had lunch there. It is one of the many houses where Queen Mary slept on the night before or after the battle of Langside. Anyhow, a fine old place in a beautiful park. We went on for an hour of the Glasgow Exhibition, which horrified me by its stale vulgarity. Anything less genuinely Scottish could hardly be imagined. The bogus Clachan made me sick, and American crooners gave tongue from loud-speakers in every tree. It looks a failure, the whole thing, and I believe it is.'

Lord Normand says that George, during his visit that year, appeared to be in no way feeling his increasing age, and was as ready for a long walk as ever. His visit was cut short. War seemed imminent and he felt it his duty to return to Oxford on 17th September. 'He spoke freely to me about the prospects', writes Normand, 'and especially of the anxieties for our sons that war must bring, and of the bitterness he felt that you should have to endure the anxiety about him in one war, and the new anxiety in a second war. But he did not allow these thoughts to overcloud his visit to us, and I remember that he took special pleasure in the company of the young people.... The last visit which I paid you was in the spring of 1939. While I was there it was officially given out at Moscow that Litvinoff had been removed from the Commissarship of Foreign Affairs. I remember his reading this out from *The Times*, as he strolled about the dining-room at breakfast. Its significance was apparent, and our forebodings became more urgent and oppressive. When we parted then, it was for the last time, and though that was hidden from us, we had cause enough to feel that memories might be the best that was left to us.

' His courage seems something which in him could be taken for granted. He was yet to show it at its highest.... I have often

1928-1938⁸

thought how he must have hated the German occupation of Paris, and how deeply he must have resented the abasement of Vichy under the invader.

'His letters continued to breathe confidence and courage through the worst time. It was good to think that such a man was in charge of the University as Vice-Chancellor;'

Of all festivals he loved Christmas most. 'The old things are good', he said, 'and Christmas is the heart of the year.' From 1909, during all the years when he was in Oxford, he never missed, except the last, the Christmas Eve celebration in the Hall of the College, when carols were sung by candlelight, ending at midnight with the ringing of the bells. That last Christmas Mr. J. M. Thompson had sent him a water-colour, done many years before by Mr. Dowson, of the scene in the Hall on Christmas Eve. He replied:

My dear Thompie,

I was touched and delighted by your letter and your gift. How kind of you! They did me good.

Dowson's picture is equally welcome to my wife, who greatly loved him. And it is choice, and makes one happy to look at it.

Pickard-C. is unmistakable; and I have guessed at the artist himself—fine head thrown back.

All good wishes to you all. I shall imagine the Hall on Wednesday.

Yours ever

George Gordon

His family all remember his exploit on Christmas day in 1938. His daughter Janet had given him that morning as a present the *Clubfoot Omnibus*. It was a monster Omnibus. After the morning service in the College Chapel he settled in a deep chair before his library fire with the book: he read steadily throughout

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

the day. There was an interval in the evening when we had some guests to dinner: but the *Omnibus* was resumed after they left, and finished before he went to bed. He had had a perfect day.

Two or three days later we left for Italy on a visit to Peter Gregory at Lerici. Lerici itself was simple and friendly*, its people welcomed with acclamation the annual visit of Admiral Bacon, who had a fine villa dominating the harbour. But all around there were signs of the baleful *regime*. There was furious activity in the ship-building yards at Spezia near-by, high walls everywhere were decorated with worn passages from the utterances of the Duce (known privately in the village as Mr. Mosquito), and petty officialdom was decked out in piratical imposing costumes and feathers.

Sometimes in our wanderings in the hills we blundered into a military zone, and got out with all speed.

George was doing some work on the new Shelley letters. The necessary books went with him to Lerici. Once, in a moment of folly, I had given him a large wooden box, specially made for packing books. We never afterwards travelled without the companionship of this formidable coffer.

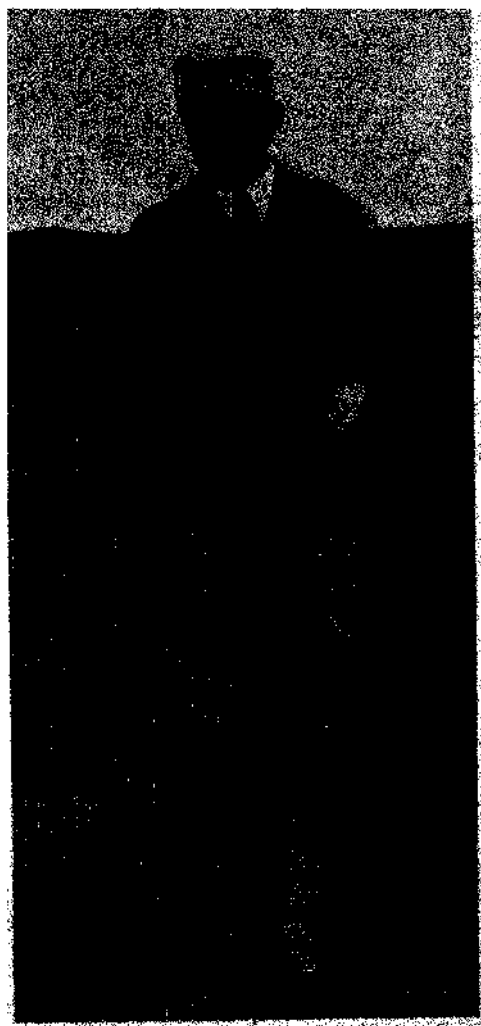
In the following spring we were in France for the last time. He wrote on 24th March to his brother:

'My dear Charlie,

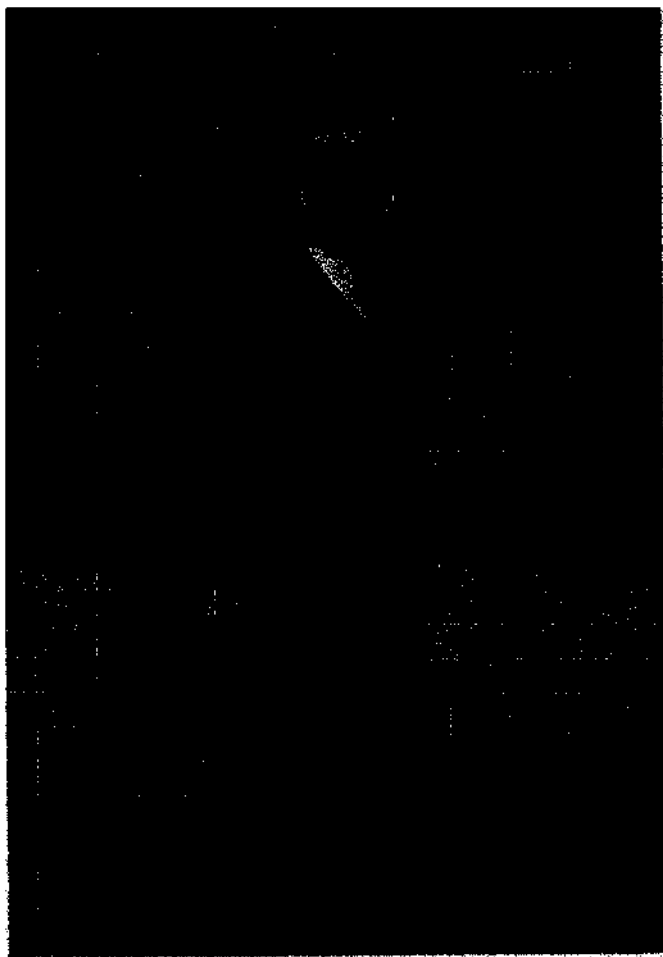
I am getting just 3 weeks off out of the 6 nominal vacation weeks, and we leave for France on Sunday. ... I felt I must have sun, the hotter the better.

We shall be a party of 4: Mary, George, Gregory (of my old battalion) and myself. Gregory is taking his car, and we shall drive from Dieppe straight to Provence. When we meet the sun, we shall sit down, call for drinks, and, if the place is reasonable, stay there.

Even this holiday is not to be free from business. I have



Wales



Magdalen, 1937

1928-1938

to attend on April 14, and speak, as the principal guest, at a Dinner of the Oxford Society in Paris, got up by our Embassy. But I shall be on my way home by that time, and full of buck, I hope.

P.S.... As to war, we shall know better in another week. I am afraid I think it might happen any time now/

At 3 o'clock on the Sunday afternoon on which we were to leave Oxford he was reading the Lesson at a Masonic Service: by 3.30 he was being swept along the road to Newhaven.

Our way lay through Burgundy and Provence to the Mediterranean, planned to include visits to old haunts. France was as fair as ever: but a pall hung over her, and her people were sullen, anxious or apathetic. At the Pont-du-Gard, the scene of our memorable holiday in 1924, we found the Mistral blowing, the Aqueduct seemed to have lost its golden colour, the jovial inn-keeper from the *Midi* who rolled his *rs' like drums when he used to tell us how his rheumatism was a 'con-se'-quence de la gue-r-r-re', was now dreading a new war: and Madame, still perched on her high stool at the cash-desk, was now clearly more interested in francs than in the quality of the food. It was a disillusionment. The situation grew worse when George discovered that he had lost one volume of a precious edition of Shelley. It was found by Madame some months later under a pile of newspapers on the verandah.

At Cassis on the Riviera, on the morning of Good Friday, it was learned that Italy had invaded Albania. While we were at breakfast a flustered English governess, in charge of a party of young children, came up, and addressing herself to G. S. G., asked if he thought she ought to take them back to England at once. 'I think you may take it that our Government will do nothing: you may safely stay', was his reply.

On the way back to Paris, at Grenoble, we found a magnificent fair in progress, crowded with young people. G. S. G.,

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

Gregory and George had some successful shooting, winning **puppets and** a bottle of the 'best Burgundy'. But the serious elders of the town were not there; they were clustered round the news-reels, their faces grave. Only for a sunny week in the mountains at the Col-du-Chat above the Lac du Bourget was there escape from this shadow of impending war.

On the day after the Oxford Society Dinner we lunched with F. Y. Eccles, and visited his quiet house in the rue Vaneau; the following day with the publisher Gillon, when the talk was all of war, and possible conscription in Britain; then dinner with the Granville-Barkers in their exquisite flat, from which they were soon to flee from the Germans entering Paris. Last of all we visited Madame de Chambrun, who delighted in spirited talk of Shakespeare with G. S. G. At Christmas, 1939, she sent him a picture of the beautiful Renaissance Portal of their house in the rue de Vaugirard. It bore the inscription: 'A door that will always be open when you come.'

Nine

LITERATURE AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

AT the age of eighteen, when George Gordon became a student at Glasgow University, the attention of his Professor, J. S. Phillimore, was first drawn to him by the scope and unexpectedness of his reading: he had already a close acquaintance with authors not usually read by undergraduates. * He saw the whole field of literature as one', said his friend, George Galbraith, 'with treasures in most unlikely corners.' This catholicity of choice was to remain with him all his life. He found literature, as he said, wherever a man had set down the best that he knew, about the thing he knew best, in words that told his meaning: and he constantly expressed his admiration of simple straightforward writing, the natural heritage of the clear-thinking Englishman.

His views on workmanship were equally simple and clear. He suspected the workman who kept stopping work to tell his ideals. The good workman takes these for granted, and goes on with his work. Presumably, if the artist has not already made peace with himself about truth and beauty and ideals, he could not begin to work.

He could not accept divorce between literature and learning. He wrote in 1929 'There was a time before the war when Literature was at feud with Learning, and when all the specialists suspected Literature. Our novelists, and essayists, and men of letters generally affected to despise what they regarded as the donnishness of scholarship and erudition, spoke loudly (to excuse their laziness) of Mr. Dryasdust, and used "scholar" and "scientific" almost as terms of abuse. It was a lamentable division both of the kingdom of knowledge and of the republic of letters, and I look upon the signs that the division is healing as among the most encouraging of the present time. A sincere reconciliation

might turn our still hesitating and rather bewildered age into one of the great ages of history.'

In an article, 'Artist and Public'¹, which he wrote for the *Book Society Annual* Gordon describes an interview between Edison, the inventor, and a reporter, 'hungry for uplift'. Edison was laconic and practical, and cut short the conversation by saying: 'Do you want to know my definition of a successful invention? It is something so practical that a Polish Jew will buy it.' But the interviewer persisted: 'Is a settled conception of the universe important as a background for deep thinking?' Edison answered with a smile: 'No: I always keep within a few feet of the earth's surface all the time. At least I never let my thoughts run up higher than the Himalayas. All my work is rather earthy'. Gordon continues: 'Though this conversation concerns what we call an inventor its lessons extend to literature and all the arts. When Edison shocked his craving collocutor, as evidently he did, by his deliberately exaggerated commercialism, he spoke under the same sort of provocation as made Dr. Johnson exclaim that "No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money". Both men were affronted by the ignorant, ill-timed, and extravagant emphasis which the gaping onlooker is apt to lay on what no artist cares to discuss except with his equals, if even with them: I mean the high and proud motives of science, literature and the arts, and the secret, sustaining and unworldly passion which drives their practitioners on.

'I detect another resemblance between Edison and the great artists in his impatient dismissal of prying inquiries how he did it. "I just work along", he said. So Johnson nipped in the bud an idle discussion about the models of Burke's eloquence by declaring that he was neither like Cicero, nor like Demosthenes, nor like anyone else, but "spoke as well as he could". Keats' account of *Endymion* was equally Edisonian when he said simply and finally that it was "as good as he could make it".

'But the age of reticence is past, perhaps even among artists,

LITERATURE AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

and it is the law of our public being now that everything shall be spilled. In the United States of America they even teach people how to "create", and I havemore than once been asked why there are no courses in creative literature at Oxford.

'The trouble is that, if the artist wishes to be intelligible and attractive to the general public, he is usually driven, in his explanations, to a reverse order. What he assumed in silence among his companions and fellow-practitioners, he is now compelled to put in the forefront of his discourse.

'In the world of artists, whether in words or colour or stone, the first and consuming concern is to make something: and of course while they are making things, they talk to each other about it, and of course this is criticism, the best there is. Sometimes it slips through and comes to the public ear, on which it makes, as a rule, a very disappointing impression. For it has a curious character.

'It will nearly always be found to be practical, and quite emphatically unsentimental, and this cannot fail to disappoint a public which brings to these matters a great fund, no doubt, of general intelligence, but primarily and above all a hungry and warm heart. But the very basis of all such intimate critical talk as I have described is that sentiment, the warm heart, sympathy, high loyalties and ecstasies are never, except on the rarest occasions, so much as mentioned.

'I am reminded of the apocryphal subaltern in the late war who, when asked by a prowling Brigadier one winter morning what he was doing with his platoon,*is said to have answered: "Serving my King and Country, Sir!" It is as if an artist, asked what he was about, were to reply that he was "serving Beauty" 1 The answer which the Brigadier expected, and which any real subaltern would have given was "Arms drill", "P.T.", or what not; and the artist's answer, without doubt, would have been equally practical. But I am afraid the general public still likes the sentimental answer better—from artists.

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

'I can think of nothing superficially more unfeeling, nor, in itself, more wholly satisfactory, than the talk of two painters about a sunset, or of two doctors about a disease. Not so much as a flush or a sigh between them! A feeling for the beauty of Nature, a sympathy for pain, is assumed among them. It was this, presumably, that took them out of the public to be painters and doctors} their concern thereafter is to be proficient in their art. The young doctor is still an ordinary member of the public when he faints at his first visit to the operating theatre. That over, he is an ordinary member of the public no longer, but the member of a fraternity and the practitioner of a craft. To expect the painter or the poet to be normally burning with the hidden passions of his calling, and willing to proclaim them, is as absurd as to expect the doctor to be on the point of fainting sympathy at every operation.'

Like those artists and craftsmen he describes, Gordon himself flinched from 'gush' about his subject. 'I meet many people', he said, 'who tell me they "love literature", and by long and bitter experience I have come to know what they mean. They don't really want to know about books and writers. What they want to hear about is "just literature"—like those enthusiasts about Nature who don't know one tree from another, or ravers about the sun and moon who cannot tell the polestar. The ordinary audience (not of students) prefers to hear about movements; Mysticism; the Catholic Note in our literature; the Celtic Movement. But the true love of literature or of anything worth loving does not grow in soft places: it is a native of the rocks.'

He reflected often on the relations of literature and life: he considered that literature, though among the very greatest and perhaps the most lasting, is only *one* of the activities of a country, and can claim no monopoly of genius and devotion. 'It is one of the signal merits of Johnson', he wrote, 'that he never loses this perspective. Literature is honoured, but it is never put

LITERATURE AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

above life. Poets are praised, but they are never exalted above humanity. Genius is acknowledged, but the licence which is sometimes claimed for it, to ignore the laws of society, is steadily and peremptorily refused/

Once, in a small company of writers met together in Walpole's flat in Piccadilly, the talk fell upon the particular words which each of them had unconsciously a habit of using—words such as *Microcosm*', etc. Gordon's word was said to be *artist*'. Was it the world of the artist which held his heart? Or did it lie in the bustling companionable world of ordinary men? He may have answered the question himself when he praised Johnson for honouring literature without exalting it above life. He praised also Charles Lamb, and found in him the most Shakespearian figure of his time because he 'daily, and at the same hours, went about his business and worked for his living*.

On our way to the Yorkshire Dales during the vacation in 1912 George was reading over in the train the MS. of his essay on *Theophrastus* which was about to appear in *English Literature and the Classics*, the fruit of a course of lectures by various authors which he had suggested and directed. In the evening it was discovered that the MS. had been left in the train, and all efforts to recover it were vain. It was rewritten during that summer, and appeared with the others. But, although it cost him more effort, the second version had lost the natural verve of the first.

This would seem to support the opinion held by some of his friends that the vivid style was what came to him first by the gift of nature, without effort or elaboration. It was like his talk with its graceful play of fancy and picturesque images from daily life. They seek to find in this one of the reasons for his reluctance to print, supposing that his ideal was something more sober and disciplined than the high-spirited manner of his lectures, letters and conversation. Some of the phrases he used in criticizing the writings of others are revealing. He commended them in such

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

expressions as 'stripped to the buff': 'the suet sliced away, leaving the beef and the bone': 'lean and sinewy': 'athletic economy'. It is true that high spirits and austerity were both natural to him: hence this duality which puzzles those who knew only one side.

When he became a teacher of English Literature, learning his trade from Walter Raleigh, and was holding youthful audiences by the humour, imagery and graphic expression of his lectures, he found his pastime in the humanities, in fragmentary translation of Walter Map's *De Nugis Curialium*^ of Du Bellay and the writers of severe French prose.

Steuart Miller writes: 'Quintilian's saying that the mark of a practised orator is that he speaks with a "firm facility" and does not try "to speak better than he can" might have been said of writers by George (whose criticism was sometimes criticism of himself), but in practice he wanted it both ways: what satisfied him did not always come readily, and yet he wanted it to look as if it did: the double labour of *ars celandi artem*?

The learning and craftsmanship revealed in his writing were adorned by an unusual sensitiveness to the usage, meaning and sound of words. He had a natural gift for the right word, yet he was never content with a word or phrase which only approached his meaning and failed to convince him. I sometimes thought him overscrupulous and hard to please.

His friend, W. G. Normand, in describing Gordon's attitude to books, as he had observed it during the time when they were undergraduates, said that the author of a book was clearly revealed to him as he read, and that he was one of the few people, seeking to know a writer in his writings, who had the gift of finding him. There is evidence of this in all his critical work. His desire in lecturing or in writing was to lead his audience and readers direct to the author, and to establish companionship with him.

When Andrew Lang died in 1912 it was Gordon who wrote, early in September, the article on Lang in the *Literary Supplement*. Mrs. Andrew Lang, from various internal evidences,

LITERATURE AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

thought that it must have been written by one of her husband's old literary friends, and was astonished to discover that it had come from the pen of a young man who had never known Lang. Later, in December, 1927, when he gave the Lang Lecture at St. Andrews, his picture of Andrew Lang had such warmth and insight that some deeply concerned members of his audience said afterwards that they had felt as if Lang were present in the lecture-room.

In the autumn of 1925, when his review of W. P. Ker's *Collected Essays* appeared in the same journal, he had a letter from R. W. Chambers: 'When I read that review on Thursday morning I said, "It's Gordon or the Devil": and got three more copies on my way up to town to distribute to the faithful.' And W. P. K's sister, C. Ker wrote: 'I just *knew* it was you: it couldn't be anybody else.'

He was most at his ease and happiest in lecturing or writing when his subject was a human being—men he had known, such as Raleigh, Phillimore, Bridges, Gosse, etc.: or the great writers of other centuries, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Johnson, Swift, Lamb, or Shelley, whose writings had brought him their companionship.

When dealing with the abstract he was less happy. 'I have been in the kitchen where "Eng.Lit." is cooked', he wrote once in a review. 'That all is not well, all the cooks would agree: but the cure is hard to find. It seems to be the fate of academic studies—not of one, but of all—to succumb periodically to formulas and modes of thought which have a horrid resemblance to reality; like the dodder, that busy plant, which is related in the vegetable kingdom, though at some distance, to the healthy green flowering whin bush which it strangles in its pale, systematic reticulations. The simile is W. P. Ker's: he knew all about these dangers and yet, as a Professor of "Eng.Lit." did not despair⁹.

W. G. Normarid writes: 'George was not by temperament

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

a philosopher, nor really interested in metaphysical thinking. It was not the abstract but the particular and actual that drew him. Life did not present itself to him as a problem but as a drama. So books were not mere items in a catalogue of human progress; nor even the means of improving knowledge or sharpening sensibility. These were not primarily his reasons for reading books. If they were interesting it was because they were pieces of life. That may seem plausible only in speaking of imaginative literature, or biography, or history. But his interest in Aristotle's *Ethics* or *Poetics*, or in Hume's *Enquiry*, was of the same kind as his interest in Herodotus, Theophrastus' *Characters* or *Ham/et*. All were works of Art, and to be judged accordingly: and a work of Art was more than a criticism of life: it was a contribution to life and a part of it. His immediate concern was with the substance and shape of the book itself. Why was that particular book written in that particular way? as he might have asked about the action of a friend; Why did he do it? A good book was the product of a self-reliant, vivid, original mind; a bad book the product of natural feebleness, imitativeness and dependence. The author was revealed to him as he read the book; and the best books were to him not instructors but companions....

'He had a method of marking his books with marginal lines and signs which was both peculiar and effective. Sometimes he used a wriggling line, sometimes a plain straight line, sometimes a straight line with a short line set against it(-|). No one knew what these signified, but they were for him a key to the book which could not be lost, and enabled him at any time to find his way about it with the minimum of labour, and to discover any reference or quotation that he needed. There were also marginal notes beautifully written in a minute script. But, even without these mechanical aids, the attention with which he read, and his retentive memory made him the permanent master of all that he had read. He did not often quote from memory, having no exact memory for the actual words, but he knew the substance of

LITERATURE AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

the book, and could trace anything that he wanted with the utmost readiness and accuracy.'

He always professed to envy the man who could write to a time-table. He drew up many of them and many schemes of work; but he could never write automatically. By temperament he was more akin to the free and happy author of whose life Trollope paints in his *Autobiography* a rosy picture: 'The author may do his work at five in the morning when he is fresh from his bed, or at three in the morning before he goes there.' Gordon preferred the latter arrangement.

1938-1942

GEORGE GORDON succeeded to the office of Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University on 5th October, 1938. Two days before, his old College, Oriel, had ushered in his term of office by electing him to an Honorary Fellowship.

His first year of office, ostensibly a year of peace, was overshadowed by what was to come, and much of it was spent in preparing the University for the conditions of war. Against that background various internal problems presented themselves. The rapid expansion of the science departments had modified profoundly the character of the University, bringing it much more into contact with the outside world: it had occasioned also an extensive building scheme which the Vice-Chancellor was anxious to complete.

The negotiations for the acquisition of the Wytham Estate began during this year. These were difficult, as the Estate was to come to the University partly by gift and partly by purchase. It was therefore necessary that a valuation should be made on behalf of the University which would satisfy the Minister of Agriculture, whose approval of a purchase would be required under the Universities and Colleges Estates Act. The transactions involved lengthy and constant interviews, and even lengthier and complicated correspondence, but the tact and patience of the Vice-Chancellor—at least in public—never gave out.

These transactions were successfully completed soon after Gordon's death by his successor; and the beautiful woods and upland meadows of Wytham are forever safe in the keeping of the University. 'Gordon's name', writes the Principal of St. Edmund Hall, 'should ever be linked with the preservation of Wytham, and with the most historic transaction in landed pro-

1938-194*

perty with which the University has ever been concerned/
Such a memorial would have pleased him.

The work of the Preservation Trust brings the Trustees into frequent contact with the city authorities: as *ex officio* Chairman of the Trust Gordon was successful in promoting the better and more equal relations growing up between City and University, making it evident that the Trust is an instrument designed to support the City in its endeavour to make Oxford and its surroundings worthy of its great heritage of architectural and natural beauty.

Aesthetic controversies in the University and in Colleges are always the occasion of passionate discussion. I have heard my husband say that it was easier to determine the fate of £20,000 than to pass the design for a new gate. Several such controversies arose in this year, one of which concerned the revised plans for Nuffield College, and it fell to the Vice-Chancellor to reconcile opposing views. This he accomplished without undue dissension. He had a notable gift for placing heated disputes in their proper perspective, making some easy casual comment which immediately transferred them to cooler and more friendly latitudes.

On the Hebdomadal Council he preserved the air of calm detachment which was characteristic of his conduct of meetings, and which actually masked a highly critical intentness. It was clear that he had been meditating on the problems he would have to tackle, observing the colleagues with whom he would have to work, considering their opinions, and forming his own judgments. At first he was chary of giving a lead lest he should seem to be trying to dictate, and in unessential matters he was ready to waive his own opinion so as not to appear obstructive. But this apparent hesitation disappeared as he gained confidence in himself.

Throughout this first year there were constant delicate and confidential negotiations with various Ministries concerning plans for the undergraduates, for the use of University and College buildings, for national work in science departments.

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

These were of necessity conducted on the sole authority of the Vice-Chancellor, since they could not be simultaneously referred to the Hebdomadal Council. In doing this he showed his power as a leader, never allowing anything to be arranged which he could not afterwards defend successfully. In consequence, when war came, Oxford was found to be ahead of any other University in its preparations.

Already arrangements were complete for the pooling of College and University buildings. It had been decided which should be requisitioned or rented, and which retained for academic purposes, with the result that no substantial part of any building was either unoccupied or overcrowded; the rents were pooled and apportioned, so that no College gained or lost financially by reason of the purpose for which its buildings were used. His picture of the situation was characteristic: 'There is, with all this requisitioning, an odd feeling in the air, as if the Bailiffs were in the College, and Longwall and St. Swithin's might be put up to auction.'

In October, 1939, as he reviewed the events of the past year, he expressed relief at having emerged from the twilight.

* An intolerable situation has at last acquired the awful explicitness of war.'

In a letter written about the same time he put it differently: 'The country was never more united. But what strange and cynical combinations Europe presents! At any rate all the sham is off, and we know, and the world knows, what's what.'

The day after the emergency was declared the work of the Joint Recruiting Board had begun. 'Everywhere I went I found them at it', he said, 'and more than equal, apparently, to every emergency and adjustment.... Round these discerning and unresting tribunals, day after day, the warren-like life of the Registry revolved. Most of our undergraduates, arriving in relays from every corner of the island, have passed before them.'

His mind was constantly concerned with the destiny and well-

1938 - 1942

being of the undergraduates: 'About the general body of undergraduates as I came to know them last year I must not be silent. They were naturally much and gravely concerned about a world which, pretty plainly, they might be asked to put right. The September crisis was followed by the National Service plan (what should they do?), and in the summer by the Militia scheme: a distracting year for young men supposed to be at their books. On each occasion I was appealed to, and with considerable impatience, for information about the Government's intentions which I was doing my best to procure. Then came a deputation, the first of several, and I told them all I knew. Their candour, good sense and self-restraint I remember with admiration, and every confidence was kept. Some of them must now, I suppose, be training with others of their time. They will make good soldiers.*

In 1940, after Dunkirk, the War Office decided that men destined for the Army should no longer be allowed to go first to the Universities but that they should, if too young for commissions, go into young soldiers' battalions. Gordon protested against this decision, and with one University official was summoned to an interview with a high officer on the War Office Staff. He argued his case forcibly on the ground that officers needed intelligence and maturity, both of which were more likely to be promoted by a year or so at a University than by a corresponding period in a young soldiers' battalion. The officer vehemently maintained on the other hand that the most urgent need was for man-power. At length, losing patience he said: 'Really, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, you must trust us to make the best use of the available man-power.' 'But then, you see,' said Gordon quietly, 'I don't.' The result of that interview was that the War Office was moved to reconsider the question, and to continue the University courses of the ordinary kind for a further two years, though their duration had to be progressively reduced.

His tenacity was amply justified. Nothing, he thought, could be too good for the young men during the limited period they

could spend in the University. 'I would gladly,' he once said, 'if I could, throw up everything else, and go back to teaching and living among them.' He much admired their seriousness and application: 'The sober industry of the undergraduate, very conscious that he was enjoying a privilege, and a privilege of slight duration, rivalled the determination of his teachers to impart the best that they could give—The great thing is that the young men were swept along, and kept interested, and that even their briefest excursions into the field of knowledge were given some sort of beginning, middle and end.'

In his last oration he admitted that the undergraduates had reached such an unexpected standard of industry that the University had to acknowledge itself caught out in a miscalculation. 'I am not sure', said the Vice-Chancellor, 'that the point was taken in our junior circles, which just went on working, but it was a retort, for all that, in the grand manner, avenging centuries of rebuke.'

Throughout his Vice-Chancellorship he served on the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities. His first meeting was in November, 1938, soon after he took up office—a special meeting, held to discuss problems of organization in the Universities in the event of war.

During the early days he found attendance at these meetings a troublesome tax, as they involved much travelling and encroachment on his already well-filled time. In a letter to the Chairman, Sir Franklin Sibly, Vice-Chancellor of Reading, he wrote in February, 1941: 'I began—let me confess it—by regarding attendance at its meetings as a bore, since they cut into my work here just as I was trying to learn it.' 'But his fellow-members', writes Sir Franklin, 'never suspected this. From the outset he was whole-hearted in his concern for the common interests of the Universities. He attended our meetings regularly; not only those of the full Committee but also those of a small standing Sub-Committee which dealt with much of our business in the

years 1939, 1940 and 1941. These were years of exceptional difficulty and responsibility—years in which the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals became a hard-worked team. Dr. Gordon was almost invariably present when representatives of our body met Ministers or representatives of Government Departments to discuss one or another of the numerous questions affecting the Universities.'

But there were alleviations: chief of these was the close friendship which developed between Gordon and Sir Franklin. They held each other in real affection; and Sir Franklin found that his unassuming friendliness and kindnesses towards his colleagues and his constant wit enlivened many dull occasions. One meeting in particular is remembered by the Committee. It was an important one, as they were settling the arrangements for carrying out the Hankey Radio Training Scheme in the Universities. It took place in 1940 during the period of heavy air-raids, so that it was difficult to hold it in London: it was therefore arranged that it should be held in Magdalen, where all the members were entertained in comfort for the night of 16—17th December.

These meetings steered the Universities of the country through stormy waters, and established the University of Oxford firm as a rock in the tempest. The other Universities recognized that they owed much to the presence of its Vice-Chancellor at all their consultations and deputations.

On the outbreak of war Gordon showed wisdom in divesting himself of as many old routine functions as possible, and deputing others imposed on him by the war. He was thus enabled to keep a free mind open to suggestions, and a calm judgment for emergencies and more important duties. He was everywhere in the University—with the Senior Training Corps, in the laboratories and in the offices, constantly debonair, cheerful and unhurried. The overworked clerks at the Registry looked forward to his passage through their room: he never failed to make some char-

acteristic remark which raised a laugh. 'There is in the Registry*, writes Mr. Veale, 'a narrow ledge in the gangway leading to the Registrar's room on which are placed papers awaiting signature. He constantly swept off these papers with the sleeve of his gown: it was noticed that he always stopped to pick them up himself, whomever he might be with or however hurried.'

He had written in the early days of the war to his eldest boy, then engaged in Government forestry work in Cyprus: 'We are assuming, and with confidence, that you will remain at your post: and that this will continue so long as the Mediterranean is undisturbed. I am sure that is common sense; and this is, from top to bottom a common-sense war. Nobody is being allowed to be merely romantic, and rush into battle when he is better employed doing something else.' In the last month of that Long Vacation Oxford was seething with young men volunteering for the fighting services, and many of the dons, faced with the possibility of having no pupils when term began, were seized with restlessness: they also wanted to be 'in it*. It needed a firm exercise of the Vice-Chancellor's authority to keep them steady. If he had been immersed in routine he could not have seen the danger. His appeal for patience was the more impressive since he had a real sympathy with this restlessness. He was constantly repressing in himself those very feelings which he wisely urged others to overcome. In April, 1940, he wrote to his brother: 'I can hardly keep still over Norway, and dearly wish I was young enough to be in it.'

It was at his suggestion that, in the Michaelmas Term of 1939, six lectures by eminent men were delivered in the Sheldonian Theatre. The course was organized by the Regius Professor of Modern History. The discourses dealt with subjects connected with the war, and, although they were intended chiefly for freshmen, members of the University of all ages thronged the Theatre. They were published in 1940 by the Oxford University Press under the title, *Background and Issues of the War*. Gordon wrote

1938-1942

in his Preface to the book: 'The war on which we are embarked is a war against brutality and insolence, but hardly less against a creed of public lying, the contempt for truth. This last is an issue which Universities are even peculiarly fitted to understand, for truth, the fearless pursuit and no less fearless expression of it, is the very breath of scholarship and science.'

Many stories survive of his unconventional remarks which helped to relieve the course of tedious business.

He offered a ready welcome to students and particularly to eminent scholars evacuated from institutions which had suffered from the war. But on occasion he looked askance at an untidy newcomer. One day, when one such passed him in the Street, and he was told he was a student of a well-known art school, he remarked: *If that is the cradle in which genius is nursed I suppose we must put up with it: but it is a very dirty cradle.'

As a lover of tradition, dignified ceremonial and established forms he did not permit these to be sacrificed to emergency or haste: yet his mind was ever open to suggestions which might prevent waste of time and effort. On one occasion as he and the Registrar were trying to arrange a heavy and complicated programme of committee work Gordon said suddenly: 'Tell me, who are the members of these committees ? Are they just distinguished cab-horses who move automatically from one rank to another? Or do they really matter?'

Even those who knew him best were surprised during his Vice-Chancellorship at his easy command of business and finance: but this owed nothing to improvisation. He took infinite pains in preparing business for meetings, bent on clarity, and on leaving nothing to chance. The swift freedom and humorous grace of his chairmanship was founded on hours of patient scrutiny.

On the outbreak of war financial affairs loomed large and threatening. There were those who thought that the University would rapidly become bankrupt: but the situation was eased

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

by Gordon's steady judgment and refusal to give way to panic. The University was given power by the Emergency Powers Act to appropriate Trust funds for general purposes. Gordon agreed to recommend Council to exercise this power, and to promote a decree which poured all surplus trust income into an emergency fund. But he insisted that a further decree or statute should be required before money from this fund was made available for emergency use, so that 'if there is a balance at the end of the war it will be easy to redistribute it'. He always expected that there would be a balance, and he was right.

As he reviewed his three years of office on 8th October, 1941, he said: 'I lay down office in the third year of a war which has inevitably and profoundly affected the University and the life of everyone connected with it. My tenure included, indeed, a year of peace, but a year already overclouded and uneasily concerned with the omens of war. As early as February, 1939, we were at work on such war contingencies as could be foreseen, and long before the summer of 1940 the intricate process of adjustment and adaptation had covered every department of our academic and collegiate life. A certain leisureliness and length of view, and a suspicion of short cuts are normally and doubtless rightly characteristic of an ancient University. But the old vistas were now a luxury; perspectives were shortened; and the national gift for compromise and improvisation, of which our local supply proved happily abundant, was exercised harmoniously, expeditiously, and to the full. That the result, all things considered, has been satisfactory I think is commonly agreed, and I can say this without complacency because it has been the work of so many skilful and willing hands. Within the sharp limits set by war, and on its necessarily diminished scale of staff and students, the University, it can fairly be stated, is running at full power.... It has become usual for a retiring Vice-Chancellor, on this occasion, to think aloud about his task, and to offer his reflections on the machine he has been minding. I have learned, no doubt,

1938-1942

in these last three years, a great deal about the University, though much more about myself, and I have sometimes thought that this or that might be improved, or indeed, in moments of impatience, abolished. But this is not the time for such matters, and I have decided that my thoughts will keep.*

These were the last words that he uttered in public.

In the midst of these activities the occasions for display of his natural love of fun and high spirits were rare, but he had by no means lost them. At the end of August, 1941, Sir Humphrey Milford drove us up one day to London. With us was Professor R. W. Chambers who had been staying with us. They had a day of meetings before them, but all the way there were lively jets of conversation from the three men who were together in the back seat. They were to pick me up in the evening at a shop where I was renewing kitchen equipment: I had finished, and was in the act of writing a cheque and proving my identity, when a gay voice called from the doorway: *Is Mrs. Gordon here?' There was a general smile, my identity was established, and a moment later the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University left the shop strumming on a large flat saucepan which had suddenly become a guitar.

William Coldstream painted his portrait in 1940 for the College. It was clear from the sound of laughter which sometimes came from his library while he was sitting for the portrait that the artist and his subject were at one. This portrait now hangs in the College Hall. While this was going on, a different piece of work was being executed in secret behind the scaffolding and tarpaulin by the College masons, who were restoring the stone-work on the Bursary wall. One morning there was a buzz of expectancy, the tarpaulin was taken down, and there emerged a grotesque and forbidding head-piece in stone—after the ancient practice: the Abbot in his monastery. * It is at least', remarked the President, 'unless a bomb drops, a notable bid for immortality.'

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

He disliked being photographed. If he was compelled to go to the photographer he went much as a sheep goes before its judges: and he evaded snapshots by tilting his hat over his face. There are many photographs of his old golfing hat.

Soon after his return from Gallipoli, Jacob Kramer, *iprotigi* of Sir Michael Sadler, made a pastel drawing of him. In spite of the undoubted excellence of the draughtsmanship this drawing was never favoured by his family. He was emaciated by fever at the time, and this gave him an unnaturally melancholy air. His own remark at first sight of it was: 'Good God, do I look like that? I might be a drug addict.'

Not long before his illness he had accepted the invitation of the English Association to be its President for 1942, and his name was enrolled in the list of presidents, although he died before > the time came to give the presidential address. He felt much honoured by the invitation, welcoming it as a happy augury of his return to a more leisured life in which Literature might play a part. In September, 1941, when the end of his term as Vice-Chancellor was approaching, he had asked Bodley's Librarian if he might have a seat assigned to him at Selden End in The Library, where he had planned to work. He acknowledged the assignment of the seat in a letter to the Librarian: * Your last paragraph cheers me immensely. After I had written to you a misgiving came over me that the President of Magdalen might be thought a very different character from the Vice-Chancellor in the matter of such a privilege as S9 confers. The assurance that for this purpose I am still thought to have dollar exchange value is most pleasant and encouraging'. But the leisure for which he hoped was remote. His diary, which had been filled in by his secretary for 1942 showed scarcely a blank day, and there would have been no change in the years of war and educational reconstruction that were to follow.

In January, 1941, the Chancellor of the University, Lord Halifax, asked Council to confer on the Vice-Chancellor an

1938-1942

Honorary Degree in grateful consideration of the manner in which he had discharged the responsibilities falling upon him in consequence of the war, and the way in which he had served the University during the time since the declaration of war. The Hebdomadal Council agreed unanimously to express their gratitude by offering him an Honorary D.C.L.

It is certain that no other honour could have given him more pleasure.

The Degree was conferred on 16th October, 1941, soon after he had laid down office. The grace and impressiveness of that ceremony struck all onlookers. His dignified bearing came from his consciousness of the great traditions of his University. While he was being presented he stood very erect, with a notable stillness. The October sun struck through the windows of the Sheldonian Theatre on the scarlet of his robes. His friends have not forgotten the picture: it was for most of them their last sight of him.

The new Vice-Chancellor, Sir David Ross conferred the degree on his former pupil.

Olim discipule meus, nunc mihi exemplar.

The Public Orator's Deputy, Mr. J. G. Barrington-Ward, in his Latin Oration, spoke of Gordon's distinguished career as man of letters, critic, scholar, lecturer, professor and finally Head of a great College. He praised his resource, courage and skill in his dealing with academic and military bodies during his three years of office as Vice-Chancellor, at the end of which he could say with truth that Oxford was serving both Mars and Minerva, while losing nothing of her own strength.

He ended with these words: *Praesento vobis virum optime de nobis meritum, erga collegas communem, erga adulescentes facilem, erga hospites affabilem, erga amicos, id est omnes, benevolum.* No epitaph could have been more fine and true.

Mr. Barrington-Ward's graceful speech brought him on 17th October this letter from my husband:

LIFE OF GEORGE 8. GORDON

My dear Barrington-Ward,

Let me thank you, however inadequately, for your most choice but far far too flattering account of me yesterday. To be embalmed in such Latinity is a fate for Kings, and my head for the moment struck the stars! I must make haste to resume my normal stature; but it was a great experience, and I am more than ever and

very truly yours

George Gordon

When one looks back on his rich and generous life, ranging over many fields, and largely given to the service of his generation, the wonder is not why he did not publish more, but rather how he contrived to do so much.

The first link in his literary career was snapped in 1914. *I was bursting with production in 1914: just threatening five years of harvest', he wrote to a friend. 'It isn't good for the spirits to look back on that: and of course it is a small matter in General History that the war stopped one little man's musings.' If there was regret in this for the books and essays which he had been on the point of publishing when war broke out there was no bitterness. He had taken his place in the army at an age and in a position which would have made evasion easy: but for him that was an inconceivable choice.

In *Some Post-fVar Reflections* which he wrote in 1929 for the Book Society he expresses his feelings about the effect of the war on living writers: 'Words went down in price; a gloom settled on the fraternity; they felt that they didn't matter, and some of them could hardly bear it. The good ones got over it more or less; the conceited ones sulked; but some have never recovered from the awful suspicion of that time that literature was futile. They are none of them quite the men they were, and not merely because they are older, but because something then happened. Their stride was broken, and the race-course now has other obstacles and younger hurdlers.'

LIFE OF GEORGE S. GORDON

Literature, as he understood it, does not readily emerge from an age of strife. The span of his active life was a period of incredible widening of practical possibilities for human beings: but it was an age neither of peace nor of faith. The urgent call was for help in the use of these possibilities. He had a great gift for affairs, and a profound knowledge of men: he believed that the reactions which flow from one human being to another are more lasting than any works of man. 'Affairs', he wrote, 'is a pleasant life, and when I am free from pen-searchings suits me wonderfully. It is so companionable, so easy! I suppose, when I have glutted myself with writing, and corrected the war-balance, I shall find peace by mixing the two lives in some sort of Mean.' He mixed the two lives to the end. 'Mysemi-literary, semi-professional life now seems like a dream' (this was in 1931) '—and even then I craved for leisure to make books. Is it possible that there is no such leisure for an academic official—whether Professor or *Praeses*—who has a conscience about the job he's **paid for?**'

'I regarded myself once', he wrote towards the end of his life, 'as primarily a scholar, and I still make attempts to retain some right to this title. In despondent moods I have an uneasy recollection of that Victorian gentleman, Mr. Lush, "who had passed for a scholar once, and had still a sense of scholarship, when he wasn't trying to remember much of it". But I seem at times to live and eat and drink on Committees—and sometimes, by a revolt of nature, even sleep on them.' But, as he had no desire to find Mr. Lush reincarnated in himself, he was determined to keep up the fight.

There have been many theories about his reasons for not printing more; some of them contain grains of truth, a few **are** so wide of it as to be unworthy of consideration. Any observer of the routine of his daily life need not seek far for an easy answer. In the last letter which Edmund Blunden had from him **he referred** to some words in the *Book Society News* that had met

his eye. They were 'time denied', and he said that they described his position. His fastidiousness and his high ideal of finish certainly played their part in delaying the publication of his work. It has been noted that much was always cut out in his final version, that many quips and sallies of the earlier version were missing from his finished work: for he feared the yawns of posterity more than he coveted her plaudits. But his real enemy was *Time*. He wrote more than is supposed, as his works, when they appear, will show. In his later years he wrote only in vacations. He would then retire to his eyrie in the Founder's Tower where his MSS. and working books had been assembled. Before anything was quite ready for print the academical term had again begun, and his work lay untouched until the next vacation.

Such difficulties as he had arose from his endeavour to put into one life more than it could hold. His adventurous mind went out to welcome each new project: he would have been unhappy to be deprived of any of his activities and interests. Up to the moment of his illness he was as young and supple in mind and body as he had always been. At his age most men have a reasonable hope of some years of leisure in which they may enjoy the favourite pursuits from which their active years have separated them. Those years were not given to him, but their loss does not change the shining truth that his life was happy and fulfilled within its human limits. It was undoubtedly with a thought of his own life that he wrote 'Whoever, still keeping his dreams, stoops to the necessities of life, and shoulders his burden, has very singular rewards.'

And here, I must have laboured towards the truth, since his friend Steuart Miller, by independent ways, reaches the same conclusion. 'He was not a professional writer', he says, 'and never wanted to be. He wanted to be an amateur of letters in the leisure of a life occupied in a dignified office, adequately remunerated. And that was just what he was. As an amateur he could

1938-1943

write what he wanted in his own way at his own speed; and that was just what he did. His way of giving his understanding commentary on men and books was by an easy flow of urbanity and wit, like the talk of a man of breeding in his favourite century. In our day the manner does not come readily, even to those of whom it is the proper expression; and George could not produce it off-hand. But it is no good wishing he could have written quicker, for it was not in his nature to write well quickly, and if he had written quicker, he would not have written so well. That being so, it was fortunate that he took pains: the result is that what he did was (almost) the best that he could do, and is excellent in quality and sufficient in bulk. There would have been more of it, not if he had written quicker, but if he had had a more ample leisure for his careful art.

'But what encroached upon his art of writing was his art of living. The most he had to complain of was some maladjustment of balance between the two things he wanted to do. But take it all in all—in commonroom and study and family—he was very fortunate in his life.'

My husband was by nature reticent about his religious convictions, and did not express them except in intimacy. It was with sympathetic understanding that he wrote of Andrew Lang: 'No man had more questions to ask of the next world, but he kept them to himself.'

From time to time, often in bereavement, he revealed his faith, and his published letters show sufficiently to those who did not know him intimately what was his feeling about human life and destiny, his firm belief in the survival of the spirit, and his constant practice of the greatest of the Christian virtues. More than one of his friends found in overwhelming sorrow strong consolation and new courage in sharing his faith.

He had always met gallantly the disappointments and setbacks of life. He would say: 'This puts out my compass-bearings*' or 'I must alter my perspective*', and go on his way without

LIFE OF GEORGE \$. GORDON

brooding, looking to the future. When he knew that he had no longer a future on earth he could still say 'I must shorten my perspective* with the cool courage that was in keeping with his strong character. He set about revising some of his work, putting his MSS. in order to the limit of his strength. He saw some intimate friends, and wrote a few letters to Lord Normand and others more remote. R. B. Smith made a long journey in order to see him, and Peter Gregory came every week-end when he could be free from his duties in London. 'He spoke frankly*, says Peter, 'about his disappointment at not being able to finish his literary work, and I told him that no man could live a life so full as his without such curtailment. I was thinking that none of us who were his friends, nor indeed any who came in contact with him, would have been willing to sacrifice that vivid warm personality, with an interest so passionate in life and humanity, to a few extra books.'

The war, which was going badly at the time, was much on his mind. He would call in his sleep: 'We must win this war.' His greatest comfort was in the thought of his family, 'all sound and clean-run and decisive in their entirely different ways', and in the afterglow of his many friendships

He died on 12th March, 1942. A month after his sixty-first birthday, and lies among the quiet yews of the churchyard in Holywell.

INDEX

Aitchison, Lord, 4

Balfour, Lord, 80

Barbier, Prof. Paul, 68

Barrington-Ward, J. G., 163-4

Belloc, Hilaire, 43

Benoist, Ch., 25

Bernhardt, Sarah, 31

Blunden, Edmund, 90-2, 165

Book Society, 88-92, 164-5

Bradley, A. C., 5

Brett-Smith, J. R. B., 16

Bridges, Monica, 132

Bridges, Robert, 80-1, 87, 91,

99> 149

Broadcasting, 87-8

Brogan, Professor D. W., 5

Cahu, Raymond, 26, 28

Caledonian Club, 103-6

Campbell, Dr., 3-4

Cannan, Charles, 36

Carter, Cyril, 102

Chambers, R. W., 73, 149, 161

'Chameleon', The, 16

Chapman, R. W., 8, 39, 78, 85,
113, 130

Clarendon Press, 31-2, 34-6,
64-5

Coghill, Nevill, 77

Coldstream, W., 161

Cook-Wilson, Professor J., 19

Cowley, Sir A., 35

Davis, Herbert, 67

Dining-clubs, 92-5

Dowson, H., 76, 139

Eccles, F. Y., 32-3, 142

Edison, Thomas A., 144

Education, Educationists, 2, 16-

I7, 133-4

Eton, 114

Faguet, Emile, 26

Firth, Sir Charles, 19, 23-4

Fisher, H. A. L., 104

Fletcher, J. Maynard, 9, 19, 33-4

Flexner, Abraham, 100

Forster, E. M., 42

Fox, Rev. Canon Adam, 21, 114,
116-8, 131

Fronde, The, 19, 21

Galbraith, Rev. George, 6, 143

Gallipoli, 65, 85

Galsworthy, John, 69

Garrod, H. W., 136

Godley, A. D., 34, 38, 101

Gordon, Prof. E. V., 67

Gordon, Elizabeth (sister), 83

Gordon, George A. (uncle), 1, 22

GORDON, GEORGE STUART—

childhood, 1-3

school, 3-4

at Glasgow, 4-7, 143

at Oriel College, 8-22

in Paris, 23-32, 141-2

at the Clarendon Press, 31-6

Fellow of Magdalen, 34-5

marriage, 37

tutor, 41

at Leeds University, 46-8,

67-74, 123-4

in the Army, 48-61

at the War Office, 62

INDSX

- work on the Military History of the War, 64
 in Gallipoli, 64-6
 in Merton College, 76, 100
 in Norway and Sweden, 78-9
 as President of Magdalen, 99-142
 as Pro-Vice-Chancellor, 123
 as Vice-Chancellor, 89, 100, 125, 139, 152-68
- Writings:**
Anglo-American Literary Relations, 130
 'Artist and Public', 144-6
Companionable Books, 87
The Discipline of Letters, 76
English Literature and the Classics (ed.), 147
 'The Fronde', 19, 21
 'Jargon', 39
 'Lives of Authors', 109
Origins of the War, 62
Poetry and the Modems, 109
Some Post-War Reflections, 164
Retreat from Mons, The, 58, 62
Shelley and the Oppressors of Mankind, 76
Universities and the War, 62
 'Theophrastus', 147, 150
The Trojans in Britain, 39
Virgil in English Poetry, 108
 portraits, 161-2
 public speaking, 107-8
- Gordon, John (uncle), 1, 22
 Gordon, Mary (nee Napier: mother), 1, 82-3
 Gordon, William (father), 1, 3, 44, 52, 82-3
- Gordon, William (great-uncle), 22
 Gordon, W. Anthony, 43-4, 88, 122-6, 158
 Granville-Barker, H. G., 109, 142
 Gregory, E. C. ('Peter'), 48-9, 53-60, 126, 130, 133, 140, 142, 168
- Halifax, Lord, 162
 Hastings, Col. J. H., 54, 60
 Housman, A. E., 18
- Johnson, Samuel, 10, 79, 86, 94, 144
- Ker, W. P., 73, 80, 149
 Kipling, Rudyard, 120
 Knox, Professor R., 67
- Lamb, Charles, 87-8, 90, 147
 Lambert, Miss, 79
 Lang, Andrew, 102, 148-9, 167
 Leroy-Beaulieu, Anatole, 24-5
 Lewis, C. S., 77
 Lucas, E. V., 42, 123
- McElroy, Prof. R., 93, 100, 109
 MacLehose, Mr. and Mrs. J., 138
 Mantey, Oscar, 24, 30
 Meredith, George, 13
 'Mermaid, The', 16
 Miers, Sir H., 34
 Milford, Sir Humphrey S., 161
 Miller, Steuart N., 4, 7-9, 33, 39, 84, 107, 148, 166
 Montague, F. C., 78
 Montgomery, H., 9

INDEX

- New Forest, the, 53, 123
 Newbolt, Sir H., 80-1
 Nixon, Florence, 22, 69
 Normand, Gertrude, 77-8
 Normand, Lord, 8, 10, 14, 18,
 19, 21, 23-31, 77-8, 85-7,
 131, 137-9, 148-50, 168
 Oxford-
 Preservation Trust, 15 3
 Publicity Board, 127
Oxford Magazine, 38-9
 Oxford University—
 Joint Recruiting Board, 154-5
 Magdalen, 34-5, 99-142
 Chorister trials, 116
 Merton, 76, 100-1
 Oriel, 7-22
 Union, 128
 Pacifism, 68-9
 Pasteur, Louis, 30
 Pedder, A. L., 3 5
 Phelps, Dr. L. R., 15, 23
 Phillimore, J. S., 4, 8, 18, 32,
 #39»75>84> 107, 143, 149
 Pickard-Cambridge, W. A., 139
 Priestley, J. B., 76
 Raleigh, Sir Walter A., 5, 19,
 "- 3, 34-5, 43, 75, 77, 148-9
 Richmond, Sir Bruce L., 39, 40,
 47, 68
 Robertson, Malcolm, 109
 Rosebery, Lord, 6
 Ross, Sir David, 19, 21, 163
 Sadler, Sir Michael, 136-7, 162
 Scheffer, M., 26
 Science, 95-8, 127
 Scott, Sir W., 1, 32, 86, 90, 102-3
 Scott-Brown, Mr. and Mrs., 121
 Seccombe, T., 42
 Selborne, n 0-13
 Shadwell, C. L., 36
 Shakespeare, 30, 36, 47, 64, 79,
 87, 90, 142
 Shelley, 76, 92
 Sibly, Sir Franklin, 156-7
 Siegfried, Andre\ 28
 Sisam, K., 80-1
 Smith, Rupert Barkeley, 9, 12, 21,
 33, 42, 96, 124, 128, 168
 Spain, 120-1
 Stevenson, R. L., 1, 2, 86
 Thomas, Prof. W. D., 41, 75, 99
 Thompson, J. M., 121, 139
 Tod, M. N., 21
 Tolkien, J. R. R., 67
 Vaughan, Prof. Charles, 27, 46
 Veale, D., 158
 Walpole, Sir Hugh, 147
 Ward, Sir A. W., 137
 Warren, Sir Herbert, 34, 99, 101
 Webb, Dr. Clement, 35
 West Yorks Regiment, 48-61
 Wilkinson, Col. C. H., 119
 Woledge, Geoffrey, 70-4

*This typography and binding of this book
conform to the authorized economy
standards*

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY THE CHISWICK PRESS, LONDON, N.11

