

The Funeral of Edwin Abbott

Times, October 16, 1926

The funeral service for Dr. Edwin Abbott Abbott took place yesterday at Christ Church, Hampstead. Canon J. G. Simpson officiated assisted by Dr. Arthur Chilton, headmaster of the City of London School. The principal mourners were Mr. Edwin Abbott (son) and Miss Abbott (daughter). Among others present were:—

The Rev. Martin Thorpe (representing the College of Preceptors), Sir Israel Gollancz (representing the British Academy), Prof. Ernest Gardner (University College), Prof. Percy Gardner, Major E. Pugh, Mr. P. E. Matheson, Mr. A. S. Owen, Canon S. A. Alexander, Judge Marchand, the Rev. Fergus Wood; Sir David Keymer, Mr. T. W. Cope (representing St. Clare's School, Southward)) Dr. J. Nerle, The Rev. F. J. Chandler, Mr. Elliott Brooks (President) and Mr. H. L. Symonds (of the John Carpenter Club), Dr. and Mrs. Bernard Allen, Dr. R. P. Scott (of the Board of Education), Col. L. G. Mortimer, Dr. William Garnett, Dr. J. Glover, the Rev. John Darbeyshire, Mr. J. P. d'Albuquerque (Director of Science and agriculture, Barbados)

(list of those present) Mrs. De Book Porter*, Mrs. Lewis Hardy*, Mr. and Mrs. Eric Larson, Mr. A. B. Burney, Mr. R. B. Burney, Mr. and Mrs. E. W. Candler*, Miss Bartram, Mr. R. H. Allpress, Miss Blanche Cuthbertson, Mr. Frederick G. Hill, Mr. W. R. Raistowe, Mr. G. H. Payne, and Mr. C. V. Young,

The burial took place afterwards at Hampstead Cemetery.

Funeral Address by Dr. James G. Simpson, Canon of St. Paul's

Today we bear to a quiet grave on the outskirts of the city a great Englishman. It is, if you will, a grammarian's funeral; but though to many of us his earliest lessons were how to parse and how to write clearly, the grammar he taught us was the grammar, not indeed of assent,¹ but of the eager and patient search for truth. He did not strive nor cry, neither was his voice heard in the streets.² No titles of dignity, no trappings of office obscured the source of his influence or the reality of his power. For the honours and rewards, which many who are not unworthy still seek, he cared nothing. These passed by, not in contempt or ostentation, — (from that self-conscious subjectivity which has sometimes proved the bane of scholars he was singularly free, and to chagrin he was a stranger) — but in the austere simplicity of an undivided purpose. To the end he remained what we used to call him in a distant past — the Doctor.

¹ A humorous reference to Cardinal Newman's *The Grammar of Assent*

² Matthew 12:19.

Those of us who forty years ago were Abbott's boys³, and who passed to one or other of the ancient Universities, encountered Jowett and Percival at Oxford, or Thompson, in the Master's Lodge at Trinity. There were giants on the earth in those days. But whatever we may have thought of others, this at least is certain, that none could for a moment obscure the memory of the voice which rang clear down the dim corridors of the school in Milk Street, and of the figure at whose feet we sat, in the high classroom that perched above the traffic of Cheapside. The master who revealed to us the glory of our native tongue, as he turned into beautiful and balanced English speech the thought of the old literatures of Greece and Rome, was even then great among the great. Other schools might show traditions we could not hope to rival, but we had Abbott.

As we gather round his bier today, it is the clear eye, the firm mouth, the keen countenance, the alert frame, unknown to this generation, which rise before us as defined and dominant as ever they were, while the idle or the evil shriveled at his approach, and the rest drew from his presence an ideal of devotion to what is true, of zest for strenuous endeavour and of reverence for whatsoever is honest and just.

From the public eye, which he had never courted, he withdrew in obedience to his ideas, no less than 37 years ago, when those who are my own contemporaries had barely entered on the work of life. For some of us it was not even begun. His silence has been majestic. He had wrapped himself round in its mysterious folds till he became almost a legend long ere he put off the vesture of mortality. He had a work to do of which the world knew little, and till it was accomplished he was straitened. For all his cares and studies, sufficient as almost any one of them have seemed for the compass⁴ of a single human being, were (to use the phrase of the English Ordinal⁵) all drawn one way. For him in the last resort the proper study of mankind was the revelation of the human-hearted God. There can be no doubt that his toil on the Gospels, through which that God is declared, has been no less monumental than his unique work as a Shakespearean scholar or a student of Francis Bacon. But it was nearer his heart. Its results are committed to a surer judgment than the verdict of today.

And now this rare personality, long secluded from our vision, has passed into the *umbra mortis*⁶, nay, rather into the Light Eternal, where no shadow rests upon the Truth, where the dullness of mortal sight no longer veils the humanity of God.

Ave, magister dilectissime: ave atque vale.

³ Simpson was a student at the City of London School, 1876–1884.

⁴ Intellectual range.

⁵ A book prescribing the rules to be observed, and containing the form of service to be used, in the ordination of deacons and priests, and the consecration of bishops.

⁶ A Biblical expression meaning shadow of death.