

In Memoriam

by J. E. A. Steggall† (From *The Times*).

It was sometime in the year 1867 when my father took me, a boy of twelve, to see Mr. Abbott, the young headmaster of the City of London School, who was to give the customary decision as to my admission there. The direct and incisive questions he asked in English, in Latin, in Arithmetic, together with my hasty and erroneous answer in the last subject, I recall vividly today.

In January, 1868, I entered the School, and from that day to the end of his life my Headmaster's presence never left me.

In those days, unless I err, the term was always opened by a gathering of the whole school in the fine theatre of the old building. The simple rules for pupils were read, and were followed by the General Confession and the Lord's Prayer. Thus the Headmaster was known to every boy, and even the least impressionable could scarcely forget him. Increasing knowledge gave increasing respect, and the growth of reverence as surely led to the growth of love. As boys grew older they became more aware and more appreciative of the extraordinary character of their Head. When they left school they realised that their direct debt to him was no greater than the indirect, through their other masters who were clearly influenced by his tone and spirit. It is perhaps impossible for old boys to pay his memory a greater tribute than the recognition of their irredeemable debt to the masters under whom they worked; masters who loyally handed down the inspiration of their great Head.

Truthfulness in the spoken word, honesty and clarity in thought, activity in body and mind, were impressed by personal example. To boys in trouble of any kind another side of his character was revealed. Tender sympathy, wise advice, or kindly warning were given with freedom, yet with reticent regard for the natural awkwardness and shyness of youth.

With the Sixth Form he was of course most at home: the boys were all his friends, although he never sought popularity. In the Debating Society, of which the present Lord Oxford and Asquith was the most distinguished ornament in my time, he often took the chair and delighted us with the dignity that he thus added to their meetings.

In the competition for Shakespearean Prizes he was unique: everyone knows what he did to encourage the study of English in schools, but everyone does not know the spirit he infused into his lessons. With him we read not only Shakespeare but Pope and Tennyson. His illuminating comments, his magnificent reading, gave these and other authors a place in our memories that to this day is almost as fresh as when we all were young.

† J. E. A. Steggall was Professor of Mathematics at University College, Dundee for 50 years. He was a student at the City of London School, 1868–1874.

And he had that great gift the want of which makes barren the work of many men: the gift of humour. When the late A. H. Bullen had to declaim that speech in *Henry VI*, where the King says

“Upon this molehill will I sit me down,
To whom God will, there be the victory.”

he seized a chair or stool and sat on it, to us foolish boys a comic action at which we laughed; but Abbott removed Bullen’s embarrassment by speaking so kindly of his happy idea that the merely comic was changed in a moment to the humourous.

But schooldays have an end: and while some boys never saw their Headmaster again, many others enjoyed the privilege of later intimacy; some can look back for more than 50 years of happy friendship since they left the School.

It is no exaggeration for me to say that hardly a day in that long time has passed without a thought of him. I am not qualified to assess in any way his astounding learning, or his accurate scholarship, or the value of his remarkable works — except perhaps that perfect example of lucid exposition and brilliant comedy, *Flatland*, a work that has been followed by many imitations but by no rivals — but I can say that the qualities which impressed us as boys were more and more embellished as time passed us with graces that to schoolboys would have been as inappropriate as they would have been unintelligible. His delicate wit, his beautifully phrased analogies, his charming and kindly epigrams, were turned out with unembarrassed profusion. In that delightful home at Hampstead, built for him on his chosen historic site, what long and exhilarating evenings were spent by his old boys: what cheerful memories of happy schooldays were recalled: what pleasant tennis matches were played with the Headmaster as adversary or partner.

Ample reference has been made elsewhere to Dr. Abbott’s position in the Church: he was in advance of his time, and his clear-cut sense of right precluded him from even the smallest suppression of what he believed to be the truth. In consequence he was misunderstood when young and he made neither comment nor complaint when he was old. I remember perfectly the intense feeling that his first University sermon, in 1876 I think, caused in Cambridge. At the second, many of the more important stalls in St. Mary’s Church were empty as a protest against some doctrinal points that today would be regarded as old-fashioned, but which were then considered quite heretical. But he was captain of his own soul, and neither flinched nor scolded. Book after book came out from his study to bring comfort and healing to weary seekers after truth.

The full extent of his beneficent influence will never be known, but many old pupils have recognised and still recognise with a feeling approaching awe, the unparalleled influence of Dr. Abbott upon the lives and characters of them all. They will often think of what his

inspiration and example have done for them, from what evils they have through him been saved, and if there be any fruit of their life's work how much of its value they owe to their dear chief.

About ten years ago even the amazing vitality of Dr. Abbott showed signs of strain: and although for some time he could keep up his social relations with his friends, he grew constantly weaker, until at length slowly, gently, uncomplainingly, he gradually became physically feebler, more in need of help. Always cheerful, always with a kind word upon his lips, I saw him for the last time in the spring of this year: he could only speak in a low voice, but he knew me and said a few kind words. After this meeting I hardly dared to hope that I should ever see him again: and when the other night I opened my *Times* with a presentiment in my heart, there was his, the first name, in the obituary list. For me, as for many others, a brilliant and helpful light has been, for a short time we believe, darkened; leaving us for the brief remainder of our lives without the presence of him to whom slackness, sloth, and deceit were almost unpardonable sins: and through whom the light of honour, thoroughness, and activity was poured into the inmost hearts of his innumerable and reverent pupils.