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Obituary, *Times of London*

October 13, 1926

**Scholar, Critic, and Teacher.**

We announce with much regret that Dr. E. A. Abbott died yesterday at his residence at Hampstead, at the age of 87. He had been bedridden for more than seven years, and during the past week was attacked by a form of influenza, which brought on the end. Edwin Abbott Abbott was the son of Edwin Abbott, Headmaster of the Philological School, Marylebone, described by those who knew him as a man of strong personality. Born in London on December 20, 1838, Edwin Abbott the younger was sent to the City of London School in the early fifties, and left it as captain in 1857, with a scholarship at St. John's College, Cambridge. When, in 1861, he became Senior Classic and senior Chancellor's Medallist, and W.S. Aldis Senior Wrangler and First Smith's Prizeman, to the City of London school fell quadruple honours such as had never come to any school in a single year. The Classical Tripos over, Abbott turned to Hebrew and new Testament Greek and soon after was ordained in the Church of England. He was elected Fellow of St. John's in 1862, and 50 years afterwards Honorary Fellow, a distinction followed in the next year by his election as a Fellow of the British Academy. Other marks of public recognition were offered him, but declined. His marriage in 1863 with Mary Rangeley, the daughter of a Derbyshire family, was the beginning of a long and happy wedded life, terminated only by Mrs. Abbot's death on February 5, 1919. A son and daughter maintained their father's high standard of scholarship; and that he was able to bring his great work to completion after 20 years of unremitting toil was due in large measure to the help he received from his accomplished and devoted daughter. She nursed him with equal devotion in his last years of disabling illness. Abbott was a student and an author from the first. Incidentally he was a preacher, incidentally a school master<sup>1</sup>, and in both characters eminent; but he gave up preaching to husband his strength, and schoolmastering to husband his time.

**An Original Headmaster.**

For a term or two he was at King Edward's School Birmingham, but an invitation from Percival drew him to Clifton. Thence, at the call of his own old Headmaster, Dr. G. F. W. Mortimer, he went up to London and was appointed to succeed him at the City of London School. At that time he was a clean-shaven young clergyman of 26, so youthful in

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<sup>1</sup> His student, L. R. Farnell, expressed an entirely different appraisal in the *Dictionary of National Biography*: "Valuable and even original as much of this (biblical and English studies) was, his claim to be remembered must chiefly rest upon what can only be called his genius for teaching."

appearance that he was a times mistaken for a junior member of his own Sixth. Twenty-four years of work placed him amongst the acknowledged heads of his profession and made his school famous at the Universities.<sup>2</sup> It has been publicly stated that Benson was most anxious to have Abbott as his successor at Wellington; Rugby also was pressed on him; and it is probable that he could have had any of the great public schools. Nonetheless, he preferred to retire to Hampstead to devote himself to the work that had attracted his youth and that gave full scope to his remarkable powers of critical and constructive scholarship. Abbott was undoubtedly a great headmaster. Originality, freshness and vigour were his in a degree far from common; but his pupils carried away most enduringly from his teaching a deep impression of an overmastering intellectual honesty and of the ruthless application of all available means to the discovery of truth. Abbott was a student of Bacon to some purpose. His direct teaching was confined to the three highest classes, but his influence was felt in every part of the school. He had the gifts of enthusiasm, of penetration into character, of fertility of resource, of clear and incisive speech. It has been truly said of him, "He always made the best of us and got the best out of us": but he was sternness incarnate to the "slacker."

It was characteristic of Abbott to bring to the solution of every task every tool that he could find or fashion. When he determined to make the study of Shakespeare — for which special inducements existed in the school — a real thing, he tackled as a preliminary the apparent chaos of Elizabethan syntax. He published the first edition of his *Shakespearean Grammar* in 1870. Reviewing the *Grammar* in *The Academy* **2** (February 1, 1871) Walter W. Skeat wrote: "The whole work is remarkable for painstaking and general accuracy, and an obviously sincere desire of attaining the exact truth. It is at once a trustworthy and perhaps the sole guide to a knowledge of Shakespeare's grammar." This pioneering study of Shakespeare's language remains a permanent contribution to English philology.

The *Grammar* was followed by *English Lessons for English People*, in which he was assisted by his old friend and schoolfellow, J. R. Seeley. Then came an incomparable guide to teachers of the Bible called *Bible Lessons*, and other small but solid enduring schoolroom classics. In 1876 Abbott produced the fullest and best edition of Bacon's *Essays* yet published. Some of his views on Bacon's work and character were resented by Spedding, and a battle ensued in which the veteran but over-partial Baconian met a discriminating and well-equipped antagonist. A further book on *Bacon and Essex* was the immediate result, to

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<sup>2</sup> During Abbott's headmastership, 153 boys gained open scholarships at Oxford or Cambridge, and 91 went on to earn University first class honors. Twelve of his students are listed in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. (Asquith, Bailhache, Beeching, Bendall, Bullen, Chalmers, Conway, Delevingue, Farnell, Gardner, Gollancz, and Lee)

be followed 10 years later by *An Account of the Life and Works of Francis Bacon*.

### **Liberal Thought.**

In 1877 the publication of *Through Nature to Christ, or Through Illusion to the Truth*, brought down a storm of hostile criticism because it defined for the first time that liberal attitude to theology which marked all his subsequent work. The year following he published anonymously a book of singular beauty, *Philochristus, or the Memoirs of a Disciple of the Lord*, written in Elizabethan English, a style proper to “the height of this great argument.” Two other works of historical imagination followed, one intended to illustrate the spread of the Gospel in the time of St. Paul, and the other to depict the conflict of Christianity with Stoicism; *Onesimus* in 1882, and *Silanus the Christian* in 1906. A long article on “The Gospels”, packed with facts, in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was from his pen. To him also was due the plan of the elaborate *Synopticon* which old pupil and life-long friend, W. G. Rushbrooke, afterwards headmaster of St. Olave’s, carried out in detail in 1881. With Rushbrooke, also, he produced in 1884 the *Common Tradition of the Synoptic Gospels*. In 1886 a realization of the difficulties presented to the would-be believer by the miraculous elements in the Bible story led to the series of letters to a young friend called *The Kernel and the Husk, dedicated to the Doubters of this Generation and the Believers of the Next*. And even this list does not exhaust the astonishing series of books written during the 24 years of headmastership in which nothing required by the day’s business was left undone, nothing done except in the freshest way and after the ripest consideration.

The notable series of erudite books which came from his hand when he left the City of London School was preceded by a long and arduous study of Syriac and of the Rabbinical literature. Yet he found time to deal also with the interesting problems presented by the character and career of John Henry Newman and the varying accounts of the Death and Miracles of Thomas à Becket. The latter subject was an excursion into medieval history made to illustrate the development of miraculous story; the former was the result of a controversy in which he became entangled and in which his intense passion for truth led him into what some regarded as unduly polemical iconoclasm.

The *Spirit and the Waters*, published in 1897, but written long before, was an aphoristic summary, intended only for students, of the course of Divine Revelation; it might be called a Manual of Theology for Thinkers. Not till 11 years after his retirement did he put out his first volume of the great work he taken in hand, and he was then 62 years of age; but as there had been no haste, so there had been no rest. This book is called *Clue, a Guide through Greek and Hebrew Scripture*, and was followed in rapid sequence by a series of volumes, solid and learned, amply justifying the promise of the first. To these he gave the general title of *Diatessarica*.

To find a parallel to such single-hearted devotion to a scholar's task one must go back to the great scholars of a bygone age. And though little or no official recognition was ever given to Dr. Abbott's work by the authorities of his own Church, from the fit audience of the greatly learned he had ample recognition. On his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday he received a remarkable tribute in the form of an address signed by the two Archbishops and many Bishops and dignitaries of the Church of England as well as the leaders of the nonconforming Churches, the headmasters of most of the great schools of the country, and most of the chief theological professors, besides men and women of eminence in various other pursuits.

Nothing has been said of his vivid and inspiring utterances in the pulpit, which those who heard him cannot forget. Bishop Percival said on one occasion, "Had Edwin Abbott been able to continue preaching, he would have been the greatest preacher in the English Church;" and a distinguished contemporary headmaster on another occasion declared, Abbott's greatness as a teacher, preacher, and scholar was based on deep and lively human sympathies and an unquenchable passion for truth.

### **Reminiscences.**

*Times*, October 13, 1926. We have received the following reminiscences by an old friend:—

One of Abbott's earliest publications was a little work entitled *Bible Lessons* (1872), which had the honour of being commended by Bishop Thirlwall as showing "how this difficult duty of imparting a sound religious education may be effected." The book was a characteristic indication of his desire to bring into their right connexion the two things — education and divinity — to which his life was with such rare consistency of purpose devoted. The lines which he chose for the motto of his last book may be deemed to express a fundamental principle of his theology:—

"Since God made man so good — here stands my creed — God's good indeed."<sup>3</sup>

His books on Bacon won the approval of the omniscient and critical Lord Acton, who styled him "notre premier Baconien" in a letter to Lady Blennerhassett.

His fixed habit of concentrating his attention and his prodigious powers of work on a few big things gave rise to the remark that he knew only three books well (if books is the right word) — the new Testament, Shakespeare, and Bacon — and that with regard to many matters, both in literature and in life, which are well known to ordinary people, he was almost as ignorant as a child. In the *Life and Remains of R. H. Quick*, edited by F. Storr (1899), the following evidently refers to Abbott:— "One of the ablest men and best workers I know gets to have a splendid accuracy of knowledge in the area on which he has worked, but shows astonishing ignorance when you go a step beyond." Elsewhere Quick compares Abbott with F. W. Walker, the famous High Master of St. Paul's, and pronounces the latter

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<sup>3</sup> From the poem, "To a Soldier in Hospital" by Winifred M. Letts

to be the stronger man of the two in the arena of controversy, though Abbott it appears, expected his sixth-form boys to do at least three hours' work in the evening, after the regular school day. At the same time his boys "have great liberty to study, for they are treated like so many private pupils." Abbott, who relished Walker's half-cynical frankness of speech, used to relate how the latter showed him over his grand new school buildings at Hammersmith, and how, when he (Abbott) expressed his admiration of everything, and especially of the magnificent chemical laboratories, Walker replied :— "Yes, they are all very well in their way; but, as we two are alone here, I may venture to say (lowering his voice to a confidential whisper) that you and I know that this sort of thing is *not education*." Among those who in certain ways influenced Abbott — for the most part he was singularly independent, while generous in acknowledging obligations — was the Rev. J. Llewelyn Davies, an intimate and life-long friend. Abbott's father was Davies's churchwarden at Christ Church. E.A. Abbott was for many years a member of the congregation, and sometimes preached. He had a natural gift of extemporaneous utterance, and his sermons were always listened to with keen interest. He showed in them a power of persuasive exposition and popular appeal of which he afterwards gave signal proof in his *Philchristus* and other works, and which is seldom found in combination with minute and profound learning. He was debarred from making fuller use of his faculty of eloquent speech in the pulpit or elsewhere by a chronic delicacy of the throat, which rendered it imprudent for him to add to the strain which his school-work necessarily imposed upon his voice. In earlier days, when Abbott lived in St. John's Wood, his garden was the scene of little Saturday-afternoon lawn-tennis parties, of which some of his younger friends have pleasant recollections. This was the only form of bodily exercise or recreation, it is believed, in which Abbott could ever be induced to indulge.

People who met him out of school sometimes wondered whether the shy little man — as he seemed to be — could possess that power of keeping order and commanding respect without which other talents are almost useless to a schoolmaster. In point of fact he was a strict and highly efficient disciplinarian; it was a case of the triumph of mind — the *vivanda vis animi* — over matter. One heard how a noisy little mob of boys round the class-room door would be suddenly hushed into awe-struck stillness at the sound of the voice of the approaching headmaster :—

"He called  
Across the tumult, and tumult fell!"<sup>4</sup>

That he was able to inspire in his pupils, not only a wholesome fear, when necessary, but also the warmest admiration and gratitude has been made known to the world by testimonies and tributes of the most striking kind.

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Canto IV of Tennyson's *The Princess*.

**Inscription underneath his photograph in the Times.**

Dr Edwin Abbott, Headmaster of the City of London School from 1865 to 1889, whose death is announced. Lord Oxford and Asquith was a pupil at the school during his headmastership.