

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

BY

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WITHIN the brief interval which has elapsed since I last had the pleasure of addressing the Fellows of the British Academy, two very distinguished members of our body have passed away, and it is fitting that any other words I may have to address to you should be preceded by some reference, however brief and inadequate, to our common loss. Professor WALTER WILLIAM SKEAT, whom I mention first, since he was an original Fellow of our Academy, warmly cherished his connexion with it, and took an interest both in its actual work and in the development of its usefulness to which he not unfrequently gave direct expression at our meetings. In return, we have always felt proud of the fact that his name should have from the first been included in the list of the distinguished men whom we could claim as representing among us a branch of research peculiarly germane to the purposes of a national Academy, and appealing with almost unequalled directness to the sympathies of us all. Yet, even in learned centres, and more especially in those seminaries of learning where the scholarship of the country is formed by example as well as by practice, how scant was the response to any such appeal before Skeat and one or two others made the systematic study of the English language the subject of their life's work, and succeeded at last in impressing upon the generation that sat at their feet the historical as well as the philological significance of the continuity of our tongue. Skeat and those whose names will be permanently associated with his own in the history of our Academy as well as in that of national learning at large may almost be said to have conquered for English scholarship this new field—a field which previous generations had been contented to leave but little cultivated or only touched here and there by a tentative and irresponsible spade, though it as it were lay just outside their own doors. Thus, the men who really began the work of English scholarship had necessarily, as is the case with new sciences,

to teach themselves, and their labours were attended by the peculiar difficulties as well as by the incomparable delights of discovery. Skeat, who was an excellent German scholar, and who found great delight in translating German lyric and other verse, was fortunately not isolated from the contemporary endeavours of continental scholarship in the field which he had chosen as his own.

The first Elrington and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon in the University of Cambridge (as well he might in what, at the time of his return to the University, was the condition of English studies there) took the view that his range of work was not bounded by the precise designation of his chair any more than limited to the fifteen annual lectures prescribed by its conditions.

The influence of his academical lectures as well as of his literary productions, in consequence, stirred a living interest in periods of our language and literature on the hither side, also, of the Norman Conquest. Among his achievements, indeed, as a textual critic and commentator, none have carried his name so far as his standard editions of Langland and Chaucer; while his edition of Chatterton is, on a smaller scale, an extraordinary effort of learning and critical ingenuity. On the other hand, the breadth of his knowledge and the sureness of his combinative power as an English philologist is shown by those etymological works, the great *Etymological Dictionary* and its hardly less admirable compendium. Any one with knowledge who compares the fourth edition of the *Dictionary* with the original edition will find reason for admiring, among Skeat's distinctive qualities as a scholar, his rare capacity for growing with his subject. While he successfully sought to keep pace with the steadily expanding work in the science of etymology, which was being carried out both in this country and abroad, he had when necessary the courage to admit that his decisions in certain points demanded revision, and thus at the same time gave proof of the true scholar's humility, for which those honoured him most who knew him best. His last book, *The Science of Etymology*, appeared only a week before his death. How in this field of research, as indeed in any of the fields which were familiar with his footfall, the late Professor Skeat was at all times ready to act as guide to enquirers who asked his assistance, many of us here and in his University, where he spared no effort and no sacrifice for the advance and organisation of his chosen department of study, would at all times be ready to testify. His services were, however, always at the disposal of those engaged in undertakings for the furtherance of the studies with which he was identified. He was a pillar of the Early English Text Society in its earlier days; and

among his other merits should not be forgotten the all-important assistance given by him to the recording of English dialects. He organized the Dialect Society, and thus brought together the materials ultimately welded into an enduring whole by another Fellow of our Academy in the great *Dialect Dictionary*.

His distinguished fellow workers among us, and the Academy as a whole, will, for the sake of our body as well as for that of English scholarship in both hemispheres, long deplore his loss.

The loss of Mr. ANDREW LANG, who had been a Fellow of this Academy since 1906, but whom of late years it seemed more difficult than ever to seduce from his beloved Highlands, in the very heart of which he died on July 20th last, was one in which many learned and literary associations beside our own body, and more than one section of this, might prefer a special claim of sharing. Perhaps we think of him most readily as a historian—for to history in the broader and truer sense, as to Andrew Lang, what field of human study and what line of scholarly research is altogether alien? Yet there must always be some aspect or side of it which comes specially home to the heart and mind of the particular student, and twice happy the historian with whom that side is the past of his own people. I like to think that I can myself remember the brilliant writer whose productions, whether in verse or in prose, attest his familiarity with so many and diverse scenes and their associations, pen in hand over his *History of Scotland from the Roman Occupation*, in the University Library at St. Andrews. His narrative power, which of its kind was not surpassed by many other historical writers of his generation, stood him in good stead even in his treatment of so broad a canvas; but he excelled in that kind of historical composition which we seem to have agreed to designate by the name of the monograph, and in which his narrative and his critical gifts alike had free play. More than one *victa causa*, as interpreted by him with indefatigable zeal or not less notable acumen, might through his writings alone prove to future generations, as those of Sir Walter Scott, whom he so thoroughly admired, proved to our fathers as well as to ourselves, how strong a hold it had upon the imagination and the sympathies of their ancestors. For, though no one was better qualified than Mr. Lang to trace the line of demarcation between history and legend, since his feet moved surely in the chiaroscuro of mythology, he was never disposed to allow any theory to elbow out its human element. And if he was a great master of style—if in conjunction with our late beloved President, Mr. Butcher, he could reproduce the Homeric poems in that noble vehicle of expression, English prose, which in their hands was adequate

even to what might have seemed almost (I say almost) as venturesome a task as it ever attempted; if, on the other hand, the cunning of his craft did not desert him in the daily round of criticism and comment on all things and a few besides—he thereby gave proof that he was an artist, born and bred, and trained in a discipline of which the world as it read him might well be slow to discern the traces. For my part I rejoice that so widely accomplished a man of letters and one who, while he had so much to say, never failed to take thought of *how* to say it, should have formed part of our learned community.

I also desire, on behalf of our Academy, to record with deep regret the recent death of Professor T. GOMPERZ of Vienna. He is best known for his great work on Greek Thinkers (*Griechische Geister*), which by means of translation is familiar to the English-speaking world, and which has secured him a place among the recognized interpreters of Greek genius. In his own country, his merits were acknowledged by the high public position conferred on him, and he was by general consent numbered among the leading spirits of the intellectual life of Vienna, more especially as regards humanistic studies. In the Vienna Academy and its work he was so deeply interested that his loss must be felt very keenly there. The representatives of our body at the International Association of Academies held in Vienna in 1907 can testify to the important and gracious part he took in that international function. His enthusiasm for England, with which he had many ties, was most sincere, and English scholars heartily reciprocated his good will. The British Academy will not fail to convey its expression of sympathy to Professor Gomperz's family and to the Vienna Academy.

The various jubilees to the meetings in honour of which during the past summer our Academy was invited to send representatives are over, including the 250th anniversary of the foundation of the Royal Society, to whose hospitality we are so deeply indebted. On July 1 last, Professor Bradley delivered to a large meeting of Fellows and friends of the Academy the annual Shakespeare Oration, applying to the tragedy of *Coriolanus* his singularly lucid method of expository criticism. The Oration to which we look forward in the coming spring or summer will be given by a German Shakespeare scholar of great renown, Professor Aloys Brandl of Berlin. His subject will probably be *Shakespeare in Germany*, or some similar theme. We are to-day to have the pleasure of listening to the Warton Lecture by another of our Fellows, another literary critic of high eminence. Dr. Johns, Master of St. Catharine's College, Cambridge, will give on Nov. 6, 11, and 13 a course of three

lectures under the Schweich Fund for Biblical Archaeology on the subject of *The Laws of Israel and Babylon*. In the near future—at Easter 1913—as I very specially desire to remind the Fellows of the Academy, the next International Congress of Historical Studies will hold its sittings in London. The organizing Committee, of representatives of the Royal Historical Society and other Societies interested in Historical Studies, as well as of Universities and other learned bodies, which was summoned by the Academy, appointed an Executive Committee, and this is at the present moment actively carrying on preparations for the Meeting of the Congress. A large number of invitations for attendance and for the reading of papers has already been issued in consultation with the several Sections into which the Congress is to be divided. A complete list of the Officers of the Congress and of its Sections and Committees will very speedily be issued to those interested in the Congress; and these Sections and Committees, including the very important Finance Committee, are busily engaged with the Secretary of the Congress and the Secretary for Papers in the preparatory work undertaken by them. I am sure that the Fellows of the Academy, which has from the first shown a special interest in the Congress, will do what lies in their power to ensure to it a conspicuous success.

I reserve for our Eleventh Annual General Meeting in the course of the coming summer some account of the literary labours of the Academy, as represented by its ordinary Transactions, as well as by particular undertakings with which it has specially associated itself.