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Dutiful curate who became a sensation

A large monument, raised by public subscription, marks the grave of the young clergyman who died at the age of 37 and was buried in the Extra Mural Cemetery in Brighton. He had lived in the town for just six years, but people of all social classes, churches and faiths packed his funeral. His name was Frederick William Robertson, and his posthumous influence as “Robertson of Brighton” was remarkable.

Between 1855 and 1880, the Five Series, or volumes, of his sermons (together with three volumes of lectures) went through as many editions as a popular novel. Some of them were translated into German, French and Dutch; his Lectures on Corinthians were even published in Chinese. As a result of those six years in Brighton, he is often ranked with John Henry Newman as the greatest of 19th-century preachers.

He made his name in Trinity Chapel, whose façade was of Grecian design, and the interior, arranged primarily for preaching, was described as “more like a second-rate Dissenting conventicle than . . . an attractive and ‘fashionable church’.” Its income came from pew rents; so, like his predecessors there, Robertson needed to fill the Chapel. He did this with both his message and his presence. He was a sensation.

Portraits (see page 16) show that he was extremely handsome — the gay theorist Edward Carpenter, whose father was a Warden of Trinity Chapel, remembered him as “a beautiful creature”. Women often fainted during his sermons. These were usually an hour long, and were preached mainly extempore. He made few theatrical effects: when an artist depicted him in the pulpit with a hand lolling over the cushion, he immediately stopped the habit.

His voice was “a rich mellow baritone of considerable range”. Charles Dickens, who travelled from London to hear him, called him “one of the greatest masters of elocution” he had known. To hear him read the service, Dickens said, was itself a liberal education.

Born the eldest of seven children on 3 February 1816, Frederick Robertson had no desire to be a priest. His dearest wish was to be an army officer. Instead, his father articled him to a solicitor at Bury St Edmunds, where he detested the work, and underwent a religious conversion. His father then encouraged him to take holy orders.

At Oxford, Robertson was a contemporary of John Ruskin, with whom he clashed in debate at the Union. There are interesting parallels between them, not least the parental pressure to be ordained, which Ruskin successfully avoided. In later years, Robertson’s aesthetic sensibility would be strongly influenced by Ruskin’s writings, especially The Stones of Venice; but at this stage in his life his artistic feelings were choked by his adherence to Calvinist theology.

Robertson’s formation as a priest was within the Evangelical tradition; but it was the height of Tractarian influence in Oxford, and, like many, he resisted Newman’s spell with difficulty. He also had the misfortune to be tutored for orders by Charles Portalés Golighty, once Newman’s pupil, but by then poised to orchestrate the opposition to the leaders of the Oxford Movement. Robertson’s distaste for religious controversy stemmed from his experience of the bitter conflict of these years.

He began his ministry dutifully enough, deferring to his elders as a curate, first in Winchester and then in Cheltenham. Exhausted by his first year of title, he went to Switzerland, returning with a wife, Helen, the daughter of Sir George Denys, Bt. The marriage, like his vocation, owed much to external forces.

At Cheltenham, Robertson idolised his incumbent, Archibald Boyd, and called his son Charles Boyd Robertson. Boyd, later Dean of Exeter, and schooled in theological polemic in Northern Ireland, was fiercely Protestant; while Cheltenham’s formidable Evangelical Vicar,

Francis Close, increasingly dominated the town.

There were, however, other influences in Cheltenham. One taught Robertson Italian; another (probably William Dobson, Principal of Cheltenham College), introduced him to German theology and literature.

In 1846, Robertson underwent a classic Victorian crisis of faith, arising from personal as much as from intellectual factors. Some blame it on a rift with Boyd, but that was a minor squabble. More important was his need to break with his parents, who now lived in Cheltenham. When he was 14 their marriage had been threatened: his mother briefly left home and family for another man. This affected him deeply. It probably skewed his relationships with both men and women, and it kept him unduly bound to both.

His friendship with Boyd's sister Fanny may also have played a part in his breakdown, exposing as it did the absence of intellectual companionship in his marriage to Helen. Throughout his short life, he needed the sympathy of a woman to stimulate him to thought and action.

At the end of a walking holiday in the Tyrol, Robertson spent some weeks in Heidelberg, where he ministered in the English Chapel and met a number of Unitarians, then one of the most progressive Christian bodies. Among them was the diarist Henry Crabb Robinson, who was immensely impressed by the combination of liberal theology and religious feeling in Robertson's preaching.

Soon after his return to England, he moved briefly to St Ebbe's in Oxford, and then, because it would provide him with a better income, he went to Trinity Chapel, Brighton.

He preached twice each Sunday, using the afternoon sermons to expound a book of the Bible, chapter by chapter. In this, as in his preparatory reading, he was highly methodical. While he was an undergraduate, he had begun to commit the New Testament to memory and to arrange texts thematically in his mind. He abstracted other books in this way, and read vast amounts of poetry, the more lyrical the better.

Increasingly, he came to the view that the Bible itself was to be read, not as science, but as poetry. Although he died before Darwin's theories were published, this insight would assist his later readers to discern the truth of scripture despite the onslaughts of scientific and historical criticism.

He read German theology, including what he termed "the dark depths of Schleiermacher's metaphysics", in the original and in translation, and regarded biblical inspiration as the most important subject of the day. He was known even in his lifetime as an advocate of the theory of "progressive revelation".

Robertson's espousal and exposition of liberal theology must have been startling to some of his hearers, but it was wrapped in a deep spirituality that touched the heart. He claimed that reading Shakespeare was vital to his theological awareness, particularly to his sense of what it meant to be human. He was especially skilled at portraying biblical characters as real people, and he taught that it is only through Christ's humanity that we can know his divinity.

Inspired by the revolutionary events of 1848, he lent his support to the founding of a Working Man's Institute in Brighton; and it has been suggested that it was his radical politics rather than his theology that made him enemies. He was often associated with F. D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley, both of whom he met, but he was not himself a Christian Socialist — though his politics was similar to theirs. Increasingly at ease with high-church clergy in Brighton, he nevertheless shared Kingsley's taste for 'muscular Christianity', as distinct from what both considered the effeminate asceticism of the Tractarians. Yet, again like Kingsley, Robertson was "feminine" in his emotional temperament, and his tendency to nervous collapse.

The 19th-century gender debate, lyrically expressed in Tennyson's The Princess, is never far away in Robertson's writings. It reaches its apotheosis in his teaching that the perfection of Christ's humanity involves his blending of masculine and feminine qualities (its inclusiveness is qualified by Robertson's private opinion that women were best suited to being wives and mothers).

His re-interpretation of Roman Catholic dogmas included a sermon on "The Glory of the Virgin Mother", and it seems apt that he should have died, as well as preached his first sermon in Brighton, on a Marian festival.

It is generally assumed that he was unhappily married. Not long before his death, he considered a separation; and in 1849 he conducted an intense relationship with the Hon. Mrs Augusta Fitzpatrick, wife of the Anglo-Irish politician John Wilson Fitzpatrick, later Lord Castletown.

He also became a close friend of Lady Byron, the poet's widow; and it was she, together with Robertson's family and Henry Crabb Robinson, who endeavoured to make him known to a wider public by publishing his writings. The stumbling block was Augusta. Robertson

had written out many of the sermons for her and her children, and, like Lady Byron, she had a large collection of his correspondence. She wanted to have her say in the choice of an editor.

Publication of the sermons proceeded, the manuscripts in Robertson's hand corroborating the shorthand reports produced by a Miss Dix, a member of the congregation at Trinity Chapel. But finding an editor for the biography proved problematic, since the book would expose Robertson's liberal outlook in an increasingly hostile climate.

F. D. Maurice was considered unsuitable as he had recently been accused of heresy, and R. H. Hutton because he was a Unitarian (though he would become an Anglican) and Robertson was mistakenly suspected of Unitarianism. It was Augusta's protégé, a young Anglican clergyman named Stopford Brooke, who finally edited The Life & Letters.

Augusta had animated Robertson, believing he could become "one of the Master Spirits of the age". His life, cut short by a brain tumour, or nervous decline, or occipital nerve neuralgia — theories vary — was too brief for that, but the posthumous appearance of his writings, which skilfully popularised liberal Christianity, made Robertson the teacher to an entire generation.

The Revd Dr Christina Beardsley, Assistant Chaplain of Chelsea & Westminster Hospital, is preparing a biography of Robertson.

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