

JOHN PERCIVAL POSTGATE

1853-1926

THE lamentable accident which caused the death of Dr. Postgate when close upon his seventy-third year has removed one of the finest and most acute of English scholars. The shock which his tragic death produced to his friends is intensified by the thought that he was taken away prematurely; for in body he was active for his years and in mind unwithered by age, full of vigour and literary productiveness to the last.

John Percival Postgate was born at Birmingham on the 24th of October, 1853, the son of John Postgate, F.R.C.S., of Scarborough, and Mary Ann, daughter of Joshua Horwood, surgeon R.N., of Driffield. Though by birth and education he came from Birmingham, in origin he was of pure Yorkshire stock. His father was a picturesque figure, a man of singular determination and force of character. Starting life as a grocer's apprentice he fixed his aspirations on medicine, and by his indomitable energy and pertinacity became a qualified doctor before his thirtieth year. He then settled in Birmingham, where he soon won recognition as a respected physician. But he did not restrict his activities to medicine. Impressed by his early experience of the sinister secrets of the grocer's trade, he concentrated his untiring efforts on checking the adulteration by grocers of food products and diminishing the evils and loss thus incurred by a suffering public. He induced the Birmingham members of Parliament to propose the enactment of a Bill against adulteration. After nine unsuccessful attempts an Act was passed to mitigate the mischief, though it still left many loopholes for the dishonest trader, whose supple ingenuity is yet a match for the devices of the legislator. But the honour remains to the Yorkshire doctor, whose efforts awakened public feeling on this important matter.

The son, John Percival, was educated at King Edward's School, Birmingham, from which he went to Trinity College, Cambridge, as a scholar in 1872. He took his degree in 1876, having been placed in the First Class in the Classical Tripos, in which he was bracketed with three others for the eighth place, and was second Chancellor's Medallist. It may be fairly presumed that his success would have been more conspicuous had he not unfortunately suffered from a severe toothache and consequent sleeplessness during the examination. He was elected to a Fellowship at Trinity, and served as Classical Lecturer

of the College from 1884 to 1909, being Senior Lecturer during the later period 1903 to 1909. He also took pupils at Girton. From 1876 to 1884 he held no official post in Cambridge, but, according to the custom then prevailing, instructed private pupils, who flocked to him through the opportunity that had been created by the death of the celebrated 'coach' Richard Shilleto in 1876. He also acted as secretary of the Cambridge Philological Society and was strenuous in its service, editing its *Transactions* and *Proceedings* and inducing scholars to read papers. In 1880 he was appointed to the Professorship of Comparative Philology in London, a post which he held for thirty years, first as Professor at University College, 1880-1908, finally in the newly reconstituted University of London, 1908-10. Though he never produced any considerable work on Comparative Philology, his sustained interest in and profound knowledge of the subject added effective lucidity and grammatical precision to his scholarship. In 1909 he left Cambridge to take up by invitation the Professorship of Latin in the University of Liverpool, which post he held till 1920, when he retired with the title of Professor Emeritus, and returned to his old home at Brookside in Cambridge, where he resided till his death. Though entering late in life on the arduous and complicated duties of a professorship of Latin in one of the new universities, where the study of the humanities is conducted with difficulty in surroundings often uncongenial and unsympathetic, he threw himself with characteristic energy into the performance of the task before him, and won the respect and admiration of his pupils on account of his masterly appreciation of the ancient classical literature and the severity of his standard of scholarship. He also took his full part in the management of the University by constant attendance at the meetings of the Faculty and Senate and participation in the academic debates. A man of simple tastes, his special delight was the bicycle. He became a well known figure at Cambridge and Liverpool plying that means of locomotion backwards and forwards to his occupations. Through the bicycle he met his death. While thus riding he was knocked down and run over by a steam-lorry on Trumpington Road, opposite Leys School, on Wednesday, July 14, 1926. He swerved into the lorry which was proceeding in the same direction, probably (though the evidence at the inquest was conflicting) being confused by a motor-cycle which passed just at the same time. The intimidating noise caused by that sort of dangerous and distracting vehicle may well have alarmed the old man and deprived him of his nerve at the moment when it was most needed. He died the next day, from the injuries he received, in Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge.

He married in 1891 a former pupil, Miss Edith Allen, daughter of the late T. B. Allen and sister of Mr. T. W. Allen, Fellow of Queen's College, Oxford, the most distinguished of living English Homeric scholars. He leaves behind him their family of four sons and two daughters. In 1887 he took the degree of Litt.D. at Cambridge, and later received the honorary degree of Litt.D. at Dublin and Manchester. He was corresponding member of the Virgilian Academy of Mantua (1910), President of the Philological Society (1922), and a Fellow of the British Academy.

Postgate was a man of untiring activity and industry, a born and dexterous organizer, by no means content to confine himself to his official duties. When the *Classical Review* was started in 1887, he was one of the band of scholars who were concerned in its promotion. To the volume of its first year of issue he contributed one article only, dealing with a subject in which he was always keenly interested, the reformed pronunciation of Latin. In this he recited the history of the movement started by the Cambridge Philological Society with the co-operation of the Oxford Philological Society, designed to press upon schools and to introduce throughout the country a pronunciation representative of that which it may be presumed was employed by the ancient Latin race. The paper is clear and persuasive, with apt practical illustration such as Postgate loved. 'If Latin (he wrote) were a spoken language, no one would think of pronouncing *nānus nainus*, any more than of pronouncing *āne ain*.' From the first volume up to the fortieth, that of the year of his death, critical communications or reviews by Postgate are found in every volume except six of the *Classical Review*, and of those six volumes three contain notices of books published by him. In the September number for 1926 appeared his last contribution, a note in which he argues plausibly that the expression about Caecina in Tacitus, *Histories* II. 20 'bracas barbarum tegmen indutus' is unsatisfactory, as neither Tacitus nor any contemporary of Caecina after the mention of *bracae* would have thought it necessary to point out that 'brecks' were a *barbarum tegmen*. Therefore in *bracas* he recognized a gloss on *barbarum tegmen* specifying the garment in question. He was editor of the *Classical Review* from 1898 until 1906, when he handed over the editorship to Dr. Rouse, and from 1907 to 1910 himself acted as editor of the *Classical Quarterly*, which was then started, an erudite publication devoted to papers of a more elaborate and technical sort. He discharged his duties as editor of these two journals with patience and good judgement. He was also in 1903, along with Professor Sonnenschein, the chief originator of the Classical Association, which has become a powerful agent for

fostering interest in the ancient classics and fighting the cause of culture among our materialistic countrymen. When he resigned the secretaryship in 1906 he was spoken of as 'the father of the Association', one 'who had done more work for it than any other member'. He was elected its President subsequently, and in April 1925 delivered his Presidential address on 'Classics to-day'.

His most considerable achievement, an undertaking which sheds honour on English scholarship, is the stately and convenient *Corpus Poetarum Latinorum*, which was designed to supersede the obsolete works of Weber and Walker. Postgate conceived the idea of a handy complete critical edition of all the Latin poets under his own general editorship. The work being too vast for one single man to complete satisfactorily, each poet was entrusted to a specially qualified scholar. This indispensable work, which appeared in five fasciculi, is finely printed and produced. The text is furnished with adequate brief critical notes showing the chief variants and conjectures, which act as danger signals, so that one who reads the poets in Postgate's *Corpus* can see at a glance where uncertainty lurks in the printed text. Postgate himself edited Catullus, Propertius, Grattius, Columella Book X (a poetical excursion on gardening by that prose writer on agriculture), the *Cynegetica* of Nemesianus, and the fragments of Ovid, Lucan, Nemesianus; he collaborated with Mr. G. A. Davies in preparing the *Silvae* of Statius. The uniformity and lucidity of arrangement in the *Corpus* was due to Postgate's inspiration and vigilance. The work is a lasting memorial of his acumen and consummate knowledge of the Latin poets. To the admirable way in which he conducted the labour of general supervision the present writer can testify, as one who worked with him, contributing part of the recension of Ovid. The care with which he corrected the proofs, the sound sense and erudition which he displayed in constant letters to his contributors during the passage of the book through the press, his good temper and reasonableness in tendering advice and considering counter arguments, were a marvellous stimulus and encouragement to those who co-operated with him in this laborious and exacting venture. The *Corpus* is appropriately dedicated to the memory of Bentley. It was blessed in its general editor with a director well fitted to follow in the footsteps of that trenchant genius. In one respect Postgate differed from Bentley: though always critical and sometimes incisive, he showed such consideration for others and self-suppression as could hardly be claimed for the great Master of Trinity, the most glorious of British scholars.

It is regrettable as regards completeness and utility that Postgate excluded from his *Corpus* the poets Ausonius, Claudian, Rutilius, and

Prudentius. Though not strictly classical, and though, as he declares in the preface to his last fasciculus, they wrote after the decease of genuine Latin poetry, these were men of mark and masters of the Latin Language, whose poems contain many gems and much of interest; and moreover, though it is true that they were aliens by birth, yet seeing that they wrote when Latin was still a living and still a spoken tongue, their graceful and melodious verse is an intrinsic portion of the body of Latin poetry, in no way to be compared, as Postgate compared them, to the Latin verses of Politian, Grotius, and Milton, which, however elegant, are but glimmerings from embers of an extinguished fire, mere artificial efforts in a language then defunct. I often argued thus to Postgate, but he shook his head and would not see.

Postgate was fitted by his acumen and sense of proportion for the editing of that kind of critical edition which aims at practical conciseness rather than completeness. Of this sort are his editions of Catullus (1889), Propertius (1894), Tibullus (1905), Phaedrus (1920). In connexion with his edition of Propertius he printed in the fourth volume of the *Transactions of the Cambridge Philological Society* an able and exhaustive paper on certain manuscripts of Propertius with a facsimile, in which he estimated the relative importance of the poet's manuscripts. In his editions his selection of readings is generally judicious, but his love of emendations (he made about twenty in Catullus and over a hundred in Propertius) detracts to some extent from the value of his editions, especially in the case of Catullus and Propertius. Indeed, in these two authors none of his emendations can be said to be completely convincing, though he is always ingenious. The obscurities of Propertius are such that it is hard to arrive at certainties. In four passages his courage may have solved the riddle: ii. 7. 20 'hic erit et patrio nomine (sanguine MSS.) pluris amor'; iv. 1. 93 'Lupercus, avi (equi MSS.) dum saucia protegit ora'; iv. 2. 12 'Vertumni rursus credis id (credidit MSS.) esse sacrum'; iv. 10. 19 'idem eques, e (et MSS.) frenis idem fuit aptus aratri'. All these corrections are masterly and reveal him as a penetrating critic. The outstanding feature of his text of Propertius is the quantity of transpositions of lines which he introduced, in order to produce a better connected sense. But the disorderly and passionate temper of the Umbrian poet of love is reflected in the incoherence of his thought and in the abruptness of his transitions, which to many scholars and critics cause difficulties and surprise. Wilful poets, however, reason not as scholars and logicians. The verses of Propertius must be accepted in the order in which they stand. Prudent editors are content to interpret the incorrigible poet's inconsistencies as best they can; for he was like

a wayward child, swayed by emotion, not by reason. The elaborate and intricate transpositions excogitated by Postgate and others, in order to restore to him consistency, fail through want of appreciation of the poet's nature. The result was unfortunate for the *Corpus*, which is designed as a book of reference; in Postgate's *Propertius* it is often hard to find the place. The numerous transpositions are both ugly and bewildering, and they are based on no external evidence. Such exercises of ingenuity are easy to make in the case of an elegiac poet, who writes in couplets, each complete proposition in themselves, which may be readily shuffled about by critical gamblers. But the process is arbitrary and can never win acceptance. When he proceeded later to edit *Tibullus* he refused to have anything to do with transpositions. His text of *Tibullus* is cautious and trustworthy, though occasionally marred by excessive reverence for the best manuscript, the Ambrosianus, which, as is the way with good manuscripts, is sometimes strangely corrupted. Thus in i. 4. 27 he retained the unclassical form *transiet*, in iii. 4. 26 *humanum* (which he explained as standing for *humanorum*!), in i. 3. 4 *modo nigra*, in place of the fifteenth-century convincing correction *precor atra*. His own emendations are few, of which some seem arbitrary; others are brilliant, notably i. 6. 3 'quid tibi, *saeve, rei* (seutie MS.) *mecum est?*'; i. 7. 53 '*sic venias hodiernae Geni; tibi*' (tibi dem MSS.). It is curious that one so careful should have claimed as his own in iii. 2. 15 the emendation *recentem* (rogate MS.), a fine restoration already made by Bach, which Dissen in his commentary (1835) describes as a '*coniectura acuta*'. His edition of the *Fables of Phaedrus* in the Oxford texts is scholarly and convenient. The manuscripts of *Phaedrus* are numerous and perplexing, and Havet's attempt to settle their value in his critical edition is not entirely convincing. Their corruptions offer wide scope for conjecture. Postgate explored their classification in a luminous preface, which is followed by an '*additamentum criticum*' containing discussions and explanations of crucial passages. He introduced several conjectures of his own, of which some are neat but others seem violent. The edition is remarkable for certain attempts at the restoration of a lost text, especially the lines at the end of iv. 14.

As a commentator Postgate was skilful and satisfying. He had sympathetic insight into the feeling and modes of thought of the Latin poets, and a profound mastery of their linguistic peculiarities. His selections from *Tibullus* and *Propertius* are among the best attempts at the interpretation for Englishmen of those elegiac poets. The introductions to both books are illuminating and suggestive. Not the least valuable of his works are his editions of *Lucan*, Books VII and

VIII. The historical introductions concerned with the difficulties surrounding the battle of Pharsalia and the last days of Pompey are distinguished by great learning and originality; the commentary is concise but packed with information. It has been aptly said of these editions that they bear on every page the unmistakable stamp of the great scholar (*Classical Review*, xxxii. 78).

As a translator into English he excelled. His prose version of Tibullus in the Loeb series is a model of nice scholarship and fine taste. It enables those not expert in Latin to appreciate the delicacy of expression and thought of one of the sweetest and simplest among Latin poets.

He was above all things interested in textual criticism, on which subject he wrote the article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and the short and stimulating section in the *Cambridge Companion*. Numerous critical discussions of difficult passages in ancient authors by him are to be found in learned journals, particularly the *Journal of Philology*, the *Classical Review*, and the *Classical Quarterly*. Especially valuable is his shrewd paper on Horace, *Satires I*, in the *Classical Review*, xv. 302, the influence of which is seen in Dr. Gow's edition. He had the true critic's faculty of divining where difficulty lies, though in the case of Horace it can hardly be said that his solutions were generally satisfactory. His paper on 'Flaws in Classical Research' (*Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1907-8) is ostensibly a contribution to learning destructive rather than constructive. It deals mercilessly and often humorously with the types of error prevalent among classical researchers. The structure of sentences, the Greek article, hypallage, translations, the text of Plautus, and other matters are passed in review, and incidentally many novel and striking, though not always convincing, theories are propounded. His little treatise on Manilius, *Silva Maniliana*, written in clear and graceful Latin, 'contains much happy illustration and suggestive conjecture. One or two emendations may be regarded as certain' (Garrod, *Manilius*, II, p. xc). His pamphlet on Lucretius, *New Light upon Lucretius*, is very striking. Accepting Jerome's statement that Lucretius became deranged, but wrote several books of his poem in intervals of his madness, he draws attention to v. 1283-1360, a curious passage on the employment of wild animals in war, which is shown to be not based on any specific statement of any previous writer. Yet so earnest a seeker after truth as Lucretius is not likely to have invented his facts. Therefore, since the diction is plainly that of Lucretius, Postgate concludes that the passage is the product of imaginative aberration, thus confirming substantially the statement of Jerome.

His keen interest in improving the methods of teaching Latin resulted in his *Latin Primer*, a well known and practical grammar widely used in England and America. His *Sermo Latinus* (1889, in an enlarged form 1913) is one of the best handbooks introductory to the study of Latin Prose Composition, on which he set a high value as an instrument of education. His *Prosodia Latina* is a useful concise treatise, brought up to date, on Latin prosody and metres, less exhaustive than Ramsay's able though antiquated *Manual of Latin Prosody* and less complicated than Hardie's *Res Metrica*. In *Translation and Translations* (1922), one of his latest works, he returned to a subject he had already touched in various places: translation, its aims and methods, distinguishing between Retrospective Translation from the original language into English, the object of which is to impart knowledge of the original to those to whom it would be otherwise unknown, and Prospective Translation, versions into Greek and Latin commonly called 'fair copies', the object of which is to exhibit knowledge of the languages into which the translation is made. The preliminary essays, divided into three chapters, are replete with vigorous and entertaining remarks. Especially he argues, with pungent illustration taken from modern experimentalists, that translation from Greek and Latin originals must be close, faithful, free from inserted verbiage or alien freaks of style; that blank verse not rhymed should be used in translating hexameters and the drama, except in the lyric passages where, in spite of the sacrifices to fidelity entailed, the sharp distinction between the metres of dialogue and chorus cannot otherwise well be reproduced in English; and that rhyme is suited for translating lyrics such as Horace's *Odes*. The latter part of the book contains a few renderings in English verse from Latin and Greek, and a series of brilliant versions from English poetry into Greek and Latin in various metres, and a few pieces done into Latin and Greek prose. The methods and secrets of writing 'fair copies' found in Postgate an able and enthusiastic exponent.

Though his published works are concerned mainly with Latin he was no inconsiderable Greek scholar, and towards the end of his life he produced two short but highly original treatises on the intricate subject of Greek accentuation, *A Short Guide to the Accentuation of Ancient Greek* (1924) and a pamphlet *On Ancient Greek Accentuation* (1925). The Guide is not a complete treatise, but a practical summary of the known facts regarding accent, which was designed to denote the peculiarities of audible sound. The rules of the Greek grammarians, chiefly Aristarchus, are explained and exemplified with incisive force, especially regarding the correct accentuation of enclitics, which

is often ignored by modern editors. This crisp and clear handbook simplifies what is often regarded by the indolent as tiresome and superfluous. The accents are shown to be no mere empirical rules but a national system of pronunciation. The pamphlet *On Ancient Greek Accentuation* develops and elucidates the principles and opinions explained in the *Guide*, and seeks to prove that the tradition of accent derived from grammarians and manuscripts is sound and trustworthy, though Postgate fails to discriminate between the trustworthiness of the grammarians as to the pronunciation of their own time and of older periods of the language. There is much in the pamphlet that is controversial and at variance with views generally held, but Postgate's firm grasp of Comparative Philology gives importance to his contentions.

Though for many years a Professor of Comparative Philology, he has left behind little on this subject, a few etymologies proposed in scattered papers and two essays, the first his inaugural address as Professor at University College, London, delivered on October 6, 1896, on the Science of Meaning, in which he examined the growth and alteration of the meaning of words, the second his Preface to the English Translation of Bréal's *Semantics*, the purpose of which book is to investigate the origin and meaning of words, and to distinguish between the products of the unconscious and conscious activities of the mind. Postgate's Preface is full of fertile illustration. He emphasizes the extreme ductility of language, which refuses to accept the rigidity, notably as regards gender, of many grammatical rules. His introduction to Ogden and Richards's *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923) and his inaugural lecture at Liverpool on 'Dead Language and Dead Languages' (1909) contain a few more philological remarks.

In person Postgate was small and spare. His features, though plain, were arresting on account of the keenness of his eye, his alertness, and the evidence of acuteness beyond that of the ordinary man. His intense enthusiasm for ancient learning, his power of close observation, his subtle humour, which illuminated and enlivened the driest subjects, his aptness in quotation and illustration, his breadth of view and high-mindedness, his penetration, his unflinching honesty, and his consideration for such as differed from him, impressed those who knew him personally and ensured the respect and admiration of those whose lot it was to be taught by him. At the same time it must be admitted that he often showed a curious perverseness, and had prejudices on certain questions which it was useless to challenge, an obstinacy of which he was conscious and which he would attribute to his Yorkshire

blood. In discussion he was apt to seize upon what to most people seemed trivial or irrelevant. To the present writer he was known through many years as a kindly friend, ever ready to help and to advise.

His high standard of scholarship would permit no slovenly work in his pupils. But, if exacting, he attained his end and produced accurate and finished scholars. As a teacher he was successful rather with single pupils or small classes than as a lecturer. Though his lectures revealed his complete mastery of his subject and opened the eyes of his listeners to many subtleties of language, a slight drawl in his voice and a monotony of utterance made the delivery of them not lively. 'But when all this has been said' (I quote from an appreciation kindly sent to me by one of his distinguished colleagues at Trinity), 'it would be difficult to exaggerate the charm and interest of his conversation. He was an exceedingly shrewd observer, and an invaluable counsellor in matters of scholarship. He would take any amount of trouble to help any younger man who consulted him, carefully reading unpublished work, and writing long letters of admirable comment, full of detailed information and references. He was absolutely honest in criticism, never flattering or feigning approval, and he spoke from a depth of learning which few scholars of our day have approached. Moreover, he was full of literary enthusiasms, sometimes of astonishing intensity. I once remarked to him that I thought that Ennius was really a very great poet. "A very great poet?" he said furiously. "He was a *supreme* poet."

I would emphasize in conclusion that despite his angular personality he had a quite exceptional attractiveness. He inspired his friends with a very real and a very deep affection, and his death has left an irreparable gap.

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