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A table of contents for the *Journal of Theological Studies* (old series) can be found here:

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pdfs are named: [Volume]_[1st page of article]

The Journal
of
Theological Studies

JANUARY AND APRIL, 1917

EDMUND BISHOP

ON February 19, at his home in Barnstaple, in response to the gentlest call and literally pen in hand, there passed from us one of the acutest and most learned of the scholars of our time. Edmund Bishop was in his seventy-first year, but his mental vitality was unimpaired, his amazing memory had hardly begun to fail him, and his eyesight, which had so often enabled him to detect erasures in manuscripts and recover lost readings with an almost uncanny skill, served him well to the last: only a weakness of the heart producing breathlessness after exertion, and an increasing frailty which prostrated him from time to time, betrayed the inroads of advancing age. During the last seventeen years I have had the privilege of being in frequent correspondence with him, and in the latter part of that time, when opportunities of meeting had greatly increased, our acquaintance ripened into a friendship, the recent loss of which makes it difficult for me to write about him. But it is fitting that this JOURNAL, to which he has been since 1903 so important a contributor, should preserve some record of his personality, and I could not refuse the request that I should endeavour to estimate, so far as my own limitations might allow, the services which he has rendered to the study of Christian literature.

A few biographical details must first be given, drawn in part from an article in the *Tablet* (March 3, 1917) by his devoted pupil and fellow-worker, Dom Hugh Connolly. Born at Totnes in 1846, he was educated partly at Exeter and partly in Belgium. Attracted as a boy to the Roman Communion he was formally received at the age of twenty-one; but he cherished no unkind feeling towards the home of his early spiritual nurture, and

I remember the eagerness with which he bade me turn again to the last pages of *John Inglesant*, a book which he told me he read every year. If some of our scholars suffered under the lash of his criticism, it was carelessness, or prepossession, or false method, that vexed him; and their treatment was after all much less severe than that which he frequently meted out to some of the most prominent writers of his own communion. From 1864 to 1885 he held a position in the Education Department of the Privy Council Office: his leisure hours and his vacations were given to patristic and liturgical studies and to researches in the British Museum. His method of study was his own. As a boy, so he told me, he bought Muratori's *Antiquitates*, and read the six folios right through. The great scholars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were his teachers. He seemed to know them personally. 'I love the *history* of books in *themselves*', he wrote, 'and am a DEVOURER of prefaces.' Changes in the Education Office offered him the alternatives of remaining under new conditions or retiring after unusually short service with a pension. He chose the latter, thus freeing himself for literary work. He went to Downside with the hope of becoming a Benedictine, but his health was too frail to allow of his taking the monastic habit. In spirit he was a true Benedictine, and in the succession of the great masters of sacred learning; and in the large-hearted community on the Mendips he found a second home, where in later years he regularly spent two or three of the summer months in each year. From 1893 to 1901 he worked with his friend Dom Gasquet, now Cardinal Gasquet, in Great Ormond Street, close to the British Museum; and shortly after that he retired to North Devon where he lived with his sister and his niece for the last fifteen years of his life.

Such a life afforded unusual opportunities for continuous and systematic study. His range of reading was immense: he analysed and annotated everything, and made vast collections, largely of materials gathered by himself from manuscripts. He was never satisfied until he had got behind the printed texts: and his way with a manuscript was his own. He would sit and gaze at a great Psalter, until it revealed to him the character of the scribe who wrote it or the ecclesiastic who had ordered it to be written. He had a sense of divination which rarely

played him false : it was controlled by an overmastering passion for getting at the facts, all the available facts, before venturing on the exposition of a theory. In his published writings some of his cherished beliefs would find expression as mere hints in a footnote—'hints', as Mgr Mercati has said, 'worthy of being carefully treasured, and capable of fruitful application.' But in his letters, as well as in his eager conversations, he would let himself go, with delightful apologies and cautions, it is true, but with a freedom and a raciness which displayed the highest qualities of the historical imagination. Many scholars have precious bundles of these letters and of memoranda (*Consultationes*, as he would call them) dealing with the most diverse topics and containing information known only to himself. It may be hoped that presently an effort will be made to collect and arrange this great stock of knowledge, and to publish some portions of it for the use of other students. So much of the character of the man and of the method of his work is revealed in his letters, that I am confident that I shall do better justice to my subject, and at the same time give more pleasure to the reader, by a considerable quotation from a letter dated August 26, 1916, than by any further effort at a personal description. I had sent him a memorandum containing the results of a somewhat elaborate investigation of the Worcester charters, especially those of St Oswald. This drew from him a letter of which the following is a fragment : I give it, as nearly as it is possible to reproduce it in print, with all the little tricks of emphasis which correspond in writing to the vivid tones and significant gestures of his rapid conversation. The opening sentence is too characteristic of his generosity in the appreciation of the work of new-comers in fields which he had made his own to be omitted :

Your exposition of Oswald's mode of action in the case is so singularly concrete and actual that you have been able to draw before one's eyes, help me to 'understand' (and 'feel') the character of Oswald and what *it* was that made Dunstan trust him, as I have never been able, even in a groping, glimmering way, to do before. To me the English tenth century means the 'understanding' (if one can come to it) of four men, three clerics and one layman : Athelstan, Dunstan, Ethelwold, Oswald. Here is the *production* (I mustn't say *projection*, which has an idea of the fortuitous in it) of the great Alfred, his outcome, the outcome as it

were of himself as contribution to the 'Making of England'. Dunstan, I think I can see—*what* he was: to me he is, remains, ever, one of the five or six greatest of Englishmen. Athelstan—ah! Why does not some one take to meditating on him—a sort of Melchisedek of the English State—*sine patre sine matre*? What *was* it that made him—the centre of a whole complex of European Alliances; *and* the donor of books to favoured English churches, 'noble' books—*and* the hero of Brunanburh? Did *anything* escape his keen and penetrating eye? But all this is not for me: I can but see, look, and wonder; and then say 'Exoriare aliquis. . .'. Who shall tell us *what* this hero, this great Englishman, was? Who? Not in my day.

All the three ecclesiastics are deserving of the most careful study. Somehow I have, and have always had, a feeling that Ethelwold was of a 'commoner clay' (there is no other way in which I can put it) than the other two. Yet glimpses we get of him—some—are so wonderfully attractive! Shewing as so singularly 'attaching'—Dunstan had *no* disciples—Ethelwold could not *help* seemingly making them. This then must be always counted in his favour when one strives to realize the living man, the living soul. Also I think we must not forget that *in fact* there issued from Ethelwold a 'literary movement'—unfortunately the Latin things have been most published abroad—but Aelfric . . . there must lie for us (to 'my' mind, whether it be right-guided or wrong) the revelation of *the best* that was in Ethelwold. Yet I feel always a something that draws me back from genuinely and freely 'warming' towards him. I fancy, fancy, it must be some obscure sense of his love of the vanities, pontifical baubles, and so on, Court splendours and the like, that this sort of 'love' and complacency was ingrained in him. 'Very unjust'—of course! But then I can't be just cold—just when I want to *see* the living man and come in touch with—don't laugh—his soul. I say 'don't laugh', because being Devonshire born, and what is more deeply felt, I have a sense of superstitious realism as to Ghosts . . . and that spirit touches spirit still though centuries divide us. . . . Do please before you send me to the limbo of 'Fanciful Nonsensicality' read *In Memoriam*, No. xcv. . . . You see I feel—that is to say in the days when I actually 'handled' (and conversed with) certain MSS that scrutinizing them one came into contact with the living writer—or originator—of them! To take two as examples, two that are to our present business—Ethelwold's Benedictional and the Bosworth Psalter. Years ago I had the opportunity of being able to examine the Benedictional, the MS itself, at leisure to contemplate it for a couple of hours. Gage's reproduction in black and white was then felt to be 'no good' whatever. How gorgeous and splendid. *Here* is Ethelwold himself figured in the dead page of script

and gold. When first I saw the Bosworth Psalter, and had it at leisure for six weeks to scan and 'meditate on', it was the same, and a *comparative* study this time. Here are the two men, Ethelwold and Dunstan, still to-day under their own very hand—more far, actually portraying themselves before one's eyes. For me I must own Bosworth is as surely Dunstan and the Benedictional is Ethelwold—'a portrait by the artist himself'—just as surely as anything in the collection at the Uffizi (isn't it? Anyhow at the Pitti Palace). It matters nought to me to be laughed at for saying so: but I feel 'sure' *you* will not laugh at these confessions, and will look at them with indulgent, even if somewhat sceptical eye. Of course one couldn't put such things in cold print: nor would one care to write them except *most* exceptionally. But I am in the deep sense that there *is* something 'true and just' in these reveries after all. Some day when you are—if ever you feel—in the mood, and are in London, and have two or three hours to spare, get out 'Bosworth' at the Museum and have in the Roxburgh reproduction of Ethelwold's Benedictional, and *contemplate* them comparatively. I think you will find at the end that a couple of hours might be easily worse spent.

I fear that I have exceeded the reasonable limits of space without even approaching the task which I had at first set before myself, namely, of indicating—'pro tenuitate mei sensuli', as one of his Spaniards of the seventh century would have phrased it—the chief contributions which Edmund Bishop made to the scientific study of Christian history and literature. But indeed such a task is better reserved for a fuller consideration and, it may be, for a more capable judgement. A volume is now in the press, on the fastidious correction of which his last efforts were expended, which, under the title *Liturgica Historica*, will present in a permanent form the most important of his many scattered essays and memoranda, brought up to date by means of additional notes and supplementary paragraphs. This will be the only book that will have appeared under his own name as sole author. In other books he stands in the second place as joint-author with a friend. For the rest we have but articles and pamphlets, or 'notes' of unusual dimensions contributed to the books of others. But no one can tell how much of his work, generously given away to a host of enquirers, lies hidden in the writings of scholars who were only permitted to make a general acknowledgement of his assistance.

I close this imperfect notice with an expression of my conviction that his work will be better known and more highly valued in the coming years, that it will profoundly influence the course of enquiry with regard to Christian Worship and the whole history of early and mediaeval religious thought, that the stimulus and inspiration which he has afforded to many younger students will survive the loss of his presence amongst us, disheartening and even staggering as for the moment that loss must be. These consolations, and yet loftier ones, are ours; but the sorrow remains. *Talem reminisci dulce est: tali carere supplicium.*

J. ARMITAGE ROBINSON.