



OBITUARY

ROBERT SCHLAPP, M.A., Ph.D., F.R.S.E.
1899–1991

Robin, the youngest of the three children of Professor Otto Schlapp, was born in Edinburgh on 18 July 1899. After three years at a private school he went in 1907 to George Watson's Boys' College; his ten years there were before the college emigrated to its spacious territory in Colinton Road. The site, later to be absorbed by the Royal Infirmary, looked onto the Meadows and as Robin's home was in George Square he was always able to declare that he had never eaten a school dinner. When E. T. Whittaker came from Dublin in 1912 to his Chair of Mathematics at Edinburgh he too brought his family to live in George Square: an advent momentous for Robin's future. Robin and his brother walked over the Pentlands and the Lammermuirs and cycled in the Highlands having, in those pre-tourism days, the whole country almost to themselves.

As a son of German parents Robin was legally barred from the armed services so that when he enlisted on leaving school in 1917 he was drafted into a labour corps. Demobilised in 1919 he matriculated in October, so embarking on his life-long association with Edinburgh University. He envisaged an honours degree in chemistry, but the course involved some first-year mathematics and lectures from Whittaker who faithfully maintained the Scottish tradition of heads of departments teaching first-year classes. Lectures from one whose persuasiveness and lucidity were even then notorious—and perhaps occasional encounters in George Square—switched Robin from chemistry to mathematics. Robin, if later not wholly uncritical of Whittaker's methods of conducting academic politics, always venerated him, remembered him with gratitude, and looked up to him as his boyhood hero.

After graduating at Edinburgh in 1922 Robin, encouraged by Whittaker, went to St John's College, Cambridge, to undertake research under Sir Joseph Larmor. Among his social activities was the gathering together of Scottish graduates; immersed as they were in a multitudinous sea of Sassenachs some cohesion seemed advisable. As it was necessary to name the club so formed they called it "The Four Airs" by Robin's casting vote. (There *were* only four Universities in Scotland in 1922.) So Burns Nights and St Andrew's Days were duly observed in Cambridge. Another commitment was to the University Musical Society's choir. Robin's attachment to St John's lasted all his life; he still attended reunions of its alumni when an octogenarian.

In 1925 Robin took his Cambridge Ph.D. and thereupon accepted the offer of a

lectureship in applied mathematics at Edinburgh; he did not apply for this: it was offered to him, an instance of Whittaker's influence at that time. The only other member of the department was its Head, C.G. Darwin; the pair ran the whole department unaided. They were a starkly contrasted couple, yet they worked together perfectly and each had, and retained, a high personal regard for the other; a regard that would be in no way lessened by their joint conquest in a single day's walk of the four highest Cairngorm mountains.

Robin spent the session 1931–32 at Wisconsin. He did not apply for this privilege of researching under the vigorous leadership of Professor van Vleck; it was van Vleck who, having met Robin in 1929 at a meeting of the British Association and being then aware of some of his published work, invited him to come and suggested to Darwin that Robin be seconded for a year. It so happened that W. G. Penney, who subsequently attained world fame as a nuclear physicist and became a life peer and a member of the Order of Merit, joined the same team of researchers at the same time. The two became life-long friends.

In October 1932 Robin resumed his teaching and examining duties at Edinburgh until he was seconded in 1938 to teach for a session in the mathematics department at Manchester. His brother Walter was on the staff of the physiology department and Mary Fleure, a student in this same department, played the violin in the same string quartet as Walter played viola. Robin naturally joined them with his 'cello (he took up the double bass later); he and Mary decided to marry immediately her medical commitments ceased in February 1940. Meal Monday, the half-term break for the Edinburgh Faculty of Arts, was on 12 February, a week before Mary's commitments ended; had they ended a week sooner Robin would not have had to return from the Saturday wedding in Manchester until Monday evening; as matters stood he had to be back teaching on Monday morning. So, Mary's commitments being unalterable, could they possibly change Robin's by transferring Meal Monday to the 19th? The odds on such a proposal being carried were small in any event; they were lessened further by Robin being unwilling to disclose the real reason behind it, thereby allowing the date of his wedding to be proclaimed to all and sundry. One would have relished hearing his valiant attempt at special pleading. The proposal was turned down and the date of Meal Monday remained as officialdom had decreed.

So Robin brought his bride to wartime Edinburgh; he was on call as an air raid warden, and the allotment he dug in response to the clamant exhortations to "Dig for Victory" supplied his table for 30 years. The lessening of student numbers by wartime demands was more than compensated by the six-month courses for service cadets which the government requested from the universities; these continued throughout the year, so annihilating any "long" vacations. The first such course to be instituted was for Royal Artillery cadets; the university appointed Robin as their mentor, a post which he held for the five years the courses lasted.

Towards the end of the war Robin was able to rent, for summer sojourns with his family, a cottage at Nether Monynut in a narrow valley winding south-eastwards in the Lammermuirs. There he could help with the harvesting and go solitary walks over the well-known hills: solitary because, their two daughters being so young, Mary could not

accompany him. It so happened, though it was and remained unknown to all save a very few people, that in 1946 Robin had applied for a post at Aberdeen; what heart searchings accompanied the decision to uproot his family defy imagination. The probability of his appointment was high, and indeed he was summoned to be interviewed in the last week of July. He therefore invited a colleague to spend two nights at Monymut, the intervening day being devoted to striding to, and returning from, some Lammermuir landmark, say the Mutiny Stones or the Twinlaw Cairns. Then, on the second morning, the two would walk over Dunglass Common to Cockburnspath and there board the train for Edinburgh, whence Robin would proceed to Aberdeen. But when they set out it was found that Mary had only packed sandwiches for one! Robin had cancelled the interview.

When Edinburgh University opened its new session in October Robin had been promoted to a Senior Lectureship. It was crucial that, in that summer of 1946, Whittaker still occupied his Chair, not to retire therefrom until 30 September. Those who knew him will readily visualise him descanting, in his inimitable style, on how dire a tragedy it would be for the department of applied mathematics if Robin were to go. So try if promotion will retain him! The boyhood hero had evolved into a tutelary deity whose guardianship now embraced not only Robin but the whole department. This year 1946 was the bicentenary of the death of Colin Maclaurin; on 13 June a wreath was laid on his grave in Greyfriar's churchyard, on behalf of the Society. The bicentenary was also commemorated at the December meeting where Robin spoke at length on Colin Maclaurin, elaborating especially on his friendship with Newton and his activities during the Jacobite rebellion of 1745.

Four years after Maclaurin there died Johann Sebastian Bach whose bicentenary was marked in the Edinburgh suburb of Morningside by renderings of the cantata *Gottes Zeit* and the D minor clavier concerto. As it proved impracticable for all the players to assemble on the actual day, 28 July, of the anniversary the performance, in the house of one of Robin's neighbours, was on Saturday 29th; the string players of course included both Robin and Mary. The 28th itself was marked by Robin (double bass) and the bass singer in the cantata walking the hills between the Tweed and Yarrow valleys. But a bicentenary was not necessary to trigger a Morningside performance of a Bach cantata; there were other events at Robin's own house, at least one being honoured by the participation of the Professor of Music (Sidney Newman). Nor was it only in Morningside that Robin collected singers and chamber music players; the quadriennial Colloquia held by the Edinburgh Mathematical Society at St Andrews afforded ideal recruiting grounds. That in 1955 is especially memorable, Bach being performed by a group not restricted to an Edinburgh suburb but including professional mathematicians from, among other sources, Toronto (continuo), Delft (1st violin) and Pasadena (2nd violin). There were other items in this evening concert; the Bach item will, for connoisseurs, be identified by the words *Schlummert ein*.

The years between 1955 and 1959 were well nigh filled by Robin's herculean labours as secretary of the executive committee of the 1958 International Congress of Mathematicians in Edinburgh. In 1959 he not only attended the St Andrews Colloquium but gave three lectures there; his growing reputation as an expert on Newton

and his contemporaries persuaded the organisers to ask for lectures concerned with them. So while some talk of James Gregory gave the lectures an appropriate local flavour they were dominated by the colossus. Some of the discourse was centred on the Newton–Leibniz controversy: an unedifying squabble which Robin suggested, and convincingly argued, was not between the two masters but rather between the two coteries of their disciples.

Robin had for a long time nurtured an interest in the history of mathematics and though he himself deprecated it as amateurish, others valued it as sound scholarship. It was, not surprisingly in view of Robin's personal involvement in Natural Philosophy, pivoted on Isaac Newton; when he made his pilgrimage to Newton's birthplace at Woolsthorpe, walking there from Grantham, some of the locals could not fathom why he so exercised himself! He had been assisting the editing of Newton's correspondence by the Royal Society since the early 1950s and he accepted invitations to lecture on allied topics even into his retirement. In 1972 the Mathematical Association unprecedentedly staged its Easter annual meeting north of the border and some inspired person, possibly aware that Robin's presidential address in November 1944 was entitled "Some early mathematical works in Edinburgh University Library", suggested that the main address be delivered by Robin. He lectured on "The Contribution of Scots to Mathematics", holding the attention of the large audience throughout. As the Aberdonian chairman remarked: "there must be very few lectures during which the only person who ever looked at the clock was the lecturer". Robin arranged for the University Library to mount an exhibition of relevant books and documents in its possession; all these were flanked in their glass cases by Robin's erudite commentaries. As examples of Robin's style one could scarcely do better than bracket, with this 1972 lecture, the Gibson lecture entitled "Inventors of the Calculus" that he gave in Glasgow in 1973, though just to read these is but a meagre substitute for hearing them.

The soundness of Robin's scholarship relating to Newton and his contemporaries was not widely appreciated; being a modest man, many would say excessively so, he did not parade his talents. But a few, not least E. T. Whittaker, who knew him well, did appreciate them. Despite Whittaker's fear of Robin's departure damaging the applied mathematics department there is, to judge from casual remarks dropped in ordinary private conversation, little doubt that had this future Copley medallist and former Vice-President been able to exercise as dominant an influence with the Royal Society as he had done with Edinburgh University, he would have moved to second Robin for full-time employment for a long period on Newtonian affairs.

The session that opened in October 1968 was the last of Robin's more than forty on the teaching staff of his alma mater. Although he had served the Edinburgh Mathematical Society as its president more than twenty years earlier the Society, in appreciation of his long membership (he was elected in 1923) and loyal support, offered him the presidency again, and greatly to its pleasure he accepted. But the finest, and indeed spectacular, tribute to him came from his own department; a prize and a lectureship were established and named after him. Mary was taken into confidence, and precautions adopted in the hope of damming any leakage of the plans; all went well and Robin's old friend Lord Penney gave the first lecture on 12 November. Robin was astounded and

more than a little discomfited to hear the Vice-Principal announce the first of the annual Robin Schlapp lectures. He was to be likewise embarrassed when the Royal Society of Edinburgh, of which he had been a Fellow for 56 years, and had served for an unbroken spell of 16 years on its council, announced that it had awarded him one of its bicentenary medals in 1983.

Lord Penney's lecture was followed by a dinner in the University Staff Club at which Robin's health was proposed. It was a distinguished gathering. Lord Penney was not the only member of the Order of Merit present; Sir Geoffrey Taylor had come from Cambridge, as also had two younger admirers, both of them soon to be Fellows of the Royal Society. The scope, and success, of this celebration must be credited to Nicholas Kemmer, the last of the three Tait professors who were privileged to have Robin as their chief support.

On retirement Robin undertook to arrange a series of chamber music concerts in the University Staff Club. That he had not the remotest intention of living a life of idleness is proved by his ascent of a 3,000 ft. mountain in Perthshire within a month of his 71st birthday. This achievement was on one of a sequence of annual day trips from Edinburgh; an early morning train ferried the walkers to Callander until closure of the railway compelled reliance on motor transport. The expedition had originated about 1934 on the resolve of a small group of students soon to graduate; when it resumed in 1946 after its forced abeyance by the war, and the participants returned from their various spells in the armed forces, Robin was invited to join the party. To celebrate his entry into his ninth decade they (a group of 16 on the occasion) entertained him at dinner some six weeks after his 80th birthday. Another custom that delighted him was participating in a series of lunches organised by some of these same graduates. Being driven to and from, and sitting down to, a lunch requires little effort so that he was able to continue to come until deteriorating health took charge. But other less sedentary occupations he was constrained to desist from sooner. It was a severe wrench to have to cease playing his double bass in the annual performances of Bach's Matthew Passion by the Edinburgh University Singers. When he lectured on Napier to a group of school teachers in Stirling his voice had lost some of its old power, and although he bravely attended the centenary meeting of the Edinburgh Mathematical Society in February 1983 (he was present at its jubilee dinner in 1933) he felt unable to stay on for the following dinner.

One whose life spans three generations is likely to be an involuntary witness of and partaker in great changes; among those experienced by Robin two may serve as examples: the St Andrews Colloquium and the Edinburgh Association of University Teachers (E.A.U.T.).

The colloquium at St Andrews used to lodge in University Hall; as the years passed the Hall was enlarged thereby rendering the colloquium less intimate. Later still the colloquium was lodged elsewhere, thereby imposing a markedly less gracious mode of life—a fact naturally imperceptible to members too young to have attended the earlier gatherings. As for the E.A.U.T. Robin joined in the early days of his lectureship and later served for a time as treasurer. It was an almost purely social club. Robin, as one of its golfers, enjoyed an annual trip to Northumberland to play against colleagues from

Newcastle in a match at Bamburgh. With the lapse of time the members laid more stress on trades union aspects of their activities. Robin did not resent these changes; with his native courtesy he, however reluctantly, tolerated them. They illustrated *The Way We Live Now*. But even his toleration could be stretched to breaking point, as it was by the line of pylons striding from the nuclear power station on the Berwickshire coast across the foothills of the Lammermuirs.

Robin's health and pristine vigour weakened inexorably as time passed, and he had to discontinue living alone in a large family house. As both his daughters were domiciled in south-east England he was taken to a London hospital and then, to be near his elder daughter, to a nursing home in Kent. The good wishes of a legion of friends accompanied him, as he surely knew. But he would also know that there was to be no return and so he entered upon a constricted existence far from his native Edinburgh, far from friends and in a milieu not competent to afford much intellectual discourse. He had a long life full of accomplishments to look back upon, and doubtless he dwelt on, among other high periods, the trips in his small yacht among the islands of the West Coast of Scotland and the many anchorages there that he knew so well. He died on 31 May 1991.

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