

Obituary.

THE REV. H. C. WATSON.

THE Editor has asked me to write something about the Rev. Henry Charles Watson, who was senior mathematical master at Clifton from 1870-1900, including the years 1874-79, which I spent there. The main facts about his peaceful life are soon told. He was a scholar of Trinity College, Cambridge, and graduated as 8th wrangler in 1865 when Strutt, afterwards Lord Rayleigh, was senior wrangler. After a time, at Elizabeth College, Guernsey, he came to Clifton in May, 1870, to fill the gap caused by the death of C. H. Cay, and remained in charge of the mathematics, as above stated, till December, 1900. In 1901 he was appointed by his old college Vicar of Gainford on Tees (near Darlington), and must have made almost an ideal village clergyman until his retirement, when he bought a house at Ripon. But there he died in his 83rd year on April 16 last. A long and well-spent life. It seems almost intrusive to say more; and yet in gratitude for much instruction which has helped me through life and for much kindness received outside our official relations, I must try to honour his memory by some attempt to recall his aims and methods, for the possible guidance of others. Moreover, H. C. Watson has a special claim to our remembrance in that he was (from 1878 to 1890) Treasurer of the Mathematical Association in its earlier incarnation. But one makes such attempts with more and more diffidence—diffidence due, I hope, less to inertia than to the realization, as experience gathers, of the difficulties besetting the life of a schoolmaster, which, when as boys we knew him, we so lightly regarded. Since I learned from Watson I have been a schoolmaster (for a few weeks) myself, I have in later years rushed in as inspector where the Board of Education was not yet allowed to tread; and I would fain make use of some of the sympathy thus acquired in interpreting Watson's life and work: but alas! the boyish memories insist on dominating the picture. It seems better to let them have their way and to write frankly as a boy back at Clifton,—a boy of whom Watson hoped great things and to whom he therefore devoted hours of his precious leisure. So we are together again, back in Watson's study to rectify some of the deficiencies of the text-books, which were not so many or so carefully considered in those days. Todhunter was one of the Moderators for Watson's Tripos, and Todhunter had written text-books* which were regarded as containing the whole duty of young mathematicians, or very nearly. But his devotees admitted that at least alternative proofs could be given in some cases, and these Watson provided with skill and precision. But first a pen must be selected and the accumulations of ink which had dried on it carefully scraped off with a pen-knife. Then when a few sheets of white paper had been neatly squared and adjusted we were ready to begin. Mathematicians are almost divisible into two camps according to their script: there are some who write a most beautiful clear hand like Professor Forsyth; and there are also incorrigibly illegible slovens like—, but most mathematicians, and all schoolmasters can unfortunately fill in the blank for themselves. Watson belonged instinctively to the former class, though his fingers were perhaps less resolute towards perfection than his spirit. The particular bit of bookwork was neatly headed, and written out, with negligible erasures or corrections, till the end was reached, when the frown of mild anxiety was replaced by a gratified smile of success with occasionally a statement of the number of years

* Other text-books were beginning to appear. R. S. Heath, a rather senior contemporary of mine, had somehow got hold of Salmon's *Conic Sections*, and knew it by heart. But I doubt whether he ever told Watson.

since there had been any call for that enterprise. And here perhaps I may allow my later experience to suggest what I never thought of at the time—that it must have been pretty difficult to find time and attention for these extra calls on a busy man. Life was strenuous in those days under Percival, who managed to get the last ounce out of men and boys. Besides organising the teaching (and did more examining fall on the staff then than now ?), and taking his full share in it, Watson had charge of a “small” house, occasional sermons to preach in chapel, and a largish family of his own. I am not exalting his cares above those of many others who have had equal or greater : I only wish to assure them all that we boys, who were happily oblivious at the time what they were doing for us, do come in later years to remember and reflect upon it with deep gratitude. Individual methods of course vary. To some we owe an enthusiasm—the outcome, it may be, of a single chance remark. That was scarcely Watson’s way. He represented neatness and the orderliness of the beaten track. The mathematics of those days both gained and suffered in this way, and since that time the sufferings have led to the successful exploration of byways ; but even these successes are apt to remind us occasionally of the restfulness of the main road. Watson seemed to inspire order : I never remember his having any classroom difficulties. He wrote out as neatly on the blackboard as on paper, after substituting for the scraping of the pen the preliminary of wrapping the finger-end of his chalk in a piece of paper. How he came to join so rebellious an Association as ours I do not know (would it have made a difference, I wonder, if it had been proposed to “reform” geometrical teaching instead of “improving it” ?), one may infer that the list of names must have been above criticism, and he found an irreproachable part to play as treasurer.

I hope I have not given the impression of a hard man, in mentioning this addiction to orthodoxy : it would be a fatally wrong impression. Kindliness was one of Watson’s strongest features, as I had good cause to know. He had a happy way of forgetting anything disagreeable that befell him or others : if by chance reminded of it by some one else overtaken by a fit of contrition, he could scarcely be persuaded that it had ever happened. One of his colleagues has told me that in giving out work to the mathematical staff he would let everyone else choose first, himself accepting as his share what was left. Small wonder that such colleagues can borrow a leaf from his book by declaring that they have forgotten the rigidity of his system and remember only the kindness that made it endurable. He was a good French scholar (I fancy he had French relatives), and would gather a few of us to read a play of Molière in his study : and there were the pleasantest of suppers occasionally on Sunday nights. That was in the days when he had a “small” house. Later he started a big one, which will keep his name permanently as the first administrator. They say it did not distinguish itself much in the athletic world : that is quite possible, for one does not associate Watson’s methodical ways with the strenuous excesses of boys’ games. But I am quite sure that the house was well ordered, and that the boys in it had a mother’s care from Mrs. Watson.

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H. H. T.

323. Mr. Bowles remarks that this mound (in the garden of the Castle Inn at Marlborough), Silbury Hill, and the mound at Marden form a triangle, which of necessity they must, unless they lie in a straight line.—Art. “Avebury,” *Penny Cyclopaedia*.

324. (Buffon’s) translations of Hales’s *Vegetable Statics*, and of Newton’s *Fluxions*, both of which he prefaced with great ability, appear to have been undertaken with a view of improving his style as well as of advancing his knowledge.—“Buffon,” *Penny Cyclopaedia*.