

PHILIP HENRY GOSSE, F.R.S. (1810-88)*

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I. The Gosse Family

A HUNDRED and fifty years ago last year Philip Henry Gosse was born. His father, Thomas, of whom Raymond Lister recently published a biographical sketch, had been a gifted itinerant miniature painter in the early nineteenth century. His son, Edmund William (later Sir Edmund), was to become a distinguished man of letters in the first quarter of the present century. Sir Edmund knew and was known by almost every prominent figure in English literature and politics. As one of the many benefactions of the late Lord Brotherton, the University was fortunate to receive as part of the Brotherton Collection a large number of letters written to Sir Edmund, covering mainly the period 1867-1928. In 1950 the Library published *A catalogue of Gosse correspondence*. In this paper I am concerned chiefly with Sir Edmund's father, Philip Henry, but would point out that inherited talent persisted in the family. Sir Edmund's son, Dr. Philip Henry George (so named after his grandfather), was well known until his death last year for his writings on pirates and similar topics. Readers may like to consult *The Times's* obituary of 5th October, 1959, and Raymond Lister's *Bibliographical check-list* of his works. In memory of his wife, herself an author, Dr. Gosse initiated and endowed the Anna Gordon Keown collection, which is to consist primarily of manuscripts and printed editions of contemporary and near contemporary poetry. I should here like to express my indebtedness to Mr. B. S. Page, the University Librarian, for his kindness in reading an early draft of this article.

It is a pity that for one person who knows about the nineteenth century Philip Gosse from his own writings or from the straightforward *Life* of him published by his son, Sir Edmund, in 1890, a hundred know only the picture portrayed

in Sir Edmund's other biography, *Father and son*, published seventeen years later, which is within its own *genre* a masterpiece. I would recommend readers to consult the unjustly neglected earlier of these two works; less well written than the later one, it gives much fuller details.

In *Father and son* Sir Edmund unfolded the clash between Philip's austere evangelicalism and his own incipient agnosticism as a young child, a clash that led to an irreparable cleavage as soon as the son grew old enough to leave home. This "study of two temperaments", enlivened by ironic comment, revealed a shrewd insight into human nature. The reactions of many people to the book were akin to those of the late Professor C. H. Turner of Oxford, himself no evangelical: "I remember well," wrote the Rev. H. N. Bate, "to what depths of indignation he [Turner] was moved by . . . *Father and son*: the one thing he could not understand was what seemed to him *impietas* in the most sacred of all relationships". Nevertheless, as Sacheverell Sitwell pointed out, Sir Edmund, while sketching in his father's eccentricities, never laughed at his father and was no doubt very fond of him. Indeed, the father emerged from the sketch a greater figure than the son.

All the same, the general impression conveyed was one of a restricted, uneventful life of almost unrelieved gloom. Treated as an intellectual equal by his father, with whom he carried on precocious conversations, Edmund was never allowed to behave as a young child. Many nineteenth-century evangelical parents brought up their children on an excellent book by Favell Bevan, *Line upon line*, the title and conception being inspired by Isaiah xxviii, 10; Edmund was nourished on such treatises as B. W. Newton's *Thoughts on the Apocalypse*. Edmund was an only child and reared largely by his father, a lonely middle-aged widower.

* Reprinted, with minor amendments, from the *University of Leeds review* (June, 1960) by kind permission of its editorial committee. An article on another special collection in the Brotherton Library appeared in the *RECORD* for January, 1959 ("The Romany collection at Leeds").

II. Life and Works of P. H. Gosse

From reading only *Father and son* one might easily obtain a distorted picture. The following outline of the elder Gosse's life and works, which may help to bring him into clearer focus, is based upon material in the Brotherton Collection and in the Brotherton Library. There are few collectors' items (these must be sought on the shelves devoted to the other Gosses); but most of his major works are included, and so is some of his correspondence. There are gaps in our holdings, and it would be appreciated if any reader is able to fill them.

As a boy he attended Blandford Grammar School. The Collection has one of the writing-books used by him. Entitled "Themes, or pieces of juvenile composition . . . from Jany. 1823, to Xmas. 1823", it contains in a neat copperplate hand week-day exercises on such subjects as "The cow", "The lion", the four seasons, various virtues and vices, and Sunday exercises on the history of David and the authenticity of the Bible.

At the age of eighteen Philip Gosse went to Newfoundland, where he spent eight years as a clerk in a whaler's office, studying natural history in his leisure time. This period was followed by three years as a farmer in Canada. It was there that he wrote his *Entomologia Terrae Novae*, which was never published. According to F. A. Bruton's paper in the *Entomological news* for 1930, this small book was illustrated with nearly 250 beautifully hand-painted figures of insects, larvae and pupae. More recently, in 1955, C. H. Lindroth referred appreciatively to it in a paper issued by the Lund Entomological Society on "The Carabid beetles of Newfoundland".

In 1838 he sold the farm and went first to Philadelphia and then to Dallas, Alabama, where he worked as a schoolmaster. In 1839 he set sail for England.

On the voyage home he wrote *The Canadian naturalist*. Unfortunately, neither the Library nor the Collection has this, his first published work, the forerunner of many widely read books by him all dealing with natural history in a semi-popular vein. As a scientific treatise on the fauna and flora of the Eastern Townships district of Quebec, it is still unsurpassed, according to an article on the subject by W. O. Raymond in the *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada* for 1951. The book consisted of a series of conversations between an imaginary father and son. Philip Gosse was best in the vivid, forceful descriptive passages; he was less happy in inventing dialogue. This was how the

boy, Charles, accepted his father's invitation to study Nature with him:

Few things would give me greater pleasure. I have often felt the want of a companion in my walks, who, by his superior judgment, information, and experience, might remove my doubts, gratify my curiosity, and direct my attention to those subjects which are instructive as well as amusing; for I anticipate both instruction and amusement from our inquiries, and enter into your proposal with delight.

Later in Philip Gosse's life this inability to grasp the workings of a child's mind was responsible for the tragic relationship depicted by his own child in *Father and son*. Yet in Philip's works of popularization, including *The Canadian naturalist*, so long as he did not attempt an artificial literary genre like the dialogue, he succeeded admirably in making natural history intelligible and palatable even to children.

We are fortunate at Leeds to possess George Macdonald's copy of Philip's second full-length publication and the first of several issued by the S.P.C.K., namely, his two-volume *Introduction to zoology*, which came out in 1844 just before he sailed for Jamaica to collect birds and insects for the British Museum.

His third book, *The ocean*, was first published in 1845. It proved to be extraordinarily popular and was reissued many times over a period of forty years in this country and America.

In Jamaica he became a close friend of Richard Hill, a planter and magistrate and an ardent naturalist. He helped Gosse with his *Birds of Jamaica*, which appeared in 1847 after his return to England. As late as 1910 P. L. Sclater, in his *Revised list of the birds of Jamaica*, found Gosse's monograph to be still indispensable. Hill helped Gosse also in what some readers found to be the most charming of all his books, namely, *A naturalist's sojourn in Jamaica* (1851).

In 1848 he married for the first time. His wife, Emily (*née* Bowes) was a devout woman, a writer of devotional verse and religious and educational tracts. By the time of his marriage, Gosse was already an established author.

In 1849 there appeared the first edition of his *Popular British ornithology*. It included twenty hand-coloured lithographs to illustrate "a familiar and technical description" of British birds. None knew better than the author how much his drawings lost by contemporary processes of reproduction. In this book he experimented by drawing directly on to the lithographic stone, although he later abandoned this practice. This year, 1849, was an important one for him. In it was born his only son, Edmund, who came to mean so much to him after his first wife's death.

The event was thus recorded in his diary: "E. delivered of a son. Received green swallow from Jamaica." This entry, as the son later explained, merely exemplified the father's punctilio: the swallow arrived later in the day than the child and was therefore recorded second. It was in 1849, too, that Philip Gosse was elected a member of the Microscopical Society.

The following year he was elected an Associate of another learned body, the Linnean Society. In 1851 he was obliged as a result of nervous dyspepsia to leave London for St. Marychurch in Devon.

There as a convalescent he was not idle. In 1854 he produced his finely-illustrated book, *The aquarium: an unveiling of the wonders of the deep sea*. Sacheverell Sitwell recently confirmed Sir Edmund's claim that the art of colour printing had scarcely advanced beyond some of the plates in *The aquarium*. As far as their contemporary scientific value was concerned, England at that time knew so little about marine life that, when Philip Gosse described certain species, reviewers denied that such creatures could exist. In fact, it was he who invented and popularized the aquarium. It all began in December, 1852, when a large tank was set up in the Zoological Gardens in Regent's Park in accordance with his instructions and stocked by him with two hundred specimens of marine animals and plants. Charles Kingsley often accompanied him on his collecting expeditions. From then onwards he was in demand as a lecturer up and down the country. His *Aquarium* was an instant success and brought him a profit of £900. This encouraged him to bring out in 1855 his *Handbook to the marine aquarium*. This was intended as a practical supplement to the larger work and gave "instructions for constructing, stocking, and maintaining a tank, and for collecting plants and animals". A ledger dating from a later period in his life and containing his manuscript notes on the setting up of aquaria is in the Collection.

He wrote not only full-length books, but also many articles for learned periodicals. A list of these articles was appended to Peter Stageman's *Bibliography* (1955) of his first editions. One of his typical "popular" articles (and one which somehow slipped through Stageman's net) was one on "A marine aquarium", contributed to the *Midland naturalist* in 1879.

His *Manual of marine zoology*, which came out in two volumes between 1855 and 1856, helped to consolidate his reputation as the most influential writer of his day in kindling the interest of the average man in nature study.

With all a Victorian's passion for redeeming the passing moment, in 1856 he turned a holiday to

account in his *Tenby*, an attractively written natural history of the seaside town of that name.

It was in June of that year that he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. Any satisfaction that he might have derived from this honour was overshadowed by the fact that this same year his wife, Emily, fell ill from tuberculosis, from which she was not to recover. Readers interested in her life story should consult the *Dictionary of national biography* and the two slight books in the Collection by Anna Shipton and Philip Gosse himself.

He was bowed down with sorrow, but not broken. He continued lecturing and writing. His F.R.S. brought him closely into touch with Hooker, Lyell and Darwin. The controversy that culminated in the appearance of *The origin of species* was beginning. Among a number of books written during the decade 1850 to 1860 in which attempts were made to reconcile Genesis with geology, Gosse's *Omphalos* (1857) was perhaps the most outstanding. He was a good popularizer of the facts about the world, but a poor apologist for the Biblical account of its creation. It is easy and unkind to be wise now that the dust of the conflict has somewhat settled; but few Christians today feel obliged to defend at all costs, for example, Ussher's chronology or a creation in six literal days of twenty-four hours each. The simplicity and sufficiency of the early chapters of Genesis inhibit many of us from reading into them what is not necessarily there and also from treating them as parts of a scientific monograph. On the other hand, few scientists would today go as far towards materialism as did some of Gosse's contemporaries. His endeavour in *Omphalos* "to untie the geological knot" satisfied no one, Christian or non-Christian. Even Kingsley who, in his *Glaucus*, had praised Gosse's zoological work, could not accept *Omphalos*. No more successful were his other apologetic works, such as one that appeared also in 1857 entitled *Life in its lower, intermediate, and higher forms: or, Manifestations of the divine wisdom in the natural history of animals*.

From 1847 onwards he had been a member of the "Open" section of the Plymouth Brethren. With the failure of *Omphalos* he returned to St. Marychurch. There he became detached from the main stream of Brethrenism and devoted himself more and more to pastoral responsibility for a small village congregation. In his later years he maintained views on prophecy and other subjects that most Brethren found to be unacceptable. More detailed information about his religious convictions may be obtained more reliably from his son's straightforward *Life* of him than from *Father and son*.

In 1859 Philip Gosse published two more popular natural histories, *Letters from Alabama* and *Evenings at the microscope*. The *Letters* had already appeared in a magazine called *The home friend*. The *Evenings at the microscope* was re-issued frequently for nearly thirty years. In 1895 a revised edition came out.

Had he not withdrawn in disappointment to Devon we should perhaps not have had what Dr. Geoffrey Lapage singled out as his most enduring scientific treatise, his *Actinologia Britannica: a history of the British sea-anemones and corals*. It is still a work of reference. It appeared in twelve parts from 1858 to 1860. The author recorded the results of investigations during the previous eight years on the shores of Devon, Dorset, and South Wales. The success of his zoological drawings in his best works Sacheverell Sitwell attributed largely to three factors: his astonishing powers of memory (he knew virtually the whole Bible by heart); his observation of his father, Thomas, the miniature painter; and the impact of his few early years in the colourful West Indies.

The year of the completion of the *Actinologia Britannica* (just over a century ago) saw also his marriage to Eliza Brightwen, the "sympathetic Quakerish lady" of *Father and son*.

His interests were still many and varied. He continued to compile popular books like *The romance of natural history* and *A year at the shore*. *The romance*, which was first issued in two series between 1860 and 1861, was reissued in many editions throughout the last century. In it he propounded his famous theory of the sea-serpent as a surviving *plesiosaurus*. Messrs. Blackie's cheap limp-covered edition, first issued in 1912, has been kept in print. *A year at the shore* (1865), consisting of articles reprinted from the magazine *Good words*, was constantly being reissued. He did not neglect more scholarly publication. A typical contribution by him to a learned periodical was *The great Atlas moth of Asia (Attacus Atlas)*. It first appeared in the *Entomologist* for 1879 (in which year, incidentally, he became a member of the Entomological Society) and was reprinted separately the same year. He continued also to write a number of religious tracts and pamphlets.

His last years were devoted to the study of rotifers. Through the good offices of Sir Ray Lankester he was able to collaborate with C. T. Hudson in the production in 1886 of two substantial volumes entitled *The rotifera*.

During his later life, when he was not working on rotifers, he was growing orchids, of which he formed a considerable collection. Sacheverell

Sitwell considered it to be a loss to the world that Gosse never wrote and illustrated a monograph on these tropical flowers. Another pursuit of his old age was astronomy, "celestial flower-gathering". In 1887, in his late seventies, while using his telescope on a bitterly cold night, he was attacked by bronchitis. This attack, although soon thrown off, became the eventual cause of his death the following year.

III. Assessment of P. H. Gosse

No one can dispute his rank as a first-rate popularizer of the submarine world. By his writings, in which he displayed a lucid, easy, literary style, he virtually originated a new form of scientific literature. He was also a very acceptable public lecturer.

Nor can one dispute his rank as a sensitive and accurate illustrator of many of his own writings. A glance at the superb colour plates in the *Actinologia Britannica* will soon convince the sceptic—and also, by the way, assist any librarian studying the history of book illustration. A characteristic of nearly all Gosse's drawings was that they were drawn from life: for he was essentially a man of the open air.

His rank as an original zoologist is more in question. In the Stageman *Bibliography* (1955) Sacheverell Sitwell preferred to class him among poets and artists, adding "that he was not quite to be numbered among men of science". Sir Geoffrey Keynes, in his review for *The Library* the following year, apparently accepted Sitwell's judgment. In another essay in the *Bibliography* Dr. Geoffrey Lapage, the Cambridge parasitologist, declared that Gosse had well earned the respect of every naturalist; Dr. Lapage went on to dismiss T. H. Huxley's dictum about Gosse, the "honest hodman of science", as a criticism less of the person in question than of the speaker. A reviewer in *The Times literary supplement* in September, 1955, pointed out that both Sitwell and Lapage had ventured on *terra incognita*, as far as Gosse's primary field of research was concerned. Otherwise, the reviewer concluded, they "would have been able to tell us how generations of naturalists have followed in this great pioneer's footsteps and even today find inspiration in his writings". Whether the anonymous reviewer's own special field was that of the marine invertebrates is not known.

At all events a layman like myself will not dare to enter the lists. To Gosse himself the opinion of posterity would have mattered little. Like Johann Kepler, the founder of physical astrono-

my, he was content in his researches to try "to think God's thoughts after Him". That he did not always succeed was no disgrace. His faith coloured all his writing, religious and scientific. When there was no text of Scripture on the title-page of one of his books, there was often one in the preface. What he wrote concerning his *Actinologia Britannica* may well stand as a summary of his life's work: "My labour has been performed *con amore*; . . . it is with no small gratification that I see it completed. I send forth the result as one more tribute humbly offered to the glory of the Triune God, 'who is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working'."

SUBJECT BOOKLISTS RECENTLY ISSUED BY BRITISH LIBRARIES

Best children's books of 1960. Coventry Public Library.

Building, carpentry and allied subjects. Luton Public Library. (Technical bulletin No. 58.)

Handlist of periodicals, newspapers and directories. Middlesbrough Public Library.

Directories and annuals. Bath Public Library.

A catalogue of Bibles. Bristol Public Library.

The legal profession. Burnley Public Library.

Architecture. Burnley Public Library.

World War II. Burnley Public Library.

Books for boys and girls, 1960. Kent County Library.

Children's books in the home. Hertfordshire County Library.

ART IN ROMAN BRITAIN

The Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies is celebrating its Jubilee by holding an Exhibition of Art in Roman Britain at the Goldsmiths' Hall, Foster Lane, E.C.2, from 27th June until 22nd July. Open daily, except Sundays, 10.30-5.30. Admission 2s. 6d. This will be the most comprehensive exhibition of art in Roman Britain ever to be assembled.

CORRECTIONS TO L.A. YEAR BOOK, 1961

Please amend entries as follows:

- p. 144. 1951 DOWLING, Miss M. T. B., Asst. Lib.,
Colonial Office, S.W.1 A 1957 AR
- p. 147. 1954 DUGGAN, Miss P. K., Sub-Lib., Hull P.L.
A 1959 R
- p. 315. 1948 REID, Miss J. M., Sen. Asst., Cent. Ref.
Dept., Middlesex A 1951 AR

CARNEGIE MEDAL ARTICLE

We regret that the initials in the signature to this article (May issue, pages 163-4) were incorrect. The author was Miss Joan W. Butler.

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