II. The Original Collector: James Andrew Bell

No great collection should be advertized without some reference to the man who assembled its core, and the man in this case happens to have been a Canadian of quite unusual personality and influence. Born in 1856, educated at Ottawa, Toronto, Breslau, and Leipzig, he was Professor of Latin in Victoria College, 1881-1921, and Professor of Comparative Philology, University of Toronto, 1900-1922. He was a bookman and great teacher, and his scholarly range is difficult to define, but certainly ought to interest anyone whose field is the Renaissance. We can bring him again to life in no better way than the Torontonians and later Professor of English Renaissance Literature and Thought at Harvard, Douglas Bush, did first in the *Canadian Forum* in 1929. After Bell's death in 1932, these pages were reprinted in a brief memorial pamphlet.

A Classical Scholar*

Professor Douglas Bush, M.A., Ph.D.

On an afternoon a decade ago a rather unusual spectacle might have been observed on lower Yonge Street. Two figures emerged from Britnell's old bookshop and strode northward. I say 'strode', but the word applies to only one of the two, a tall and more than substantial man of about sixty, with a full, ruddy face and bright blue eyes, who progressed with long and stately steps, *verus incessu patuit deus*. He carried his massive head a little on one side, and a small soft hat rode buoyantly on the waves of his white hair. His sober topcoat, restrained by only one button, floated behind him in the breeze; and while one hand rested in the small of his back the other rhythmically brandished a furled umbrella in the manner of Mr. Stokowski. Beside him a shorter and slighter young man of twenty kept more or less in step, by means of a stride alternated with a brief trot. The latter was saying nothing, having no breath anyhow, but he was listening ecstatically, for from the heights above him rolled a continuous stream of thunderous music. The older man, whose imagination was far away, and whose waving umbrella caused an occasional astonished pedestrian to leap off the curb, was chanting Kipling with royal gusto. On they went, the St. Bernard and the terrier, through Queen's Park, up to Avenue Road, and the glorious recital – from Kipling to Heine, Lucretius to Gautier – never ceased until the pair reached the old scholar's home.

That home had become a familiar place to the young man, a Zion where one could be happily at ease, and he knew how to thread his way dexterously over floors almost covered with tall piles of books which frequently tottered, but by a miracle never fell. The

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two settled down in the study – there was still room to sit, for two – and talk began. In that room somehow talk never failed to lead, in five minutes or less, to Virgil and Horace. One crux after another was brought up, and tried on the dog, as it were. The young man was only becoming initiated into the subtleties of Latin style, but if his learning was slight his admiration and affection for his preceptor were infinite, and he was equally ready to share in the ceremonies as either junior priest or sacrificial victim. Leaning back in his capacious chair, his eyes shining with mirth and triumph, the old scholar would toss and gore Sidgwick and Page and Munro and Postgate. Those editors, they would never trust the manuscripts, they thought they knew more than Servius – if they read Servius – and they had that incurable disease, the *cacoethes emendandi*! Then he would dive into a corner for his first edition of Bentley's *Horace*, or perhaps some linguistic hare would be started, the verb 'to be', say, in Umbrian and Oscan dialects, in Gothic, in the modern languages, with forays into Lithuanian and Old Norse. The young man would shiver slightly, for all his ecstasies, since he had been born without a trace of philological instinct.

But when the prey had been run to earth, and the young man's pallor perhaps become evident, that voice, which had stripped commentators to the bone, and chased vowels over Europe, would begin again to recite poetry. 'Do you know so and so?' he would say. In the early days of their acquaintance the young man would eagerly answer 'Yes', but he soon learned that 'to know', to this man of Macaulayesque memory, meant 'to know by heart', and he became more cautious. This was always the radiant part of the evening, when that voice, becoming warm, deep, sonorous, poured forth golden cadences. Sometimes he would reach for a book, and sometimes he would find it – happily for one's self-respect he did not know everything by heart – and the melodious chant would go on. Most people who recite poetry confirm one's habit of absorbing through the eye, but when this white-haired classic put on his singing-robcs – to wit, carpet slippers and an old coat – a familiar poem became a new one.

And of course there was talk, roaming back and forth from Homer to Shaw, Virgil to Pepys, Scott, Chaucer, Burns, Rossetti, Balzac, Shakespeare. When the young man expressed opinions a sixty-year-old head was courteously inclined to receive them – to straighten up, perhaps, with a vigorous word of agreement, or vigorous but jovial dissent. Many old names were remembered and saluted. To ardent youth there seemed nothing greater than scholars, and the life of the scholar, perpetual saturation in fine letters; surely in a lifetime one could pick up more than a few shells on the shore of the boundless ocean. ... The life so short, the craft so long to learn. ... Then a hand might fall suddenly upon one's knee, and upon one's ear the sound of an inward, reverberating chuckle which sought egress, and ended in 'Scholar, my boy, does not rhyme with dollar.' But the thud of descent to earth was softened by a gesture, at once complacent and modest, towards the walls, or the place where invisible walls presumably stood – 'Still, I've been able to get a few books.' Indeed, he had; they numbered twenty-four thousand at the last count, and college tradition, for once authentic, told how a possible collapse of the house had necessitated the summoning of an engineer. 'I have more incunabula than anyone in Canada,' he went on, with that consciousness of achievement pardonable in epic heroes and book-collectors of limited means. Unlike most book-collectors, however, he had read his books; he knew all the literary (not to mention non-literary) languages except Hebrew, and what human frailty the omission suggests he never avowed, though he did express the intention

of mastering it shortly, and doubtless he has done so. 'I know about as much English literature as the average professor of English,' he once observed, and it was a prodigious understatement; his knowledge made one feel, in the words of George Eliot's villager, 'no better nor a hollow stalk'.

Then he might produce some Baxter prints, or some faded but precious letters from the hands of Pitt, and Burns, and others. The latter name reminds one that perhaps nothing could have increased his devotion to Virgil except the discovery that he had been born in Scotland; in fact, when in the class-room he rendered the *Bucolics* into smoothly flowing English one had the feeling that in private he translated all the Virgilian plants and flowers into heather. Contemporary pacifism left him cold, or rather warm. 'Rev. Dr. X,' he exclaimed, 'Who ought to have known better, stood there and said nothing had ever really been won by battles. But,' he sat up, gripping the arms of his chair with boyish glee, 'I floored him with Bannockburn!'

How many generations of young men in that same room had seen visions and dreamed dreams! His home, he used to say, (when the class had arrived at a certain spot in Horace), did not need to be measured with a *decempeda*, a foot-rule would do – and there would follow that rumbling, heart-easing chuckle. But no four walls could contain more shadowy guests from the Elysian fields, and after such high converse with the mighty dead, young men left that house, in Horatian phrase, striking the stars with their exalted heads, wishing they could conquer all literature in one Gargantuan gulp. And the glow had not vanished before another invitation or chance meeting would come to renew it. Even Latin composition became a spiritual experience, and one could never be sure how far one's toil aimed at disinterested mastery of ancient idiom, how far at the not quite ignoble winning of an approving word from the master, who himself wrote as if his voluminous trailing gown were a toga made by Cicero's tailor.

How his mannerisms of speech and gesture were treasured in amused and reverent memory – that extended finger, rigid as a Roman javelin, which seemed to impale the luckless victim; that opening of the office door, precisely as the bell rang, then the slow advance, with head forward, and a little on one side, while the small group of students wished they had been somewhat more rigorous in preparation.

He was not altogether a recluse. One day our young man met him near his home – it is to be feared that the young man sometimes strolled out of his way with certain possibilities in mind – and he walked with bent head and meditative mien, as if he had just come from the Library, or a meeting of the Caput. As a matter of fact he had just come from the Island, whither he had repaired by himself to witness a non-intellectual conflict between Toronto and Baltimore. And one of the most refreshing phrases in that austere work, *Who's Who*, lists under his Recreations 'Used to play golf'. Nor can anyone who attended college social functions forget his elaborate old-fashioned courtesy towards the young women, who would rather have a greeting from him (along with a merry quip which bowled one over) than from their most dashing contemporaries. Now and then a brief excursus upon ancient Umbrian might disconcert a stranger, but after all is not a little Umbrian a pleasant change from the tedious small-talk of receptions?

Like all men of learning and wisdom, he had, and has, some strong prejudices, though his most explosive utterances were generally accompanied by a twinkle of those keen blue eyes. Only one prejudice or conviction it was perhaps really dangerous to touch upon, and

our young man never felt quite intimate enough to hazard the remark that some persons consider Latin inferior to Greek. University lore does indeed tell of a colleague who hinted at some such dark infamy, but the versions of his fate are so conflicting that possibly, as with some ancient heroes, a protecting deity carried him away in a mist. And it was just as well if one testified early in conversation to sound principles in the matter of the Latin dual.

He reminds one, in his single-hearted love of learning for its own sake and not for the sake of *kudos*, of some of the best Renaissance scholars. He has quietly gone his own way, without practising or even understanding the arts of publicity, and the influence he has wielded for forty years has been almost wholly personal. Nor, like some famous academic characters, has he ever been a conscious influence, with an eye on the gallery. But simply by being himself he has made young men want to be like him. He reminds one, too, of a man who had no special Scottish sentiments, one Samuel Johnson, in his immense acquisitiveness, his honesty and sincerity, his downright and yet courtly manner, his devotion to literature, his freedom from all cant and humbug, his generous interest in aspiring youth, his stout prejudices and his hearty laughter. Such rich and mellow personalities have never been very numerous in universities – not so numerous in the past as sentimentalists like to think – and successors are hard to find. Meanwhile, scholars old and young, all over America, re-kindle the memory of some of their happiest undergraduate hours when they think of that majestic figure, with one hand resting in the small of his back, still pacing through Queen's Park, murmuring (with a mental bow to Servius, that trusty guide), *Non ignara mali miseris succurrere disco*.