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THOMAS WILLIAM RHYS DAVIDS

1843-1922.

Eulogy by Lord Chalmers

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In the late Professor Rhys Davids the British Academy has lost one of the most ardent of the original advocates of its foundation, and scholarship has lost one who combined unique learning in Pāḷi with an exceptional gift in winning public attention to the fruits of his Buddhist researches.

It was as a Civil Servant in Ceylon—during 1864-72—that, like his (older) friend Robert Caesar Childers, Rhys Davids was drawn to the study of 'orthodox' Buddhism and of the Pāḷi language in which the Canon and Commentaries have survived in their island home. When first Childers, and then Rhys Davids, began their studies of the original authorities, the current views on Buddhism in the West were a mere jungle of doctrines and legends derived from sources as multifarious as they were disconnected, both historically and unscientifically. The life-work which Rhys Davids set before himself after his return to England was (in his own words) —'to render accessible to students the rich stores of the earliest Buddhist literature now lying unedited and practically unused in the various MSS. scattered throughout the University and other Public Libraries of Europe.' To this end, in 1881, the Pāḷi Text Society was founded by his enthusiasm, as it has been continued till to-day by his tenacity of purpose. To-day that Society can point to over 25,000 printed 8vo pages in which are contained—in complete form and in roman characters—all the four great Nikāyas and almost the whole of the remainder of the Canon, together with many of Buddhaghosa's indispensable Commentaries, &c. Included in his original scheme were Jain texts; but his scholarly catholicity met with such marked disfavour from Buddhist theologians when the first Jain text appeared, in 1882, that Rhys Davids had to forgo this promising and unexplored department of his original conception; and so to-day our knowledge of contemporary Jain literature lags far in the rear of our Buddhistic knowledge, (the engines of which primitive Jainism has yet to illuminate to the full). In the actual editing of specific texts Davids ostensibly took no great share, confining himself to editing (with Prof. Estlin Carpenter) the *Dīgha Nikāya* and the first volume of Buddhaghosa's Commentary on that foremost of Buddhist scriptures. His translation of the *Dīgha* in three volumes was completed, with the devoted aid of his wife, in 1921, under the title

of *Dialogues of the Buddha* (Clarendon Press); and it is here perhaps that, as an expositor of earliest Buddhism, Rhys Davids was at his best. Not only as an Orientalist, but also as a writer of vigorous and stately English, he reached a high level in his illuminating Introductions to the several 'Suttas', or Dialogues, which compose that book; nor is there any present likelihood of his version and views ceasing to hold, unless perhaps in minor details, the commanding authority with which his work— mainly pioneer work though it was—is regarded today by Indianists of all lands. For this text and translation of the Dīgha he had prepared himself by his earlier *Buddhist Suttas* and *Vinaya Texts* (with Hermann Oldenberg), published in 1881 by the Clarendon Press, in Max Muller's series of Sacred Books of the East. In these earlier volumes, as even a cursory examination of the two or three other Pāḷi translations of that day will show, Rhys Davids had already raised Pāḷi to a sure and independent footing of its own, with its own separate and enduring traditions of over two thousand years.

It was as early as 1877 that he had previously published his little manual of *Buddhism*, now in its twenty-fifth thousand, about which he was able, in 1894, to write that—'it was a very venturesome undertaking to attempt to give an account of a system on which its European interpreters differed irreconcilably, at a time when they could not be brought to bar before the original authorities. The conclusions arrived at in 1877 have been throughout confirmed by the more recent publications of recent texts, and have even been adopted and circulated by authors who have not deemed it necessary to refer to the manual in which those conclusions were for the first time stated,' To my mind, this little manual has not been eclipsed by his excellent *Hibbert Lectures* of 1881, or by his 1894 American Lectures, or by his succinct *Early Buddhism* of 1908 (though Rhys Davids opined that this last was really the best of all his books on Buddhism and its tenets). Perhaps the most remarkable thing in the 1877 manual was the intuition by which, working on the modicum of canonical texts then available, Rhys Davids dissipated prevalent errors respecting the meaning of Nirvana and established the true view (as all can see today from the published Canon) that it really mean simply and solely an ethical state, 'holiness', to be reached *diṭṭhe dhamme*, here and now. 'The Buddhist heaven', he wrote, 'is not death, and it is not on death but on a perfect life here and now, that the Piṭakas dwell in those terms of ecstatic description which

they apply to Arahatship, the goal of the Excellent Way, and to Nirvana as one aspect of it.' ...'The very gods envy the blessed state of those who, here on earth, escaped from the floods of passion, have gained the fruit of the Noble Path, and have become cleansed from all defilement, free for ever from all delusion and all sorrow, in that Rest which cannot be broken,— the Nirvana of Arahatship, which can never be lost.'

From this, the kernel of Buddhism, I return to the Pāḷi language. No sooner had the Pāḷi Text Society got well under way than Rhys Davids turned his thoughts to a new Pāḷi Dictionary which should embrace all the new lexicographic knowledge which was being brought to light in the edited texts. To this end, be studiously noted up each new word or illustrative passage in his interleaved copy of Childers's *Dictionary of the Pāḷi Language* (1875). In 1908 he had hoped to enlist the Pāḷi scholars of all lands in a co-operative and international work; but herein he was leaning on a broken reed, and with the outbreak of war in 1914 his darling plan was perforce abandoned. In 1915, at the age of 72, when he retired from his Manchester professorship, the old man's indomitable spirit inspired him to face the great task alone, lest it should be postponed to the Greek Kalends. Later, he secured the aid the philologist Dr. William Stede, and in 1921 the Pāḷi Text Society—which had received a donation of £50 from the British Academy towards the total of £2,160 collected by Rhys Davids— 'after long-continued exertion and many cruel rebuffs and disappointments' was 'now at last in a position to offer to scholars the first instalment'—of the new dictionary, edited by Rhys Davids and Dr. Stede. Half of this work is now published and the remainder is well in hand; but Rhys Davids regarded it as 'essentially preliminary', and looked forward to 'the eventual issue of a second edition which shall come nearer to our ideals of what a Pāḷi Dictionary should be'. But in this 'essentially preliminary' work there are garnered the materials and ideas of nearly half a century's devoted labour by Rhys Davids; it is, as he himself wrote of the pioneer work by Childers, the indispensable means by which further progress can be made'; and the gratitude of Pāḷi students attends its daily use.

On the historical side, Davids always took an earnest interest in gleaning, from the Pāḷi Text Society's publications and elsewhere, every scrap of information which could throw light on the India of

Gotama's day, whether from the social or the political point of view. His earliest book was on *The Ancient Coins and Measures of Ceylon*; and another early book was his (first and only) volume of *Buddhist Birth Stories*, a volume which, though the whole of the Jataka has since been translated and published, still holds its ground by reason of the elaborate introduction in which the descent of this ancient folklore is traced down through other lands and other literatures.

In the general field of history, Rhys Davids, after a visit to India in 1899, published (in 1903) a remarkable book on *Buddhist India*, bringing to focus the studies and conclusion of a quarter of a century's pioneer work on the local oligarchies of the Ganges Valley and on the subsequent rise of the kingdoms of early Indian history. His final and mature views on this latter subject were summarized (in 1922) in his chapter on *The Early History of the Buddhists* in the first volume of the new Cambridge History of India. A more ambitious and far-reaching scheme was adumbrated in his proposals of 1900 to the Viceroy of India to inaugurate for India a series answering to our own Rolls Series, so as to furnish full and accurate materials for the history of India. It is greatly to be deplored that, though 'so generously adopted by Government and so generously enlarged and improved', this enterprise of his fell through and shows no immediate prospect of revival in these days of retrenchment and 'the axe'.

To indicate his general outlook—and his outlook was very far from being limited to Pāḷi or to Buddhism—I may quote, from the *Hibbert Lectures*, a characteristic passage, showing he felt and said about the fruits of research in Indian matters. 'It is not too much', he wrote, over forty years ago, 'to say that a New World has been once more discovered by adventurers as persevering as Columbus, and perhaps at present earning as little gratitude as he did from his contemporaries; and that the inhabitants of the Old World cannot, if they would, go back again to the quiet times when the New World was not, because it was unknown. Every one to whom the entrancing story of man's gradual rise and progress has charms particularly its own, will welcome the new light; others will have to face the new facts, and find room for them in their conceptions of the world's history—that history which is the Epic of Humanity. Happy are we if the strains of that epic are ever ringing in our ears,

if the spirit of that epic is ever ruling in our hearts! An abiding sense of the long past whose beginnings are beyond imagination, and of the long future whose end we cannot realize, may fill us indeed with a knowledge of our own insignificance—the bubbles on the stream which flash into light for a moment and are seen no more. But it will perhaps bring us nearer to a sense of the Infinite than man in his clearest moments, in his deepest moods, can ever otherwise hope to reach. It will enable us to appreciate what is meant by the Solidarity of Man, and will fill us with an overpowering awe and wonder at the immensity of that series of which we are but a few of the tiny links. And the knowledge of what man has been in distant times, in far-off lands, under the influence of ideas which at first sight seem to us so strange, will strengthen within us that reverence, sympathy, and love which must follow on a realization of the mysterious complexity of being—past, present, and to come— that is wrapt up in every human life.' And in 1905 (when he was giving up the Secretaryship of the Royal Asiatic Society to become the first Professor of Comparative Religion in Victoria University at Manchester) he dwelt on 'that increase of knowledge, that broadening out of ideas, which is the main basis of the welfare and progress of mankind'.

Catholic in his enthusiasm for all knowledge—physical as well as humane—he was closely akin to the late Professor Cowell in his delight in stimulating and encouraging 'fellow-workers'; nor was he ever more happy than when, with unselfish generosity, he could hand over to a worthy disciple the materials garnered by his own diligent and methodical labours. The staunchest of friends, bubbling over with fun, fond of outdoor (and indoor) games throughout his long life, a convinced Liberal in politics, he lived the life of a 'philosopher in the world', *Φιλοσφώνάν άευ μαλακίας*

CHALMERS.