

Introduction

There is something exquisitely painful in the thought that we die out and are forgotten; therefore it is, that in the higher walks of life people solace themselves with the hope of posthumous reputation; they think, perhaps, that *then* only their true worth will be known.

Sermons, 4th Series, p. 63

In September 1846 the poets Robert Browning (1812-1889) and Elizabeth Barrett (1806-1861) married and eloped to Italy which they regarded as a more creative milieu than mid-nineteenth century England. An impractical couple, they relied on their friend, Anna Jameson (1794-1860), who appears later in this story, to help them set up house. As the Brownings settled into their new home a young English clergyman began a walking holiday in Austria. He too was a poet and rebelling against the constraints of English society and its religion. He had learnt Italian to read Dante's *Inferno*, and at one stage in his wanderings he looked longingly towards Venice, which he calculated was only a day's walk away. The thought of soft, Italian landscapes was extremely tempting but the jagged mountains and glaciers reflected his mood, and held him in the Tyrol. Later he would describe the southern European temperament as 'feminine,' compared to the 'masculine' north, and this awareness of gender was even then uppermost in his mind, foreshadowing its integral significance to his later thinking and preaching. At this point, however, after only six years as a curate, he was ready to abandon the clerical profession altogether. Yet in just over twelve months he would be preaching some of the most outstanding sermons of his generation; and a mere six years later he would be dead, at the age of thirty-seven.

The clergyman's name was Frederick William Robertson (1816-1853), the Anglican preacher known as 'Robertson of Brighton',

and this book is the story of his life and work. One of the foremost preachers of the Victorian era, Robertson's fame was almost entirely posthumous, and his reputation rests on the volumes of his sermons, lectures and addresses published between 1855 and 1880, together with *The Life and Letters of F.W. Robertson*¹ edited by Stopford Augustus Brooke (1832-1916), published in 1865. Robertson's transition from Evangelicalism to Liberal Anglicanism is one trajectory and response to the Victorian 'crisis of faith' and his articulate engagement with doubt, scepticism and historical criticism, combined with his fondness for Romantic literature and German theology, especially the school of Schleiermacher, with its stress on religious feelings, ensured the relevance and popularity of his writings in the decades after his death. By then the rise of scientific materialism seemed to threaten the very foundations of Christian belief, but the establishment of the Church of England had been slow to engage with the intellectual issues involved, and were punitive to those who did. Brooke's biography of Robertson, written in that slightly later context, presents Robertson as an anguished pioneer of an emerging Broad Church school of liberal theology.

My aim in this book, having consulted most, if not all, of the sources Brooke handled, is to locate Robertson's theological development in its proper context in the 1840s and, linked to this, to reveal the manner in which his posthumous works and reputation were managed to advance the cause of liberal theology. For example, Robertson died tragically young, and it was implied that he was, in effect, a martyr to his convictions, while his outstanding virtue and integrity gave them moral authority. The sources tell a rather different story: two episodes were effectively covered up at the time. His spiritual crisis in 1846 seems to have been precipitated, in part, by his infatuation with the sister of Archibald Boyd (1803-1883) his incumbent at Cheltenham. This relatively innocent fantasy was mirrored and then acted upon when, in 1849, four years before his death, and in the eighth year of his marriage, Robertson embarked on an affair with a married woman, Augusta Mary Wilson Fitzpatrick (1810-1899),² later Lady Castletown. Brooke's picture of him as a man troubled to the end by religious perplexity does not ring true: in the Brighton years Robertson's preaching and correspondence show tremendous confidence and maturity. His relationship with his wife, on the other hand, was permanently damaged by his affair with Augusta. How he reconciled his public role with his private behaviour will be discussed in Chapter 7, and his endeavour to make sense of his experience of gender and sexuality is a major thread of this study.



Augusta Wilson-Fitzpatrick by G.F. Watts:
pencil on paper, circa 1844. By courtesy of Nicholas Bowlby: The 'mystery woman' in Robertson's life, the identity of Mrs Fitzpatrick was protected by coded entries in his diary and the discrete management of his posthumous reputation.

Robertson's life and theology will be examined in detail in the chapters that follow, but here, to begin with, is an outline of his life.

Brief Life

Robertson was a slightly late starter as a Christian minister. The eldest son of an army captain, descended from a long line of soldiers, he grew up assuming that he would join the military, as his younger brothers were to do, but his father appears to have decided that a different career path was more appropriate. Captain Robertson had retired on half-pay to educate his children at home, which gave him a unique insight into their character. In due course

Robertson was enrolled at a local grammar school, but when he was fourteen his mother ran off with another man, though she eventually rejoined her husband. To escape the scandal the family went to live in France, where Robertson attended a lycée, but they were forced to return to England by the political unrest of 1830. Robertson was then sent to school in Edinburgh, where he also attended classes at the University. In 1833, having reached the age of seventeen, his education was deemed complete and he was articled to a solicitor in Bury St Edmunds, just over thirty miles away from his family who were living in Saxmundham. He hated the work and became unwell, which would be his standard response to an unhappy situation throughout his life, and was allowed to return to the family home to reconsider his future.

He still wished to become an army officer and enquiries were made about a commission, but the ministry of the Church began to emerge as an alternative. While he waited for the commission Robertson underwent a religious conversion as a result of influences received at Bury, but which probably occurred in the Evangelical

epicentre of Cheltenham, to which his family had moved, and where a chance meeting with a clerical visitor elicited the proposal that he should be ordained. His father welcomed this development, but it left Robertson torn between his own desires and paternal duty.

The long-awaited commission to the Second Dragoons arrived on May 9th 1837, but Robertson had already matriculated at Brasenose College, Oxford, five days earlier. He was now 21 years old: an Evangelical, serious, and puritanical; critical of the cold donnishness of Oxford, he nevertheless imbibed its habits of thought and culture. He decided not to read for an honours degree, but his examiners, impressed with his final examination papers, wished to enter him. Unwilling to be persuaded, he was awarded Fourth Class.

As an undergraduate in the darkest days of the Oxford Movement, just before the University turned against Newman, Robertson could hardly avoid these shadows. In 1840 he was ordained deacon to serve his title with Mr Nicholson, the Incumbent of St Maurice, St Mary Kalender and St Peter, Colebrook, in the City of Winchester. His account of his deacon's year was kept by the Bishop as a model, but his health had broken down again, and after being ordained as a priest he was sent to recover in Switzerland where he met and married, Ellen, the daughter of Sir George William Denys, Bt.

Returning to England Robertson moved to Cheltenham where he served as Assistant Curate of Christ Church from 1842 to 1846, and learned the art of preaching from his incumbent, Archibald Boyd. His two sons, Charles and Augustus, were born at this time. Now in his late twenties Robertson began to develop intellectually and to question the simplistic Evangelical creed he had hitherto expounded. The death of his son Augustus, followed by his emotional entanglement with Boyd's sister, Fanny, were both destabilising, and when his health failed again he took extended leave of absence on the continent. A long walking holiday in the Tyrol contributed to his spiritual restoration, and he learnt German in order to engage with the theology and metaphysics of Germany, at that time still considered heretical by many in England, ending his stay as chaplain to the English community in Heidelberg.

In January 1847 he resigned his Cheltenham curacy, and in May he became incumbent of St Ebbe's, Oxford. This was a comparatively poor living, and Robertson had a family to provide for, and so, with his Bishop's approval, he left Oxford that August to become Perpetual Curate of Holy Trinity Chapel, Brighton. The pay rise was necessary, as his family continued to grow: his wife was delivered of a stillborn daughter in November 1847; their surviving daughter, Ida Florence

Geraldine, was born in 1849. The new curacy proved a positive move in other ways as well, though it was not without its difficulties. In 1848 he was denounced to his Bishop for ‘political preaching’ and subsequently suspected of dangerous, heretical views. Despite this controversy, however, he hardly lacked for a congregation. Some people probably went to hear him preach out of curiosity, but many stayed on, captivated by the man and what he said. A brilliant orator, he was fully aware of the gift he had cultivated, and sensitive to its dangers. Today he would be described, in the popular sense of the word, as a ‘charismatic’ preacher. In Brighton his words and delivery had the power to unite a congregation ‘as one’ and there are reports of ladies fainting during his sermons. He was also more than able to win himself admirers and friends through his preaching – indeed, his friendship with the Fitzpatrick family, and especially his emotional entanglement with Augusta, meant that each year he spent several weeks on their Irish estates from 1849 onwards.

Various well-known people of the day attended his chapel or made contact with him. The diarist Henry Crabb Robinson (1775-1867) travelled regularly from London to hear him preach, and on one occasion the entire Cabinet is said to have visited Brighton for this purpose. The Christian Socialist theologian Frederick Denison Maurice (1805-1872) and the Liberal politician and reformer George William Frederick Howard (1802-1864), seventh Earl of Carlisle, encouraged his efforts on behalf of working men; Lord Ashley – Anthony Ashley Cooper (1801-1885), later seventh Earl of Shaftesbury – also wrote to him in this connection. His friend and confidante, Annabella (Anne Isabella) Lady Noel Byron (1792-1860), widow of the poet, sang his praise as “the Genius of the Soul’s world”³ to influential people, including Prince Albert. William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863) stayed loyal to Joseph Sortain (1809-1860), minister of the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion in North Street, Brighton, whom he called “the most accomplished orator I have ever heard in my life,”⁴ but his fellow novelist, Charles Dickens (1812-1870), pronounced Robertson “one of the greatest masters of elocution I ever knew and that to hear him read the service was itself a liberal education.”⁵ Apart from the occasional hostile notice in the Evangelical newspaper the *Record*, Robertson enjoyed a [sizeable, if far from immeasurable,] degree of public respect throughout his lifetime. This fame, however, would only grow after his premature death; indeed, Dickens’ accolade was delivered to Robertson’s son, Charles, long after his father’s death, by which time his published sermons had become best-sellers.

In his sermons and letters Robertson is dismissive about the value of popular preaching and he made sure that his ministry in Brighton was also devoted to education and matters of social concern. He taught at the Diocesan Training School for Teachers, supported the founding of the Working Man's Institute in 1848, and lectured to both middle and working class organisations. This type of presence in the community ensured that he was highly respected by working men as well as by the young men of his congregation. He did not, however, shy away from opportunities of greater renown. In 1851 he joined F.D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley (1819-75) in a series of sermons at St John's, Charlotte Street in London, and the following year he was appointed Chaplain to the High Sheriff of Sussex. He enjoyed the friendship and trust of Lady Byron to so great a degree that she made him her literary executor – a sign of intellectual respect he would never enjoy, as he pre-deceased her on August 15th 1853. Ill-health had dogged him throughout his time in Brighton and he was persuaded to nominate a curate to assist him, but the Vicar of Brighton, Henry Michell Wagner (1792-1870), vetoed his nominee, Ernest Tower, and he chose to continue without help. His death certificate says that he died of brain and heart disease, but there are various theories as to the cause of death.

His funeral in Brighton was an occasion of public mourning. Shops were closed and a vast crowd, a complete cross-section of Brighton society, followed the cortege. He was buried in the Extramural Cemetery, Lewes Road, on August 23rd 1853, where a large monument, erected by public subscription, marks his grave.

Posthumous praise

The story of how Robertson's biography and sermons were shared with a wider public is told in Chapters 12 and 13. It was a haphazard process but within ten years of his death four substantial volumes of *Sermons* had been published and they ran through many editions. Crabb Robinson thought it was "remarkable" that they should be included in Baron Tauchnitz's series of English classics,⁶ the only sermons to achieve this accolade,⁷ and they were also published in an *Everyman's Library* edition. 'Robertson of Brighton' became a well-known name and Anglican liberals were quick to acknowledge him. By 1860, Benjamin Jowett (1817-1893), Fellow of Balliol College and Regius Professor of Greek at the University of Oxford, ranked Robertson with Newman as a preacher in his controversial essay 'On the Interpretation of Scripture'.⁸ Five years later, Jowett's old friend Arthur Penrhyn Stanley (1815-1881), Dean of Westminster, described

Robertson's sermons on the Person of Christ as "the most purely theological of our age",⁹ and by the early 1880s declared him "beyond question, the greatest preacher of the nineteenth century".¹⁰

In 1916, another famous preacher and liberal Churchman, Herbert Hensley Henson (1863-1947), then Dean of Durham, was invited to Brighton to deliver a lecture on Robertson to mark the centenary of his birth. He found it "amazingly difficult to frame a coherent notion of him"¹¹ but his slim volume, *Robertson of Brighton 1816-1853*, is a brilliant introduction by someone who greatly admired his subject and identified with him. Noting that a quarter of a million copies of his works had been sold in the United States he suggests "that no Anglican preacher has ever had so extensive and constant an influence".¹² In the mid-twentieth century, surveying the long history of the English sermon, Charles Smyth acclaimed Robertson "the one *great* preacher in the history of the English Church".¹³ Some of his sermons were translated into French, Dutch and German and that doyen of liberal theologians, Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), claimed that even Germany had not produced a preacher to match him, or one who had so profoundly influenced both clergy and laity alike.¹⁴ His *Lectures on Corinthians* were even rendered into Chinese as a model of expository preaching.

Robertson's sermons were read by people of many different religious traditions, including those alienated from the churches. Rejecting the Evangelicalism of his ministerial formation, yet retaining its stress on the importance of religious feelings, the Bible, and the person of Christ, his preaching addressed the tidal wave of scepticism and doubt that had swept over nineteenth-century believers, himself included. Though he died before the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) and the liberal theological agenda set out in *Essays and Reviews* (1860), he was open to the insights of moderate biblical criticism, while his interest in science was tempered by a sense of its limitations; and because he preferred principles to historical detail, his insights remained fresh with the next generation. By articulating the tension between faith and modern thought, and suggesting that the two were compatible, Robertson's writings met a genuine religious need, and he "did much to change the spiritual atmosphere of the nineteenth century".¹⁵ Confronted with what he dismissed derisively as 'vulgar Protestant orthodoxy' he admitted privately:

I believe of most orthodox doctrines, as Greg says of prayer, that they are fictions, which may be considered as the expression, the approximate formula, of mighty eternal verities.¹⁶

It was a method he had learnt, in part, from the historian and critic Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), whose influence is discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. Having abandoned Calvinistic Evangelicalism Robertson was particularly opposed to its exclusivist interpretation of salvation, especially its account of Christ's atoning death. Sensitive to the seriousness of sin, he was unable to be a complete universalist, and his vision of the spiritual world, like his ideal of human society, was of a meritocracy. His emphasis on the inclusive humanity of Christ, however, was universal in its scope and the basis of his engagement with the working classes, whom he addressed as "brother men".

Gender theory

The ideally human Christ of Robertson's *Sermons*, universal in his sympathy, is also a perfect combination of masculine and feminine: "His heart had in it the blended qualities of both sexes."¹⁷ This image reflects the nineteenth-century gender debate (including the contradictions of the 'muscular Christianity' which Robertson espoused), Romantic preoccupation with the reconciliation of opposites, and the intimate workings of his own psyche. Gender is not a word that he or his contemporaries would have used in this context, but when he confesses to being obsessed with the relations between the sexes¹⁸ it is gender that he is thinking of (though sexuality was part of this), and he uses the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine', as well as 'manly' and 'effeminate'. Gender is a recurring theme in this biography, and it has four distinct, yet interrelated, theoretical strands.

Firstly, there is the rise of feminism in mid-nineteenth century England, in particular the desire of middle-class women to escape the 'domestic sphere' to which they were confined by the gendered division of labour associated with Victorian capitalism. An obvious example is Marian Evans (1819-1880) assuming the male name George Eliot to enter the world of letters. For some liberal thinkers, like J.S. Mill, (1806-1873) women's emancipation was a straightforward matter of justice, but for Robertson, and others, Victorian feminism, often referred to as 'The Woman Question', seemed to provoke a 'crisis of masculinity' which is reflected in their writings. They sympathised with women's predicament, but engaged in a measured 'defence' of male privilege, based on fairly conventional ideas of men and women's 'nature' and roles.

Secondly, the impact of twentieth-century feminism, and the growth of gender studies, has resulted in 'gendered' readings of historical

texts that may, or may not, have been obvious at the time they were written. Nineteenth-century authors and their readers were evidently aware of the significance of gender, even though they used a different vocabulary to describe it. ‘Muscular Christianity’, which Robertson advocated – now regarded as an important construction of Victorian masculinity¹⁹ – invites a gendered reading of his life and work, as does his friendship with Lady Byron, Anna Jameson, and other feminists.²⁰ Jameson’s feminism has been explored by recent reappraisals of her writings,²¹ while Robertson’s notion of ‘blending’ genders has reappeared, in a very different context, in current transgender theory.²²

Thirdly, the psychological typology of masculine and feminine, developed in the early twentieth century by Carl Jung (1875-1961), which is sometimes applied to historical figures, seems appropriate in Robertson’s case given the psychological character of his preaching that Harnack and Smyth both remarked upon.²³ Michael Lamb detected a similarity between Robertson’s ideas on gender and Jung’s concepts of the *animus* and the *anima*,²⁴ and there might be a connection. Paul Bishop²⁵ has demonstrated Jung’s debt to the German Romanticism of Goethe and Schiller, a tradition Robertson inhabited, which was preoccupied with the reconciliation of opposites,²⁶ while Camille Paglia has drawn attention to the ‘bisexual’ or ‘transsexual’ imagery in Goethe’s fiction.²⁷

Fourthly, and this is discussed further in Chapter 13, Robertson appreciated the important theological point that the biblical writers had stressed that Christ was human rather than male. The Victorian gender debate, feminist theory, Jungian psychology and its Romantic roots all shed light on this and other aspects of Robertson’s life and thought, and where they intersect care has been taken to indicate which strand is being discussed.

Androgyny

According to the *Record* one of Robertson’s clerical contemporaries at Oxford remembered him as “a half-effeminate lack-lustre sort of man”,²⁸ while a friendlier parishioner at Winchester recalled that he was “tall and very handsome, though delicate looking, and in manner particularly gentleman-like, bland and graceful”.²⁹ At Cheltenham he was reckoned “beautiful rather than handsome”³⁰ and a fellow minister in Brighton remembered the details of his face – the high forehead, deep-blue eyes, straight, finely proportioned nose, delicate mouth, curvaceous lips, and weak chin – and that it was “a beautiful

one”,³¹ while the homosexual theorist and poet Edward Carpenter (1844-1929), who was only nine years old when Robertson died, also remembered him as “a beautiful creature”.³² These descriptions all suggest that Robertson’s appearance was as androgynous as his personality, and his first biographer felt obliged to explain that “despite extreme nervous sensibility and an almost feminine delicacy of feeling, he was at heart brave, manly, intrepid”.³³

Carpenter’s mother “simply adored Robertson” and his father, Charles, who was one of Robertson’s chapel wardens, was a devotee of Coleridge and Broad Church theology, an outlook that Carpenter apparently shared when he became Maurice’s curate in Cambridge, though he would resign his orders to concentrate on educational work among the working classes. Best remembered as a poet and sexologist – the anatomist of “homogenic love” and “the intermediate sex,” i.e. ‘feminine’ homosexual men and ‘masculine’ homosexual women – Carpenter’s last work was a commentary on the Freudian hypothesis that Shelley was a repressed homosexual. Unconvinced, he discusses the hermaphrodites and “sexual variants” in Shelley’s poems (and Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*)³⁴ and credits him with recognising “that only a new type of human being, combining the male and the female, could ultimately save the world”.³⁵ Barnefield, Carpenter’s collaborator, also remarks on this androgynous imagery, and Shelley’s preoccupation with incest between brother and sister.³⁶ Both were literary devices of Romanticism.

Romanticism

Although Romanticism is notoriously difficult to define, several features of Romantic religious thought stand out: its pantheistic tendency, egoism, emotional intensity and aestheticism; its subjective handling of religion; the feeling that human life is burdensome; that the darker aspects of human personality must be explored; a longing for reconciliation – for stillness, not as stasis, but as the climax of perpetual striving – and the image of the Romantic hero as exile or wanderer.³⁷ All can be found in Robertson’s life and writings from the time of his wanderings in the Tyrol in 1846, and he was steeped in Romantic literature. Wordsworth’s poetry was a major influence and his sermons and private thoughts often adopt its vocabulary and leading ideas: nature as a sacrament of God, the presence of infinitude in humankind, the importance of contemplative prayer, the fact of ‘common humanity’ irrespective of social class, and compassion for the labouring poor. Coleridge’s poems and prose are quoted in

the sermons, and he was intrigued by Goethe, whose works he read. He had devoured Byron's poetry, pondering the 'Byronic' in human nature, and Shelley's poetry provided the imagery with which he framed his relationship with Augusta.

Goethe, Shelley and Byron were notoriously amorous with women, but Paglia argues that the 'passive' subjectivity of Romantic poetry denotes a repressed masculinity, hence its fondness for androgynous imagery, and the presence of a female muse, usually addressed, incestuously, as 'sister', but who is, in fact, an aspect of the poet's self.³⁸ In Wordsworth, of course, this female muse was his actual sister, Dorothy. When Robertson and Ellen first began to meet he tried to moderate their mutual physical attraction with the hope that they might love one another as sister and brother. Indeed, the use of this Romantic conceit of woman as sexualised but forbidden 'sister', following the death of his own three sisters, can be found first in Robertson's flirtation with Fanny Boyd, and then with Augusta, who became his muse. The very last words he wrote were to Augusta and seem to recall Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* with its reference to a 'dear, dear, sister'. Paglia also contends that the asexual, attenuated masculinity of Wordsworth's male characters follows from his idealised vision of nature.³⁹ Was Robertson attracted to Wordsworth's poetry as a young man because it encouraged sexual repression?

Sexuality and gender

As an adult Robertson would say that 'romance' – his idealisation of women – had 'preserved' him from youthful sexual encounters. His mother's conduct had demonstrated the destructive potential of sexuality, and in later life he placed responsibility firmly on the male, especially as society tended to excuse a man's sexual indiscretions and victimise the woman. Was part of his enthusiasm for the army because of the sexual freedom it seemed to offer? As the eldest son of a military family it felt like an assault on his masculinity that his father considered him better suited to being a clergyman, a profession which he afterwards claimed was guilty of the worst aspects of femininity, and that involved the indignity of wearing 'skirts'.⁴⁰ (He became more playful about this at Brighton, scolding 'Miss Tizey' for referring to "'Our morning gowns.' O horrible, to remind me that I wear petticoats – cruel too."⁴¹) Wordsworth's poetry probably helped him to negotiate the transition from a longing for the field of action to the sphere of study and contemplation.

Although his emotional nature and poetic sensibilities attracted him to the Tractarians, he found the ‘manly’ tone of Evangelicalism, with its dogmatic certainties, more appealing and felt secure in that environment, at least for a while.

Marriage brought sexual and emotional relief, and his relationship with Boyd, his incumbent at Cheltenham, bears all the hallmarks of what is now referred to as ‘the masculine plot’⁴² concealed in Carlyle’s writings, but its destabilisation was catastrophic for Robertson, since it implied the escape of dangerous male energies. Thus his ‘crisis of faith’ was also one of sexuality and it is hardly surprising that the significance of Goethe and his great work, *Faust*, with its strongly sexual undercurrent, should have occupied him then. Gradually he began to integrate his sexuality, a process continued in Brighton, largely due to his affair with Augusta, who was also somewhat androgynous. Her swagger and physical strength are evident in the striking portrait by G.F. Watts painted in Florence in 1844, about three years before Robertson met her,⁴³ which depicts her somewhat ‘masculine’ arms and shoulders – a consequence, perhaps, of her sailing skills. With her intellectual curiosity and “passion for fine poetry” – Goethe’s words, “‘Be content with your limitations’” was a favourite phrase⁴⁴ – Augusta challenged his low expectations of women, and his desire for her, which she reciprocated, seemed to heal his internal splitting, common in Victorian culture, of ideal womanhood and the sexualised female. The material assembled in this volume also shows that, although he was heterosexual, Robertson was sympathetic to the emotional ‘homosexuality’ implicit in Tractarianism, and the ‘feminised poet’ that contemporaries and later theorists have recognised in Tennyson.

The gendered dimension to Robertson’s story, already evident in the published sources, is very apparent in the manuscript material used here which reveals his mother’s extra-marital affair (Chapter 1), the odd circumstances surrounding his own engagement and marriage (Chapter 3), his romantic attachment to his rector’s sister, Fanny Boyd (Chapter 6) and his infatuation with Augusta in 1849 (Chapter 7).

Private passions, private papers

This emphasis on gender and sexuality also rectifies a lack of detail about Robertson’s private life that has frustrated and intrigued readers of the official Victorian biography. There have been two attempts to supplement Brooke’s account, neither of which

illuminated Robertson's personal relationships. *Robertson of Brighton* (1886) by Frederick Arnold (1832-1891) contains a few fresh anecdotes and reminiscences, some from Crabb Robinson's published diary, and others provided by Robertson's son, Charles Boyd Robertson,⁴⁵ but the author seemed more concerned to address the unorthodox tendency of Robertson's theology, which he discussed in its final chapter.⁴⁶ The best version of Robertson's life based on the published sources is James R. Blackwood's *The Soul of Frederick W. Robertson* (1947), which also has chapters on his preaching. Blackwood dismisses Arnold's book as "a discursive, often pointless, biography".⁴⁷

The second attempt was much more recent. *Victorian Conscience: F.W. Robertson* (2001) by Marilyn Thomas Faulkenburg was written in the knowledge that a diary probably existed in which Robertson had recorded the details of an extra-marital affair in secret code.⁴⁸ Unable to recover it the author went ahead with a new biography, using a 'life and times' format.⁴⁹ Given that she was aware of the rumour of his infidelity, it was disingenuous of her to say, at that stage,

I am more convinced than ever that there are private papers and that finding them might resolve some of the mystery that still surrounds his private life ... Is it possible that Robertson committed indiscretions with regard to women?⁵⁰

As Faulkenburg was writing this, the 'missing' diary, which covers the year 1849, and records his affair with Augusta, was still in the hands of his descendants, but about to come into my keeping. I never anticipated a discovery of this kind. My own research began with Robertson as a theologian, and although his life experience was relevant I longed to find documents that would elucidate his 'crisis of faith' which was my main preoccupation then. I read of his deep admiration for Lady Byron but the suggestion that they might, under different circumstances, have become romantically attached⁵¹ seemed utterly implausible, as it still does. In any case Brooke's saintly portrait, and Robertson's puritan moralism, had led me to believe that he was incapable of scandalous behaviour of any kind.

The first haul of documents I came across in the mid-1970s (which I call Robertson MSS), however, which revealed his obsession with Fanny Boyd and the personal aspects of his intellectual and spiritual crisis in 1846, was evidence of at least one 'other woman'

to whom Robertson was emotionally attached, though not of an affair as such. It was around this time that I stayed with the Bishop of Sheffield, Gordon Fallows (1913-1979), who was researching a biography of Robertson, though it was never completed. The Bishop had confirmed me when he was in the Wakefield Diocese, and he gave me copies of various unpublished letters and sermons, pointing out that, since he was focusing on Robertson's life, and I was researching his thought, we would not be in competition with each other. I agreed, but only to a point, given that life and thought are often intertwined, particularly with an autobiographical preacher like Robertson. Sensing that the bishop was holding something back, I was tempted, during the night, to creep down into his vast book-lined study to see what I could find, but conscience, or nerves, kept me between the sheets.

Over twenty years later, in 1999, while staying with Robertson's great granddaughter, I examined the manuscripts (which I call Robertson Papers) she had loaned to Bishop Fallows, now safely returned to her by his family. What I saw proved that the bishop had withheld unpublished material from me, including Robertson's diary for 1849, with entries in secret code: a diary I had no idea existed until that point. A recent biography of Bishop Fallows explains that he decided to suppress the contents so as not to tarnish Robertson's reputation, even though John Bowker, who had decoded it for him, thought it relatively mild by today's standards.⁵² Coincidentally, I had turned to Bowker's successor as Dean of Trinity College, Cambridge, my friend Arnold Browne, for advice on 'breaking' the code, though it did not take us very long as Robertson had written the key in the front cover. What I didn't appreciate was that Bishop Fallows had made a photocopy of the diary. In 2001 it was in the hands of his son Geoffrey, and after reading *Victorian Conscience*, he responded to Faulkenburg's request and sent her a copy, which means that we were both deciphering the contents at roughly the same time. In 2008, by then known as Marilyn Thomas, she paraphrased the 1849 diary (not always accurately) as the appendix to her privately published work, *The Diary: Sex, Death and God in the Affairs of a Victorian Cleric*,⁵³ the record of her (often fruitless) search for manuscript material. The subtitle conveys the sensationalist tone of the narrative, which makes heavy work of identifying Augusta as Robertson's lover, an attribution I made in print five years earlier,⁵⁴ and the title is misleading: the one thing she has not seen is 'the diary'.

The affair

Robertson's 1849 diary is a detailed account of his affair with Augusta. Every kiss, each little tiff, and the childish mood swings of their infatuation, are recorded in secret code, not, it seems, because he was ashamed of his behaviour, but to keep the minutiae of their friendship from prying eyes within his own household. Ellen, his wife, was uncomfortable that they spent so much time together, as was Augusta's husband, and other people had their suspicions. Moses Ricardo (brother of the famous economist, David Ricardo), who supported Ellen when she was widowed, told Crabb Robinson in 1860 that while he rejected "all imputations upon Robertson in relation to Mrs Fitzpatrick of a criminal nature, yet he confesses, as his friend, imprudence".⁵⁵ The *Record* too recalled that "ladies of fashion rode on the parade with the handsome but eccentric preacher"⁵⁶ and in 1849 his riding companion was invariably Augusta.

No doubt Robertson justified their behaviour to himself in the most laudable terms. It was a generously reciprocal relationship. He was helping to lift Augusta's depression, and she to energise him as a thinker. The outcome was calamitous and he had to live with the penalty – a concept he distinguished from 'punishment' – of his adultery. The consequences were also prodigious, for although shorthand writers took down his words, the bulk of his published letters and sermons were written for Augusta, and through her friendship he gained fresh impetus and emotional power as a writer and theologian.

The discovery of a single sexual indiscretion by a Victorian worthy need not necessarily merit much attention, but this particular relationship quickened Robertson's creative energies, ensured the preservation of his writings, and offered a vantage point from which he could interpret his past confusions about sex and gender. Given its pivotal role in his life and work it is apt that it should be narrated in the central chapter of this book.

Manuscript sources

The two Robertson collections have also yielded information about Robertson's intellectual formation and public role. Originally one collection, the property of Robertson's son, Charles, it was divided, after his death, between two of his sons (their brilliant brother, Charles Donald Robertson, died in a mountaineering accident). Sir

Malcolm Arnold Robertson, the second son, received the letters and papers relating to Robertson's earlier life, including the diaries from 1840 to 1845, which begin with his last few months at Oxford and end in his penultimate year as a curate in Cheltenham. This is 'Robertson MSS', which also included many documents relating to the publication of his sermons and some annotated books from his library. It was inherited by Sir Malcolm's son, the late Major Donald Robertson, and remains in private hands. Frederick William Robertson, the eldest son, received unpublished manuscripts of various Cheltenham sermons, many of the autograph MSS of the *Fifth Series of Sermons* (1880), numerous letters, and the diaries from 1848 to 1853. These are the 'Robertson Papers' which passed to his daughter, Mrs Jean Rome, who instructed me to deposit them at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, when my research was complete.

Robertson's diaries seem to have been divided between the brothers on a hierarchal basis. The earlier, ones, from his Evangelical days, went to the younger man, and the Brighton ones to his older brother, in keeping with Brooke's biography, and the general assessment at the time, which saw the former as less interesting and significant than his liberal period. Today this division seems artificial, and the rich record of his Evangelical years means that this period can be treated more comprehensively than in previous biographies. There is no diary in either collection for the years 1846 and 1847 when Robertson's views were changing rapidly, and perhaps he did not keep one then when so much of his life was dislocated (the 1851 diary is also 'missing'). Brooke appears to have faithfully summarised the other diaries, and since he claims to have relayed all the available information relating to Robertson's crisis of faith it seems that these diaries, if they existed, were not part of the collection when he examined it. Perhaps they contained further (un-coded) revelations about his private life, and were destroyed or concealed by the family. Given his custom of recording the books he was reading they would be an important find today, if they have survived, but there is enough new material in these collections to cast fresh light on this important stage in his development.

Two further manuscript sources have been consulted. Robertson's correspondence with Lady Byron, part of the Lovelace Byron Papers at the Bodleian, ought to have appeared in the *Life and Letters* and Charles eventually learnt that he was at liberty to publish extracts in later editions (though he never did) and that the legal embargo had been imposed, partly, for his protection.⁵⁷ Presumably this is because one letter clearly alludes to Robertson's marital problems, and the

collection also includes correspondence about the proposals for the publication of his memoir, discussed in Chapter 12, where it emerges that he had begun to plan a separation from Ellen during the final months of his life, as noted in Chapter 11. The manuscript versions of Crabb Robinson's diary and letters at Dr Williams's Library, Gordon Square, London, which contain revealing comments about Robertson and his contemporaries omitted from the published edition,⁵⁸ have also been consulted.

Interpretations

There is a considerable secondary literature on Robertson, most of it dependent on Brooke's narrative, but the focus of interpretation varies and there is debate in the English-speaking world as to whether he should be considered primarily as a preacher or as theologian. Older texts see him as both, although Marcus Dods believed that he "was not, indeed a scientific theologian",⁵⁹ a view repeated in Robertson's entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*,⁶⁰ presumably because of the occasional nature of his writings. The opposing argument can still be made, however; E.C. Moore noted that "out of them, even in their fragmentary state, a well-articulated system might be made".⁶¹ John Tulloch emphasised Robertson's preaching,⁶² but regarded him as "the greatest thinker who has appeared in the pulpit in modern times",⁶³ and for Moore, "It is, before all, the wealth and depth of his thought, the reality of the content of the sermons which commands admiration. They are a classic refutation of the remark that one cannot preach theology."⁶⁴ Writing in 1913 Vincent Storr claimed that Robertson had "proved himself one of the most potent forces in the recent history of English theology"⁶⁵ and late-twentieth-century surveys of the period by Horton Davies⁶⁶ and Bernard Reardon maintain this theological focus. In Reardon's words, "he was that comparatively rare phenomenon, a preacher who is also a teacher. The sermon, not the treatise, was his natural medium."⁶⁷

Once his writings were translated Robertson developed a European reputation as a theologian. After the publication of E. de Pressensé's sympathetic critique of his theology two French Protestant bachelor's dissertations appeared in monograph form,⁶⁸ followed, in 1905, by Jakob Nieweg's Dutch doctoral dissertation, which examines Robertson's ideas about revelation, dogma, the doctrine of God, and Christ's person and work.⁶⁹ In Germany Harnack praised his sermons as Christian apologetics in the

highest sense of the word,⁷⁰ while Otto Pfliederer acknowledged his truly Lutheran understanding of faith;⁷¹ tributes that explain the significance Emanuel Hirsch attached to him in his monumental history of Protestant theology.⁷²

I believe that Robertson's writings deserve this theological perspective.⁷³ That Brooke's paragon should have experienced sexual temptation, and marital difficulties, increases his humanity rather than diminishing him as a thinker. It also illuminates his emphasis on 'sympathy', a Wordsworthian word⁷⁴ he used often, as did George Eliot, another moralist who flouted Victorian convention, with whom he has been compared.⁷⁵ Christ's humanity, his divinely human sympathy, is central to Robertson's vision of Christianity and he speaks of the humanity of Christ's divinity, an expression I have adapted as 'the humanity of divinity' to convey his theological method.

Other interpretations are also appropriate, and in the United States, where homiletics is a major discipline in ministerial training, there have been a number of dissertations about his work as a preacher.⁷⁶ Faulkenburg's biography belongs to a strand of American interpretation which sees him as a precursor of modern liberal attitudes,⁷⁷ though she glosses over his conservatism on 'the woman question' by implying that he shared Lady Byron's views of female emancipation.⁷⁸ She also notes that he is a paradoxical figure,⁷⁹ a perspective explored by Michael Lamb who remarks on the consonance between Robertson's thinking and modern dialectical theology.⁸⁰ His Christology is also said to have prefigured Ritschl's⁸¹ but I have become increasingly conscious that what he proclaims is an Enlightenment Christ – like the Enlightenment Bible, a cultural construct to ensure the survival of belief in a secular age⁸² – with a Romantic face: startling in mid-nineteenth century England but hardly new. The previously unpublished material in this biography reinforces this impression by locating him even more securely in his own time.

In recent years students of English literature have begun to take an interest in Robertson – his lectures on poetry were reprinted in 2003⁸³ – and the cultural setting of Victorian religion is an important feature of this biography, and hence its chapter titles which are, in the main, books he had read. The visual, whether in the form of natural landscape or painting, was deeply significant for him, though he suspected his habit of 'colouring' his descriptions for the benefit of others.⁸⁴ Contemporaries attributed this, in part, to an 'excitable' tendency within the culture,⁸⁵ recently characterised as

“a religiously inflected vitalism”,⁸⁶ and “the slight under-current of fever ... due to physical delicacy, heightened the moral colours of his mind” giving his face a “hectic expression of nervous suffering”.⁸⁷

Pictures and portraits

The visual record of Robertson’s appearance is slight. A silhouette taken when he was seven, and the coloured sketch which shows him in a military cloak (c.1837), were never reproduced and may no longer exist.⁸⁸ The daguerreotype by William Edward Kilburn⁸⁹ was taken in London as he returned from holiday in Ireland, probably in 1851, and his posture suggests impatience with the procedure. It is said that there were two positive prints, “one for a dear friend in Ireland” (i.e. Augusta), the other for one of his chapel wardens, William Bowdidge, but that, having paid for them, Robertson placed the negatives on the ground and broke them with his umbrella.⁹⁰ Charles Robertson thought that its hard outline and blurred detail obscured the true characteristics of his father’s face, and that “the only authentic portrait is a water coloured drawing by Basebe, which was taken in 1853.”⁹¹ No portraits of Ellen during Robertson’s lifetime have been reproduced in earlier biographies. Elegantly attired in the latest Parisian fashion, determined and moody, like her husband, there was some confusion about her first name. At first Robertson referred to her as ‘Ellen’, then, later, as ‘Helen’, which is how she was named on their daughter’s birth certificate in January 1850, but two months later he returned with her to substitute ‘Ellen’ for ‘Helen’ in the register.⁹² In this biography, apart from quotations, which may vary, she is referred to as Ellen.

Charles could recall his father’s lightness of step as he walked, his hands often clasped behind his back, and his head, framed with thick, wavy, auburn hair, thrown back.⁹³ He remembered the deep-set dark blue eyes, sometimes dreamy and withdrawn in thought, then penetrating someone’s soul, or twinkling with delight, and how his pale, mobile face produced “an effect of brightness when he began to speak, which I think was one of the secrets of his attraction”. He shared his father’s dislike of the picture by W. Mason (reproduced as the frontispiece to Henson’s monograph) showing him robed in the pulpit, or at the reading desk, and tried, unsuccessfully, to prevent its circulation.⁹⁴ Drawn surreptitiously as Robertson preached, or afterwards from memory, it was produced to meet the public demand for an official portrait which he always resisted. At five feet eleven and a half inches he looked immensely tall in the hugely elevated

pulpit, and apart from the occasional, usually unconscious, gesture, his style was as austere as his black Geneva gown, which merely served to heighten the effect of his oratory. His military bearing was complemented by “the symmetry of his figure and his faultless features”.⁹⁵ His voice, “a rich, mellow baritone of considerable range”,⁹⁶ was said to have a “musical quality”,⁹⁷ though there were occasional complaints that he mismanaged it when preaching, and it became “an inaudible murmur or whisper”,⁹⁸ so that hearers had to crane their heads towards him “as if fearful they might lose a golden sentence”.⁹⁹ The “reverent force” with which he said certain prayers in the Communion service also made a deep impression.¹⁰⁰ With his patrician manner and aesthetic sensibilities it was easy to label him as an elegant, fashionable preacher but he was uncomfortable with celebrity status.

There are a number of occasions when Robertson’s life mirrors art and, despite his devotion to Wordsworth, similarities with the second generation of Romantic poets, especially that archetypal modern celebrity Lord Byron. Both were charismatic and good-looking in the fashionable “Grecian cast”:¹⁰¹ even Lady Byron remarked on the resemblance, though she may have been thinking of their temperaments, and Robertson maintained that most people had a Byronic side to their nature. Both died young, apparently worn out by the pressures of the Romantic/liberal trajectories and the hectic pace of contemporary life.¹⁰² Both were fascinated by androgyny, as was Goethe, and in the late 1840s Robertson appears to exchange the seduction plot of Goethe’s *Faust* Part I for Byron’s *Don Juan*, with its passive hero surrounded by strong women. When Lady Byron talked with him about Byron’s reputedly incestuous relationship with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh, the dark secret that she blamed for destroying her marriage, Robertson’s marriage was already threatened because of his affair with a lady, also called Augusta. Eventually he would confide in writing to Byron’s widow his own unhappy secret of marital breakdown, but it is not known if he confessed to her the infidelity which had led to it, or the earlier family secret that had overshadowed most of his life.