

Preface

People who have shaped the history of their times have often left their imprint clearly on the pages of history. Yet there are those who were most influential that have often been either ignored or relegated to lesser roles. Sir William Robertson Nicoll is an individual who usually worked behind headlines and this study has tried to look at the several planes of influence and interest that he had, although each one merits fuller treatment. The original plan was to let words of the subject of this biography come through its pages, but this proved a mammoth task. The original MS was almost twice as long and contained large amounts of material from the subject. Although this was a fair way of allowing the subject to speak for himself, it was also considered tedious and often only succeeded in getting bogged down in detail. Instead, there has been an emphasis on seeing the man himself, as well as giving a reasonable comprehensive over-view of his career. WRN accomplished so much and this biography seeks to acknowledge that – a life of undoubted brilliant achievement. He was caught up in social, theological, cultural, and political movements of his day and made his distinctive contribution to them all, enforcing or enhancing the lead of others.

Mainly the sources available to the writer have confirmed the mainlines of WRN's life, which have been written over the years since his death in 1923, and this is an attempt to bring together all that has been written about him and to harmonise those comments and insights made about him. There has been an attempt to examine personal letters where they exist. This has generally proved a disappointment in the case of WRN. There have been discovered snippets of information about WRN's relationships with individuals – which adds some colour, but there has been nothing discovered that challenges or changes the basic pattern and understanding of the subject's life. However, it is now possible to appreciate and see WRN in his life-context and to be able to distinguish between what he attempted and what he actually achieved.

WRN was an extraordinary individual who confined himself to certain fields of life, 'narrow' constraints, but through methodical study,

observation and much toil, he made himself a master of journalism. This achievement was all the more remarkable and enhanced by his having a severe disability, which would have finished most others' careers – yet at times WRN's disability acted as a spur for him in how he arranged his life and simply got on with life's tasks and opportunities. He had to get on with life and do what he could, as thoroughly and as well as he could.

The author has tried to give a rounded study of the man in his times. Nicoll, or Robertson Nicoll, which he often used to distinguish himself from other 'Nicolls', or as he became known by his family, WRN, was an individual who is difficult to sum up completely. Commentators, even his authorised biography by T.H. Darlow, though they captured much, yet to others, who also knew the subject, felt there was much left out. T.H. Darlow published his official biography of WRN in 1925 and he did such a fine job that there has never been any subsequent attempt until now. WRN's biography was written two years after WRN's death, but in spite of being a long-time friend and of having access to letters, family and friends, there are areas that he missed and assessments that would have been impossible to make at that time. These are some of the missed emphases of WRN's life, which mean that Darlow skewed the final picture. Such significant areas I have sought to rectify in this study. Biographical studies can become as conditioned by the author's times as those of the subject, but my interest in WRN began with the patchiness I discovered in modern assessments of him. Historians, who appraised and assessed the period 1886 to 1920, seemed to have an extraordinary range of interest or lack of acknowledgement of Nicoll. There were appreciations which saw him as having considerable influence, such as Willis B. Glover's *Evangelical Nonconformists and Higher Criticism in the Nineteenth Century* (1954), and James Munson's *The Nonconformists – in search of a lost culture* (1991). However, there were those who ignored his role completely, such as John W. Grant's *Free Churchmanship in England 1870-1940* (N/D c1946), E.R. Norman's *Church and Society in England 1770-1970* (1976), David Bebbington's *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (1989). Furthermore there were eulogies in the contemporary press, such as one quoted by Darlow, "For many years Sir William Robertson Nicoll has been the intellectual leader of Nonconformity – the chief exponent of its thought, and the most effective advocate of its causes in the press. Both as a speaker and writer he has been looked to for guidance by the Free Churches."¹ High appreciation was understandable in the days just after Nicoll's death, but then Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, who ministered at Westminster

Chapel, London, from 1938 to 1968, wrote as one who had lived through the latter period, when Nicoll's influence was at its height. "I have always regarded W. Robertson Nicoll as one of the worst, because of the most subtle, influences in the decline of Nonconformity at the end of the last century and the beginning of the present century."² So was WRN too liberal for conservative Evangelicals and yet too conservative theologically for Liberals to remember him?

Then there were other questions I wanted to investigate and here WRN's life was a rich basis in which to ask some more general questions:

What happened to the second generation of the Scottish Free Church to cause them to take the lead in accepting many of the conclusions of higher criticism?

What factors caused the considerable size and influence of the Nonconformist churches to decline, so that they failed to recover their prominent position?

What place was there for culture and sophistication as a cause of dampening spiritual zeal and evangelistic advance?

Can the Kingdom of God become mistaken for temporary political success?

These questions and others intrigued the author to investigate further. WRN was a dominant figure of the times and I felt that his life and work would help contribute to an understanding of his attitude and concerns during that stormy period from 1885 to 1920. Therefore, it was with the eventual hope of trying to write a biography that seeks to set him in his chronological context and so review the whole life and achievement of a remarkable man.

My study of William Robertson Nicoll has taken quite a few years. There have been different periods of intensity at times significant enough for my wife to speak of my 'obsession'. I have successfully submitted a study for a Master of Theology degree, but further research has deepened my appreciation of WRN and some of my original conclusions have been modified. This is a biographical study and mainly concerned with the public side of the man. Strangely, for one who released much personal information in his writings, WRN remained a little distant, remote to many, but never to his close friends, and family.

I am very conscious and grateful to the kindness, generosity and help that I have received in getting to this stage. The staff of the libraries at New College, Edinburgh, the University of Aberdeen, St Andrews University, Birmingham University as well as the British Library, The Guildhall of London Record Office and the Evangelical Library, I owe

my appreciation for their dedication and support in dealing with my requests. Various friends and colleagues have encouraged me and I am grateful to them all. Dr. David Bebbington of Stirling University has been most attentive and encouraging, even finding valuable time to read and re-read some of my writing. My indebtedness has been to so many, especially those who let me respond to their question, 'Who is Nicoll?'

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