

# Preface

This project has had a long gestation going back over thirty years. In the summer of 1973 I arrived in Cambridge as a research student keenly interested in the nineteenth-century theologian F.D. Maurice. Stephen Sykes, my supervisor, quickly pointed out that while there were several studies of Maurice no one appeared to be researching his contemporary, F.W. Robertson, who was particularly interesting because of his first-hand knowledge of German theology. Emanuel Hirsch, the German historian of Protestant theology, was especially complimentary about Robertson yet he was now somewhat neglected in his own country. What did I think about dedicating the next three years to this intriguing figure: and who better than a graduate of the University of Sussex to undertake research on ‘Robertson of Brighton’? I have to thank Bishop Stephen, therefore, for starting me off on this absorbing task.

I read Brooke’s *Life & Letters of F.W. Robertson* and then the *Sermons* and was hooked, but there were several puzzles. Robertson’s ‘crisis of faith’, which precipitated or coincided with his visit to the Tyrol in 1846, was legendary yet impenetrable. What were its causes? How influential was German theology in resolving the crisis? Again, a recent book, which drew on a much older article, maintained that many of Robertson’s sermons contained close verbal similarities to discourses by the Unitarian thinker, James Martineau. This raised the issue of plagiarism. In what sense, if any, could Robertson be considered an original thinker?

To try to answer these questions I began to track down original manuscripts. The British Museum had part of the manuscript of Robertson’s *Lectures on Corinthians*, written on letter paper in his neat hand, but I needed unpublished letters and papers. Eventually I made contact with Robertson’s great-grandson, Major Donald Robertson, who had continued the family tradition by joining the army. Yes, he had some manuscripts but I would have to wait as

he was about to move house. When I called at his new home I was overwhelmed by the amount of material he showed me: a trunk full of papers and a shelf of Robertson's books. It appeared to be a treasure trove but how was I to sort through all this now that my three years research grant was coming to an end?

The Major kindly allowed me to take the trunk away for a few weeks while I examined its contents. It was thrilling to look at Robertson's diaries, although frustratingly they only covered the 'Evangelical' years of his curacies at Winchester and Cheltenham, and not the crucial year of 1846. There were many interesting letters and documents but it was a race against time to copy everything that might be relevant before the trunk was due to be returned. Finally I resorted to audio tapes in order to speed up the process and filled five reels, in addition to typed and hand written notes, all of which I have used in writing this book.

Meanwhile, I discovered that there was another researcher in the field. The Bishop of Sheffield, the late William Gordon Fallows, was planning a new biography of Robertson and examining the manuscripts that belonged to another branch of the Robertson family. I knew Bishop Fallows personally. When he was Bishop of Pontefract he had confirmed me and I had visited his home to talk about the possibility of Church work after university. I am sure that his book-lined study in Oxford Road, Dewsbury – the largest private library I had so far encountered – encouraged my own bibliophile tendencies.

The bishop provided me with copies of two unpublished letters Robertson had written from the Tyrol, but there were many more documents in that particular collection, including the later diaries, which I did not see then, and only caught up with in 1999 at the home of their owner, Mrs Jean Rome, Robertson's great-granddaughter. This remarkable lady not only gave me generous hospitality but the care of her collection pending its deposit at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and it has yielded much material for this biography. Sadly, Bishop Fallows was prevented by illness from making further progress with his monograph on Robertson. According to his literary executor, John Peart-Binns, he was saving it for his retirement, "a retirement that never came". Those words inspired me to proceed without delay in writing my own biography of Robertson, and I am very pleased to be disseminating the fruits of the research that Bishop Gordon and I were both engaged in so long ago.

In those Cambridge days, after Stephen Sykes had moved to Durham, the Revd Don Cupitt and Professor David M. Thompson

became my supervisors. Both have been supportive of my ongoing work on Robertson, and I am especially grateful to David for reading and commenting on the various drafts and manuscripts I have produced during the last decade or so. The groundwork of the research was done between 1973 and 1978, but the possibility of resuming this task came during a sabbatical in the autumn of 1997. The PCCs of All Saints, Catherington and St James, Clanfield, and the Diocese of Portsmouth, generously supported me, and a month at St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden was invaluable. There I met Andy Lie, a student of the Old Testament, and a writer on healthcare chaplaincy, now a good friend, who is a great encourager of aspiring authors.

When I returned to the parish, my colleague Chris Tebbutt and I covered for one another so that we could each devote one day a week to study, and I am grateful to Chris and the other members of the benefice team for their co-operation. A scholarship allowed me a further stay at St Deiniol's Library where I compared Robertson in more detail with John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites. Thanks to Canon Terry Loudon, I was able to share these findings with a Portsmouth audience in a CME session entitled 'An afternoon with F.W. Robertson'.

Terry and I were both curates of the late Canon Bill Sargent – a Christian Socialist, steeped in the works of F.D. Maurice, and, like Robertson, a courageously outspoken priest – who I recall reading the first draft of my dissertation on Robertson's theology, back in 1978. I only wish that Bill, and my late father too, were still with us to comment on my latest efforts. The late Angela Heather Hammerton, a dear, dear, friend, also loved to discuss Robertson. I miss too the late Sister Rhona, CSMV, who as well as helping me to dance and to pray, networked me with radical feminist and gender performance artist, Diane Torr, whose work has had a considerable influence on my thinking. Michelle O'Brien and Jasmine Woolley, my collaborators in the Sibyls workshop project 'Gender, sexuality and spirituality' now help to concentrate my focus on these topics. Another dear friend, Arnold Browne, Ralph Blair of New York, Craig Wood, and Joyce Cummings of Cheltenham Local History Society, are acknowledged in the book; Doris Daby kindly typed Appendix Two.

The idea that I should write a biography of Robertson came from my examiners, Dr Sheridan Gilley and Professor Nicholas Lash, in 1998. When I began to set about it properly in 2002, my manager, the Revd Steven B. Smith, then Head of Multi-Faith Chaplaincy at Chelsea & Westminster Hospital, gave me, as he always does, great encouragement. I would like to express my thanks to Steven and

to my colleagues in the Multi-Faith Chaplaincy team, especially Fr Gabriel Bannon OSM, the Revd Sharon Connell, and Imam Sadeq Hansali, who have kept me going with their enquiries about 'the book'. Like me, they are delighted that it is, at last, complete, thanks to the efforts of the team at Lutterworth.

Having lived with Robertson for so long it will feel strange to 'let him go' but like an old and trusted friend, I suppose that he will always be there, ready to join me in spiritual conversation whenever I need him.

A.S. Byatt's novel *Possession*, published in 1990, captures something of my world as a research student back in the 1970s. The long hours in libraries and archives, for example; in my case in Brighton, the Bodleian Library, Oxford, Cambridge University Library, and, not least, Dr Williams's Library, Gordon, Square, London, the repository of Henry Crabb Robinson's diary, which contains unexpected information about Robertson, as Byatt claims that it does about her fictional Victorian poets.

The painstaking work of accurately transcribing from old manuscripts and letters is another aspect of research discussed by Byatt, and given the vast amount of documents covered by this biography I am sure to have made mistakes, for which I crave the reader's forgiveness.

There is, though, a difference of ten years between my time as a research student and the 1980s era evoked by Byatt, a period in which feminist studies and gender theory began to take off. I was aware of the gendered aspects of Robertson's thought from the start – how could one not be? – but it was as if I had to wait for this revolution in interpretation to occur before I could begin to make sense of it.

Most significantly, as its title suggests, Byatt's novel examines the rich possibilities of relationship between a biographer and her subject, including the fascinating scenario that a researcher's attempt to 'possess' a historical figure might result in the deceased person actually 'possessing' them in some way. Albeit that biographers need to be more than a little obsessive, I know that there have been times when my husband has sometimes felt that he had a rival in F.W. Robertson. I hope to make amends for that by dedicating this book to Rob, with whom I have now shared my life for thirty-seven years. Sadly for Robertson, that was, in fact, a lifetime.

Christina Beardsley  
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