(end)

The Whole Man in his time.

It would be convenient to be able to remove all those hats, and find underneath the real Robert Chambers; but this is just as unreal a hope as to create a tidy model of his life. There was no one unaltered personality, nor clear stages through which to trace him.

It might be possible to construct a model, to use for him as for dozens of other men and women; almost encompass it into that ever-elastic Law of Nature. There are the conforming twenties, followed by the more liberal, more scientific thirties and forties, coming to rest finally in a prosperous and secure and fairly conventional last twenty years. Some, like Robert, took little erratic steps at the end. At sixty eight, the age he died, he would be allowed some harmless eccentricity.

Such would have been considered his devotion to spiritualism, if it had been generally known. This fad from America was to many a superior party game, an upper class diversion. Two letters written to Wallace in 1867 reveal that Robert was a complete convert. At first he had attended seances out of curiosity, his mind reasonably open. His diaries of the 1850's reveal some scepticism, and he had seen most of the men and women he admired withdraw in disgust from the scene. Yet finally his doubts were laid to rest. His family destroyed all his papers on the subject after his death, which makes it difficult to decide whether there was a Moment of Truth for him, or a general slide into acceptance.

One would need to stray into the hazy areas of psycho-analysis to make guesses as to why Robert felt a gap in his life which he could fill with visitors from Beyond. Spiritualism had swept across America before it was brought to Britain by various charismatic missionaries. The States had echoed to the voices of Milton, Aristotle, Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin et al speaking in the voices of mediums in a way that showed they had totally lost their ability with words and ideas. Beethoven came down to Boston to help little girls with their piano practice, literally millions of people were sitting in dark rooms watching furniture fly about, not to mention the mediums themselves.

By the time the most famous medium, D.D. Home visited Britain, the majority of the Americans had been exposed as frauds. Yet this foppish youth, who spent his time with the idle rich, battening on widows and getting involved in unsavoury lawsuits to get his hands on their money, was someone Robert admired and believed in, writing a fulsome introduction to Homes's spurious autobiography. It now seems like an aberration. Yet he was not the only intelligent, well balanced man to experience conversion of an almost mystical kind. The phenomenon can be compared to present day evangelism, and be described in terms of mass-hypnosis. Nevertheless there must be a willingness to be hypnotised. Subjects must feel a need; be dissatisfied, bored perhaps.

In his private papers, one was overlooked in the general destruction. In it Robert described a seance he attended in America in 1860. Here his two dead daughters were conjured up to chat with him; Margaret who had died twenty five years before at the age of two, and Mary who had passed over after the birth of her third child. In spite of the large gap in their ages, they were apparently comforting one another, Margaret being the most vocal and lisping that she wanted to be with her

Papa. Highland music was played on the accordion that was the background to most of these ghostly get-togethers. Reading this, one is not surprised that his family wanted to expunge the whole sorry story.

Yet one must pause to consider why Robert, and Wallace, and a considerable number of eminent, sensible judges and politicians were won over. Robert Owen apparently enjoyed conversations with the Duke of York which must have been as banal as all the other recorded wisdom. As Thomas Huxley put it, "Better live a crossing sweeper than die and be made to talk twaddle to a medium." General theories could include a Sense of Loss, the old certainties destroyed and something needed to replace them; or a Time of Transition, so much happening so fast that a sort of vertigo seized people's minds; a mental contagion, a kind of mass hysteria which had often in the past visited populations and caused them to burn witches and heretics.

In Robert's case the answer probably (and the word has to be emphasised) lay in his childhood experiences, and his relations with his father. In all those destroyed papers were there meetings with this man he had first loved and respected, then had to pity and blame and reject? Did he finally resolve all those opposites, make friends with his father again, and maybe his mother too, for there was something ambivalent about his feelings for her in the end. Or so it seems, but the evidence is too flimsy to make any real judgments. He became a believer. One must leave it at that. Sad in a way, abandoning such an accomplished scholar in such dubious company. Yet it assuaged some sorrow, explained some mysteries for him, briefly gave him comfort. In his last years, in the grip of a debilitating illness, he needed every scrap he could get.

That he felt buffeted by all the changes in the Time of Transition he had lived through, and sought a safe haven in the presence of dead Red Indians is worth considering. His life span covered dynamic alterations both in the material world and in the minds of the human race inhabiting it. He was an inheritor of the Enlightenment, when his small country shone with the works of great scholars thinking in new ways about God, indeed questioning His very existence. He heard those geologist's hammers that Ruskin complained of, and wielded one himself, and from their findings was the first to put pen to paper to elaborate on evolution. He saw steam power propel trains and ships and thus alter concepts of time and space.

His whole country expanded and flourished as never before under the impetus of steam, became in fact world leader, world conqueror, waging wars in distant parts and planting the conquered lands with tea, sugar, coffee, cotton and tobacco, growing ever richer as the railways and steamships collected and distributed the goods. Rail travel transformed the countryside in many ways; eight hundred thousand acres of land were freed from the growing of oats for horses, thus changing patterns of agriculture, sometimes with profit, sometimes with unhappy results for farmers who could grow nothing else on poor land.

Edinburgh and London were pulled closer together, and Robert and other business men were able to ply between them with speed and comfort. Robert's daughter Nina described carpeted railway carriages, softly cushioned, exclusive and progressively safer. Strangely Robert never bought shares in railway companies, and tut-tutted in the pages of the **Journal** at the "rascality" of the original share purchasers, the engineers and directors, and also of the landed gentry who sold their acres "rapaciously"

for the trains to cross.

So he saw the physical landscape change, but also momentous upheavals in the mental world of the educated middle classes, his friends and neighbours; indeed he had initiated the most important change in the steady concepts Victorians held about the universe. After **Vestiges**, after **Origins** a new world order was laid out in which man took his place alongside apes and armadillos, no longer uniquely created in God's image. He lived his life as did many of his contemporaries, precariously tossing on the "sea of faith"; watching with Tennyson the solid lands melt into mist; like Matthew Arnold substituting a trusting faith for "Sad patience, too near neighbour to despair."

God, for the majority who still believed in Him, wore as many hats as Robert; the Potter, the Gardiner, the Clockmaker, the Almighty Chemist among others, but none of them seemed to fit after evolution. He had to withdraw, taking the security of His ever watchful care with Him. He left a chilly space for the literate to inhabit, but for the majority there were signs of other securities, more immediate and relevant; better drains, cleaner water, less adulterated food, vaccination and chloroform and antiseptics. All these were making life safer for many people, always excepting the very poor, ignorant and helpless. Robert and William had been important agents in bringing about most of the reforms.

They had also worked tirelessly to remove the ignorance that blocked the escape route to a better world for the Masses. In the year after Robert's death, 1872. the Education Act offered free, state controlled, non-sectarian schooling for all, his dream realised. Girls were supposed to be beneficiaries of the Act, and some were. Women were beginning to be bored with their roles as Angels in the House, and demanding to be taken seriously as themselves, half the human race, with brains and energy and expectations that stretched beyond embroidery and tinkling on the piano. They went in large numbers to the East, where they lived lives of relentless pleasure, in the manner of Kipling's heroines, breaking most of the Victorian taboos with the abandonment of their corsets. These again were the privileged upper classes; working class women slaved harder than ever, benefiting little from education, good housing or medical breakthroughs. They and their children underpinned the industrial revolution, worked as hard, and with as little reward, as the slaves on southern plantations in America.

America was the country to which all eyes were turning in Robert's lifetime, combining mystery and grandeur with wealth and success. Every articulate visitor there returned to write of his or her experience, not always kindly especially before the abolition of slavery in 1865. Harriet Martineau was described as a "foreign incendiary" on her visit, a watch set on her movements (she was easily recognised by her ear trumpet), and there was talk of lynching. Even when she got home letters followed her from America "full of insults and particularly taunts about my deafness." America disliked "scamperings over strange lands for the purpose of writing books" particularly when the scamperers were women like Martineau and Fanny Trollop. This touchiness was perhaps predictable in a new country. Its most famous visitor, De Toqueville, found more to praise than blame, and his book "Democracy in America" was one of the great social commentaries of all time, and enormously influential among reformers in Britain.

The fact was this newly emerged country was galloping ahead of Europe. Young as it was, it had huge resources, enormous assurance, mixed and dynamic skills. Somehow it had leapt straight into the nineteenth century, not needing to unburden itself of ancient custom and medieval law. It took words

like equal opportunity as for granted, and worked into its constitution the checks and balances of its British inherited legal system. It went for advice and inspiration to John Locke and Tom Paine and Montesquieu; its schools were better, its women more emancipated, its class system flexible. It was truly a land of opportunity.

Robert was impressed, but by the time he and his wife went there they were in their late fifties, physically and mentally less able to cope with the bustle and novelty. His daughter Nina's husband, Frederick Lehmann, had made a lot of money supplying arms through his firm Vickers in the Civil War, but Frederick had been appalled at slave markets and neither of them had contemplated spending much time there. Slaves were not seemingly an issue for Robert nor did he seem to have been aware of that other great scandal, the annihilation of the indigenous Indians and the rape of their country.

Annihilations were going on all over the world and some voices were raised in protest. Robert's was not one of them. The empire that was spreading in a pink wash across the world map was a source of pride to him as to many others, and a source of comfort. The Rev. Malthus's gloomy predictions about population outrunning resources could be forgotten when all those vast expanses of virgin forest, those tremendous, powerful rivers, those sources of oil and opium could be first "annexed" to Britain, then become part of her network of trade. The work had been started a hundred years earlier, now it was a question of snapping up the last bits of India, taking over Burma, and getting the Chinese to be more friendly and relaxed about opening their ports, and Japan to fulfil its "duty" to trade.

Robert's attitude is clearly shown in his defence of Sir James Brooke, whose behaviour in Borneo called for a parliamentary enquiry. Brooke had found that the islands of Borneo and Java were not only rich in gold, copper, tin, antimony ore, porcelain clay, iron and spices, they were also inhabited by "listless savages", their seas infested by "pirates" and their ruler was a gentle, trusting man easy to dislodge. Brooke betrayed everyone, with the assistance of the British navy, and ruthlessly destroyed whoever got in his way. Robert assured his readers that the accusations against him were false calumny. His methods were presented as the private pain that produced the public gain for his country. The Motherland, that great Victorian icon, was to prosper at whatever cost to her distant children, ignorant natives who in his theory were slotted very low on the evolutionary scale. Some of them, poor things, were due to become extinct.

At home there were similarly "backward" people, but Robert's feelings about them were more ambivalent, because he knew them and could make surer judgments. But this very knowledge and proximity created different problems. He had travelled the Highlands and met people he could personally like, for whom he felt genuine concern. He had read Edward Burt's famous letters, which raised the lid off the clan system. He had researched for his books on the Jacobite risings. All this brought home to him that there was a separate nation living "up there" who when they appeared in their plaids, barefooted and speaking a foreign language, seemed as savage to lowlands Scots as would have been a tribe of Hotentots.

This second nation surrounded their Christianity with a mass of pagan superstition; their law was administered in private courts at the whim of the chieftain and his lackeys; railways could not penetrate their watery mountains so they could not trade or establish any centre of industry. Where did they fit into the new vibrant Scotland of mills and coal mines? They didn't. They were an anachronism and

must either emigrate or try to find menial work along with the Irish. The only way forward was the one being taken by the absentee landlord chieftains; sheep farming.

It was the dichotomy, the Adam Smithean fork; general progress at the expense of personal loss. Robert felt the pulls particularly, as business man/folklorist, as a lover of old traditions and man of the new sciences. He was also a kind man, who took trouble with the losers in life. His father's story was there to remind him, if it had been in his nature to forget. He could not see a way of resolving the opposites though, the only solution seemed to be to remove a lot of harmless people from land they loved.

They were only a degree above the Irish in their need and importunity. European armies no longer wanted them as cannon fodder; as far back as the Thirty Years War Highland chieftains had sold their tenants into service with a callousness that makes nonsense of any notion of the clan as a benevolent, patriarchal system. The Chief of Mackay plied backwards and forwards with his human cargo, it was his most useful form of revenue, and when one lot got wiped out he was ready with replacements. Clansmen who were unwilling to be sent to the slaughter had their houses burnt down. "My Loves in Germanie" bewailed the women widowed and destitute at home.

A great deal has been made of the ruthless efforts to stamp out the whole Highland way of life after Culloden, but the idea had occurred to local landlords long before that. Robert Gordon wrote to a man to whom he had sub-leased part of his vast estates: " Use your diligence to take away the relics of the Irish barbarity...to wit the Irish language...Purge your country piece by piece of that uncivil kind of clothes, such as plaids, mantles, trews and blue bonnets. Make severe acts against those that shall wear them." James 1 tried to set out an Anglicising programme, with a legal system using J.P.s, and it soon became the fashion to send sons to school in the south, or even to the continent. This reinforced their sense of being vastly more sophisticated than and superior to their "vassals" back on the ranch. It was colonialism in a local setting.

Robert neither despised nor feared them. He made a Highland tour in 1850 and wrote long thoughtful notes. On the Duke of Sutherland's estate he was told of a woman evicted for non payment of rent; she was pregnant but the doctor was called in to assert that she was in a condition to be removed, her husband away at the herring fishing. It was hard to reconcile the "disparity between the debtor and the creditor" Robert said, "the idea of the one giving the other to what is equivalent to destitution for the sake of a petty sum not equal to the expense of lighting up the hall for one night's banqueting" was not a pleasant one. Robert advocated the letting out of small boggy patches of land at a nominal rent on long leases. He saw only too clearly how the extravagant schemes of the Duchess, "active in the arrangements for the decoration of their houses" could not be financed without the huge increase in income effected by the new system of sheep farming; £1500 a year rising to £10,000 over a relatively short period.

And yet moving on to Caithness and the estate of Sir George Sinclair, he found this landlord "over benevolent, almost encourages the poor to remain poor and tempts the young and strong into unprosperous idleness. The fisher people have become much enervated through his bountifulness...instead of going out into the open sea they hang about the shore..." His conclusions were depressingly familiar; "there is no concealing the truth from ourselves - that the old communality of

the highlands is an encumbrance on the face of the earth...In a modern system where law is supreme they are a set of Indians sitting on a soil which is applicable to a totally different economical purpose...keep them in their own country and they remain in most ways a barbarian population always on the borders of distitution - a distressing problem to the rest of the community."

The sad fact was that Highlanders were redundant in the modern world. Their country was full of geological interest, he visited it as he made trips to Iceland, to study rifts and raised beaches and trace glaciers. He saw the beginning of tourism, and the renting out of grouse moors, but neither of these helped the Highland poor. Burns and others had revealed the richness of their folklore and songs, but these were not enough. They were sad remnants of a system that no longer "worked", indeed had been decaying over the centuries. They had to be treated like the rest of the victims of an outgrown social system. They had no legal titles to land. Like the aborigines or the American Indians they were helpless and expendable. They had their moment of brief glory in 1745, but even then many were coerced and some were just in it for the spoils. An Englishman who was sent up to Edinburgh to report on them wrote (with some ignorance obviously and a natural aversion) as "dirty, villainous looking rascals who seem more anxious about plunder than their prince and would be better pleased with four shillings than a crown."

But generally speaking it was success that underwrote both his own life story and that of his country, though he was aware of the price many others, as well as Highlanders, were having to pay for it. If he had lived another twenty years would he have abandoned his cautious liberalism and joined the new generation of radical reformers? Could he have approved the words of William Morris in his manifesto against the greedy capitalists; "these men if they had the power...would thwart your just aspirations, would silence you, would deliver you bound hand and foot for ever to irresponsible capital."

Who knows? He was brave enough to shock the country with **Vestiges** but also reluctant to admit to authorship. He was not only personally haunted by his father's failure, he was anxious about the welfare of his large family. A caution born of memories of planks on Leith Walk holding the few books he had for sale, taken in on wet days to a room lined with brown paper, made him extremely, perhaps obsessively afraid of failure. He could take no risks that threatened himself or his family, even the risk of writing rebellious prose and urging drastic reform. His attitude is well expressed in a letter of advice to Alexander Ireland, when he had taken over the **Manchester Examiner**. "You are certainly right in going some way with the reforming party...it is most prudent to go a certain way with the Chartist movement...The difficulty will be to stop at a safe point in extending the electoral basis of parliament."

So this careful man left large sums of money in Savings Accounts to be distributed to his family, and nothing to charity. By the time he died all but one of his daughters was married and his sons provided for. It would have been nice to find he had endowed a foundation for the betterment of poor students or set up a Trust for indigent governesses. Everyone who met him remarked on his kindness and the trouble he took to help people in small ways, both with time and money. There are many references in letters to this thoughtfulness; one of 1849 from a father says "Your gracious letter to him which he showed me, at the time relieved him of a great deal of doubt and uncertainty." Yet there is that sense of disappointment.

He left the reputation of being a kind, modest unselfish man. James Paine, who had worked as

editor for the **Journal** for many years, wrote of him in his **Literary Recollections**: "His manner was dry, and though his eye wrinkled with humour, I did not immediately recognise it as such... Robert Chambers' humour was of the good natured sort, his nature was essentially "good". From the pleasure he took in the prosperity of his friends I used to call him the Well Wisher...I was in intimate communication with him for twenty years, every one of which increased my respect for him; when he died I lost one of the truest friends I ever had. His manner however, on a first acquaintance, was somewhat solid and unsympathetic. He had a very striking face and figure...but a stranger would have taken him for a divine, possibly even for one of the 'unco guid'". "It was no uncommon thing for strangers to turn and look after Robert Chambers in the street, certain that he unknown to them was no ordinary individual" wrote another of his acquaintances.

In the cut throat world of rapidly expanding journalism, such a man was rare. From stray remarks in his notebooks, Robert admitted to have schooled himself in an unruffled good humour, partly, as he confessed so as to be likable. Both he and the **Journal** had to be sensibly impartial, at a time when such papers were, like **Blackwoods**, known for "scurrility and personal savagery" or like the **Edinburgh Review** government organs. Its first editor Jeffrey said of the **Review** "its Right leg is politics." Lockhart wrote to Peel suggesting a confidential channel between editor and government.

The great influence of the periodicals is reflected in the men who wrote for them; Carlyle, Macaulay, Dickens, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Personal animosities spilled over spitefully into reviews and boorish preferences influenced who was accepted for publication; Croker of the **Quarterly** looked with scorn on women writers. Editors had their problems too; "daily devoured by the petulance of authors - the jealousies and intolerable delays of contributors...an editor might well require leisure the most uninterrupted and patience almost patriarchal, if he hoped to enjoy his life" wrote one of them.

Robert and William steered their way through this world of backbiting and rivalry with remarkable ease, and when many of their rivals disappeared, particularly at the time when newspapers were taking over their role from the 1840's, they kept up their circulation fairly consistently. The friction between them, Robert's breakdown, substantial losses when their agent went bankrupt, the need both of them felt at different times to retire, never affected sales. They had arrived at a formula familiar to a large swathe of the reading public; familiar with a sort of cosiness, a confidence of not being shocked, but also with a pleasurable assurance of being informed and educated. Not everyone joined the chorus of approval. A Glasgow journal of 1835 refers to "the peculiarly mercantile pound shilling and pence spirit of the Messrs Chambers view of things", thinking perhaps of Robert's lectures on savings. They are not too happy with the "avuncular cosiness " of his essays either.

Both Robert and William, and the editors they later employed, were scrupulous about accepting work for its value, rather than the status of the author, and for paying the same for a first article by an unknown as for the work of a mature author. Conan Doyle was one such, his career launched by **Chambers Journal** who paid him three guineas for his first offer, though this was after William's death. It is tempting to guess that the Chambers brothers were specially sensitive to the aspirations of the poor beginner.

William the survivor in the family did bequeath money to charity, but he had no immediate family. Between them the brothers left a publishing empire whose dictionaries and encyclopaedias are still

being produced. But **Vestiges** is largely forgotten, the educational material is out of date, and old copies of the **Journal** with Robert's incomparable articles are hard to locate. His books on folklore and balladry are only to be found by chance in second hand bookshops. This is the fate of many Victorians, perhaps that Law of Nature again.

Yet Robert Chambers spoke for his age in a voice that is still worth listening to. He lived at a time when his country was in the throes of painful transition, when the last great European famine was exacerbating the plight of the Highlands. He noted how, at the end of the winter Highlanders were semi-starved like hibernating animals: "when they come down to the low countries to work, famine reigns on their countenances. The quantity they eat for the first fortnight till they recover flesh is enormous. After being engaged in this remunerative labour and well fed, they acquire an appearance quite different from what they formerly were." Then back to their hills and semi starvation.

This was true of the poor generally at a time when the parish had not handed over responsibility to the state, and the destitute lived in a limbo of little charities and worthy if misdirected good works. Professor Smout described Robert's Scotland as a time of "unspeakable urban squalor, compounded of drink abuse, bad housing, low wages, long hours and sham education." The commodity on which it was building much of its prosperity was a poison; tobacco. An even more lethal poison, opium, was creating wealth for the company directors and the investors both north and south of the border. Robert in his publications reflected both the anxiety and the pride of the period.

His views on the church had to be circumspect in the **Journal** but in letters and private jottings it is clear he would have echoed Wilkie Collins' ironic advice to a worthy Calvinist, as expounded in pulpits across the land; 'Dont read story books, dont go to plays, dont dance. Finish your long days work and then intoxicate your minds with solid history, revel in the too attractive luxury of the lecture-room, sink under the soft temptation of classes for mutual instruction." Robert encouraged the instruction, but deplored the zealous refusal to allow the poor working man any cheerful relaxation on his one free day. The many hours he spent in darkened rooms in conversation with the dead could have been a welcome break from the dreary church services on offer in Scotland. His diary shows that he continued to go to such services fairly regularly; part of Sunday perhaps, a habit, a showing himself to his neighbours as an orderly and respectable citizen.

Almost his last words, as reported by his daughter Alice, were of Darwin, so perhaps of all his ventures his evolutionary thesis was in the end what pleased him most. His very last words were of being quite comfortable and happy. He died in a house half a mile from where he had written **Vestiges**. I pass it twice a week, and always with a feeling of affection and gratitude for the man whose life closed there at twenty to five on March 17th 1871. It was a life so full of interest and importance that sharing even bits of it has been enriching.

Admiration for the man cannot disguise what, in retrospect, seem to be errors of judgment. Though he didn't constantly call on the Law of Nature to justify all the manifest inequalities of the day; "to try and make men equal is to wage with the laws of Nature" Scott believed; "The Noble in the high places the ignoble in the low, the Almighty law" Carlyle declaimed; and Spencer, though declaring "Belief in a law of nature is the enemy of historical method" yet was confident that there was "a universal law of nature" that poor perish; yet he did have a mind furnished with what he considered self evident facts.

It was a fact that women's brains were inferior; he passed on this judgment to his readers, when he only had to look round his own family to disprove it; it was a fact that white races were superior; it was indisputable that overtaxing the brain with hard work could damage it and cause insanity; a royal personage, however second rate (and he was extremely critical of George IV) was a stablising factor and aristocrats too; the law produced sufficient checks against their becoming despots; division of labour was an economic necessity, and a caste structure within it, but as in his own life, there were gaps through which the clever and hardworking could escape to a higher level. The Law of Development underlying evolution could work on a personal level.

So reading him today is to be brought up with a start, sometimes at his extraordinarily modern perceptions about education, punishment, child rearing, the elderly and insane, the military; sometimes at his rather ordinary acceptance of convenient truths that others were questioning. Since he was disseminating his assumptions to thousands round the world, he and William assuming the roles of truly Universal Uncles, it now seems a pity that he did not get everything right. On balance, though the **Journal** and the **Papers**" and the **Tracts**
circulated an ideology that was thoughtful and progressive. Infinite numbers of men, and a few women, learnt from them, and with knowledge were able to escape from the poverty trap in which ignorance and illiteracy had confined them. It was a slow process and Robert seemed to expect it to be. He was no revolutionary. His aversion to corporal punishment and the life of the army and navy of brutal random floggings, perhaps set him against violent change, violence seeming to be implicit in any real social revolution.

As in life, so I think in his attitude to a biography, Robert would prefer his "bitter painful childhood" to be played down. Yet now and then something slips out to show how will and discipline sometimes fail him, and he has to maintain a constant struggle against self pity about his past. In a letter to a friend who he feels is wasting his energies and talents in work that is unrewarding he writes of a "strange mortifying pleasure in bending itself to these circumstances...I have felt this myself and scarcely yet have got over it. But it should be struggled with and I hope you will do so and be more successful in the effort than I have been." This was written in 1837, five years into the **Journal**'s success, an admission that in work of whatever kind there was "mortifying pleasure" because of the dangerous spaces that lack of it would leave.

Apart from his own problems; a need for constant occupation but at the same time resentment at the ensuing exhaustion; the articles and Reports of commissions looking into the appalling social world around him, could not but depress a sensitive man. Circulars from the Poor Law Commissioners of 1840 described weaving villages where children ran barefooted through blood and offal from slaughterhouses, and of women and children left to starve because they were refused money to join their husbands who were soldiers abroad or had been transported. Sometimes pamphlets remained in Robert's private papers. **Journal** readers would squirm at the description of many graveyards, where coffins were burnt and bones collected for distribution, not to mention hair, teeth and clothes. Mothers with dead infants were asked "Did it breathe?" of still borns, and it did charged extra. Often they could only pay with a shawl or blanket.
Tiny deal coffins were useful to light fires under the bigger oak ones. Since nothing useful could be garnered from such small bodies grave diggers did not bother with them, but at least they were easy to

cover. Their small ghosts appear in many folk tales.

In his papers Robert also kept a pamphlet written by a clergyman from Bath which most eloquently showed where the money was going that should have been helping the poor; "a hundred million on barbarous and unjust war - costly palaces have been built, princely incomes have been granted...enormous sums have been divided amongst the families of the great in pensions, sinecures and half pay." But this same state "permits the child of misfortune to be dragged from his bed at daylight in the cold mornings of winter" to climb chimneys and "it withholds corn from 26 millions of people for the real or supposed benefit of 3o,000 landowners."

Did Robert have a twinge of conscience about the £1000 dowries he gave to his daughters? Did his "going some way" or "stop at a certain point" ever strike him as inadequate? Sadly it seems not from the evidence as it is. One would wish perfection for him. He was kind and thoughtful on a personal level, a much valued friend, a good husband and father. He could support Darwin and Huxley in spite of their signal failure to do the same for him. Darwin wrote to his daughter Alice on his death; "few things have struck me with more admiration than the perfect temper and liberality with which he treated my conduct." Genial, generous, a Well Wisher were words often used to describe this man who bore only one grudge in his life, and that against the one he also worked with harmoniously for nearly forty years, his brother William.

He would most have liked to be remembered as a geologist, and especially for his work on glaciers and sea margins, but though he was right about one and wrong about the other, his general contributions were less than those of the really great men of the time, his friend Lyell for instance, or Hugh Miller whom he had helped to get started. They all enjoyed his company; his friends included Lyell, Spencer, Buckland, Forbes; he read papers for prestigious societies and never missed a British Association meeting; but there was his large family, and there were the publishing ventures, and the biographies and the folklore collections.

Since he spoke on his deathbed of **Vestiges** it could be that he felt this to be his most enduring interest, and greatest contribution to knowledge. It could be that he was right. For fifteen years before **Origins** it stirred, worried, excited, infuriated people across the country, and in Europe and in the States. Its impact and importance have been greatly underestimated, as have Robert's courage in writing it, and rewriting it, and republishing it in the face of almost total lack of support from anyone who mattered.

He retreated into a spirit world in the end, he and Wallace both, men who had contributed so much to the century's most exciting discovery but with little thanks or acknowledgement from that century or this. Wallace, with a nature almost irritatingly self-effacing, is now partly restored to his rightful place in the story of evolution. Robert Chambers should be. His self imposed anonymity is one of the reasons he has been forgotten, plus too close proximity to the book that repeated him, but without the doubtful references, and with a wealth of extra detail.

The scientist's hat was the one Robert would most like to have worn permanently, and yet he was comfortable in the others, and it is possible that his most enduring contribution was in the field of education; not only school books but in the hammering away in the **Journal** about teacher's pay and the dispiritingly bad results of this in the classroom. Behind the whole depressing picture there was the

laird with his patronage, creating a wall round the parish school that was hard to break down. William contributed as much as Robert to the barrage of articles exposing the system, comparing it with others as in the States and Germany, insisting that it could and must be changed.

Looking back on Robert's lifespan from 1802 to 1871 distance lends to the century a sense of dizzying change. How amazed he himself must have been with the industrial revolution, the railways racing about the country, the steamships plying back and forth from the expanding Empire. And on top of all this, the geologist's hammers, the doctor's discoveries, the electrifying news that he and Darwin had brought. Yet it is our birds eye view that gives the scene its wild exhilaration. Living through it from day to day, year to year, Robert and his contemporaries would see it in stages, in glimpses, like a picture painted slowly so that the colours could be absorbed gradually, and the whole not dazzled.

Every lifetime accepts change, being part of it, but few of us take an active part in bringing it about. Robert Chambers was a major figure on the stage of Victorian Scotland and his part in changing the way the drama was played out is incalculable. Even if it can never be properly assessed, it should still be recognised. He scoffed at statues and medals. Perhaps he would have been amused to have a website. He would certainly appreciate his name being mentioned, if not with the reverence accorded Darwin, with honour and dignity for being the first to break the scientific news that changed the world for ever.

With all those hats removed he lies beneath a simple inscription in St Rules tower in the grounds of the ruined abbey at St Andrews. The house in which he wrote **vestiges** is part of a girls school, whose pupils are unlikely to have come across his name in their history books. How strange. He is a man to celebrate, mostly for his work but also for being kind, unassuming. helpful to the unknowns who really needed a lift, loving to his family, welcoming and constant to his friends. One would hope that he and Wallace might be together somewhere in their spirit world, talking as they never had the chance to do in life, a little smug perhaps that for all they had been over-looked at the time, everything they said had turned out to be true.