

Preface

It is strange to have to justify a biography of Robert Chambers, but the fact is that a man of great gifts, and enormous influence, who touched history at so many points is little known today; "something to do with dictionaries" is the nearest most people get to remembering him.

The reasons for this neglect are several; the book that would have made him a household name, then and now, had to be written anonymously because of family pressures. By the time he was acknowledged to be the author of the first work in English on evolution, he had been overtaken by Darwin and was long buried. His output of essays, which are the best source for the social life of Victorian Scotland anywhere available, were printed cheaply so as to be accessible to all, and their small print and rather dim illustrations do not recommend them to the modern reader. The vast amount of educational material he and his brother William produced; according to Andrew Carnegie "The contributions of the firm constitute a mine of wealth such as has never been bestowed by one family upon any nation"; was eventually superseded when acts of Parliament took over the subject and removed it from the private sector. His books on folklore and social history, and his last wonderful two volume "Book of Days" which combines both, were trail blazers, setting others off most profitably along roads that he clearly marked out but never quite had the time to follow.

He was a Victorian polymath, thinking no subject too complex to investigate, working impossible hours, and helped by a photographic memory. He was also driven, as the son of an improvident father and a much loved put-upon mother, to become a workaholic. As the book will show, he recognised the dangers of his multi-talented progress, and wanted to settle down with the subject that he came to recognise as most important to him. But life continued to drag him in different directions, to our enrichment in some ways. The essays he would have given up writing are, in my opinion, his most valuable contribution.

To write about a man like Robert Chambers is to write about fathers and sons, husbands and wives, servants and masters, schoolmasters and pupils, employers and employed, lairds and lawyers and vagrants and the endless Victims of Victorian society, because all these people and their relationships moved with him through the nineteenth century; he was swimming in the same sea, and yet often his head was way above the water, observing, changing his own direction and theirs. It was a period of change, indeed of revolution, and as the man who introduced one of the most fundamental paradigmatic changes in history, he was himself a revolutionary.

Yet in many ways he was a traditionalist, wary of going too far, terrified of seeing his well known world collapse about him, as it had once so disastrously done. He hated the stranglehold of the church and heritor, the acceptance of a social structure enjoined by them as a duty; but dreaded strikes, and was wary of too much widening of the franchise, and though he talked of women's rights he married off his daughters in the most conventional way after giving them the most basic of educations. In these conflicting patterns he was a normal man; but because in so many ways he was exceptional, and so far ahead of his time, it is something of a disappointment when he is found conforming. The strains of reconciling the opposites in his nature led to breakdown, as well as making of him a man careful to tread an even course, to be nice to everyone, to keep the grudges he bore well hidden, only allowed an

occasional airing in a private letter or in a diary. Insomnia and bouts of depression show it was not easy.

Wearing his many hats, Robert Chambers is quite an exhausting figure to follow, but the pursuit is always worthwhile. On the way we meet many of the great figures of the day; Charles Dickens, Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley and Richard Owen, William Emerson and Thomas Carlyle, these and many others were friends or acquaintances. Railways were being built, the Highlands were being cleared, slavery was being abolished, reforms in voting patterns and sanitation and education were afoot; and in all these areas Chambers was both a participator and an innovator. Alas, he was not a great letter writer, and it is in his published works that his character is most fully revealed, in all its aspects, not least as husband and father, roles he filled with exceptional grace. His daughter Nina, on the other hand, wrote remarkable letters, which deserve a book to themselves.

Reinstating Robert Chambers is therefore a great pleasure. He made it a duty to be courteous and helpful to everyone, and the duty became a habit. He was bitterly disappointed that the scientific establishment rejected his extraordinary "Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation", but when it came to helping Darwin to dismiss the same sort of criticisms, he did not hesitate. The spiteful self-regarding world of the university men who knew they were right, and would brook no new ideas from unknown amateurs, was one he was as well to avoid. Yet he craved their company and approbation, though he was aware of their shortcomings. He was always the boy circling on the fringes of success, but lacking the necessary credentials; degrees, the kind of patronage and background that allowed Darwin space to work out details.

He was, in so many fields, an inspired guesser, and his guesses were afterwards proved to be right, but too late for him to take the credit. Now it is time to give him the credit he deserves, to show him as a great essayist, a great educator, a great folklorist, a great publisher, and the author of the book presenting the most revolutionary theory of the century. The dictionaries and encyclopaedias were only a fractional part of his work; it is time that the true stature of Robert Chambers should be acknowledged, that he should emerge from under all those hats as one of the major figures of Victorian times; that, as he himself stylishly put it, we should raise to him statues in the heart.