

EDMUND BISHOP

BY DOM HUGH CONNOLLY.

CATHOLIC scholarship, or more truly learning in the widest sense, has sustained a heavy loss by the death of Mr. Edmund Bishop, which took place at Barnstaple on Monday morning, February 19, after an illness of several weeks. The loss will be felt far beyond the pale of the Catholic Church in this country; and in the domain of historical research it will perhaps be realized even more keenly on the Continent than in England. Indeed, his own countrymen have been on the whole first somewhat tardy, and then somewhat sparing, in their appreciation of one whose signal services to the *Monumenta Germaniae* had already before 1879 won the personal recognition of Mommsen, Waitz, Wattenbach and the whole group of distinguished men then associated in the production of that great work. The explanation of the phenomenon that he hardly received in England quite that full and generous recognition which was certainly his due, is to be sought in causes which cannot be analysed here. That the recognition he received was slow in coming, is in part explained by the fact that he was already in middle life before he published anything likely to arrest the attention of the public in these islands, Catholic or non-Catholic, and that he was well past that period when his most important work was done. But another cause was the self-effacement with which he placed his time and his strength (never great) at the disposal of others, when he might legitimately have been engaged on work of his own, which must soon have gained for

him a foremost place among the learned. During the best years of his life no applicant, however humble, who sought his counsel was denied; and when he undertook to help he spared no pains, but threw himself into the task with as great enthusiasm as if the work had been his own. How many who have eventually made a respectable show of scholarship have owed their success in large measure to his initiation and subsequent guidance, and how much of his work lies hidden in the books of others, will perhaps never be fully known. There was probably no man of the last century who, for similar reasons and in the same proportion to his knowledge, produced less under his own name than Edmund Bishop. The one other name that suggests itself is that of the great Cambridge scholar, Dr. Hort. And it was perhaps this parallel between the cases of the two men that caused a disciple of Hort, himself a scholar of the first rank, to exclaim on hearing of Edmund Bishop's death:—"Nothing like this has happened since the death of Hort. The one judgment to which each new scrap of work hastened to submit itself is no longer to be had."

Edmund Bishop was born at Totnes on May 17, 1846. His early schooling was received at Ashburton and Exeter. Afterwards he was sent to a Catholic school in Belgium. On his return, still but a boy, he began life as a kind of literary secretary to Thomas Carlyle. The one compositor who could read Carlyle's manuscript had died, and it became necessary for him to have someone who would make fair copies of his writings for the press. This in itself called for some preliminary apprenticeship, and must have been a severe test of the intelligence of a lad fresh from school. Carlyle wrote on any odd slip that came to his hand, scribbled, scrawled, and added or corrected in every margin and corner of the paper, hooking together the scattered sentences with rapid slashes of the pen. The art of deciphering these neographical puzzles was acquired, and the young scribe appeared to present his first attempt. The sage cast an eye over copy and copyist, and then let fall the observation that the handwriting was out of the ordinary, and so, he was inclined to think, was the writer. Edmund Bishop's relations with

Carlyle continued to be easy and pleasant, and always afterwards he cherished a most kindly recollection of "the old Curmudgeon."

In 1864 Edmund Bishop entered the Education Department of the Privy Council Office, where he was employed for the next twenty years. In 1867 he was received into the Catholic Church. During his time in the Education Office he laid the foundations of his wide and varied learning. The easy office hours, after he had risen rapidly to a high place in his department, together with the vacations, left sufficient leisure for study, and this was turned to the fullest account. He bought books, copied documents at the British Museum and Record Office, read assiduously and with amazing rapidity, and, gifted with a phenomenal memory, never forgot what he read. It was during this period that he transcribed, analyzed, and annotated the great "Collectio Britannica," with copies of 300 papal letters dating from the fifth to the eleventh century. Failing the means of publishing the collection in England, he handed over the whole to the *Monumenta Germaniae*.

In 1885 he retired from the Education Office, having resolved to make trial of a vocation which he felt to be the monastic life. Shortly afterwards (in April, 1886), he went to Downside. There he remained as a postulant till 1889. His fragile physique prevented him from taking the monastic habit; but during his stay at Downside he formed friendships with members of the community, and an attachment to that house which were to last till his death. His later visits there, which were frequent and prolonged, added to the number of his older friends others from the younger generations. In 1893 he joined Dom (now Cardinal) Gasquet at Great Ormond Street, close by the British Museum, and the two friends worked together there till 1901. In 1902 he retired to Barnstaple, where he lived till his death with his sister and niece, Mrs. and Miss Crosskey; but for the last ten years or so he was accustomed to spend two or three of the summer months at Downside.

Only those who have known Edmund Bishop personally, and have enjoyed the privilege of working with him, can fully realize his loss. His personality was no less remarkable than were his rare gifts of mind—the

strikingly handsome face, the penetrating eyes, which kept their keen sight to the last, the lively talk and animated gesture, the enthusiastic interest in the undertakings of others and in the world at large, and the deep and unaffected piety: these will never be forgotten by those who have lived with him and loved him. But of all outside the circle of his own family, his loss will fall on none more heavily than on Cardinal Gasquet, with whom he was so long and intimately associated in a labour which has brought forth abundant fruit, and who dedicated his *Henry III and the Church* to "My old and tried friend Edmund Bishop, to whom I owe more than words can express." Those words he treasured to the end; and the elevation of Dom Gasquet to the Cardinalate was to Mr. Bishop a source of deep and abiding satisfaction. It was a great joy to him to have been able to take part in the Cardinal's jubilee celebration at Downside last September.

Of Mr. Bishop's work, the present is not the occasion on which to speak in detail. But it may be mentioned that the Clarendon Press has in preparation a volume of his collected essays on Western liturgical and historical subjects (to be entitled *Liturgica Historica*), which will help to do justice to his memory as a great Catholic scholar. At the time of his death the printing had already reached an advanced stage, and so it may be hoped the volume will not fall far short of what he would have wished.

By his own wish he was buried at Downside in the Monks' Cemetery, the Abbot singing the Requiem Mass.—*R.I.P.*

