

(Reprinted from the *Cambridge Review*)

### **A Great Headmaster**

Dr. Abbott (1838–1926)

SENIOR CLASSIC AND CHANCELLOR'S MEDALLIST, 1861

*“O mihi qui nunquam nomen non dulce fuisti,  
tunc quoque cum domini fronte timendus eras.”*

I have always wondered whether other countries than our own breed schoolmasters who impress their personalities upon their pupils so deeply as have English headmasters. I hope it is so in other lands too; but it is certain that England, and the English character, owe a vast - and growing - debt to the memorable succession of great men who, disregarding for themselves ‘the dazzling prizes of life,’ have been content to be spent in shaping the minds and in moulding the characters of the men of to-morrow. Necessarily, a boarding-school — with its continuous intimacies of corporate life — gives a headmaster the fullest scope for the pursuit of his ideals; and naturally, therefore, the vast preponderance of names on the golden roll of England’s great headmasters has been contributed by those ancient ‘public schools’ which are not day schools; but on that roll is inscribed the name of Edwin Abbott, headmaster of the City of London School from 1865 to 1889. And this is not his sole (or chief) title to commemoration by his University.

Himself a pattern of the old Cambridge Classics who knew exactly what they purported to know, and who looked less to how much a man knew than to how he knew it, Dr. Abbott had, and knew that he had, the born teacher’s gift of never imparting information until, first of all, his questions had educed — from the class as a whole, and not merely from the top boys — all that, collectively, they either knew already or ought to be able to build up inductively from the facts before them. This was a bracing (and lasting) experience for his pupils; on whom further, in dealing with ‘unseens,’ he conferred the privilege of letting them see, when they (and he) had jointly reached the limits of their knowledge, how his trained mind would cast about for a ‘provisional hypothesis,’ and finally embark (in the very last resort, when ‘all waters had been tried’) on a guess, honestly, and deliberately recognized as such. Nothing shocked him so much, intellectually, as the dishonest use of ‘I thought’ to designate mere guess-work; and though he was no master of sarcasm, it was a painful, if salutary, experience for any boy in his Sixth to be exposed by the Socratic method in an attempt to palm off a guess as an honest thought. As a school-master Dr. Abbott was at his best in dealing with a class as a whole, when his mind and the minds of all his pupils could work consciously together to arrive at precise truth. Like Dr. Arnold of Rugby, Dr. Abbott rarely, and almost incidentally imparted information, and then only (as it were) by

way of reward and as an incentive to individual research thereafter. Averse from ‘cram’ in any shape, and trusting to method and hard work for his pupils, he rarely failed to secure for them open scholarships at the Universities.

To pass from his oral method (as recalled to mind after half a century’s interval), special stress should be laid on his pioneer work in introducing into the school curriculum — from the lowest to the highest form — the serious study of English literature, and particularly of Shakespeare. As there were no suitable text-books then in existence, Dr. Abbott set himself the task of providing them, beginning in 1870 with a *Shakespearian Grammar* conceived on large lines of classical scholarship. This he followed up, in collaboration with his old school-fellow Prof. Seeley, with *English Lessons for English People* (1871) a book which for many years (like his *How to Write Clearly*) had a large vogue among others than schoolboys. In these, as in his numerous smaller Latin school-books, Dr. Abbott worked on practical lines. He never wrote a book unless, by experience, he thought a book was needed; and he tested his teaching rigorously before — not without missionary intention — he formulated it in book form. He was never a retailer of other men’s wares; there is the stamp of his own vigorous and independent personality on every page he wrote.

Having earned retirement by a quarter of a century’s strenuous work as a schoolmaster, Dr. Abbott now joyfully seized the long-coveted opportunity to devote his undiminished energies to the theological studies always dearest to his heart. His first book (1872) had been *Bible Lessons* for schools; and, a little later, perhaps the most significant indications of his outlook were *Through Nature to Christ* (1877) and *Philochristus* (1878). Accepting whole-heartedly the (then new) revelations of physical science (in common with all other certain truth), Dr. Abbott set himself the task of re-stating the Christian position in the light of those now familiar revelations, so as to bring out and to emphasize by scholarship and research the one thing which seemed to him to matter, namely the Personality of Jesus. Neither Anglican, nor evangelical, nor modernist, Dr. Abbott was essentially a devout Christian, inspired by an inward passion to realize in himself, and by his untiring labours as ‘student and author’ to lead others to share, the love and the worship of his Master. Not all will agree with the theological views of *Diatessarica* and the ‘New Kingdom’ volumes, in their entirety, but all will unite in recognizing in Edwin Abbott a great schoolmaster, a single-hearted seeker after truth in all fields of thought, and a beacon light to scholars in his unsurpassed devotion to a vast task, self-imposed and all-absorbing.

A favourite motto of his was: *Senescas addiscens*.

C.