

THE BICENTENARY OF WILLIAM ROSCOE

BECAUSE it was founded in Liverpool, because for most of its life it has been housed in the Royal Institution, and because it exists to promote the study of local history, our Society had at least three sound reasons for asking its honorary secretary, Dr. George Chandler, to mark the bi-centenary of the birth of William Roscoe by delivering a public lecture on Roscoe's life and works. Dr. Chandler fulfilled the engagement with distinction: a representative body of members and friends heard him speak with deep knowledge and understanding of one of Liverpool's most renowned and well-remembered citizens. Undoubtedly the Council would have printed the lecture in this present volume of the *TRANSACTIONS* had not the Liverpool City Council already invited Dr. Chandler to write a biography of Roscoe, and to edit a commemorative volume, which for the first time would bring together all Roscoe's poems and photographs of many of his book-plates and pictures. Published by Batsford and graced by a scholarly introduction by Sir Alfred Shennan, this book *William Roscoe of Liverpool, 1753-1831*, reached the book-stalls towards the end of the bicentenary year. It is a book worthy of the occasion.

Roscoe did not achieve contemporary distinction and long remembrance because he was supreme in any one human activity. In the England of his day there were abler poets, better historians, more distinguished patrons of the arts, more successful business men and bankers, more influential religious reformers, more learned botanists and agriculturalists, and even more outspoken radical politicians and reformers. But no one else possessed the enthusiasm and ability with which Roscoe combined these many and varied interests and activities. Among the most renowned Englishmen of George III's reign Roscoe claims his place as the great all-rounder. In his lifetime almost all aspects of Liverpool life felt his influence, for though his reputation crossed the Channel and even the Atlantic, he himself rarely moved outside the confines of his native borough. Present-day Liverpool still holds much to remind its citizens of Roscoe. His collection of early Italian and Flemish pictures are on view in the Walker Art Gallery; his many papers and his correspondence can be consulted in the Picton Reference Library. Mount Pleasant, his birthplace and burial-place; Islington and Allerton, both sometime residences; the Town Hall and the neighbourhood of the older docks; all can recall Roscoe memories.

Though every age has its special attractiveness, Roscoe could not have chosen eighty more fascinating years through which to live in Liverpool than those that were granted to him. In 1753 Liverpool was entering upon its first half-century of commercial

eminence. Its population was about to increase astonishingly, and its growing wealth was soon to make itself apparent not only in new docks and a more imposing water-front, but also in the evolution of an artistic and philosophical coterie, which steadily acquired a national reputation. Roscoe helped to shape and educate Liverpool society during these formative years. He knew old Liverpool, and he saw ahead the shape and character of the present city. He lived in Islington when it was a suburban lane, and in Mount Pleasant on a "sober evening wet with pearly dew" he heard "the red-breast's throat pour the clear warbling of his closing note"; yet he helped to found the Athenaeum Club and the Botanic Garden, he opened the Royal Institution as a centre for adult education, and with understanding of their significance he wrote of "the crowded navies" riding in the harbour, and of the merchants who "with ceaseless toil add gold to gold and swell the shining pile".

To Roscoe the end of all learning was virtuous action, and in his lifetime he strove to bring about what he knew to be right. He was often at variance with most of his fellow townsmen: for the sake of moral right he sacrificed an easy popularity and resounding social success. In a port which drew large profits from the trade he vehemently denounced traffic in slaves, and during the popular Napoleonic Wars he steadily advocated peace. Years before they became respectable causes, he spoke and wrote in favour of the extension of the franchise, educational and prison reform, and equality and political freedom for Roman Catholics and Protestant Dissenters. But he was no dreamy idealist, no despairer of mankind. Despite his political foresight he was of the age in which he lived.

Few men have enjoyed so full or so satisfying a life as William Roscoe, and few have been such an inspiration and example to their contemporaries and to the generations which have followed. Liverpool has never forgotten Roscoe, but Dr. Chandler's book has caused the flame of his memory to burn all the brighter for the Liverpolitans of today, and has provided for those who come later an attractive and convenient store of Roscoeana.

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