

Léopold Delisle

SORROW for the death of Léopold Delisle is not confined to his native France. His loss will be felt through all Europe ; but nowhere can there be more genuine feelings of regret than in this country. Students of the history, the palaeography, the diplomatic, and the miniaturist's art of the middle ages will no longer benefit by the continuance of the astonishing succession of monographs that flowed from his pen, traversing the wide field of medieval research, yet, with that common sense that distinguished all that Delisle wrote, always kept within legitimate bounds. A friendship of nearly forty years which has subsisted between Delisle and the writer of this memoir is now brought to a close : it is a melancholy gratification to be able, at the invitation of the Editor of the *English Historical Review*, to record in its pages an appreciation of the personal qualities of the departed friend and the scholar's life-long services to letters.

Those who have known Delisle in person will recall the short, sturdy figure, the studious stoop of the shoulders, the bent head, and above all the clear intelligent eyes that looked out from the broad face with the expression of frank honesty which at once inspired confidence. A man on first acquaintance of a somewhat shy manner, and brief of speech, modest in the extreme, helpful to all who consulted him, bountiful of his stores of knowledge, and loyal and true in friendship. What wonder then that others were attracted to such a nature, and that, when he addressed his fellow-librarians in other lands as 'colleagues,' the expression was gladly accepted as meaning something more than a conventional form of compliment.

These personal qualities were reflected in what he wrote. The impression conveyed by the perusal of any one of his numerous literary contributions, however brief or however extended, was one of perfect lucidity, of skilfully and logically marshalled facts, of extreme modesty of assertion, and of conspicuous fairness and courtesy in argument. Perhaps it is not quite possible, in portraying character, to do full justice to one of another race and country.

It may therefore be permitted to quote the estimate of Delisle's personal and intellectual qualities by one of his compatriots. In his memoir on Delisle which recently appeared in the *Revue Historique*¹ M. Charles Bémont writes these words :—

De souche vigoureuse et saine, solidement charpenté, avec un tempérament sanguin et les plus heureuses facultés ; il avait le don et le goût d'observation précise, un jugement sûr, clair et pénétrant, peu d'imagination, mais une rare aptitude à recueillir les faits, à les cataloguer, à les classer dans l'ordre le plus logique, une mémoire rapide, étendue et ténace, une puissance de travail que l'âge devait à peine amortir ; d'autre part beaucoup de sens pratique, un esprit prudent, avisé dans les affaires ; il était bienveillant avec les personnes, d'une bienveillance qui n'allait pas sans quelque réserve ni détour, mais qui savait encourager et guider les travailleurs. Ces dons s'unissaient d'ailleurs dans un si bel équilibre qu'ils donnaient l'impression d'une nature d'élite, capable d'aborder les plus grands sujets ou les questions les plus délicates et d'y réussir sans qu'on sentit l'effort.

This estimate will be generally admitted to be just and true ; but the closing sentence rather challenges the question whether Delisle was not capable of higher historical efforts than those of his long and laborious life. His early works, M. Bémont observes in another passage, had raised some expectations that in the young Delisle there might be dormant a great historian, but that he distrusted his own powers and hesitated to launch into the domain of the *grandes idées*. We venture to think that he did not mistake his rôle, and that he did more for history by the course he adopted than he would have done by a more ambitious flight. We would not assert that he was incapable of the higher flight : that could only be proved by the event ; but under the conditions of the career marked out for him, he was wise in not making the attempt. It was his lot to be a librarian and, we speak with the knowledge of experience, the proper discharge of the duties of such a post, exacting as they are in these latter days and distracting in the extreme, is incompatible with the concentration and absorption needed for the highest order of original work. If he had succeeded as an original writer, it would probably have been at the expense of his reputation as a librarian.

Léopold Victor Delisle was a Norman, born at Valognes (Manche) on 24 October 1826. Prefixed to his works, *Recherches sur la librairie de Charles V* (1907), are some 'Souvenirs de jeunesse' in which he furnishes interesting details of his early days. Educated at the École des Frères de la Doctrine Chrétienne and at what he describes as the '*très modeste collège de ma ville natale*' he attracted the notice of Charles Duhérisier de Gerville, an old *émigré* who

¹ cv. 84-91.

had passed his years of exile in England, where he had acquired a taste for research in science and history, and who on his return to France had devoted his knowledge to the benefit of his native province, becoming one of the founders of the Société des Antiquaires de Normandie and doing good service for the preservation of its ancient buildings and monuments. De Gerville detected in the young Delisle the mind and taste for antiquarian research, and appears to have found pleasure in guiding the lad's inclinations in the path of his own favourite studies. Delisle tells us that his first lesson in palaeography (the branch of medieval research which proved the most attractive to him through life) was derived from a manuscript chartulary of St. Sauveur-le-Vicomte which had fallen into the hands of de Gerville, and the first entry in which was a charter of Henry II of England. By one of those curious accidents of life, the last work on which Delisle was engaged and concerning which were almost the last words that he uttered, was the edition of the Norman charters of that king.

In the course of the year 1845 the removal of his parents to Paris took Delisle away from his native town and afforded him the opportunity of entering the École des Chartes, where he followed the three years' course from 1846 to 1848, not however under the most auspicious conditions. Whatever advantages he derived from the first year's course under Benjamin Guérard, in his second year the school was in the throes of reorganisation, and owing to the political events of 1848 it was closed for most of that year. But if Delisle was thus deprived of a part of the training of that excellent institution, his own innate eagerness for work made up for the loss. The subject chosen for his thesis at the close of his career at the École, an *Essai sur les revenus publics en Normandie au xii^e siècle*, indicates the direction in which his studies tended; and his spare time when at the École and the three years that followed were devoted to researches in the national archives in Paris and in the provincial archives of his native Normandy. Thus, as he tells us, before 1852 he had made transcripts of most of the Norman charters previous to the conquest of Philip Augustus.

His ambition, in which he was guided and supported by his old friend de Gerville, was, at this time, to secure the post of archivist in one of the departments of Normandy, and the offer of a vacancy which occurred in 1851 in that of the Seine Inférieure would perhaps have sufficed to divert his career into a channel which would have proved too narrow for his abilities. But Guérard, his old master of the École des Chartes, intervened, and, to repeat Delisle's own phrase, 'forbade' him to leave Paris, where a larger field lay open to him. He had not to wait long for a career. In 1852 Guérard was appointed to the keepership of the department of manuscripts in the Bibliothèque Nationale; and in November of that year

Delisle became an 'employé' under him. From that time for upwards of half a century Delisle was identified with the great library in the Rue Richelieu, rising through the different grades and becoming the keeper of his department in 1871, and in 1874 Administrateur Général of the establishment.

He has told us in his 'Souvenirs' of the sorry state of things in the department of manuscripts when Guérard took up the reins, and how his chief worked to reduce chaos into order during his brief tenure of office. This was Delisle's opportunity. The confusion and arrears of arrangement called for industry and energy and method; and it was in the course of his work on the *indigesta moles* before him, and following the advice and instructions of Guérard, that he gathered the intimate knowledge of the history of the collections which he afterwards embodied in the *Cabinet des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Impériale (Nationale)*, first published in 1868. Guérard died in 1854; but his successor was as good a friend to Delisle. In Natalis de Wailly the young employé found 'the same qualities, the same knowledge, the same wisdom, and the same affection,' as in Guérard. Nay more, it was to de Wailly among others that Delisle owed his introduction into the family of Eugène Burnouf, the distinguished orientalist, where he found the domestic happiness of his life, marrying on 10 June 1857 Laura, the eldest daughter of the house. This gifted lady became not only the companion of his hearth but also the companion of his studies, working with him and assisting him, as he himself has described it, with modest self-effacement and finding her happiness in her husband's career and in the successes and honours that came to him.

Six months after his marriage, on 11 December, Delisle was elected a member of the Institut de France, in the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres: a great distinction for a young man of only one-and-thirty, and a proof of the esteem in which he was held and of the position he had already attained as a student of history. Although he had been attached to the Bibliothèque Nationale but five years and still ranked as an 'employé,' he had made a name by several valuable publications. Even before he had passed out of the École des Chartes he had printed the monograph *Des monuments paléographiques concernant l'usage de prier pour les morts* (1847) which gained for the author the commendation of the Académie des Inscriptions. In after-years he followed up this essay with other works on the same subject. In 1866 appeared his *Rouleaux des morts du ix^e au xv^e siècle*, published under the auspices of the Société de l'histoire de France, gathering together and analysing upwards of fourscore original documents; and it was only in the year before his death that he rounded off his researches and delighted his fellow-palaeographers with his handsome

facsimile edition of the *Rouleau mortuaire du B. Vital, abbé de Savigni*, 1122–1123.

To continue his early productions. Besides minor papers on different subjects of medieval interest, a large and laborious work, *Études sur la condition de la classe agricole et l'état de l'agriculture en Normandie au moyen âge*, appeared in 1851, bringing to its author for two years the first prix Gobert of the Institut. This was followed by the *Cartulaire Normande de Philippe Auguste, Louis VIII, Saint-Louis et Philippe le Hardy*, in 1852, and in 1855 by his *Notice sur Orderic Vital* which appeared in the fifth volume of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Ordericus, in the editing of the last two volumes of which Delisle had been associated with Auguste Le Prévost. The *Catalogue des actes de Philippe Auguste*, a large work accompanied by a most valuable introduction, was issued early in 1856; and in the next year Delisle's *Mémoire sur les actes d'Innocent III*. Those who may have had occasion to attempt to unravel the intricacies of the diplomatic of the papal chancery will have appreciated to the full the masterly treatment of the subject of this last-named monograph.

From the year 1858, then, to the end of his life Delisle's interests may be said to have been divided in particular between the Bibliothèque Nationale, the Académie des Inscriptions, the École des Chartes, and, we may add, his native province of Normandy. The Bibliography of Delisle's works which was compiled in 1902 by M. Paul Lacombe gives the amazing total of nearly nineteen hundred items. Of course, this covers not only important works such as those which we have already noticed and those which remain to be noticed, but also such smaller things as reports, reviews, brief memoirs, and short essays. But even then the number is astonishing, and is a proof of what the *labor improbus* of a long and self-denying life is capable of accomplishing. It has been remarked elsewhere that we may rank Delisle among the illustrious savants of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; and indeed he resembled them, not only in the enormous output of his work, but also in the methods which he followed in its production. It may be said that, in spite of the distractions of modern life, his whole time was devoted to work, and that the idle moment found no place in his daily toil.

It is not easy to apportion to the head of a department or of a great library the actual share which is his in the several publications officially issued under his name. They need not necessarily be, nor are they generally to be accounted, the work of his own hand. They may be chiefly compiled by the staff working under him; but he is responsible for their trustworthiness and accuracy, and in any shortcoming the blame must rest with him. Delisle was not one to allow imperfect work to pass out under his name, and we believe

that we are correct in stating that the catalogues of the Latin and French manuscripts of the Bibliothèque Nationale issued in his time were altogether of his compilation. The *Inventaire des Manuscrits latins*, nos. 8823–18613, was published in the pages of the *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes* between 1863 and 1871, and took up the work from the point where the old catalogues had left the collections. The *Inventaire des Manuscrits français* appeared in two volumes in 1876–1878; and the *Inventaire alphabétique des Manuscrits latins et français* issued in 1891 covered the acquisitions between 1875 and that year. But the book of special attraction, which was the outcome of his early connexion with the department of manuscripts, was the *Cabinet des MSS. de la Bibliothèque Impériale* [*Nationale*], to which reference has already been made, being the early history of the collection of that department, issued in 1868–1881. The sub-title gives the key to the interest of the work which is described, deservedly, as ‘Étude sur la formation de ce dépôt, comprenant les éléments d’une histoire de la calligraphie, de la miniature, de la reliure, et du commerce des livres à Paris avant l’invention de l’imprimerie.’ Indeed, of all Delisle’s many publications, this one has been very generally regarded as the most remarkable. Towards the end of his life, in 1907, he issued an elaborated development of one section of the *Cabinet* in his *Recherches sur la librairie de Charles V*, which he dedicated to the Académie des Inscriptions on the jubilee of his membership, prefacing it with the interesting *Souvenirs de jeunesse* to which we have had occasion to refer.

As Administrateur Général his field of operations was extended, and he at once turned his energies to the reorganisation of the much neglected library of printed books. A methodical system of cataloguing under alphabetical arrangement was instituted, arrears were gradually absorbed, and at length, after some twenty years’ preparation, the first volume of the *Catalogue général des livres imprimés de la Bibliothèque Nationale* appeared in print in 1897.¹

¹ The catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale is drawn up on different lines from those of the general catalogue of the British Museum. The latter is a general catalogue in one full series, arranged alphabetically under authors’ names, including also anonymous publications, and incorporating large class-headings, such as ‘Academies,’ ‘Periodical Publications,’ ‘England,’ ‘France,’ ‘Rome,’ etc., and being furnished with a very elaborate system of cross-references. The French catalogue is to be composed of three series: (i.) a catalogue, arranged alphabetically, of all works in the Library, the authorship of which is stated or is known from other sources; (ii.) a catalogue of anonymous works and works published by learned societies and other bodies; (iii.) a catalogue containing special headings for certain classes of publications which it is considered advantageous to group together. The series which is now in course of publication is the first, viz. the catalogue under names of authors, the first volume of which, as stated above, appeared in 1897. Progress since that date has been slow, the last published volume, issued in September 1909, bringing the work only down to the middle of letter D.

Meanwhile, amidst all his official duties, Delisle did not neglect service to the publications of the Institut. To volumes xxii and xxiii of the *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*, issued respectively in 1865 and 1876, he contributed; but volume xxiv is entirely his work. In a regular supply of essays and papers to the *Mémoires de l'Institut*, to the *Notices et extraits des Manuscrits*, and to the *Histoire littéraire de la France*, he never failed. The École des Chartes, to which he was attached by a feeling of almost filial piety, had the benefit of his constant attention. He became a member of its Conseil de perfectionnement in 1858, and its President in 1878. One has only to turn over the leaves of the volumes of that most capable and valuable publication the *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes* to appreciate how constant was Delisle in his contribution of memoirs, notices, reviews, and matters of palaeographical and cognate interest. One specially important work which we owe to him and other members of the École is the *Album paléographique* of heliogravures of selected manuscripts of the libraries of France published in 1887. In loyalty to his native Normandy, as well as from choice and predilection, a large portion of Delisle's studies, as may have been observed, was devoted to its records and antiquities. For the Société de l'Histoire de Normandie he edited the *Actes Normands de la chambre des comptes sous Philippe de Valois* (1328-1350) in 1871; and in the following years the important chronicle of Robert of Torigni. Nor should we omit to record a considerable work which he had previously edited in 1864: the *Recueil de jugements de l'Échiquier de Normandie au xiii^e siècle* (1207-1270).

But a further recapitulation of the results of Delisle's untiring literary activity in so many directions might prove wearisome. The writer of this article would, however, desire to place on record the debt of gratitude which, together with other palaeographers, he owes to Delisle for the numberless monographs on Latin and French palaeography and the lore of the manuscripts of the middle ages which flowed from his pen, models of lucid description and modest exposition. Probably in his own estimation the greatest triumph in Delisle's career was when he succeeded in restoring to the Bibliothèque Nationale those manuscripts of the Ashburnham collection which had been abstracted by the too notorious Libri from the libraries of France. Those who remember the offer of the collection by the Earl of Ashburnham to the British government in 1883 will not have forgotten the intimate knowledge and the rare sagacity that Delisle displayed in the identification of the several manuscripts to which he laid claim in the name of France as part of her possessions fraudulently alienated. His proofs were incontestable; and it is a pleasure to remember how his efforts for the restoration of the lost sheep were eventually crowned with success after five years'

diplomatic negotiation. He himself tells the story of the affair in his preface to the *Catalogue des Manuscrits du fonds Libri et Barrois*, 1888.

But to his personal friends another occasion was perhaps of greater interest. This was the celebration, in 1902, of the triple jubilee of his first appointment to the Bibliothèque Nationale, and of his membership of the Société de l'Histoire de France and of the Société de l'École des Chartes, when from every side and from distant lands came the congratulations of those who had benefited by the labours of Delisle as librarian, palaeographer, and historian, and who rejoiced to acknowledge his supreme merit in all three capacities. M. Paul Lacombe's *Bibliographie* of his works was the outcome of that celebration.

But a brief three years brought changes which were less happy both for Delisle and for his friends. We are not here concerned to criticise the action of those who control the destinies of great establishments such as the Bibliothèque Nationale. If, after his service of more than half a century, they felt constrained to call upon the Administrateur Général to resign his post, we must presume that they had sufficient reason for their decision. But the sudden announcement that Delisle was placed *à la retraite*, 21 February 1905, came as an unwelcome shock to his friends; to himself, it was a humiliation that he felt in all its bitterness. And, alas! by one of those calamitous strokes of destiny which touch the human heart so keenly, on the very day appointed for their departure from the Bibliothèque, husband and wife were separated by the death of Madame Delisle on 11 March 1905. Such cruel blows might have crushed a man of even greater endurance than Delisle; but with fortitude and courage he submitted to his lot and turned again to his old studies. He was fortunate in having at his disposal resources such as but rarely fall in the way of the pensioner. As one of the curators of the Musée Condé, that noble bequest of the Duc d'Aumale to the French nation, he had the library of choice books and rare manuscripts at Chantilly open to him in which to continue his palaeographical and bibliographical researches for the remaining five years of his life. There, then, contentedly he passed his last days, mentally strong and bodily vigorous almost to the end. It was only during the few closing weeks that his health was visibly affected. On the evening of the 21 July 1910, he wrote excusing his attendance at the celebration of the millenary of Cluny.

Ma vue s'est bien affaiblie, ma mémoire me trahit à chaque instant; souvent j'ai grand' peine à rester debout ou à faire quelques pas. . . . L'heure du repos a sonné pour moi et j'aurais dû m'en apercevoir plus tôt.

On the morrow, while conversing quietly on literary schemes, he peacefully expired. *Felix opportunitate!*

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