

**PATRICK
SHAW-STEWART**

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Patrick Shaw-Stewart by Ronald Knox

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Chapter One

It may be easily thought that the times are too late for War biographies. While the public felt it almost heartless to indulge in any other literature than that bearing on the one subject which pre-possessed it, the demand for such biographies was natural. Now that the spectre has passed by, do we do well to linger still over the details of individual lives cut short, instead of burying the very memories of our dead in a cenotaph of common fame? There is more public appetite, perhaps, for Post-War revelations, for the bandying of 'I told you so' and 'Your fault all the time' between public and ex-public characters. But it is to be hoped that there are some who are inclined to tend the ashes of memory in a more generous spirit, and to pause a moment longer before they turn away from the imperfect monuments of a generation that died before its time.

They utter no I-told-you-so's, those patient rivals of living greatness, they do not impute fault. They have left to others the two-volume biographies, with index and map. Few of them had the opportunity to play a part which in itself made a story worth the telling. Their letters do not speak of advances or of hand-to-hand fighting, but of books, of quiet hours, of welcome rest-camps; they appeal, not for credit or for sympathy, but for trivial daily needs,

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pathetic because trivial—boot-polish and pipe-cleaners and shaving soap. Tight corners there were, and hair-breadth escapes, but they did not mention these—did not mention them at least in letters home, or to those who, in reading such accounts, might feel their hearts quicken at the reading. There is a great deal of sameness in the experiences, and one soldier's letter might easily stand for another. Is it necessary, then, that they should all lie under a common mound of earth, *indiscretum atque immiserabile vulgus*? To be sure, that honourable sepulture is enough record of their deaths. But if some more than others laid down lives rich in promise, flowers without fruit, yet already marked out by some earnest of their futuribles; if some more than others had the eye which sees the significant or the picturesque detail, and the pen in some measure trained to record it, need the survivors, the two-volume men, be jealous if we try to preserve a few phrases of such authorship, a few living echoes of what they felt, or rather—for their letters always cheated us just a little—of what they meant us to think they were feeling?

If any such distinctions are to be drawn, if we can contrive to make some memories vocal without slighting those other memories that are dumb, it needs no further preface or apology to give Patrick Shaw-Stewart a memoir of his own. The many friends who mourn him will feel that something is lacking to the Epic cycle which includes the *aristeia* of Charles Lister and the Grenfells, if the

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tale stops short at *Τάφος Ἑκρόπος*. And a larger public, when it reads of an Eton and Balliol scholar, winner of the Newcastle, the Ireland, and so many other academic laurels, a fellow of All Souls', who could transfer himself lightly (though none of us supposed finally) to finance, and hold the position of a Managing Director in Baring Brothers before he had reached twenty-five, may guess that this was not one of the passengers of his generation.

Yet all who knew him will realise the difficulty of making such a record. His penetrating insight and his perfect humour played for preference always with people, not with things, and a good part of his letters, if it were published so as to be understood, would have to be accompanied with a whole Targum of footnotes, of intolerable dreariness. Of literary remains he himself regrets, as will be seen, that he has left practically nothing. When he was called upon to write (for example) a paper for a society at Oxford, he would always put off the evil day till the last moment, and dash off what was in the circumstances a brilliant performance without leaving anything for posterity to cherish. He had a genius for relating means to ends, for doing just so much work as was required to gain this scholarship, for making just so much impression as was required to consolidate this acquaintanceship; and his whole life (I think) was mapped out on a plan which involved the acquisition of an assured position in the world before he began to toy with literature,

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with Movements, with serious politics. This plan, in itself so admirable, so much to be recommended to the many whose desire for self-expression leads them to express themselves far too early, is all lamentable to the biographer. There are only two sections in this book which were even remotely designed by him for publication—his account, written from Salonica, of his own school days, and his description of the *Hood* Battalion's Argo-voyage, which was meant to be a contribution to the memoir of Charles Lister.

Further, he acquired at Eton the habit of writing in a sort of parody of journalese. The parody was perfectly conscious; he never thought that he was writing good English when he used long words and far-fetched adjectival periphrases. I must implore every reader of this book to remember that whenever Patrick wrote, he wrote (as we used to say) 'in inverted commas': it was not the style but the parody of a style which was intended to catch your fancy. I do not mean that he copied journalists' phrases; I mean that he wrote as a journalist would write who possessed, and knew that his readers possessed, a very complete classical education, an almost verbatim knowledge of the Bible, and an intimate acquaintance with certain periods of history and literature; in the spirit of such an imaginary character he coined language for himself instead of facing—when had he the time for it?—the scholar's task of making language do justice to his thought.