EMERITUS PROFESSOR EDWARD ROBERTSON
EMERITUS PROFESSOR EDWARD ROBERTSON,
LIBRARIAN AND DIRECTOR OF THE JOHN
RYLANDS LIBRARY, 1949-62

BY PROFESSOR W. H. SEMPLE
A GOVERNOR OF THE LIBRARY

IN the early part of 1962 Professor Edward Robertson tendered to the Governors his resignation from the office of Librarian which he had held since 1949; and he indicated that, now being in his 83rd year, he had accepted his daughter's invitation that he and Mrs. Robertson should emigrate to Canada and spend their retirement with her and her family in Hudson, Quebec. The Governors with great regret acquiesced in Professor Robertson's decision, conscious that this scholar and administrator had given to the service of the Library more than a decade of those years which most men claim for leisured retirement and that he had made a contribution of conspicuous importance to the government and well-being of the Library in the difficult post-war period.

When in 1949 Professor Robertson began his tenure of the Rylands Librarianship, he had already completed an academic career such as might have seemed ample achievement for a lifetime. In his special field of Semitic Studies he had held the Chair of Hebrew at University College, Bangor, prior to his appointment in 1934 to the Chair of Semitic Languages and Literatures in Manchester University—a post he held, with impressive
distinction and authority, until 1945 when he withdrew, with the title of Professor Emeritus, at what was then the normal age of retirement. It was from this retirement that at the invitation of the Governors he returned to public life to succeed Dr. Guppy as Librarian; and in making the appointment the Governors felt confident that, under the control of this experienced scholar, the work and reputation of their world-famous Library would be fully maintained and the serious problems of post-war finance and reorganization met with vigour and wisdom.

The task of modernizing the financial and administrative structure of the Library was indeed formidable, but it called forth in Robertson all the qualities of statesmanlike vision and sound business-sense which his academic colleagues had known him to possess as Head of a large Department and as Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University. It is, of course, only possible in this brief notice to mention the more notable changes which he introduced—though the effect of his reforming influence was felt in every part of the Library. His first reform had to do with the internal administration which had remained virtually unchanged for half-a-century and which he now reconstituted to consist of three departments—of Registrar, of Keeper of Printed Books, and of Keeper of Manuscripts, an arrangement which made for much better division of responsibility and therefore for administrative efficiency. Allied with this departmental reconstruction was a much needed review of the salary scales to bring them into line with post-war conditions and to supplement them with a proper superannuation scheme. The Governors know with what strength of conviction Professor Robertson supported these reforms in Council, for he believed that here was a situation which, despite the financial straits of the Library, demanded a prompt and generous action if the existing staff was to be safeguarded and if proper provision was to be made for the future.

The financial resources of the Library, at that time derived mainly from its private endowments and therefore peculiarly exposed to losses resulting from inflation, had become a matter of great concern to the Treasurer, the Governors, and not least to the new Librarian; for while the Library continued to offer
its magnificent services to scholars throughout the world, the finances upon which these services depended were being continually eroded by the progressive fall in the value of money. It will be remembered how this situation led to the promotion of an Appeal for £100,000, an Appeal most effectively assisted by the efforts, both public and private, of Professor Robertson whose persuasive statement of the Library’s needs in view of its national and international importance contributed greatly to the success of the Appeal. His advocacy of the Library’s cause is also to be seen in the approach to the Wolfson Foundation which resulted in the splendidly equipped extension named the Lady Wolfson Building, and in the generously liberal contributions made by the Pilgrim Trust, by the Friends of the National Libraries, and by an Honorary Governor, Mr. Francis Neilson, whose munificent gifts included a capital donation which guarantees the financial security of the Bulletin, now recognized as being one of the scholarly journals of the world.

But much as one values Professor Robertson’s administrative abilities in his conduct of the Library’s business, it is on the personal side that his influence was most pervasive, and the recollection of his friendship most enduring. Few who have experienced the persuasive power of this resolute but quiet Scot will ever forget the attractive charm of his manner. His genial humour, his native shrewdness, his long experience of men and affairs, his cautious daring, his unassuming personal dignity, and his eminence in scholarship had all blended to form a character which at once commanded respect and created trust and friendship: *bonum virum facile crederes, magnum libenter*. It was in recognition of the man and his work that, before he left Manchester, the University conferred on him the degree of LL.D., *honoris causa*; and it was equally in recognition of their profound indebtedness to the man and his work that the Governors invited Professor Robertson to become an Honorary Governor of the Library and referred in their resolution of thanks to “an association beginning with respect and merging into a regard and an affection now so enduring that it has become part of the Library’s heritage”.