"a duty from which I cannot deviate": Bodley's Librarian and the New Laboratory

By Matthew Simpson

On February 6th, 1882, *The Times* had a long editorial about a new Oxford University appointment, and it began in this way:

> The Curators of Bodley's Library at Oxford have at last appointed a successor to Mr Coxe, the late Chief Librarian, who died in the middle of last year. Their choice has fallen on Mr E.W.B. Nicholson, the Librarian of the London Institution. It would be mere affectation to deny that this appointment will be viewed by many with considerable surprise.

"The Librarian of the London Institution": one senses a missing exclamation mark. "There could hardly", *The Times* said, "be a greater contrast than between the *genius loci* of the London Institution and that of Bodley's Library". On the other hand, as the paper did not mention, both had come to need reform, and had successively brought in Nicholson for that purpose. At the nearly moribund Institution, he had revived the lending library, made the lecture programme notable in the metropolitan calendar by calling in great names of science and literature (Huxley, Ruskin, William Morris, Oxford's George Rolleston), and by these and other means given the place a new prosperity and prestige. The Bodleian too needed change - of a different kind but requiring the same energy and tenacity - because the University which it served was itself being remade, with a suddenly increasing population of students, proliferating subjects of study, and more academically active fellows. And so began what one historian of the Bodleian calls "the Nicholsonian era of storm and reform".[1]

Such a reformer inevitably makes enemies, and Nicholson was soon at odds both with his sub-librarian, Falconer Madan, and with several of the Curators. Madan in fact kept a detailed hate-journal of Nicholson's activities, storing up hostile evidence and using it to brief Curators and others against his boss. With the Curators themselves Nicholson was to have a battle of wills and interests lasting the whole of his long period in office. It was not just his actual reforms - his "popularising" (the word was current for what was being done) of an institution which had become something of an initiates' club - that offended these people. They felt a general loss of institutional and personal tone. There had come into the place an incongruous rush of business, absolutely scotching the "stately dignity and benignant charm" which readers like Mrs Humphry Ward remembered from Coxe's time.[2] Nicholson was an Oxford graduate (Trinity, 1867-71), but he didn't seem like one. And this was really the sub-text of the *Times* account of the matter: through all the litotes and other courteous obliquities of style, it was made clear that what would be

coming as a "considerable surprise" to many was the abrupt change from Coxe, patently a gentleman and a scholar, to Nicholson, who was apparently neither. One of the Curators, Mark Pattison, put the point more bluntly in his journal: Nicholson was "vain, egotistical, and vulgar".[3]

However, when Vice-Chancellor Jowett felt obliged to have a corrective word with the Librarian a year or so after his arrival, it was occasioned by quite a different element in Nicholson's mind and history: his interest in the status of animals. More about that painful conversation later. As to animals, Nicholson had made his views on the subject known in a book of 1879, *The Rights of an Animal: a New Essay in Ethics*. This really was a new essay: he quite fairly called it "so far as I know, the first systematic attempt in our language – may be in any language – to treat the question of man's social relations to animals as a branch of moral philosophy."[4] But it was not the merely intellectual treatment of the subject which its sub-title suggests. It was purposeful and practical. In the book's longest chapter, called 'Limitations in Practice', Nicholson tries to bring the philosophical principles of earlier chapters to bear on the whole range of human-animal relations, and offers some characteristically eccentric accommodations. Then at the end of the book he gives advice on how to turn one's sense of duty into useful effort. And that was what Nicholson was now finding himself required to do at Oxford.

Within a few months of Nicholson's appointment, the University had elected its first Waynflete Professor of Physiology, John Scott Burdon Sanderson, and was making plans for a new laboratory on the edge of the University Parks for Burdon Sanderson to work in (see *Oxford Magazine* No 262, pp.20-22). What sort of work he would be doing was obvious enough, since this was a man who, according to *The Oxford University Herald*, "might well be called the arch-priest of vivisection".[5] Nicholson's *Rights of an Animal* had been composed in and after 1875, a period when vivisection had become a national topic and when Burdon Sanderson had been establishing the reputation mentioned by the *Herald*. "And now for vivisection …" says Nicholson as he reaches that theme in the book, evidently expecting his readers to have been waiting for it. The rules he proposes would probably appeal to nobody now, and they make sense in their context mainly because he has a curiously simplified Darwinian notion of life on earth. Something has to be done about those animals, whether wild or deliberately bred, whose numbers will compete for space and food with mankind: that is, some animals will certainly have to be killed. It is allowable (though "much against my own feelings") to put some of these to scientific use, but allowable on these conditions only: that the animals should be about to be killed anyway, that they should not suffer any pain (which includes the pain of "suspicion beforehand"), and that they should not include in their number any "home-pets". Later, perhaps as a result of his experience at Oxford in the 1880s, Nicholson wrote in the margin of his own copy at this point in the book the

comment "to be very much re-considered": he had become more radical about an animal's rights.[6] But even as it stood, *The Rights of an Animal* was ethical worlds away from the practices of such men as Burdon Sanderson, with their apparatus for immobilising frantic subjects, their spendthrift ways with dogs and cats, their willingness to bake, freeze, suffocate, and otherwise ingeniously put to death animals not formerly competing for anything.[7] Therefore, in spite of the precariousness of Nicholson's own place in the University as a newcomer largely unwelcomed and disparaged, he now took on the leadership of a campaign to oppose a grand new University project, the physiology laboratory and its distinguished professor.

That at least is how it seemed, and indeed turned out, in the self-simplifying way such controversies have. But in fact all that Nicholson originally aimed for was that the University should attach two conditions to the work done by Burdon Sanderson and by all his successors at Oxford: first, that anaesthetics would be used in all experiments which would otherwise cause pain, and second, that no experiments would be done on domesticated animals. To put into effect such conditions would require a vote in Convocation. Only the University's Hebdomodal Council could decide what Convocation voted on, and so in November of 1883 the committee of Oxford fellows and MAs which Nicholson by now represented put a 'Memorial' to Council asking that a vote might be taken on this subject. The members of Council refused this request: "an intolerable wrong", Nicholson felt, because it meant that the University as a whole was not to be allowed to express an opinion about vivisection in Oxford, even though "a large fraction of its members" thought that the two specified limitations at least were "morally indispensable".[8]

Nicholson believed that his party would have won such a vote. Possibly the members of Council did too, and avoided it accordingly. After all, that "large fraction" was not wishful thinking on Nicholson's part. There were 143 signatures to the Memorial, easily enough to secure a majority in Convocation on most occasions. At one time or another during the campaign, the names signed up to it included the heads of Magdalen, Pembroke, Keble, Worcester, St Edmund Hall, and St Mary Hall, the professors of Ancient History, Hebrew, Moral Philosophy, Political Economy, Fine Art (John Ruskin, that is), Modern History, Civil Law, and Ecclesiastical History, and many other fellows of colleges (including Charles Dodgson at Christ Church). The Bishop of Oxford, John Mackarness, was an active supporter, and beyond these were all the non-resident MAs whose sympathy might be enlisted, and indeed was. For although Council had refused to put that general question to Convocation, the laboratory project itself depended on money which only Convocation could release for it. In fact four distinct supply votes were in the end needed. At the time when the Memorial was rejected, there had already been two of these, one accepting the cost of some apparatus for Burdon

Sanderson's labours, and one authorising an expenditure of £10,000 for the new building. The first had gone through unopposed. The second had caught just the first stirrings of Nicholson's campaign, but even so the vote was very close: 88 to 85. Nicholson now warned Burdon Sanderson and Henry Acland (Regius Professor of Medicine) in personal letters that since there was to be no vote of the sort requested in the Memorial, the campaign would be directed against any further supply votes; they would be turned into debates on vivisection.

Evening after evening, after strenuous days in the Bodleian, Nicholson now put his talents as an organiser and publicist into the campaign against the laboratory. Printed letters and cards, circulars and other documents went out from his house at number 2, Canterbury Road, broadcasting information on relevant matters: the Memorial affair, Burdon Sanderson's performances in the past as a physiologist and as a witness at the 1875 Royal Commission on vivisection, the coming votes in Convocation, what the University's Council was doing. As to this last, the Council itself had finally felt obliged to campaign for its own policy, rather than push ahead in patrician silence (its preferred method then as now), so that by the time of the last vote in 1885, as the historian Charles Oman later recalled, Oxford MAs "had been inundated with leaflets from both sides, with the names of prominent men attached, for weeks before the day of debate."[9] In fact Nicholson successfully urged this subject upon the whole University, and it was active not just in Convocation, and in the deliberate debates in University journals and at the Union, but more generally in the University imagination, outcropping for instance in pulpit imagery or in undergraduate jokes.

The third vote in Convocation, officially on the releasing of the funds and the allocating of land for the laboratory, came on February 5th, 1884. Dean Liddell opened for the University. He was supported by the Warden of Keble, Edward Talbot. This man had formerly signed up with Nicholson but was now himself a member of Council and had reluctantly recanted, fearing, he said, to give young science at Oxford "a slap in the face". Henry Acland praised the moral character of Burdon Sanderson and reassured the anxious: the new professor would be practising vivisection only in one of the rooms in the laboratory, and that a very small one (an argument which seems to have become a bit of a University joke, and rather bears out Max Müller's suggestion that the best way to success in Convocation was to have Acland against you – though it didn't work in this case). Among the speakers on the other side there was Dr Pope of Pembroke ("who, we are credibly informed," said an *Oxford Magazine* reporter, "spoke with a loaded revolver in his pocket"), and Edward Freeman, soon to be elected professor of Modern History. It was in Freeman's speech that the first reference was made to one particular animal experiment which, according to records submitted to the Royal Commission and re-quoted in a paper circulating in Oxford, Burdon

Sanderson had called "beautifully simple" and had enjoyed "the pleasure of repeating … very frequently." It was a mistake to rely on one out of so many experiments like this: Acland and others disputed the facts as reported (was the subject a dog or a frog, and was it living or dead?), references were hunted for, and the debate began to lose its way in this particular bustle. (*The Oxford Magazine* accordingly gave its report the facetious heading 'Some Pathetic Passages in the History of a Frog'.) While the matter was being settled, Nicholson himself spoke, "bristling with little books and papers". By now there was evidently a lot of noise and unofficial participation coming from the Sheldonian audience. Burdon Sanderson had hitherto "leaned against the side of the arena, gaunt, grim, notable", and said nothing. Now he came forward ("received with a storm of applause and hisses") and said that the experiment in question was made upon a brain-dead frog. The debate proper did not recover, and the vote went against Nicholson's party 188 to 147.[10]

It was at some time after this that Jowett (who had presided at the Convocation just described) had his private word with Nicholson and warned him that the interests of the Bodleian – and Nicholson's own interests with them, presumably - must suffer if he continued to agitate against the laboratory. Among Nicholson's papers in the Bodleian, there is a draft letter preparing his comment upon that conversation. Here are some sentences from it:

> Dear Mr Vice-Chancellor,
> It will be a satisfaction to me if you will allow me to make quite clear to you my feelings and intentions in regard to the matter which you spoke of this morning […] On the matter of principle I feel as strongly as it is possible to feel, and so I consider it a duty from which I cannot deviate for one moment to do all I can to avert the practice [of vivisection] in Oxford. If the majority on February 5th had been able and willing to compel me to resign my office on account of my action in this matter, I should have taken that action just the same […] if Council were to propose any further grant without allowing a vote on the principle it would be our duty to oppose the grant.[11]

It is not clear whether Nicholson actually sent, to the man who had hitherto been his main ally among the Curators, this bold and uncompromising letter, but he certainly acted on it.[12] In 1885, Council did indeed propose to ask for a further grant in Convocation, this time to provide for the annual maintenance of the laboratory (heating, lighting, staff), and the opposition now concentrated upon making that too a vivisection vote, and of course upon winning it. Convocation was to meet on March 10th.

By now there was a different committee with a different secretary managing the campaign, but Nicholson was as active as before, on his own initiative and on behalf of the new organisation. On the eve of the vote, in

fact, Nicholson sent a note to Jowett, offering to let the grant through if Council would promise an opportunity next term to vote directly on the question of painful vivisections. The reply came back that Council continued to regard the 1876 Cruelty to Animals Act as sufficient for the University's purposes. Meanwhile *The Times* of that day had reproduced side by side for its readers the statements put out by the two opposing parties, and it was clear that what was coming would be a major University event. On the afternoon itself, "hundreds of non-resident graduates had come up to vote from London and the shires … the Sheldonian Theatre was crammed, the upper undergraduate gallery no less than the lower." Although 656 votes of MAs were finally recorded, many more people than that were present, not just the undergraduates but, for instance, "row on row of ladies interested in the scene".[13]

As before, Dean Liddell opened for the official University and was given a respectful hearing - the last of the speakers, apparently, to enjoy that amenity. Canon Liddon, until recently Ireland Professor of Exegesis, came next, speaking against the grant. He was famous as a preacher and controversialist, and "some of his telling phrases led to a certain amount of booing from those whom they provoked." He also roused the sportive element in the audience when he stumbled on the professor of Physiology's unwieldy name and called him "Professor Burdensome". When the next of the *non-placets* spoke – it was Mackarness, the Bishop of Oxford - there was a more thorough-going breakdown of order. He described some especially disgusting experiments done on the continent, and this evidently infuriated some of his opponents. "One prominent supporter of the decree", Charles Oman recalls, "got upon a chair, and led, waving his arms, a regular chorus of the word 'name' or 'shame' – I could not quite make out which. The Bishop kept his feet and tried to proceed, but the rhythmical din continued." Mackarness was forced to give up, and Professor Dicey then spoke for the laboratory. A reporter for the *Oxford Magazine* pictured "the keen-eyed, eager Professor, with his spare frame, standing on the steps, confronting a turbulent and hostile House, undaunted by their cries, his features passionately working", and wrote that the scene here "rose to the level of the tragic." After him came Edward Freeman, himself now a professor and once again speaking against vivisection, but he "was absolutely howled down." Somewhere between these speakers came Acland, with his customary tribute to "the humanity and tenderness of heart" of Professor Burdon Sanderson (who again was present). The last person to attempt a hearing, a clergyman whom no-one seems to have been able to identify, "got in enough sentences to demonstrate that he was about to defend vivisection by the example of Christ", a piece of nonsense which so increased the disorder that Vice-Chancellor Jowett now announced that he would call no more speakers. The

matter was put to the vote, and the University got its way, 412 to 244. Charles Oman summarises the whole thing as "a scandalous riot". [14]

So the votes in Convocation went progressively against Nicholson's party. The last vote in particular seems to have taken them aback, but it was not really so surprising. Once Burdon Sanderson had been appointed, the opposition was always behind the game, and the University's leaders were careful to keep it there. It was one of their tactics to defend Burdon Sanderson's character, as if deposing him was the aim of the campaign (so Acland's tiresome eulogies were not so irrelevant after all). Certainly Burdon Sanderson was not the target, and Nicholson frequently said so, but the University withheld from Nicholson and his party what they really were aiming for, a vote on the substantive issue, so that the professor's character necessarily but uselessly came into the firing line. The same was true of the laboratory: the required votes for it were all that really exposed the University's policy to opposition at all, but they were in fact supply votes, always the wrong target again. After the first one of these had gone through, it was always reasonable to ask – and in one form or another was asked – whether Burdon Sanderson was expected to work at his apparatus in the open air, or, once the laboratory had been awarded its funds, whether it was to be built and then left unoccupied, "a useless hull".[15] At each new stage, stopping the project made less practical sense, and accordingly the opposition progressively lost its force, even while it grew in numbers and earnestness.

That is not to say that Nicholson hazarded his career for no result, that the campaign merely failed. In some ways it was a very great success. He turned a subject which early in 1883 had gone through Convocation hardly noticed into one which in 1885 raised one of the largest assemblies and some of the fiercest passions that anyone present had ever before witnessed in the Sheldonian. (The debate about evolution between Huxley and Wilberforce, held in the University Museum twenty or so years earlier and now much more famous, was really a very mild affair in comparison.) Nicholson forced the University to suffer a convulsion commensurate with the importance of the decision it was taking. In doing so, he gave that Oxford generation a lesson in ethics which very few of them can altogether have missed or forgotten.

Back in the Library, Nicholson never did settle down, but stirred the institution and fought the Curators to the end, nearly thirty years later. One of the last innovations for which he had to fight was the appointment of a woman to the permanent staff. That was in 1910, but already in 1897 he had dared to look ahead a hundred years to a woman in his own job, and to say with typically defiant carry-through, "I am sure she will amply justify her appointment." For Nicholson was usually right. Even his interest in ephemera - that "mania for collecting rubbish, such as valentines and tradesmen's advertisements", which so annoyed the Curators - justified itself in time, and

much of what had been scornfully thrown out of the Bodleian eventually came back as part of the John Johnson Collection.[16] In short, Nicholson made his period of office a time of sustained renaissance for the Bodleian. And he never left, but worked for it until he burst, dying within a month of being forced by the Curators to take sick leave (one of their very few absolute successes against him). But the institution has not been grateful. Nicholson was never asked to sit for a portrait, as Coxe before him and Madan after him were. The underground bookstore, which he first imagined (there was no precedent for his scheme) and then steadily pushed into existence against the familiar opposition, is not called the Nicholson Bookstore, as it ought to be. The collection of papers which Nicholson prepared as a bequest, and confidently shelf-marked in pencil 'Nicholson MS …' was broken up by Falconer Madan and dumped in 'Eng. Misc.' and elsewhere.

One of Nicholson's supporters in the campaign against the laboratory wrote to him on the evening of the 1885 defeat, "the protest will remain a valuable one, and one which we may hope will not be forgotten in the future history of the Laboratory."[17] Yes, a valuable protest, and a remarkable, unromantically heroic, essentially modern man: there are good reasons - indeed, moral obligations - to remember both.

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[1] Edmund Craster, *History of the Bodleian, 1845-1945*, Oxford, 1981 (1952), p.246

[2] *A Writer's Recollections*, London, 1918, p.111

[3] Quoted in K.A.Manley, 'E.W.B.Nicholson and his Importance to Librarianship', unpublished PhD thesis, Oxford University, 1977, p.54. This remains the only full-length account of Nicholson's life and work, but for an excellent short account see Mary Clappinson, 'E.W.B.Nicholson: Bodley's Librarian, 1882-1912', in *Bodleian Library Record*, vol.18, no.4, Oct. 2004, pp.365-78.

[4] Covering letter to a Prospectus for *The Rights of an Animal*, London, 1879, pasted into Nicholson's own copy (Bodleian 2653 e. 10)

[5] Editorial in *The Oxford University Herald*, October 27th, 1883

[6] *The Rights of an Animal*, pp.60-63 in Nicholson's copy

[7] For Burdon Sanderson's practice or endorsement of these particular experiments, see *Handbook for the Physiology Laboratory*, ed. J.S.Burdon Sanderson, 1873, pp.319-21, and *Royal Commission on the Practice of Subjecting Animals to Experiments for Scientific Purposes*, London, 1876 (the Cardwell Report), p.146.

[8] Draft letter to T.H.Grose in Nicholson papers, Bodleian Ms Top.Oxon c.182, f.419

[9] Charles Oman, *Memories of Victorian Oxford*, London, 1941, p.236

[10] Reports of the debate in *The Oxford Magazine*, February 13th, 1884, p.69, and *The Oxford Review*, February 7th, 1884, p.214. The quotation from Burdon Sanderson is from the Cardwell Report, p.381. Müller's unkind joke about Acland is reported in W.Tuckwell, *Reminiscences of Oxford*, London, 1907, p.48.

[11] Nicholson papers, f.364

[12] Most of Jowett's incoming letters were destroyed after his death, and this letter does not seem to be among the papers which survive in the University.

[13] *Memories of Victorian Oxford*, p.236; *Oxford Magazine*, March 11th, 1885, p.163

[14] Quotations from *Memories of Victorian Oxford*, pp.236-7; *Oxford Review*, March 11th, 1885, p.176; *Oxford Magazine*, March 11th, 1885, pp.163-4
[15] Henry Acland's phrase, *Oxford Review*, March 11th, 1885, p.192
[16] Interview for *The Oxford Chronicle*, July 31st, quoted in Manley, 'E.W.B.Nicholson', p.98; Lewis Farnell, *An Oxonian Looks Back*, London, 1934, p.272
[17] Letter from Samuel Driver, Regius Professor of Hebrew, Nicholson papers, f.417-8