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OBITUARY NOTICES

OF

FELLOWS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY.

PART iii.

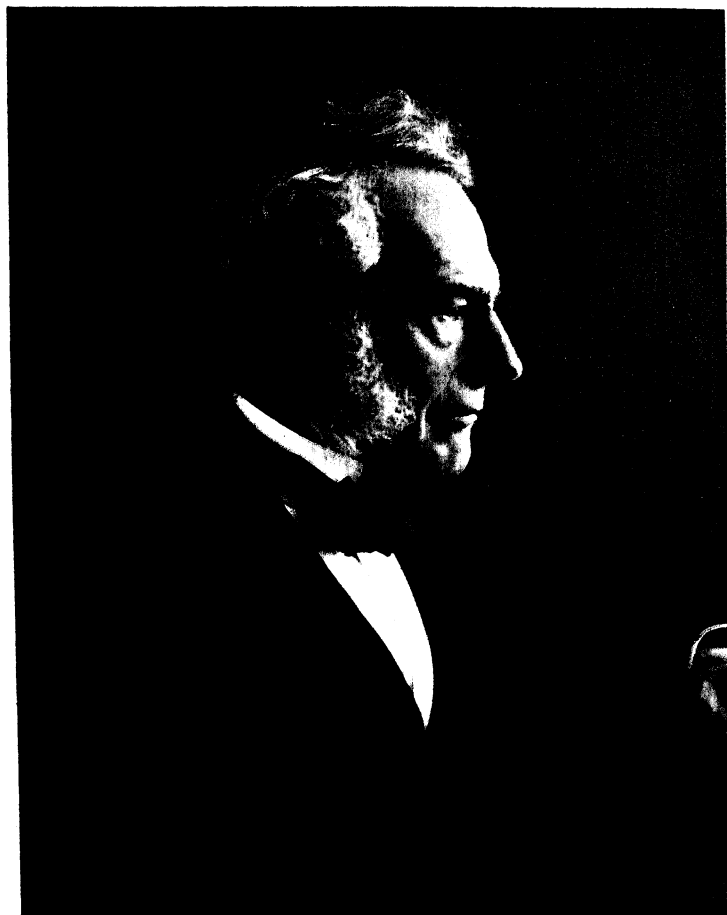
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G. G. Byron

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OBITUARY NOTICES

OF

FELLOWS DECEASED.

(PART iii.)

SIR GEORGE GABRIEL STOKES, BART. 1819—1903.

In common with so many distinguished men Sir George Stokes was the son of a clergyman. His father, Gabriel Stokes, who was Rector of Skreen, County Sligo, married Elizabeth Haughton, and by her had eight children, of whom George was the youngest. The family can be traced back to Gabriel Stokes, born 1680, a well-known engineer in Dublin and Deputy Surveyor General of Ireland, who wrote a treatise on Hydrostatics and designed the Pigeon House Wall in Dublin Harbour. This Gabriel Stokes married Elizabeth King in 1711 and among his descendants in collateral branches there are several mathematicians, a Regius Professor of Greek, two Regius Professors of Medicine, and a large sprinkling of Scholars of Trinity College, Dublin. In more recent times Margaret Stokes, the Irish antiquary, and the Celtic scholar, Whitley Stokes, children of the eminent physician, Dr. William Stokes, have, among others, shed lustre on the name.

The home at Skreen was a very happy one. In the excellent sea air the children grew up with strong bodies and active minds. Of course great economy had to be practised to meet the educational needs of the family ; but in the Arcadian simplicity of a place where chickens cost sixpence and eggs were five or six a penny, it was easy to feed them. They were all deeply attached to their mother, a beautiful and severe woman who made herself feared as well as loved.

Stokes was taught at home ; he learnt reading and arithmetic from the Parish Clerk, and Latin from his father who had been a Scholar of Trinity College, Dublin. The former used to tell with great delight that Master George had made out for himself new ways of doing

sums, better than the book. In 1832, at 13 years of age, he was sent to Dr. Walls' school in Dublin; and in 1835 for two years to Bristol College, of which Dr. Jerrard was Principal. There is a tradition that he did many of the propositions of Euclid, as problems, without looking at the book. He considered that he owed much to the teaching of Francis Newman, brother of the Cardinal, then mathematical master at Bristol College, and a man of great charm of character as well as of unusual attainments.

On the first crossing to Bristol the ship nearly foundered; and his brother, who was escorting him, was much impressed by his coolness in face of danger. His habit, often remarked in after life, of answering with a plain "yes" or "no," when something more elaborate was expected, is supposed to date from this time, when his brothers chaffed him and warned him that if he gave "long Irish answers" he would be laughed at by his school-fellows.

It is surprising to learn that as a little boy he was passionate, and liable to violent, if transitory, fits of rage. So completely was this tendency overcome that in after life his temper was remarkably calm and even. He was fond of botany, and when about sixteen or seventeen, collected butterflies and caterpillars. It is narrated that one day while on a walk with a friend he failed to return the salutation of some ladies of his acquaintance, afterwards explaining his conduct by remarking that his hat was full of beetles!

In 1837, the year of Queen Victoria's accession, he commenced residence at Cambridge, where he was to find his home, almost without intermission, for sixty-six years. In those days sports were not the fashion for reading men, but he was a good walker, and astonished his contemporaries by the strength of his swimming. Even at a much later date he enjoyed encounters with wind and waves in his summer holidays on the north coast of Ireland. At Pembroke College his mathematical abilities soon attracted attention, and in 1841 he graduated as Senior Wrangler and first Smith's Prizeman. In the same year he was elected Fellow of his College.

After his degree, Stokes lost little time in applying his mathematical powers to original investigation. During the next three or four years there appeared papers dealing with hydrodynamics, wherein are contained many standard theorems. As an example of these novelties, the use of a stream-function in three dimensions may be cited. It had already been shown by Lagrange and Earnshaw that in the motion of an incompressible fluid in *two dimensions* the component velocities at any point may be expressed by means of a function known as the stream-function, from the property that it remains constant along any line of motion. It was further shown by Stokes that there is a similar function in three dimensions when the motion is