ALAN GEOFFREY HILL

Alan Geoffrey Hill
1931–2015

Alan Geoffrey Hill was born on 12 December 1931 to a comfortably off family in London. He attended Dulwich College, was an undergraduate at St Andrews and a postgraduate at Merton College, Oxford. In 1960 he married Margaret Rutherford and three children followed this, 'the happiest decision of my life'. In 1994 Hill, now Professor of English at Royal Holloway, was elected Fellow of the British Academy (FBA)—'the greatest honour I have ever received'. Shortly afterwards he retired and moved to Malvern, where, after a long illness of intermittent periods of severity, he died on 14 April 2015.

My first meeting with Alan was in the late 1960s, when I was just starting out in Edinburgh University and he was already a Senior Lecturer in Dundee. As members of the Wordsworth Trust we continued to meet over many years, both regularly in the formal meetings of the Trust and more occasionally at convivial Wordsworthian events, so that I got to know him quite well. Or rather, I thought I did. It is a mark of Alan's sober character that he never, at least in my hearing, advertised himself or paraded his honours, and it is only from the autobiographical memorandum which he deposited with the Academy that I have become aware of many aspects of his interests and achievements. He was profoundly engaged with orchestral music and opera, an enjoyment which he declares he owed to early encouragement from his father. Drama and film were lifelong interests. He acknowledges very gratefully the immersion in the classics he received in his old-fashioned prep school and later at Dulwich, a grounding which was of enormous value in the kind of literary study he was to embrace. His love of the English countryside and in particular of

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its church heritage, what he termed his 'ecclesiology', is traced right back to childhood, to time spent in a Sussex cottage his father had acquired 'as a bolt-hole'. But he was also widely travelled in Europe. His autobiographical memorandum touches repeatedly on his pleasure in exploring and learning from Greece, Italy and the Mediterranean more widely, 'before the days of tarmac roads and tourism in the South'.

What emerges also from the autobiographical reminiscences is Alan's capacity for friendship. Recollection of each stage of his life is accompanied by a roll-call of people whose friendship he valued or whose influence he gratefully acknowledged. Almost without exception Alan's comments on a new acquaintance are warmly positive. In all the years I knew him I never heard him be less than generous to colleagues, even when in his later career university politics were challenging and disappointment not unknown.

This capacity for appreciating and valuing the capacities of other people is strikingly revealed in his account of a year (1948–9) spent in a sanatorium at Ventnor, Isle of Wight, where the schoolboy had been sent to recover from pleurisy and residual tuberculosis. Ventnor was 'a liberating experience', partly because of the wide cross-section of people he met there—mostly ex-servicemen, a brigadier, a dentist, a bus driver, some adherents of curious fringe political groups and a few cranks. Alan recalls that among the inmates of the sanatorium was one of the most intelligent people he ever met, a man who ran a winkle stall in Portsmouth Market and who completed the Ximenes crossword in *The Observer* in about ten minutes.

The stay in Ventnor was also important in that it marked a change in Alan's intellectual direction. He ended the year impatient with the confines of school and determined to read English at university. He failed to get into Oxford, but this setback was in fact a blessing. A place at St Andrews was offered and accepted, and so began Alan's 'Scottish experience'; as he termed it, 'one of the most formative of [his] life'. Alan made many enduring friendships at St Andrews, and he revelled in the intellectual possibilities the university offered. Continuing with Latin, Greek Literature and Ancient History for a further year, he was able to take Philosophy courses for two years as part of the four-year course. He records that he 'was left with a lasting admiration for the Scottish University system and a suspicion of over-specialisation'. From the present-day perspective, it is striking that he also notes that of the ten papers examined in finals in the English school, three were not covered by teaching. Students were expected to 'get them up' out of term. Freedom of this sort allowed Alan to explore

the Victorian sages—Carlyle, Arnold, Ruskin, Morris—and to develop an already active interest in Newman and the Oxford Movement. The autobiographical memorandum affords a rather touching glimpse of the young Hill reading Newman's *Apologia* and *Tract XC* 'in the Cathedral grounds on a warm spring afternoon'.

These interests determined the next stage of Alan's career. Supported by a Carnegie Trust Research Scholarship he went to Oxford—Merton College—and worked for a BLitt—doctoral research status at that time being granted only to a very few 'except as a grudging concession to Americans'. Though Oxford had been the taproot of the High Church revival, it had little time for study of allied intellectual movements within literature and Alan found himself regarded as somewhat eccentric for pursuing the literature of the Catholic Revival. His taste for the art of the Gothic Revival was thought almost laughable. As many others have testified, supervision of graduates in Oxford in the late 1950s was often somewhat less than diligent. Although he records encounters with many of the fabled Oxford names, and singles out Humphry House as someone who did help by encouragement, it is clear that Alan's research was largely self-directed. The resultant thesis—*Some Social and Historical Points of View in Nineteenth Century Literature in Relation to the Catholic Revival*—was ambitious, encompassing Scott, Cobbett, Southey, Kenelm Digby, Pugin, Tractarian novels, 'Young England' and Disraeli, Carlyle and Kingsley, with the Wordsworth of *The Excursion* and *Ecclesiastical Sketches* as an important background presence. It was successfully presented to examiners Hugo Dyson and John Sparrow in 1957.

After a year of precarious existence as a part-time college tutor, Alan's career proper began with a lectureship at the University of Exeter. Professionally challenged by the demands of the courses he was required to design and deliver, Alan, by his own account, also felt enlarged by them and by some of the colleagues he shared them with. Reviewing new work on the novel gave impetus to his own interest in genre study, leading many years later to a well-regarded lecture tour for the British Academy on 'Shakespeare and the Novel'. It was in Exeter that he met and married Margaret Rutherford, herself a graduate of St Andrews in French and Spanish, and here their first child was born.

A return to St Andrews in 1963, however, was not to be resisted and now the focus of Alan's life's work became clear. He enjoyed the wider teaching opportunities on offer—Chaucer and seventeenth-century as well as more modern literature—but in research Wordsworth came to the fore. Envisaging a study defined as 'Wordsworth and the Church Tradition:

Form and Spirit in the Poetry of William Wordsworth', Alan spent a lot of time at the library of the Wordsworth Trust at Grasmere and in archives in Carlisle and Kendal. He became editor of the multi-volume Oxford University Press edition of the *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth* and a member of the Wordsworth Trust. Living 'in one of the most venerable historic cities in the British Isles and among the ruins of past greatness' was a privilege, one which directly fed into the study of a poet who was fascinated by the significance of ecclesiastical ruins and by the Scottish past.

Alan's next move, though, embraced the future rather more than the past. In 1968 Dundee University, having recently established its independence, offered him a Senior Lectureship with responsibility for running the department and, it was hoped, establishing a School of Literature. Though this latter was not realised, Alan did introduce courses in American Studies and Scottish Literature and was gratified that his was one of the first universities to appoint a Fellow in Creative Writing.

North America played a large part in Alan's life in the next few years. A tour of New England and Thoreau territory; study of religious sects as well as the American Episcopal tradition; archival study in the magnificent Wordsworth collection at Cornell University—all contributed greatly to Alan's understanding of the later Wordsworth's religious affiliations. This westward tendency also prepared the way for a year, 1973–4, as Visiting Professor at the University of Saskatchewan at Saskatoon and to further exploration in American archives. In later years Alan was to enjoy notable success on lecture visits to the University of Arizona at Tucson and the University of Toronto. Twenty years later, after retirement, Alan's ability through profound historical awareness to generate links between his various interests in language and the visual arts ensured that he remained in demand as a visiting lecturer in the USA, Canada, Malta and Italy. He dutifully served as external examiner at the new University of Buckingham and much further afield in Singapore. In short, he was an academic with a real sense of what he owed to his profession.

When offered the Chair of English at Royal Holloway College in 1980, in succession to Francis Berry, Alan had no hesitation in embracing a move to what he described as 'very much my kind of place'. The Picture Gallery, the splendid buildings, the proximity to London, the opportunity to create courses in the mould he had always favoured—all invited. And Alan did inaugurate a much-needed course in Introduction to Literary Studies, a Classical Heritage course and the Centre for the Study of Victorian Art to develop the potential of the Picture Gallery for research

and teaching. But it was not overall a happy time, nor one that need be dwelt on here. Within a few months of Alan's arrival, the merger with Bedford College was effected with, in his view, too little thought in too little time. Alternating headships generated much stress; a few members of staff from both sides were reluctant to see the merger experiment work; temporary overcrowding became intolerable. It was with relief that Alan took slightly early retirement in 1994, when he and Margaret moved to a house in the Malvern Hills.

In retirement Alan was elected to a Fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Research in the Humanities at Birmingham University, and he valued the facilities offered and the resources available at the Barber Institute and the Birmingham Oratory Library. He gave lectures and seminars at the university, while continuing research and writing. From the beginning of his career Alan's interests in literature had been wide, but he wrote and lectured mostly on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century figures. Hopkins, Ruskin, Swinburne, Scott, Arnold, Clough, Gissing and many other Victorian heavyweights appear in his earliest publications but eventually two topics came to the fore—Wordsworth and his circle, and Newman and his. What fostered both these concerns was Alan's abiding interest in religion and literature.

With his own classical grounding, his interest in the history of ideas and not least his love of Oxford, the Anglo-Catholic literary-historical scholar clearly had a deep sympathy for, perhaps even a sense of kinship with, John Henry Newman, and was to play a significant part in the revival of interest in him in the later twentieth century. Alan's edition of Newman's novel *Loss and Gain* (Oxford, 1986) was a landmark. Published in 1848, just three years after Newman's own reception into the Roman Church had brought the first phase of the Oxford Movement to an anguished close, *Loss and Gain*, subtitled *The Story of a Convert*, might be supposed to have little more interest now than as an historical *roman à clef*. What Alan does so deftly in his introduction is show what an impoverished reading of the novel this would be. Fully aware of the historical contingencies that motivated the production of this story at this time, and which determine its polemical charge, the editor acknowledges that 'Newman himself was deeply implicated in his fiction, and brought a profounder *personal* response to the discussion of issues which might otherwise seem uncongenial or irrelevant' (p. xix). But what he also insists on is the imaginative generosity of the novelist who dramatises with great sympathy and persuasiveness troubled young men taking up theological positions which he had himself relinquished. It is Newman's literary gifts that are

emphasised, his sense of the possibilities of the novel as a form which could 'appeal as much to the heart and imagination as to the head' (p. xii), an emphasis that was returned to in a fine essay in *Newman after a Hundred Years*, a collection of essays co-edited (Oxford, 1990) by Alan and Ian Ker. In his contribution, 'Originality and realism in Newman's novels', Alan explored the effect on the novel of Newman's 'penchant for racy language'. Copious examples of linguistic oddities demonstrate just how attentive Newman was to details of usage in establishing the novel's differing scenes and dramatis personae. It is a fine, original essay which suggested possibilities for understanding the linguistic texture of nineteenth-century novels more widely.

Alan's greatest achievement, and his most significant contribution to historical research into the nineteenth century, is his body of work on William and Dorothy Wordsworth, their wide circle of acquaintance, and the line of ecclesiastics and educationalists who constituted the distinguished Wordsworth family dynasty. In a series of articles Alan presented entirely new research on the poet's American friends (this a very influential piece), on his educational theories, on Wordsworth and Pagan Gods, on his reception in Germany, on the last phase of the relationship between Wordsworth and Francis Jeffrey, and on many other biographical and literary-historical topics. Every one of these articles adds to our knowledge of Wordsworth and the historical circumstances which enabled his writings in prose and verse to become an important cultural force.

The 1986 British Academy Warton Lecture on English Poetry, 'Wordsworth's "Grand Design"', deserves particular notice (published in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 72, 1986, 187–204). In 1798 Wordsworth let it be known amongst a few friends that he had the ambition of writing a poem with the object of giving 'pictures of Nature, Man, and Society', adding, with the confidence of youth, 'Indeed, I know not any thing which will not come within the scope of my plan' (6 March 1798). It was to be called *The Recluse*. As the years passed, nothing seemed to have come of this work, but in 1814 Wordsworth gave, as it were, a substantial work-in-progress report by publishing a long blank verse poem, *The Excursion*, which, readers were informed in a Preface, was but part of the still-ongoing larger whole, *The Recluse*. After that, however, apparently nothing. Wordsworth grew tetchy in old age at people who kept asking after progress on *The Recluse*, and the posthumous critical and biographical consensus has been that the poet failed in the great task he had set himself, that *The Excursion* was at best only a partial success, and that the appearance of it in 1814 actually marked the beginning of such a

marked decline in the quality of Wordsworth's poetry that almost everything he wrote after 1815 could be disregarded. It is a consensus challenged on every front in Alan's consideration of Wordsworth's grand design. Beginning with the proposition that it is more profitable to look at what was achieved rather than lamenting what was not, Alan suggests that much of Wordsworth's later poetry consists of what might be called '*Recluse* materials', and that it constitutes a coherent body of work from a poet with a profound understanding of the nature of religious faith and its place in human life and with, in particular, a growing interest in the history of the Christian Church.

Alan's sympathetic reading of *The Excursion* and of *Ecclesiastical Sketches*—this latter pretty well unique in Wordsworthian scholarship at the time—has been very important in shaping the move towards a better appreciation of Wordsworth's later poetry. His telling use of historical detail has been a model, but in its range and depth also a warning against casual contextualisation; the subtlety of his exploration of the poet's attitude to religious faith and its relation to literature is inspiring but also quite properly daunting. Alan's greatest contribution to literary-historical scholarship in the Romantic period, however, was the multi-volume edition of *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth* (Oxford, 1970–88; supplementary volume 1993). It is unquestionably a magnificent achievement.

The Wordsworth family letters had been edited by the indefatigable Wordsworthian William Angus Knight at the end of the nineteenth century. His pioneering work was built on by Ernest de Sélincourt, another enormously diligent scholar, who assembled a great deal of fresh material for six volumes for the Clarendon Press from 1935 onwards. By the 1960s, however, it was clear that further editorial work was called for. A revised volume covering 'The Early Years: 1787–1805' appeared in 1967, edited by Chester L. Shaver. A second volume, for 1806–11, appeared two years later under the editorship of Wordsworth's biographer, Mary Moorman, who mentioned in the Preface the help she had received in the later stages of her work from Alan Hill. The title page of the second part of this 'Middle Years' volume, which was published in 1970, properly acknowledged that it was the work of Moorman and Hill and from then on, to the completion of the series in eight volumes in 1993, the editorial labours were Alan's alone.

These were immense. Working before the era of databases and union catalogues online he brought into view hundreds of new letters. In the Acknowledgements pages of each volume Alan thanked with characteristic

scrupulousness everyone who had helped him in his quest, but he was the coordinator and commentator. The copious annotation to each volume cannot be over-praised. It supplies a context for the correspondence, makes links between letters and, most usefully of all, it identifies recipients, not all of whom are well known. Wordsworth was dutiful in maintaining correspondence with figures who are now quite obscure, and to produce the notes which bring them to life must have demanded so many hours of dull detective work that one cannot but be grateful for Alan's resourcefulness and assiduity. Knowing that as a grateful end-user I would have some appreciation of what was involved, Alan once told me that he actually enjoyed this jigsaw work amongst the obscure dead; that the rewards were small but very satisfying.

What emerged very strikingly from the later volumes of the letters was the extent of Wordsworth's engagement with churchmen and with ecclesiastical concerns; what was demonstrated from the accompanying detailed annotation was just how fitted Alan was to write the much-needed study of Wordsworth and the Church. That Wordsworth moved increasingly in Anglican circles was not news—his brother, son and nephew were all ecclesiastics—and he corresponded with leading churchmen of the day. Scholars had explored to some extent the relation between many of his later poems and important movements within the Church, and the poet's growing reputation over the last thirty years of his life as a not-too-specific spiritual guide had been acknowledged in literary-cultural histories. But no one had yet explored Wordsworth's ecclesiological imagination with the care that the subject demanded, not least because of what would be required of the scholar who attempted it. Wordsworth read widely in Church history; he was particularly interested in the monastic life; he thought deeply about the interdependence of personal faith and the institutional forms of religion as they had evolved in differing societies over the centuries; he was much occupied—often anxiously—with contemporary developments in the Church; he had strong views about the relative importance of religious faith and writing about religion. In the 1986 Warton Lecture Alan wrote with brilliant, highly suggestive economy about Wordsworth as didactic poet and declared, 'No purely literary approach can do justice to Wordsworth's significance here, and another occasion must be found for following his influence through the conflicts of the nineteenth century to the modern ecumenical movement.' His monograph for the Tennyson Society ten years later, *Tennyson, Wordsworth and the 'Forms' of Religion* (Lincoln, 1997), demonstrated his ongoing engagement with this fundamental aspect of the poet and seemed to

promise that the book we all knew Alan was best placed to write would appear. But illness prevented what would have been the culmination of a career devoted to literature and the literature of religion, and I have no doubt that the disappointment was felt as deeply by Alan as it was by his many admirers.

Alan Hill was a fine scholar, whose work added greatly to knowledge and understanding of the literary and religious culture of the nineteenth century. Much of his editorial labour was unglamorous, but, though he would have been the last person to trumpet this claim, it underpinned the scholarship of a generation of Romanticists and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

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