



*From the portrait by John Gibby, 1952, in the County Hall, Hertford*

SIR HAROLD WILLIAMS

## HAROLD HERBERT WILLIAMS

1880-1964

**D**URING the latter half of his long life Harold Williams was honoured as one of that small group of scholars who 'wonderfully mended' the common view of Swift. In the twenties and thirties no service in the field of English letters was more sorely needed. Helping to do it, however, incurred one disadvantage for Harold Williams: its importance blotted out for us the importance of his other work. Younger contemporaries at least were guilty of thinking that his good work—indeed his good works—began and ended with what he did for Swift. Apart from all that, however, he had much to say both in writing and action, and the present occasion provides an opportunity to right a balance.

### I

Harold Herbert Williams was born on 25 July 1880 in Tokyo, the eldest son of James Williams who had been trained for the Anglican mission field at the College in Islington, and who had served in East Africa before he served in Japan. Harold's early education was privately conducted until the family returned to England, when he went to Liverpool College. In 1900, after a further spell of private tuition, he entered Christ's College, Cambridge, where, in 1901, he was elected to a scholarship. Records of his undergraduate studies are incomplete, but the College magazine records that in the Michaelmas term of 1900 he rowed for the winning boat in the College Junior Trial race, his weight being 9 st. 9 lb., and that he repeated the performance, now a stone heavier, in the Lent term of 1902. It seems likely that he read theology throughout his course, taking at the end of it the First Part of the Theological Tripos with a First Class and with distinction for his Old Testament work. In the same year, 1903, he was bracketed for the Carus Greek Testament Prize for undergraduates. As a graduate he proceeded to win the Steel University Studentship, the emoluments of which still range between £30 and £60 per annum, as if discipline cannot begin too early for clerics. In 1904 he was ordained Deacon and Priest at Exeter, taking up a curacy at Swimbridge. In the following year he migrated to Ripon Theological College as lecturer and

chaplain, but was back in Devon by 1906, remaining curate of Crediton until 1909.

In this latter year he relinquished his Orders. As he reminds us in the novel he wrote soon afterwards, 'there are always hundreds of reasons for everything in life', but it is plain that the prime reason for his momentous step was that he had come to prefer to think more freely than is compatible with the retention of Orders. He wished to admire, as he now felt impelled to, the author of *The Way of All Flesh*.

Meanwhile he had begun to lecture for what was then known as the Cambridge University Local Lectures Syndicate, and to lecture to audiences sometimes 350 strong, first in Devon and later in Norfolk, Northumberland, Sussex, Lincoln, Yorkshire, and Derbyshire. The booklets he prepared to accompany his lectures evince the vigour of mind that explains why his audiences did not fall away. During the next five years lecturing kept him busy, for in 1911 he began to serve also the Department of Extra-Mural Studies in London. As if this was not enough, he had thoughts of extending his circuit to take in local audiences for Oxford, but this ambition came to nothing. The dozen courses he offered are impressive in their number and range—they covered Shakespeare and everything since Pope and Swift, and even included a course on 'Goethe and His Times'. It is interesting to note that in the prospectus he drew up for 'Men and Letters in the Eighteenth Century' the programme for his fourth lecture opens with the words:

Swift is the commanding genius of the early decades of the eighteenth century. Despite his misanthropy and cynicism he possessed real greatness of soul and character;

and interest deepens with one of his questions for those students choosing to write essays: 'Are we justified in speaking of Swift as a cynic?'

While still a lecturer he had married in 1913 Jean, daughter of Andrew Chalmers, M.D., but the war broke out in 1914 'with its calls', as he was to put it, 'to action, to sacrifice for a cause greater than and lying outside oneself'. After the lectures of the Michaelmas term of that year he joined the army, serving with the French forces in the Vosges and later with the English, and holding the rank of Captain in the Mechanical Transport Section of the R.A.S.C. At the close of the war he was mentioned in the Secretary of State's list for 'valuable services', and awarded the M.B.E. But the peace brought further experiment. 'No man',

he wrote in 1918, 'can be unconscious of a change within himself and in his preoccupations during the past four years . . . few . . . continue contented in the old paths.' For him the old paths were now unnecessary because of the fortune his wife had brought him. His being called to the Bar from the Inner Temple in 1920 was, therefore, a social rather than a professional step—at no time does a legal address stand against his name in the Law List, and he still continued to lecture for London University. But in 1921 he shook off all professional ties and signaled his freedom by leaving London for the country. Migration, however, merely drove his public usefulness into other channels. Living at Aspenden House, Buntingford, until his final move back to London in 1950, he straightway took up the duties of J.P., and in 1928 became a member of the Hertfordshire County Council. Of this body he was Vice-Chairman from 1939 to 1947 and Chairman from 1947 to 1950. Meanwhile he had acted as 'additional' member of its Education Committee and as member of the Library Sub-Committee, of which he was Chairman for over twenty years, resigning in 1962. On the evidence of his lecturing and early writings we can see that this sub-committee would mean much to him: the County Librarian tells me that she never ceased to be thankful to have him for Chairman—he 'never needed to be converted to the value of what the County Library was doing', and it was largely because of him that the book-borrowing services of the county flourished as they did. Moreover, as if determined to make his county work as complete as possible, he held the office of Chairman of the Local History Council from 1950 to 1963—we may recall that he had been elected F.S.A. in 1948. Nor did his relinquishing of Orders—which he never alluded to in later life—prevent his undertaking church offices open to laymen.

The other public offices he undertook during this long latter phase of his life were those that went along with the work on Swift. Having been elected a member of the Bibliographical Society in 1921, he became its President in 1938, remaining in office throughout the war. In 1950 he returned to his old University as Sandars Reader in Bibliography. The British Academy elected him Fellow in 1944, and in 1951 he was knighted for his dual services to county administration and bibliography. Finally, in 1954 the University of Durham conferred on him an honorary D.Litt.

His wife had died in 1948, and in the following year he married his old friend Pauline Louise, daughter of Major

Campbell-Renton of Mordington and Lamberton, Berwickshire. He died on 24 October 1964, making his public-spiritedness once more evident by bequeathing to the National Portrait Gallery a version of Jervas's first portrait of Swift and to the Cambridge University Library his many rare books.

On the occasion of his knighthood I sent him my congratulations, and received a pleasant reply:

. . . The generous sentiments of my friends have made me grateful and humble.

I hope I may, before too long, find more time for bookish pursuits. At all events, following upon Greg, I have brought 'bibliography' into the honours list, and people will begin to ask what the word means.

The world may slowly be learning what bibliography means, but it already knows what county administration means, and it rightly suspects that it can be both burdensome and dull. From the time the Tudors set up the office of J.P. we have been beholden to people who, not needing to earn their living, are public-spirited enough to give their time and thought to help run public affairs. Hertfordshire, which Harold Williams was always fond of, claimed half his knighthood, but the half he was most pleased with was that claimed by bibliography. His passion was for books.

## II

By the time he had become known to the bibliographer and reader of Swift, and well known to Hertfordshire, Harold Williams had reached the age of 50, and his writings during the teens of the century had been forgotten, simply because they lay in so separate a field. In their own time they had importance and prominence. They had brought him some general fame as an author, for he had written four books, all but one of which drew on his widespread contributions to weeklies and monthlies, English and American. When we know his work early and late we see that the halves had their points of interconnexion. In particular the grace of his writings as bibliographer and editor is, unusually, the grace of a poet, novelist, and literary critic.

The main interest of his little book of verse, which appeared in 1912, is that it exists. *The Ballad of Two Great Cities*—the allusion is to the mid-nineteenth-century idea of the Two Nations—makes no. 19 of 'The Grey Boards Series' published by one A. C. Fifield at a Clifford's Inn address. The dust-cover describes the

series as consisting 'of original verse, essays, and drama, printed on deckled-edge paper in high-class style, and uniformly bound in quiet grey paper boards with loose jacket, foolscap 8vo size'. If we are looking for reasons why he relinquished Holy Orders, we shall find some here. In his *Ballad* he writes of

. . . temples where priests sang to gods  
Nobody cared for in their hearts.

Like Wordsworth, Arnold, and others he looked at the starry sky, but, unlike them, was not encouraged. For the rest he was aware of the beauty of Devonshire and of gardens, was in love, and was thinking about matters that intelligent lyric poets usually do think about. This much can be said for the book—its voice achieves some individuality.

Two years later he published a novel, *Discovery*. In an earlier book he had noted that Charlotte Brontë's novels had a 'marked significance for the future development' of the form in that they built their story on a 'narrow theme of personal conflict, the play and working of life and character between two or three people'. His own novel is concentrated in this way. We can imagine it recast for the stage—it might indeed figure in the West End as a play of 1965. Its story, interesting and even exciting, concerns two men and two women who are linked and opposed by ingenious accidents—accidents which are acceptable because those who suffer them feel and think. The *Times Literary Supplement*, which at this date scrupulously reviewed all novels and poetry books, described *Discovery* as 'a short novel containing a somewhat concentrated but effective drama'. It is interesting to note that the ending is 'unhappy'—the main character, Oswald Bouverie, having 'reached the end of [his] quest . . . and found [himself]', sees that his future lies apart from the woman he has courted, and who is now free to marry him. In the main Williams was equal to grasping the difficult materials he had imagined.

On the title-page of his poems the poet is bolstered up by reference to an achievement of the previous year—the poems are guaranteed as by the 'Author of "Two Centuries of the English Novel"'. Williams had every right to be proud of this earlier achievement. Nowhere exist better chapters on a dozen of the great English novelists. His favourites are Thackeray, Meredith, and Butler, and the quality of the criticism may be conveyed by the following passage on Thackeray:

A professor of philosophy once offered to an audience the opinion

that Thackeray was the greatest of English psychologists; and those who know their Thackeray well will not be likely to demur to the assertion. After reading a chapter in the novels we cannot put our finger upon the exact instrument or means with which Thackeray conveys his impression; it lies in a number of minute and almost imperceptible strokes and touches of the brush; but we feel that we have been intimately concerned in the narrative, not merely spectators of a scene.

There is also a sound paragraph appreciating Thackeray's authorial commentary, which must have read daringly at that date. The Conclusion begins with a characteristic paragraph, characteristic because searching—it tries to understand the changes brought about by time even in something so elusive as the novel form:

. . . The classic image of the spiral staircase reverts to memory. At each turn, as we ascend, we retrace our lateral direction, but we are a little farther up. And so with the novel: Richardson does not include all we find in Defoe; he is without his predecessor's verve and rapidity, but he has a deeper insight into individual character. Jane Austen, though later in time than Fielding, does not supersede him; yet she works with perfect command of her powers in a narrow field which had hardly been guessed at in his day. And Thackeray, perhaps the most significant name among novelists in the nineteenth century, might learn something from third-rate writers of to-day without losing a jot or tittle of his greatness.

The book is also noteworthy as an index of contemporary taste. The women novelists are treated separately; *Hard Times* is dismissed as 'one of Dickens's failures'; and while Trollope is accorded only a couple of pages, Mrs. Gaskell is accorded only a couple of references—and those to her 'classic biography' of Charlotte Brontë!

After the books noticed so far there is less of a surprise when we come to the others. Sidgwick and Jackson, who had published his novel and book of criticism, advertised their *Poems of Today*, first and second series, as containing 'Examples of the work of most of the poets of whom Mr. Williams writes' in his *Modern English Writers*. This substantial work of his had been published in 1918 here and in America, and it reached a second impression in the following year and a 'third edition revised' in 1925. Meanwhile in 1920 Williams had followed it up by *Outlines of Modern English Literature, 1890-1914*, which reached a second impression in 1928. Works of this comprehensive scope have obvious weaknesses. The demands on one man made by all the imaginative literature of a third of a century are too heavy,

especially when that period is only recently past, and its writings still unsifted. Yet what could be wisely done was done, and in the right spirit:

The author is not unconscious of the temerity of criticising in summary writers still living. Contemporary estimates need not be falsified by time, but they are subject to the indistinctness of near vision, to those confusions and aberrations the critic could easily have avoided had he been removed from the scene instead of playing a part within it. Nevertheless these chapters may not be without interest and usefulness as a record of adventures among books, and possibly something more.

That comes from his preface and in the body of the book there is this further reassurance:

It is a good rule, worthy of acceptance, never to write upon living authors, unless it be recognised that this is but a means of study and inquiry, not a dogmatic assignation of values.

On that understanding he gallantly tackled the multitudinousness. It is plain that he had read all the hundreds of works he discusses and of which he says something pointed. Conrad receives some excellent criticism, and there is an interesting comparison between Meredith and E. M. Forster. On the whole it is fiction and drama that fare best—poets could sometimes have complained that their use of material was dealt with too inflexibly. All told, his work can stand as a continuation of Oliver Elton's *Surveys*.

In 1924 he edited with a memoir the *Collected Works* of Herbert Trench, an old family friend, and in the same year brought out the *Selected Poems* of that recently deceased poet.

### III

Williams's response to Swift as a young man explains why he was claimed by Swift as an older man. It does not explain, however, why he became Swift's editor in the exacting sense that that word bore for him. Williams himself offered an explanation at the outset of his Sandars lectures:

Not long after the war of 1914-18, when demobilised, I entered by a chance for which I can call to mind no prompting the shop of J. & J. Leighton, antiquarian booksellers of high standing in their day . . . I bought, again for no reason I can remember, two of the 1726 editions of *Gulliver's Travels*. I had not then any special interest in Swift; but in life it is only the unexpected that happens. At home I began to turn over the pages of the four volumes I had purchased, and before long it was borne in upon me that here was a bibliographical problem calling for solution. I ransacked the shelves of booksellers. I read their catalogues. Soon



more and more editions of *Gulliver* lined my own shelves. The problem began to clear itself; and I, who had never previously given much of my time to the minutiae of bibliographical or textual research, succeeded, I hope, in teaching myself some guiding principles.

This account, however, is too transcendental. In *Who's Who* Williams entered up his hobbies as travelling, gardening, shooting, and book collecting, and even if in 1920 he had not yet become a book collector, he must have had it in him to become one, or why would he have entered Leighton's—most people, even those with a passion for reading, find it superlatively easy to give antiquarian bookshops the go-by. Then there was the further impulse to explain—why, having bought those two extraordinary volumes, did he choose to collate them? Is not the single explanation for both his actions that, like the hero of his novel, he had now at last found himself? Perhaps that discovery had been facilitated by the silent example of McKerrow—it was with that great bibliographer and textual scholar that his correspondence with his publishers had been conducted. And perhaps also he needed a change, being drawn to the exactitude of textual studies because of the contrast it afforded to the uncertainties of the work he was still engaged on in the broad fields of modern imaginative literature. Whatever the reason, he had found what suited him for the rest of his life.

Reviewing Williams's edition of the *Journal to Stella*, Emile Pons noted that Swift's writings 'bristle with editorial difficulties as complex as any in the whole range of English literature, not excluding the works of Shakespeare himself'—a judgement that Williams feelingly endorsed in his Sandars lectures. But they are more nearly amenable to solution than Shakespearian problems, and more than any other scholar Williams helped to solve some of the most pressing of them.

His work on Swift achieved massive proportions. There was in 1932 the little book, surprisingly readable, entitled *Dean Swift's Library with a Facsimile of the Original Sale Catalogue And some Account of Two Manuscript Lists of his Books*. In 1935 came a paper in *The Library* on the 'History of the Four Last Years of the Queen', which finally disposed of the doubt of that work's being authentically Swift's. Sixteen years later he introduced the *History* in Herbert Davis's edition of the *Prose Works*. His edition of the poems appeared in 1937, with a much revised second edition in 1958, and in 1948 the edition of the *Journal to Stella*. As for *Gulliver's Travels*, we have seen that his work on that masterpiece had begun in the early twenties. His first bibliographical

venture had been the paper in *The Library* in 1926, 'The Motte Editions of *Gulliver's Travels*', to be followed, in the same year, by his edition for the First Edition Club, the text of which reproduced, except for misprints, that of the first edition of Motte. This edition had the benefit of a long bibliographical and textual introduction and explanatory notes. Later on, working independently of the American scholar, Lucius L. Hubbard, he came to see that the despised Faulkner's Dublin version of 1735 'represented Swift's last thoughts', and was also 'nearer to the original manuscript from which, with excisions and alterations, Benjamin Motte printed the first edition in London', the evidence for this conclusion being set out in the Sandars lectures which were printed in 1952 as *The Text of 'Gulliver's Travels'*. In 1941 he had the satisfaction of introducing an edition that represented Faulkner's text when *Gulliver* was added to Davis's *Prose Works*. Nor did this exhaust his labours for Swift. He had a great respect for that 'true scholar', F. Elrington Ball, and in improving (as he did considerably) on Ball's edition of the *Letters*, he wrote:

I make no attempt to conceal my debt to him. The present edition is to some extent a reissue of Dr. Ball's. It differs mainly in the text, in which I have always printed from the autographs, wherever they are available, in libraries and in private hands both in this country and in the United States, and otherwise from early printed editions. Dr. Ball made no use of manuscripts in America, and only a limited use of those in private hands; he conventionalized the text of the letters whether of Swift or his correspondents and resigned the pointing to the printing-house. This edition follows the spelling and the punctuation of the originals as closely as possible. I have also been allowed to incorporate here both the text and the annotations of the Letters to Charles Ford, which were edited from the autographs in 1935 by David Nichol Smith. I have thus been able to bring together here a considerably larger number of letters than in any previous edition.

Williams lived to see the first three volumes of the *Letters* through the press in 1961, and the final two, which he had left in manuscript, were published in March 1965.

Among these splendid works the masterpiece was the edition of the poems. Its three volumes consist of a series of separate editions, each of the many poems (most of them brief) requiring to be edited separately—to be received as authentic or dismissed as not, to have their text established from manuscript and printed versions, to be dated, to have their allusions, political and personal, explained. All this was done in exemplary style. The only

complaint was one of minor moment in an edition of Swift—there was an absence of what might be called ‘literary’ annotations: Swift’s expression did not always begin from scratch, his verses sometimes showing what had stuck in his mind from his reading in earlier poetry. The edition was fittingly welcomed by Mr. John Sparrow in a four-page review of the *Review of English Studies*, a tribute culminating in the belief that

No finer piece of scholarship of this kind has been produced in England during the present century.

The reviewer, however, felt constrained to wonder if the poems were worth the care expended on them:

The further one reads in these three volumes (which contain some 1,300 pages in all) the more one admires Mr. Williams and the less one admires Swift. Reading the last page of the last volume one breathes a sigh of relief, as the editor must surely have done himself, at having come to the end of so much lewd and tedious rubbish.

I cannot myself hear the sigh ascribed to the editor. I recall what he had said in the 1911 prospectus of his lecture on Swift:

Most of his pieces were thrown off at random and upon the impulse of the moment. Yet his merest trifles seize upon us by their strength, originality and force.

Finally, editing and lecturing did not exclude other work on Swift—nor the more general work implied in his lively survey *Book Clubs and Printing Societies of Great Britain and Ireland*, published in 1929 for the First Edition Club. In the pages of the *Review of English Studies* Williams subjected every important book in the Swift field to a masterly review.

#### IV

And so to conclude my praise, I claim Williams as a prince of reviewers. His reviews were regularly contributed during a quarter of a century to the *Review of English Studies* and less frequently to the *Modern Language Review*. Is it not clear that some of the best prose of the twentieth century exists in the pages of the learned periodicals, especially in their reviews? When we talk of good prose we have in mind more than verbal felicity, such felicity being a mockery unless aiding the expression of good matter. In the best pages of the reviews in the learned magazines we find the work of men who are masters of their subject, and who are alive to the opportunities for writing well. Among the best of learned reviewers stands Harold Williams.

He retained into the thirties enough interest in the novel to review books in that genre, but his greatest work was done on studies, editions, and bibliographies of eighteenth-century writers, and particularly of Augustan writers. Whether it was Pope, Addison, Steele, or Swift, he was always master. Occasionally he met his match—he could do nothing but describe and praise Nichol Smith's edition of the Ford–Swift correspondence—but usually he had faults to find, sometimes many. The interesting thing is that in every erring book he also found virtues. Much can be read into the following sentence in a review of Norman Ault's edition of Pope's prose: 'His argument is brilliantly conducted, but is it decisive?' If a man was brilliant but wrong-headed, Williams did not omit to praise the brilliance, for one who could be both brilliant and judicious did not under-rate either quality. If the results of a man's hard work were worthless, he would say so gently, and cast about to find something to commend—allowing perhaps that the method was right, or alternatively that the execution, though mistaken, was skilfully done. When reviewed by Williams no author could have felt that he had been treated unfairly. Nor, if he had any right feeling at all, could he fail to resolve to do better next time. All the many books Williams reviewed he saw steadily and saw whole. He had no narrow conception of the role of the reviewer, any more than of the bibliographer, and his reviews of Swift, if collected, would make a little book of weighty criticism. He found opportunities to speak of Swift himself. The twentieth century—thanks to Williams and a few others—now prides itself on being fair to him, but Williams saw the danger that fairness might become soft. In his review of Ricardo Quintana's *Mind and Art of Jonathan Swift* he wrote:

A satirist Swift was; and, when roused, savagely intolerant. A cynic he was not. Until the last years, when idiosyncrasies grew upon him, he was a friendly man of social interests. The confirmed cynic is not, as was Swift, the champion of morality, good order, liberty, and justice. Are we justified in asserting further that faith and hope, behind the guise of the satirist, animated Swift? Is this what lay hidden behind the mask? This it is not so easy to believe. That he was disappointed, not contented with the turn of events in his own life, is abundantly manifest. He was, in consequence, not always just to those whose religion and politics were not his own. As a moralist he betrays no hopefulness in the destiny of man or of faith in a future event. Nor are we conscious that religion, save as a moral control, supported him through life. In any re-assessment of values we must not allow the swing of the pendulum to carry us too far. A man may well enjoy the passing hour, he may find happiness in the

companionship of his fellows, he may be guided by high motives, he may sacrifice himself in the public interest, and yet, in the secret places of his heart, think of life as an evil, a game which in the end must be lost.

The gift of life Swift never prized. 'I do not think life of much value,' he tells one of his oldest friends. 'I never wake without feeling life a more insignificant thing than it was the day before,' he writes to Bolingbroke. And how unforgettably this despair is manifest in the picture of the Struldbruggs. The possibility of discovering the secret of an immortality on earth has fascinated men from the beginning. Swift dissipates the dream of felicity. Perpetuity of life would only be desirable if a man could 'chuse to be always in the Prime of Youth, attended with Prosperity and Health.' But the Struldbruggs are vicious old dotards, dragging out a pitiable existence, cut off from the life of men by the passage of the generations, 'living like Foreigners in their own Country.'

The compelling force of Swift's character and genius will elude us if the harsher outlines are always agreeably subdued.

Remarkably, this was written by the scholar who in the next number of the *Review of English Studies* reviewed, as only he could, Teerink's *Bibliography of the Writings in Prose and Verse of Jonathan Swift*.

## V

Harold Williams's reviews are an index to his character and personality. Sure of himself, he was hardworking, scrupulous, and courteous. In later life he held himself stiffly, a rather military-looking person, with a handsome profile, high-coloured and inclining to the aquiline, and with undiminished hair, which was now white. His voice was high-pitched and clear. He looked well on a platform, and perhaps for this reason had a sense of the dignity of office and of special occasions. He was proud of his presidency of the Bibliographical Society, and never missed a meeting during its prolonged term. But unlike his hero Swift he was always ready to laugh, and to laugh loudly. Scholars seeking his acquaintance found him kindly, and he always did his best to enliven a club dinner, where his conversation was especially pleasant for those who wanted to talk only of scholars and their scholarship.

I am grateful to the following for their help towards the gathering of materials: Lady Williams; the Master of Christ's College, Cambridge; the Librarian of the Inner Temple; the Librarian of Dr. Williams's Library; the Secretary of the Bibliographical Society; the Secretary of Cambridge University; the Board of Extra-Mural Studies; Officials of the Hertfordshire County Council.

GEOFFREY TILLOTSON