PLATE XXV

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ROBERT WYNDHAM KETTON-CREMER

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1906–1969

WHEN Wyndham Ketton-Cremer died, on 12 December 1969, he had come to the end of a road which, for most of the way, was straight but very hard.

He was born in Plymouth on 2 May 1906, the son of Wyndham Cremer Cremer and his wife Emily Bayly. As much as he chose to tell—that is, a good deal about his family and his predecessors at Felbrigg, very little about himself—is to be found in his book, *Felbrigg, the Story of a House*. His mother traced her descent from sixteenth-century shipwrights and shipowners of Dorset who had later established themselves as timber-merchants in Plymouth. His father, a Cremer of Beeston in Norfolk, was connected with the Wyndhams (or Windhams), a name associated with Felbrigg since 1450, and also with John Ketton, a Norwich merchant, who bought this estate when the male line failed in 1863. It came to Wyndham Cremer from his mother's brother, Robert, the second son of John Ketton, with the stipulation that the Ketton name be added to his own. Robert Wyndham (called Wyndham by all but family friends) was the elder of his two sons, separated by three years from his brother, Richard.

He was educated at Harrow, and, in spite of more than one attack of rheumatic fever, went up to Balliol as an exhibitioner in 1924. There, rheumatic fever struck once again, forcing him to postpone Schools, and, although his mother came up to Oxford and nursed him through it—a necessary measure—he was left with a crippled heart, an inert right hand, looks quite at variance with his real age and indomitable spirit, and, as time passed, bouts of increasingly severe ill-health.

When Wyndham came down from Oxford in 1928, his situation, to those of his contemporaries imperfectly acquainted with it, may well have seemed enviable. In a time when employment was hard to find, he was not even seeking it. But, besides his impaired health, which had put him out of step with them and perhaps increased his shyness, there was another shadow stretched across the future. The Cremers, especially the father and elder son, had been confronted with a difficult choice when, in 1923, Robert Ketton had proposed making

over the Felbrigg estate to his nephew and living elsewhere. As a boy, Wyndham had shot over the estate and read in the once splendid library. He was drawn to a place so charged with historical associations, but he shared his parents' forebodings. Against his great-uncle, he recorded the two worst things he could say of any land-owner: 'I do not think that during the whole forty years of his ownership he built a single cottage . . . after the year 1900, he does not appear to have planted a single tree.' He had been no more regardful of himself than of his tenants: land and buildings, his gardens and his farms, his own house and his farm-houses, were alike derelict; and he had despoiled the library which generations of Wyndhams had built up, and which his father, John Ketton, had taken over intact. Characteristically, Wyndham attributes his failure to some unexplained frustration or disappointment.

Thus, for the Cremers—or Ketton-Cremers, as they must now become—there was on the one hand the beauty and historic dignity of Felbrigg; on the other, their contentment in their own manageable and pleasant home, and the crushing burden of dilapidations which they must face if they were to enter fully into their inheritance. Moreover, the agricultural depression was deepening. Johnson said of a young man faced with a like situation: 'If he gets the better of all this, he'll be a hero.' Despite apprehensions, most keenly felt by Mrs. Ketton-Cremer, the family were at one in their resolution to revive Felbrigg—which had escaped one misfortune, it had not been restored in the nineteenth century. It was typical of their intention that the house and the church were repaired simultaneously; the land was brought back into good heart and the woods replanted before the gardens. And, although a regular water supply replaced the primitive contrivance by which water had been lifted from a well, Wyndham was to subsist without electricity until 1954 (by which time nearly all his tenants had it). He did not indulge himself with heating until 1967, and then only in a part of the house designed to serve as 'winter quarters'.

Wyndham's early promise—his 'bookish precocity', as he would call it—had been recognized; he had fallen in love with Oxford, though not with Balliol; and he was deeply in love with the art of writing. But, by 1928, when he had to make his *choice of life*, the strain of bringing back into cultivation a derelict estate at a time when farms might have to be taken in hand for want of tenants was telling on his father. He came home to

help him and learn by practice the essentials of estate management. Thenceforth his life was to run in three channels: care of Felbrigg, and, after his father's death in 1933, of his mother and younger brother; public work, such as fell to a country gentleman with a sense of tradition—with much besides, for which few country gentlemen are qualified; and writing.

At first, as his letters show, there was a little loneliness, he missed his Oxford friends; he was aware that they were systematically acquiring professional skills which, to the end, he overvalued. Any such sense of isolation was diminished by hospitality and friendship. Although his father was a reserved man and his mother shy in large social gatherings, they were neighbourly and had the gift of making people welcome: Felbrigg became and remained a very hospitable house. Wyndham himself kept his friends and made always more: his public work brought him into a new and active relationship with country neighbours, and his books gained him an always widening circle of friends, admirers and acquaintance in the world of letters. The family circle, however, continued to shrink: 1941 brought the long drawn out anguish of the loss of his brother in Crete—reported missing, then known to be dead; in 1952 his mother died. For the last seventeen years he was alone, though faithfully served, in a house of many associations.

Wyndham's work as landowner and as public servant, in the English tradition of public service, may seem to lie outside the province of the British Academy, but it cannot be passed over in silence, for it was an intrinsic part of his life and achievement. It shall, however, be recounted briefly. The Felbrigg estate comprises the parishes of Felbrigg, Metton, Sustead, and Aylmerton: some two thousand acres in all. Once he had it in good order, Wyndham was free to follow his own bent and concentrate on afforestation, which he carried out with due regard both for economic common sense and aesthetic ideals. He would have no unmitigated clear felling, and plantations must accord with the character and contours of the landscape. 'My woods', he wrote, 'are my joy and pride.' Although he judged it better not to farm himself, he was careful to study and understand just so much of current farming problems as would enable him to enter into his tenants' point of view, and to know them as neighbours: the channels of communication were never closed nor clogged. He looked into the needs of the four parishes and built, or maintained buildings, accordingly.

The churches were his especial care, but no dwelling-house was neglected.

Wyndham's public duties ranged from Rector's Churchwarden of Felbrigg to High Sheriff of Norfolk. He served on the Erpingham Rural District Council from 1930—notably on the committees concerned with housing and coastal erosion—and on the North Erpingham Bench from 1934—Chairman from 1948, service terminated only by his death, though ill-health forced him to resign the chairmanship in 1966. As a magistrate he was patient and careful, with a bias towards mercy. In the office of High Sheriff he had a happy sense of ceremonial occasion, but, when the hard thing was to be done, he went through with it himself. Among the committees to which he brought his memorable skill in reconciling opposed interests, he probably enjoyed most his service on the Norwich Diocesan Advisory Council for the Care of Churches, of which he became a member in 1936 and Chairman in 1956. (The chairmanship he was obliged to resign in 1966.) This, and perhaps hardly less his membership of the Regional Committee of the National Trust, drew upon and developed his unrivalled knowledge of Norfolk, past and present. Indeed, it would be very difficult to surprise him with the discovery of an inscription of historical interest in any East Anglian church—and harder still to fault him on records of lost memorials, effaced by former zeal. His interests were in no sense narrowly antiquarian: he was a Trustee of the National Portrait Gallery (from 1958), and, although the historical significance of portraits gave them a peculiar place in his affections, his taste and knowledge extended further, and he was a buyer of present-day paintings. He was well informed also about silver, and his knowledge was at the service of public bodies and of his friends. In sum, he refused no call upon his time or strength. He served in the East Norfolk Home Guard (1941–5); he was a Governor of Gresham's School, Holt (1957–67), and actively interested in the founding and development of the University of East Anglia, which conferred on him the honorary degree of D.Litt. (1969). I mention the dates to indicate the duration and continuity of these representative activities. How he got through so much business was a riddle to his friends, baffled as they were by the unobtrusive art with which he husbanded his resources. An observer who happened to know that breath was not plentiful with him might remark the well spaced pauses in the structure of his sentences which allowed him to lecture without

apparent effort. He gave the Rede Lecture at Cambridge (1957) on Matthew Prior; the Warton Lecture for the British Academy (1959) on Lapidary Verse; the Lamont Memorial Lecture at Yale (1960) on Gray as a letter-writer; and the Presidential Address to the Johnson Society of Lichfield (1961) on Dr. Johnson and the Countryside. He spoke to the Johnson Society of London on Johnson's interest in antiquarian studies. Among the more pleasurable activities of this *clubable* man was his part in the Society of Antiquaries: he was a Fellow and a member of the inner circle, the Cocked Hats.

When Wyndham published *The Early Life and Diaries of William Windham* (1930), he announced—with unusual foresight for a man of twenty-four—the course his writings would take. Those who wished he had gone on to the more interesting —and better known—part of his subject's life missed the point. It was never his intention to offer familiar material for reappraisal, to write (as he later confided to a friend who shared his enthusiasm for local history) 'yet another biography of Johnson'. It was his fortune to command original sources of information, and his aim to use them in lighting up hitherto obscure passages in history. This purpose he pursued alike in his journalism and his books—several of these being collections of brief memoirs. From the *Early Life . . . of . . . Windham*, the tale of his published work runs: *Horace Walpole* (1940); *Norfolk Portraits* (1944); *Norfolk Gallery* (1948); *Country Neighbourhood* (1951); *Thomas Gray* (1955); *Norfolk Assembly* (1957); *Forty Norfolk Essays*, a selection from a much larger number contributed to the *Eastern Daily Press* (1961); *Felbrigg: the Story of a House* (1962); and *Norfolk in the Civil War* (1969). There were besides contributions to presentation volumes, such as the essay on 'Johnson and the Countryside', in the collection presented to Dr. L. F. Powell in 1965.

In his disastrous reign at Felbrigg, Robert Ketton had sold books with the recklessness of utter ignorance, but the manuscript riches of the house remained intact. These furnished material for the *Early Life of Windham*, and the whole story of Felbrigg and the four families who in turn owned it; also for many of the essays in the Norfolk collections. The first major biography, *Horace Walpole*, originated elsewhere. Part of the story is pleasantly recalled by Mr. Lewis, famous editor of the Yale *Walpole Correspondence*. He had himself begun to draft a life of Walpole, but desisted in favour of work on the letters, when, in 1931, R. W. Chapman took him to a Johnson Club

dinner at Pembroke College, Cambridge, where he met Ketton-Cremer. This led, among other happy results, to his visiting Felbrigg, where Wyndham asked him whether he were planning to write Horace Walpole's life. ' "Not for twenty years at least." "In that case would you mind if I write one? It will be forgotten by then." '[1] Their collaboration, in the following nine years—a time when the wealth of unpublished Walpole material was coming to be realized—and their long friendship, make a pleasant chapter in the history of scholarship. Another friendship, and admittance to another treasury of letters, was gained in the course of writing the *Walpole*: the friendship of Leonard Whibley and the association with Pembroke, where much of the work on Gray was to be done and further links forged with Cambridge.

The *Life of Walpole* was a notable achievement in the sympathetic interpretation, by a man of thirty-four, of a worldly and complex character very different from his own: one who had lived to see many changes, and had himself been subtly changed by time. The insight that goes to the making of the *Life of Gray* is deeper, partly because Wyndham had here much more in common with his subject, partly through the experience he had acquired in writing his 'Norfolk books'. These, with the accompanying contributions to the *Eastern Daily Press*, are of so distinct a kind, so far, in their sum total, from any other writing, that they ask to be characterized as a whole. The professional discipline required is most clearly seen in those small pieces, a few inches of print, written for a daily paper. Each places within these prescribed limits exactly what they should contain; there is no crowding nor any complaint as to want of room. The only limitation explicitly acknowledged is (so to speak) deficiency of light: here the diary ends, or further letters are lost, and the surrounding darkness takes over. Similarly, the biographical essays in the larger collections are three-quarter-length portraits, the events narrated are episodes—an election, a journey. Yet each, in its own way, is a serious, though often humorous, contribution to the understanding of the past. The context is East Anglian, the subject, local history—predominantly, family history. But the outcome is very far from those 'learned loiterings' attributed to an eighteenth-century antiquary. They *amount* to something. Many of them subsequently proved to have been 'work in progress'. The subjects of the portraits would reappear in the continuous

[1] Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis, *One Man's Education* (N.Y., 1967), pp. 251–5.

narrative of *Felbrigg* or *Norfolk in the Civil War*. (Indeed, there is sometimes a perceptible resemblance to the recurrences in the Barchester novels.) Critics who dismissed these studies as parochial had failed to recognize that the annals of a parish, rightly handled, may throw light on the history of a county, and county history on that of a kingdom. Those who appreciated the handling but wished such skill had been otherwise employed were still wide of the mark. Here was work asking to be done, and a man with the means and ability to do it. In the Preface to his *Forty Norfolk Essays* he thanks owners and custodians who have made their archives available to him and so ensured that the people and events he commemorates shall not be forgotten. Indeed his friendliness, his courtesy and his known probity unlocked the doors of many muniment rooms. He would encourage others to make use of their family papers, and was to write of his own *Felbrigg*: 'I am the only person alive who knows the story, and much of it would . . . die with me'—unless he should set his hand to it.

Much of the work on Gray was done in time of war, and service in the Home Guard, and bitter loss, but Cambridge offered release from any remaining sense of intellectual isolation. In 1935 Wyndham had contributed a brief life of Gray to the Duckworth series of *Great Lives*, and Leonard Whibley entered into a friendly correspondence with him. This grew into an informal collaboration which ended only with Whibley's death. Through this association Wyndham became a welcome guest at Pembroke, and worked there on the papers which Whibley had bequeathed to the college. *Thomas Gray* may come to be regarded as his best book, though *Felbrigg* will probably remain a favourite, at least among his friends. The lines were as usual carefully laid down, and the author realized that as a biography it might be censured for avoidance of 'psychological jargon', and acceptance of some mysteries of personality as inscrutable. To a plea, while the work was in progress, for more critical observations, he replied 'I am no critic'—which was mere nonsense from a man who met his obligations as a reviewer for *The Times Literary Supplement* readily and with sound critical judgement. He might have urged that the *Elegy* had already been expounded within an inch of its life. Instead, he deprecated his own capacity for 'philosophical criticism of poetry': he had no fund of theory. This did not hinder him from singling out the right passages from the letters to illustrate the poems, nor from characterizing one or another of these in a sentence:

'Graceful, touching, its rueful truisms delicately edged with wit, it reflects a mood which seldom appears in Gray's poetry, though often enough in his letters.' There is not very much more to say about the *Ode on the Death of a favourite Cat.*

A life of Matthew Prior should have followed, it was promised in Wyndham's Cambridge lecture of 1957, and appeared the ideal subject for his peculiar gifts as literary biographer. Here was a fine poet who met the challenge of life, while recognizing his own precarious tenure; a complex character within whose friendly candour there were reserves—something still to be known and more to be admitted unknowable; a man concerned in events which determined the course of English history. Perhaps there may have been too much of this last factor. 'I am rather intimidated', Wyndham wrote, 'by the volume of his diplomatic activities.' These had already been fully recorded, there was room for a literary life, but to attempt this alone would destroy the balance. All this is no doubt true, but I surmise that it was the strong impulsion under which he wrote *Felbrigg* that forced him to set Prior aside.

Felbrigg is, as its sub-title affirms, the story of a house: it is part of the history of English architecture, to be understood not merely in terms of taste, but also of economics. Correspondence between the *building* Windhams and those who served them told the story with remarkable particularity. But the book is much more than this, it is a continuous piece of family history—the Windhams, the Lukins (who took the name of Windham), the Kettons, and the Ketton-Cremers. It serves to show that, though the author was most at home in Norfolk, he was not confined to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The tale opens in the lamentable reign of Henry VI with the ousting of the Felbriggs by a successfully turbulent Windham, principally known to us through the Paston letters. 'It is perhaps unfortunate for his reputation that he was usually on the worst of terms with the Pastons. John Paston was pursuing much the same career of personal aggrandisement himself, and their interests conflicted more than once.' The story comes down through Thomas Windham, who completed the original house in 1624, and through descendants who, fortunately, either enlarged it with taste and judgement, or let it alone. Such a tale must inevitably be dominated by the last of the true Windhams, 'William III', Johnson's friend, a man of exceptional gifts, offset by equally notable self-searchings and vacillations, the Hamlet of his line. By concentrating on the

part of his life which he spent at Felbrigg, Wyndham maintains proportion and balance. Like other writers of family history, he has to reckon with a natural disproportion in his material: the scarcity of early documents, the loquacity of later diarists and letter-writers, but his steady vision of the Norfolk scene gives continuity to the narrative. Reviewers fastened on the scandalous end of William Frederick Windham, who lost his wits (if he had any), and the estate, and to whose burial in the family vault came his last friend, the proprietor of the coach he had driven between Norwich and Cromer; but his part in the tale, though flamboyant, was very small. Future readers will probably dwell on those ample, leisurely chapters of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century history: the world of the South Sea Bubble, of building, and bringing home pictures from the Grand Tour, of the Napoleonic wars and a manual for training the Norfolk militia which began with the Grecian phalanx. But to those who knew Felbrigg and its owners between 1924 and 1969 the last chapter will remain unforgettable.

Norfolk in the Civil War is in more than one sense a turning backward. It is by definition a piece of local history, it returns to the seventeenth century, and it makes use of a considerable number of those essays which had formerly appeared in the 'Norfolk books', as Wyndham called his five collections. These borrowings are scrupulously acknowledged in the Preface, no part of the proceeding is irregular, but it may be thought uncharacteristic. Some articles, for example, 'The King's Journey', from *A Norfolk Gallery*, are reproduced verbatim, with an explanation: 'When a writer has done his best to narrate an event or to describe a human being, he seldom prefers a different choice of words thereafter.' This indeed is true, and yet the more memorably something has been expressed, the harder will be acceptance of this very expression in another context. And since those earlier pieces, whatever their relationship to this last work, could never be called mere drafts, they were memorable. Because I have found the return to Little Gidding somehow disturbing, I venture a further explanation. Wyndham knew, at least after 1966, that he was running against time, 'an antagonist not subject to casualties', and that to recast takes longer than to write. He therefore chose reproduction in preference to what could only be a superficial revision. Moreover, having been persuaded to change his course from a collection of related biographical studies to continuous historical narrative, he was not free to omit any integral part of the story.

The substance of *Norfolk in the Civil War* is for historians to judge, but of the presentation something may be said here. This was stigmatized as 'out of date' in a too prompt review. Writing long ago to a friend about a newly published work, with no reference to himself, Wyndham had observed: 'I thought . . . [it] . . . decidedly good, only a little *too* up-to-date—i.e., it will date badly.' How a work will weather, only time can tell, but it is surely natural for a serious writer to regard literary good manners as a safeguard.

The constant principles of Wyndham's style were consideration for the reader, and appropriateness. It was a sense of fitness, not timidity, which had made him choose his own kind of writing, and hold fast to his choice. His prose was formal, but generally plain—ornate only when occasion warranted; there was very little figurative language, either for use or play. In grave passages it maintained a sober dignity, but there was often scope for his quiet humour and dry wit, especially in what may be called the middle distance: in the remote past, a small part only of character and motive could ever be known, and he was willing to give the benefit of the doubt; of contemporary events he spoke guardedly, for fear of wounding, but the recent past, the late nineteenth century (of which he knew more than most people supposed) was quite another territory. Of a formidable dowager he observes: 'She moved about the district with a retinue of pious nieces and promising curates.' Whatever the mood, his style kept always the traditional rules of politeness: its cadences fell pleasantly on the ear; above all, it was unfailingly lucid. Beyond this, it possessed a quality which is easy to recognize but very hard to define, it was evocative without being allusive. This delighted his American audiences. There was no assumption that you must surely know all the principal Norfolk families, but he could call up a past in which they seemed to move and talk, until you seemed to have known them. His narrative manner conveyed the impression that he was in command of the relevant facts, and was recalling just so much of them as might be necessary for a clear understanding of the people and the situation.

Wyndham was absurdly diffident about his writing. He set too high a value on the technical instruction he had missed, and confessed, with a shy smile, that 'the *ibids* and *op cits* of footnotes daunted him', but his practice was thoroughly professional. He felt himself out of touch with the academic world; yet he was a welcome visitor in his own University and even more at

Cambridge—he was a Fellow Commoner of Christ's, and he had worked much with Mr. and Mrs. Lewis at Farmington and had many friends at Yale. He seemed to himself to belong in no particular category—much like William Windham III, who, in his own estimation, was 'a scholar among politicians, and a politician among scholars'. Indeed, his political opinions were not those of his generation; to be a conservative in the depression of the thirties seemed almost criminal. This difference came to matter less, but his conservatism was never of the fashionable kind: he could not have been a Tory, in the proper sense which requires Whig for complement, since he was no Jacobite. As historian of the Civil War he had, no doubt, his own bias, but his deepest sympathies were always evoked by the moderate men, ground between the stony extremists. For him, Bishop Hall of Norwich was a more moving subject than the broken King. Breaches between friends were a graver matter than hardships or dangers.

Friendship played a big part in Wyndham's life, from his Oxford years on. The modesty in which his diffidence was rooted made him take his friends' work more seriously than his own—the verse which he had himself ceased to write as well as local history, and, beyond their circle, he wanted to know what the young poets were writing. He kept his friendships in repair: with the exception of a Scandinavian excursion, he did not (to my recollection) travel to see places or things, but he would always undertake a journey to meet people. He went to the United States some half-dozen times—the last, after a nearly fatal illness. He had two talents not often found in combination: he was a good host and an easy guest. In the solitary years there may have been something of nostalgia, a sort of generous fantasy, in some of his hospitality: if you could imagine Abbotsford on a sound financial footing, and with all its appointments in irreproachable taste, then you would be prompted to compare Christmas there and at Felbrigg. He thought poorly of those who, like his great-uncle, declined to play the part for which life had cast them, and he played out his own to the end.

Apart from that brief autobiographical passage in the last chapter of his *Felbrigg*, he does not bring himself into his books, but there are some writers (notably biographers) who unconsciously reveal their own scale of values through the qualities they single out for notice. When he attributed to Gray, a shy man, 'sympathy and warmth of understanding' in his friends' distresses, he revealed a salient characteristic of his own. Of

condemnation he was sparing; even malice provoked him to little beyond amused exasperation.

Like many of his Windham and Ketton-Cremer ancestors, he was a notable buyer of books—which he valued for their contents and their associations. He would not rebind the shabby volumes which had come to William Windham from Johnson. He had a way of saying to friends: 'Now this ought really to be in *your* library', and insisting that it should find a home there. It should not be supposed that his friendship was confined to those who shared his 'bookish' tastes; it went out to all his country neighbours, particularly to those living in the four parishes which made up the Felbrigg estate—and happily it was reciprocated. His shy manner and alienation from Norfolk speech were no hindrance, because they realized the essential fact—that he was the same to everyone.

The ruling principle of his life was piety, in three good senses of the term: he preserved the memory of the dead, in his writings and by his care of tangible memorials; he was a cherisher of the family, a devoted son and brother; and he was a faithful Christian and churchman. None of these can be dismissed as irrelevant to my present purpose, because separation is impossible: he was not merely consistent, he was all of a piece throughout.

Wyndham Ketton-Cremer had reckoned up his resources—strength, opportunity and aptitude—and had set his course accordingly, with deliberation and boldness. Of his large and complex undertaking he achieved the greater part—that is, the part he judged most worth achieving, and this surely is a kind of fulfilment.

MARY LASCELLES

My thanks are due to friends of Wyndham Ketton-Cremer who have helped me generously: have told me what they remember of him, and allowed me to read his letters to them. I am particularly grateful to the Ven. Robert Meiklejohn, of Metton; also to Sir Edmund Bacon, K.G., of Raveningham, Sir James Fergusson of Kilkerran, Mr. John Buxton of New College, Mr. James M. Osborn of Yale. Mrs. Tillotson has shared with me her recollections and Wyndham's correspondence with Geoffrey Tillotson. Dr. A. N. L. Munby of King's College, Cambridge, and Mr. John Mottram, of Felbrigg, have enabled me to correct facts and verify impressions.