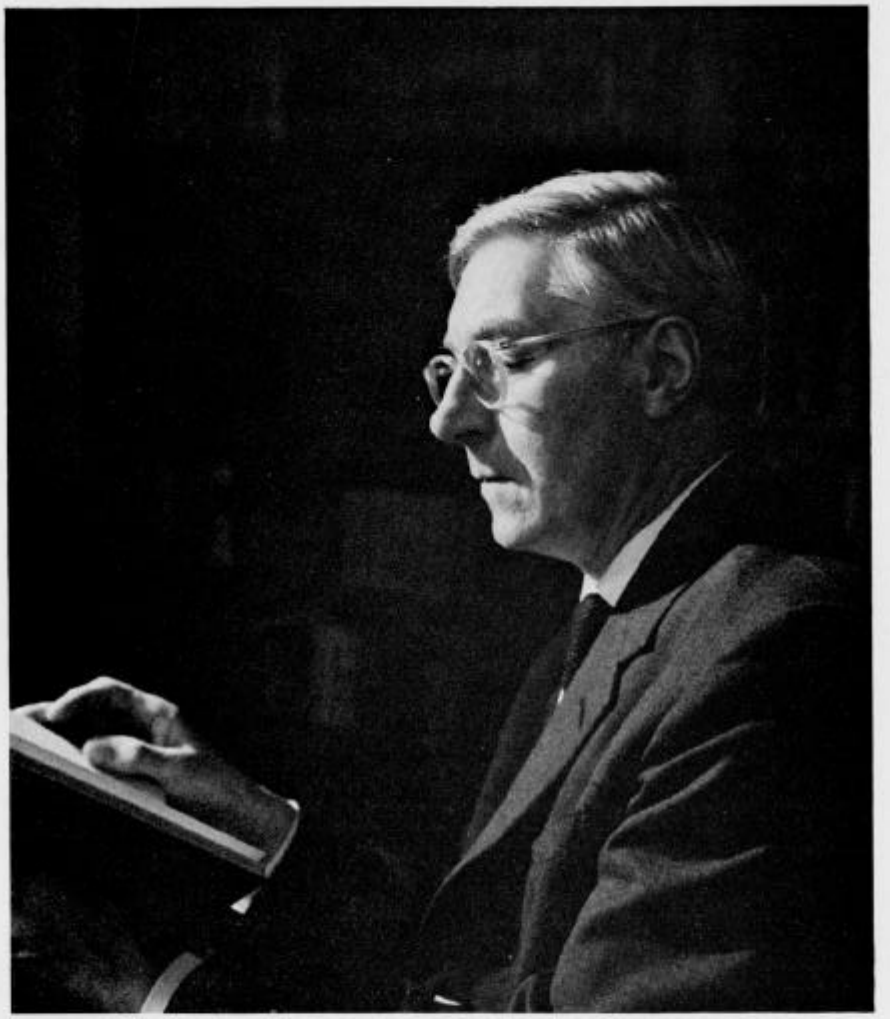
PLATE XXIII



Photograph by Lotte Meitner-Graf, London

GEOFFREY TILLOTSON

GEOFFREY TILLOTSON

1905–1969

GEOFFREY TILLOTSON, who died, still in his prime, on 15 October 1969, was born on 30 June 1905, at Nelson in Lancashire. His parents, John Henry Tillotson and his wife Annie, were natives of Bradford, but had left it in search of better working conditions. Both had left school at ten years old, to work in the woollen mills, and were largely self-educated, with the help of the Congregational chapel. Although they had been married nine years, Geoffrey was their first surviving child. At the end of that year they returned to Yorkshire (Cononley in Craven). In 1909 John Tillotson left the mill and became agent for the Refuge Assurance Company (Skipton), and the family settled at Crosshills, Geoffrey attending the Glusburn Elementary School from 1910. His schoolfellow (from 1914) and lifelong friend, Mr. Thomas Dargue, recalls their upbringing in the strict observances of the Wesleyan Church, and Geoffrey's absorption in music: he began learning the piano at ten years old, the organ three years later. Whether from ignorance of the possibility of a scholarship, or from contentment with music, he remained at the Glusburn school until 1918, when the headmaster, learning that John Tillotson could not afford to send his son to grammar school, gained the interest of Sir John Horsfall, mill-owner and philanthropist, in this promising pupil, and an undertaking that his expenses should be paid. (Geoffrey liked to say that he was the last beneficiary of private patronage.) This head-master, Mr. Kemp, was remembered as a stern disciplinarian, but one who could awake his pupils' response to two poets not usually offered to children, Gray and Cowper.

From 1918 to 1924 Geoffrey attended the Keighley Trade and Grammar School, winning a scholarship for the last four years, his interest still divided between music and literature. By 1920 (a year before the family moved to Skipton), he was cherishing thoughts of Oxford and Balliol, buying second-hand books and haunting public libraries; and, in November 1923, he took the Balliol scholarship examination in English. He obtained, not a scholarship but a place, and a letter of encouragement from Roy Ridley, who was to be his tutor. He went up to Balliol in 1924, with a Major County Scholarship, and took schools in

1927. His tutor, satisfied with his promise and his progress, had recommended him to take a fourth year and work for a B.Litt. His Oxford years, after an initial sense of strangeness, were happy, he was writing much prose and verse, some of the verse being published in *Oxford Poetry*.

In his third year he discovered, to his delight and wonder, the modern Italic hand—which, as an art to practise (not merely to appreciate) was to supersede the piano: no one who had a letter from him, or even an off-print with marginal notes, will forget his handwriting. He recorded the progress of that discovery in his diary, and, more formally, in a contribution to *Calligraphy and Palaeography* (1965), the volume collected for Alfred Fairbank's seventieth birthday: 'Italic Revival: Early Days'. This essay, in which reproductions of letters by celebrated hands sometimes serve as illustrations, and sometimes carry on the narrative, recounts his progress, from fascinated scrutiny of a specimen of Italic seen by chance in a friend's lodgings, through the study of Mrs. Bridges' writing cards and a tract put out by the Society for Pure English, to his establishment within the charmed circle of notable writers of Italic. He had always been interested in handwriting, assiduously copying details from any hand he admired (a 'chaotic practice', he confessed). Now he knew his aim—not merely to 'make a worthy *q*, a *q* as lively as a tadpole', but to take part in the recovery of the Italic hand, under the leadership of his new-found friend, Walter Shewring, and of Stanley Morison, James Wardrop, and Alfred Fairbank himself.

In the autumn of 1927 Geoffrey began work on a thesis for the degree of B.Litt.—his subject, William Browne's *Britannia's Pastorals*; his supervisor, Percy Simpson. To one who essayed to master the technique of research before any guidance was available, and in due course to serve as guide, after increase in numbers had turned the quiet garden of research into a public park, those years of the late nineteen-twenties appear a golden age of graduate studies in Oxford. David Nichol Smith, gathering round him Percy Simpson, George Gordon, Strickland Gibson, and F. P. Wilson, built up a finely organized B.Litt. course. Those taking it in 1927 numbered only sixteen. Moreover, that small company included, besides Geoffrey Tillotson, Kathleen Constable, John Butt, and J. B. Leishman. Looking back even they saw something to be desired, the formality of intercourse belonging to those days hindered them from learning as much as they might have done from one another, but their

subsequent friendships, though of slow growth by present reckoning, were durable and fruitful.

Thus equipped, Geoffrey was thrown on a world which had little use for his gifts and training. Those were cruel years for young graduates seeking admittance to the world of learning and letters. Lecturing at the Leicester College of Technology in 1928, he found himself not only unhappy, but a failure. But his father's faith in him was unshakeable: though John Tillotson's means were small, and though the second son, now at Cambridge on a scholarship, might soon have to face the same adverse circumstances, he determined that Geoffrey should have six months at home, to finish his thesis and try his hand at free-lance literary journalism. Such a plan asked courage and resolution from both, for Mrs. Tillotson was anxious and perplexed. Geoffrey wrote indefatigably in those months of 1929, but it was the completion of the thesis, accepted in March 1930, which half reassured his mother, and wholly proved that he was on his true course. A temporary post at Castleford Grammar School dispelled the fear that he could not teach; his writing won acceptance in *The Times Literary Supplement*, then under the editorship of Bruce Richmond (another golden age), he rode out 1930 with a salary of £70 as Sub-Librarian of the English Library in Oxford, supplemented by a War Memorial Studentship from Balliol and a little teaching, and, after some unsuccessful applications, was appointed, in 1931, Assistant Lecturer at University College London, under C. J. Sisson and R. W. Chambers. The post was humble, much of the teaching was humdrum and security of tenure had still to be won. In London, however, he renewed his friendships with John Butt and Kathleen Constable, now at Bedford College. His marriage to Kathleen in 1933 was the beginning of great happiness and of a splendid literary partnership.

By 1934 Geoffrey Tillotson stood on the threshold of his career, he was now a Lecturer and 'Recognized' Teacher in the University; he had published much in periodicals of high literary standing—too many of them now extinct, and he had begun work on his volume of the Twickenham Pope. A year later he submitted the manuscript of his first book, *On the Poetry of Pope*, to the Clarendon Press. R. W. Chapman passed on to him the reader's report—not unfavourable, but with reservations. For his part, however, if the author should not wish to make the suggested alterations, 'I would rather publish it as it is than see it published elsewhere'. So, with only minor revision,

it came out in 1938. Like more than one first book, it carried a declaration not merely of preference but also of purpose.

As a critic Geoffrey Tillotson was happiest in the part of advocate, even of champion, and his championship was not expressed simply through eulogy. Alike in his books and his teaching, he was concerned to dispel prejudice, to shift the inert weight of false assumptions and unexamined antipathy. For him, Pope was an undervalued poet because his poetry had never been read with the right kind and degree of attention. Criticism had entangled itself helplessly with biography. (It should be remembered that R. K. Root's account of Pope's *poetical* career came out a little later in that same year, and the 'vivid intuitive sympathy' which Geoffrey acclaimed in Edith Sitwell's book had been incidental to a reading of Pope's life.) He was not himself drawn to biography, it was the poetry that mattered, but this was never exhibited in a vacuum. Letters were employed as illustrations, but far beyond this ran a purpose of historical criticism: to study the language and versification through a fresh interpretation of the critical terms then in use, their full meaning and application. Never inattentive to Johnson, he was not content merely to quote him, but to make sure, for himself and his readers, what such terms as correctness and sweetness really signified, and can still convey. Nor was he satisfied with the nineteenth-century tradition of criticism which acknowledged Pope's formidable excellence as a satirist, and left the matter there. With a salute to Thomas Warton, he proposed to rate the poems of sentiment on a level with the satires, and to claim for Pope command of emotional response through the medium of sensuous beauty. (John Tillotson had early noted his son's love of beauty.) Habitually preferring musical to pictorial analogy, he likened Pope to Mozart—as he had likened a perfect Italic hand to the music of Bach. And if, in these claims, there is perhaps some buoyant extravagance, the book is still the best introduction to Pope for the young student who has been taught to distrust him; while, for the wiser reader, it may define and clarify what he has been too ready to take for granted: the rational basis of poetic usage in Pope's time. Meanwhile, Geoffrey Tillotson was accumulating the knowledge he would need as editor of Pope.

In 1939 U.C.L. was 'evacuated' to Aberystwyth. Geoffrey remained in London, looking for a war job, and, in the spring of 1940, was appointed Assistant Principal in the Ministry of Aircraft Production—which, after a few months in Harrogate,

returned to London for the rest of the war. It did not seem strange, in that strange time, to get a letter from the Ministry of Aircraft Production, about poetic diction. This was not the detachment of indifference; the Tillotsons were keenly aware of the political implications of events, even before these declared themselves, it signified a capacity for concentration on the thing in hand, which was presently to increase as Geoffrey found himself doing much of his reading in air-raid shelters. Meanwhile, in 1940, his volume of the Twickenham Pope appeared.

I have often heard it claimed, and I think it may be true, that to edit is the proper function of the literary scholar, and the true test of his scholarship. It is certainly a disinterested and an arduous service to the commonwealth of letters. And, whereas the earlier editors of English texts would undertake the whole works of an author, discovering as they went along how to adapt the tools of classical scholarship to their purpose, those very tools have now become so numerous that the labours of a team may be required—and we, unlike the natural scientists, are not trained to work in multiple harness. Geoffrey was, however, happy in that the general editor of the Twickenham Pope was his friend, John Butt, whose own volume, the *Imitations of Horace*, had come out in 1939. Geoffrey's—the second—contained *The Rape of the Lock*, the Chaucerian Imitations, *Eloisa to Abelard*, and the *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*. In such an assembly, *The Rape of the Lock* will take pride of place, offering the principal challenge to the editor.

For the proper elucidation of the poem, three things were necessary: Geoffrey Tillotson had to develop his former study of literary usage into that notable essay on the conventions of mock-heroic which forms part of the introduction, he had to broaden his view of social usage and show, particularly in the notes, its bearing on the behaviour of the characters in this little story, and, not content to indicate the habits, customs, and assumptions that Pope was satirizing, he must identify the persons and events. This identification entailed a full and particular account of the Roman Catholic circle of the Fermors and Petres and Pope's more familiar friends, calling for the organization of a great number of disparate items of information. It was fortunate that this editor had a light hand and a natural gaiety of spirit, to save the poem from sinking under commentary and critical appraisal. Offering both versions of it in his text, he illuminated the fine proportions of the earlier

while acknowledging the skill with which the later had been amplified. Both were rich in the quality he prized—'serious technical care'.

In 1942, the University, on U.C.L.'s recommendation, signalized the distinction of his work by conferring on him a Readership *in absentia*. In 1944 he was appointed to the Chair of English Language and Literature at Birkbeck College. Since the teaching at Birkbeck was in those days confined to week-ends, he combined it with work at the Ministry of Aircraft Production until he was released early in 1945. Apart from six months in America and one period of illness, he held this post to the end of his life.

At Birkbeck Geoffrey Tillotson built up a remarkable school of graduate studies, but, since his undergraduate pupils might be in their middle thirties, his approach to their several claims must have been much the same, differing rather between one individual and another than between the two categories. He welcomed whole-heartedly the Birkbeck *idea*—which might almost be called the idea of the second chance, since he was equally concerned with those who had missed a university education, and those who had missed their mark in other universities. He did not forget by how narrow a margin he had achieved his, and he was mindful of many who had never found fulfilment. There was no sentimentality in this, he was too strenuously concerned with the quality of his students' reading. I remember his arguing that, beyond the four years which the University allowed them, no concession should be made for their peculiar difficulties. This (apart from his habit of playful teasing) might be understood as the manner of a commander who, having to conduct a hazardous campaign with scratch troops, deliberately addresses them as though they were a crack regiment. (He would not have chosen this analogy himself.) Thus he asked of men and women who came to him at the end of a full working day 'accurate, sensitive, and disciplined reading of works of imagination'—and got it. His favourite method in teaching was to concentrate 'on the major works of a great author for several weeks, examining them in detail from various literary, historical and linguistic aspects'. Pressure of numbers, so daunting to those who practise a spontaneous and personal way of teaching, did not quench his spirit. Indeed, reckoning that (such was the singularity of Birkbeck) this might be the applicants' only remaining chance, he welcomed an increase. It called forth 'his unique gift as a teacher of seminars

containing large numbers of students. . . . He made it seem easy, because he had an intuitive capacity for divining on the spot just what would stimulate a particular group as a whole, and so he invariably inspired many to think and talk instead of only a few.' That he was approachable must have been immediately evident, but, beyond the spontaneous and equable friendliness and the youthful appearance, his students found an active goodwill and helpfulness, which did not lessen after they had gone down. With his help, they had grasped opportunity, and he wanted to know what they were making of it. Innumerable letters record his kindliness and generosity.

From January to June of 1948 Geoffrey was visiting lecturer at Harvard, where they would have been glad to keep him. In the fifties he was engaged in lecturing tours in Europe. At home he never declined an invitation to address any literary club or society, however small; and none of those who have experienced the uncertain hospitality of these little assemblies will underrate his altruism.

Throughout these years of strenuous teaching he wrote and published much. He took his full share of the burden of serious reviewing and contributed to learned periodicals. Ever since those early days of free-lance journalism, he had been a prolific writer, but he was never a mere Sunday-newspaper journalist. (I intend no disparagement of real, professional journalism, having in mind only those writers who, from the security of a chair, canvass issues thrown up by the day's uncertain turmoil with an air of judicial finality.) His subjects were chosen for their intrinsic importance; it is difficult to imagine him writing on a trifling matter, or a merely frivolous author—if any such there be. His collected essays and reviews appeared in three volumes: *Essays in Criticism and Research* (1942); *Augustan Studies* (1961); and, with Kathleen Tillotson, *Mid-Victorian Studies* (1965). The prefatory verses to the first of these show the pressures of the time. The Preface sets forth his ideal of historical criticism: that which can recover for us the work as it first lay completed under the author's eye. The historical critic undertakes his unpopular task 'because he believes that a good author is worth understanding in the sense he intended rather than in the sense that has been foisted on him simply by his having been tough enough to go on existing'. The range of subject in this volume is a reminder of his early interest and training in Elizabethan literature. He was to contribute the Bibliography to the volume with which Kathleen Tillotson and Bernard Newdigate

completed J. W. Hebel's edition of the works of Michael Drayton.

Some of the published work of these years may eventually come to seem provisional, the off-shoot of vigorous teaching. Geoffrey was a remarkable extempore speaker, and it has the fluidity of lively talk. He used extensive illustration in his lectures, reading a long passage so well that it upheld his argument, but on the printed page it can overweight it. His little book on Thackeray becomes an anthology. He aimed at provoking discussion, and his style has an open mesh, as though he were leaving space for participation. Indeed, he shunned dogma, and did not always allow enough regard to opinions reached with difficulty and held with proportionate tenacity. He was habitually more interested in the process than the product, and was able, with entire unselfconsciousness, to record his own development simply as that of an individual. He would pursue a favourite subject over the years, taking up contingent themes and returning to recapitulate in successive articles. Thus, his views on eighteenth-century poetic diction weave in and out of the first two volumes of essays, and elsewhere. He was of course invited to review books on subjects in which he had made his mark, and so Pope recurs in these collections. Johnson's *Rasselas* was a prime favourite, and he completed four studies of it, one of them still to be published.

The third volume (*Mid-Victorian Studies*) manifests an important expansion of Geoffrey's interests, which had begun some eighteen years before, when he was invited, with Kathleen, to undertake the massive Victorian volume which the plan of the *Oxford History of English Literature* required. Evidence of this fresh activity is traceable in the several acknowledgements prefixed to her *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* and to her published work on Dickens. It emerges in *Thackeray the Novelist* (1954), and, more vigorously, in the edition, with Kathleen, of *Vanity Fair* (1965), and, with Donald Hawes, the volume on Thackeray contributed to the *Critical Heritage* series in 1968.

Thackeray, like Pope, roused Geoffrey to eager championship of an author whom he found neglected and misunderstood. Just as he had formerly investigated the mistaken view of poetic diction which impeded approach to Pope, so he now bent himself to examine afresh the practice of 'authorial presence' in the novel; and this theme, in its turn, threads its way through his critical thinking, until his contribution to the memorial volume for John Butt. As before, he takes the bull by the horns: Thackeray

is not to be excused for acquiescing in an obsolete fashion of story-telling; he is to be justified for accepting and developing a perennial method. 'The critic who likes Thackeray's novels must show that they are great without having their commentary shorn away; indeed he must show that they are greater because of their commentary.' He must look at his author squarely, not with the oblique glance of invidious comparison: 'It is a law of criticism, however numerous the exceptions to it, that one can see truly only what one sees in and for itself; that a contrast seized on as handy, though perhaps not so certainly a comparison, usually depends for its existence on the falsification of the minor term.' The Tillotsons' edition of *Vanity Fair* exemplified the recent recognition—it reaches back only to R. W. Chapman's Jane Austen—that an English novelist may need and deserve textual care. Indeed, the novel, more urgently than other literary forms, will come to require social commentary for the full understanding even of its language. Moreover, the nineteenth century affords ample sources for such comments: once the periodical reviewers had advanced beyond the practice of re-telling the story they were bound to throw some light on the social assumptions behind it, and the letter-writers would presently take up the argument—while the material stood a better chance of survival than ever before. The documents collected in *Thackeray: the Critical Heritage* proved rich beyond expectation; for, as the editors admit with rueful candour, the first reviewers very often had something worth saying, and were given room to say it. *Vanity Fair* asks an exceptional range and density of editorial care. In addition to the textual and other problems posed by the Victorian practice of publishing in parts there are the historical references, especially for the Waterloo chapters. All these matters are made clear, and a measure of the work's formidable greatness conveyed—that sense of inevitability which is not very common in English novels.

Pope and Human Nature was a book which seemed to come into existence of its own volition. Its predecessor, *On the Poetry of Pope*, had quickly gone out of print, but the conditions of that time—government work at the Press and shortage of printers—made reprinting impossible. By the end of the war it was long overdue, but the time for a re-issue was likewise past, and Geoffrey, always a scrupulous corrector and reviser, set about overhauling his first book for a second edition in 1947—although he was then committed to Harvard for six months of the coming year and to the *Oxford History of English Literature* in the foreseeable

future. Initially there was to have been a thorough rewriting, with considerable *addenda* for which he had material in hand; but by the spring of 1950 it became clear that another book on Pope was asking to be written. The first must therefore be reprinted, with no more than minor corrections and a new Preface, explaining the situation and promising 'a new work' within the next few years. In 1955 this other book still dwelt in his mind as a 'sequel', but by June 1956 it had come to be called a 'companion volume': the very title underwent many changes indicative of gradual development from a supplementary to a complementary work, and of a deepening interest in Pope's moral philosophy. By 1958, when the book appeared, it may have lost something in respect of coherence, but it had gained much in range of reference. The Twickenham Pope was now complete—Geoffrey had meanwhile revised his volume—and Sherburn's great edition of the correspondence had appeared. This was not the only direction in which Geoffrey's conception of his subject had grown, he had edited a selection from Newman's writings (1957), and published other work in this new field of interest, and the outcome is here apparent. Newman as moralist, with the religious string muted, affords a counterpoise to eighteenth-century systems of morality. And, still in that familiar century, there were further explorations to be made: man's position in the scheme of things being a topic which moral and natural philosophers could then discuss in approximately the same language, with the poets ready to offer themselves as interpreters.

When Geoffrey and Kathleen Tillotson accepted the invitation to write that Victorian volume for *O.H.E.L.*, it was on the understanding that, even after the completion of his engagement to lecture at Harvard, there would be some eighteenth-century undertakings to fulfil. These multiplied, as such things will. Moreover, his interest and delight in Thackeray, growing out of this Victorian reading, developed into a book. Nevertheless, Geoffrey was at work on the Oxford volume, steadily and indefatigably, until, and into, his last illness, not merely reading for it, but drafting and writing. The plan necessarily underwent changes, and, although the partnership between the two authors remained constant, the balance shifted: Geoffrey, by amicable mutual consent, gradually took over the writing. He framed successive plans, organizing the mass of material under 'themes', refashioning these after four years' experience of their practicability, and eventually (in 1965) constructing chapters

on single authors and groups of authors, based on a big introduction. By 1954 the formidable scope of the subject had impelled the Tillotsons to plead for two volumes, but this proposal took fourteen years to obtain approval, and the change of general editor entailed further delays. When all was once more in train, Geoffrey was too ill for further work.

There is sadness in this story, unless you hold that it is better to proceed as though life and even health were inexhaustible than to achieve a circumscribed success. The first of the two volumes for which permission had been given was submitted to the Press in February of 1969. It consisted of an introduction, twelve long chapters on great authors and a bibliography. The outstanding merit of the work was acknowledged. Regarded rather as criticism than as literary history, it was of very high quality indeed, the writing fresh and distinctive, the range of reading impressive. But, in the context, it was too long. The second volume had scarcely advanced beyond a draft when Geoffrey died, and no other hand than his could complete it. The verdict of the Delegates, which came in March 1970, was a disappointment but not a surprise, the volume could not make part of the *Oxford History of English Literature*. We may however hope that, with Kathleen Tillotson's revision, it will be published as an independent book. Of the projected contribution to that ill-starred series, the bibliographies remain as a legacy to some future writer.

Thus the hopeful labours of those twenty years and more would seem to have left an incomplete memorial. It is, however, by the work that he has enabled others to do that a great teacher may be longest remembered. Geoffrey was, in all he undertook, an *initiator*. By his gift for evoking questions and provoking discussion, he could transform a lecture audience into a group of disputants. His work with individuals was equally seminal, and it was not confined to formal teaching. He chose his research assistants, for example, with insight, and gave them a training that was at once rigorous and exhilarating: he could be as exacting as he was gentle. It was the survival, into an alien age, of the old system of apprenticeship to a skilled craft. Birkbeck necessarily limited his contact with pupils of the usual undergraduate age—Harvard had shown how happy his relationship with those could be. But indeed he was at home with people of all ages, provided only that they cared for good literature. He was a Governor of the City Literary Institute and President of the Charles Lamb Society.

For these arduous and pleasant labours there was a secure foundation in happiness at home. Geoffrey's family relationships in boyhood had been happy. The Tillotsons adopted two sons. Their own shared interests and sympathies were inexhaustible. Though never as robust as his appearance suggested and his friends assumed, he was a great walker, even in London, and their brief holidays were the occasion for excursions on foot, usually in the lake country. Their working life was in the fullest sense a partnership. Teaching at Birkbeck began at about the time of day when it was drawing to an end at Bedford, and Geoffrey never failed to ring his wife up in that interval. All they wrote was concerted together. Here were the springs of his joy in success and fortitude in illness. It was a good life, although too short.

MARY LASCELLES

NOTE. This memoir could not have been written without Mrs. Tillotson's help and encouragement. My debt to her is of such dimensions that I should rather call it a work of collaboration, but that the responsibility must rest with me.

I acknowledge with thanks permission to quote from Professor W. A. Armstrong's address at the Memorial Service, and to draw on the recollections of Professor Harold Brooks and the Academic Board of Birkbeck College.