



N. J. WILLIAMS

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NEVILLE JOHN WILLIAMS

1924-1977

NEVILLE WILLIAMS was born at Kenninghall, Norfolk, on 31 August 1924, the second child and only son of John James Williams and Gertrude May Sworn. His parents, both born in the year 1893, had both trained as teachers, respectively at Goldsmith's and St. Gabriel's Colleges. He thus had the good fortune to come of a family neither opulent nor deprived, one in which education was valued and its vigorous pursuit demanded by any professional career. A further early advantage appeared in his congenial involvement from infancy with the Church of England. He enjoyed a happy childhood alongside his sister Patricia, to whom he felt very close throughout his whole life, and who was eventually to marry John Howard Churchill, now dean of Carlisle. Neville's earlier forbears make a pleasantly variegated group. His father's father had died very young in Dublin, being described in his death certificate as an 'artist in stained glass'. His paternal grandmother came of a family settled for centuries at Melksham, Wiltshire: she remarried, her second husband being a master-printer Thomas Murcutt, who worked both for *The Times* and for Macmillan's. Neville remembered him vividly as a staunch churchman and an amateur musician. Neville's mother's family, the Sworns, had emigrated from Denmark two generations back and maintained a long medical tradition, one of its doctors being still in practice at Winchester. His three older brothers' medical training having depleted the family finances, Neville's grandfather William Augustus Sworn was debarred from that career, and pushed by his family into business. In fact his real interests always lay in music: he sang in the Temple Church choir, became organist to Paddington Church, and published various ballads, settings of the Canticles, Anglican chants, and anthems in the style of Stainer. As a boy Neville had a great regard for Augustus, whose large collection of music descended to him. In whatever sense we 'inherit' such proclivities, Neville's early passion for music must have derived in large part from this source. In any event it looked like providing his own career until his entry into Oxford.

Neville's father was by origin and preference a Londoner. A Liberal by conviction, he never paraded his politics, but he did

serve as honorary general secretary of the London Teachers' Association, a Union later to be merged into the NUT. Aware that many years might elapse before he was assigned the headship of an LCC School, he moved out in 1920 to Kenninghall, which also offered a dubious perquisite in the antiquated schoolhouse where Neville was born. Twelve years later, wanting to be nearer his London friends, John Williams took a similar post at Chalfont St. Peter, where Neville enjoyed greater amenities, including a garden large enough for cricket practice and his own boat on the adjacent River Misbourne. His mother exercised a continuing influence upon his development. She had spent her own schooldays at Canterbury, loved cathedral cities, and remained a devout and regular worshipper in the High Anglican tradition. In the main she had taught six-year-old children and held 'no nonsense' views on early literacy. If a child could not read at the proper age, it showed a want of patience and skill in the teacher! As an incidental bequest she transmitted her Scandinavian blonde hair and pink complexion to Neville, and through him to her grandchildren.

At Chalfont St. Peter, Neville had to attend the school of which his father was head, a situation not wholly to the taste of either. Though an industrious child, he was often in trouble for messy written work, while he made slow progress in mathematics, his father's preferred subject. Like so many boys he was liberated by a marked early talent in one subject. He had in fact started piano lessons and choir-singing at the age of five, and he soon attracted the attention of the organist at Chalfont St. Peter, who in turn aroused the interest of a distinguished colleague at the neighbouring church of All Saints: M. K. Andrews, later a Fellow of New College, Oxford. The two persuaded his parents that he should try for a choristership; and though regarded as too young for acceptance by Eton and New College, he was eventually placed first in the annual competition of 1935 at Oxford Cathedral Choir School. Once there, he enjoyed life to the full under the musical guidance of Dr Thomas Armstrong, who imbued him with the ambition to become thoroughly professional and 'not another of those damn amateurs'. Though in retrospect Neville could remember doing little formal work apart from music and Latin, he began in that superb setting of Oxford Cathedral and Christ Church, the former Cardinal College, to develop his endless fascination with Wolsey's century. His interests broadened further from the time of his entry in 1938 into Merchant Taylors' School,

London. Nevertheless, music still took first place. Alongside organ lessons from Frank Watson Hardy, he was soon running the School's musical society, which had already helped to produce several professional musicians. His career had not yet been mapped out, while the advent of war brought further distractions in the form of OTC and Home Guard training. Shortly before he left Merchant Taylors he was called upon to be Head of School. But amid all these pressures the balance of his interests was beginning to change. He began to doubt whether he possessed the superlative musical talents demanded by a notable career in that subject. Despite his good Latin he had begun Greek too late to make a first-rate classic. On the other hand in 1941 he won five prizes in essay competitions, mostly historical, so he dropped Greek, joined the Special History class and took a couple of shots at Oxford history scholarships, one of them a near miss. But alongside these attempts he also entered for and won an award at St. Edmund Hall—but it was an organ Exhibition!

Having thus gained a footing in the University, he resolved not to accept the normal two terms of deferment of military service, but to join the RNVR. Early in 1943 he went off to train at Fareham, then did sea service on a minelayer off Zealand before coming back to the OCTU based at Lancing. As yet too young to become a Sub-Lieutenant, he emerged in February 1944 as a midshipman and was posted to a minesweeper which operated from Portland and Plymouth, and often acted as an escort vessel in the Channel approaches. His arduous duties as a navigating officer concentrated his mind wonderfully; but the only war story I ever heard him tell arose from the fact that he became the first Englishman to land in 1945 on Alderney. Here he received the surrender of the occupying force on VE Day, plus one. It was low tide as he approached a somewhat obscure situation and a boat had to be lowered, leaving him to climb over 30 feet of iron ladder at the jetty. A few steps from the top he suddenly realized he had forgotten his revolver, and amid a certain mutual embarrassment the German commander found himself surrendering to a very junior and unarmed officer, arising from the sea somewhat out of breath. There followed some peaceful but not uneventful months as his ship moved around between the Cuxhaven and Norway engaged in mine clearance on the Dogger Bank. He passed his spare time by compiling, entirely from memory, an extensive and more or less publishable anthology of verse.

Demobilized in July 1946 Neville entered St. Edmund Hall in the Michaelmas Term and took his final decision to read History, even though he still played for chapel services, ran the musical society, and sang once again under Thomas Armstrong in the Bach Choir. Faced by History Finals at the end of only seven terms, he incurred a great debt to George Ramsay, one of the finest and most laborious tutors in the Oxford of that day. Neville preserved in later life a deep regard for the Hall and became a keen worker for the Aularian Association. Though in 1948 he missed the expected First, the margin was very narrow, and he was at once encouraged to undertake research by his examiners Vivian Galbraith and C. T. Atkinson, neither of them a readily impressionable character. Thus he carved out his D.Phil. thesis on the maritime trade of the East Anglian ports during the sixteenth century. At first he was placed under my own supervision and then, when I left Oxford, under the far more appropriate guidance of Bruce Wernham. From the first I found great pleasure in his company, while concerning the Port Books and other voluminous but hitherto almost unworked documents at the Public Record Office, he soon taught me far more than I could teach him. I can only hope that in return I helped him to realize the deep significance of regional and local studies to the history of Tudor England.

Even before completing his doctorate he had articles accepted by the *English Historical Review* and the *Economic History Review*. Though he never published his thesis as a whole, portions of it emerged in at least four articles and in his book *Thomas Howard, Fourth Duke of Norfolk*. In September 1950, two years before its completion, he secured—somewhat to his own surprise—a permanent post at the PRO. Despite his marked success in that austere institution, I sometimes thought that his outgoing personality and remarkable gifts of exposition would have suited him even better to the career of a university teacher. But in the event the PRO did provide no small scope for these versatile gifts, since over a period of nearly 23 years he served it in almost every possible capacity.

At first his chief mentor was Harold Johnson, who enlarged his expertise by giving him medieval tasks. He also did odd jobs, and rather more, for the august Hilary Jenkinson, at least two of whose articles might just as properly be included in Neville's own bibliography. Indeed, he received ample schooling in the selflessness which the PRO demands of its learned staff. His earlier years as an Assistant Keeper were spent largely

along with Kenneth Timings in the research rooms, where they helped the users and answered innumerable letters. He also worked upon various editorial projects concerning the Port Books, Exchequer Miscellanea, State Papers, and Patent Rolls of the reign of Elizabeth I. He became the first Secretary of the Advisory Council on Public Records set up by the Act of 1948. Appointed in 1967 to the post of Records Administration Officer, he at once became involved in the implementation of the new 30-year rule: his former colleagues are agreed that his wide contacts with the academic world and his general flair for public relations did much to improve the links between the PRO, the government departments and the users. Quite naturally, he hoped to succeed Harold Johnson on the latter's retirement from the Keepership in December 1969, but in the event the top job went to Jeffrey Ede, who at once appointed Neville as his Deputy Keeper. In his capacity he had much to do with the planning of the huge and complex Office at Kew; but despite happy personal relations with his chief and his colleagues, he did not enjoy the Deputy Keepership nearly so much as his previous task. In his own words, 'It was too wide an empire to administer properly.' Altogether, he felt stale and quite ready for a change of scene by 1973, when the British Academy offered him its Secretaryship in succession to Derek Allen. Knowing that the Academy would also demand great labour and varied attainments, he readily accepted our offer.

At this point I must interpose a short account of Neville's personal life and literary career during his years at the PRO. What he achieved as a person was securely based upon a felicitous marriage and a stable family life. When he went to the PRO he was again living with his parents at Chalfont St. Peter, and serving as organist in the church where he had once been a choirboy. 'It was', he wrote later on, 'a way of saying thank you to the Church of England for what it had done for me musically and educationally. I kept on this quite demanding task until I married.' He first met Betty King, then a social worker, in November 1952: he proposed to her on 21 February following and they were married at Wimbledon on 5 September. Again in his own words: 'What a wonderful decision, for she has given me so much support and happiness in everything.' They spent their early years in a small house at Northwood, where three of their four children were born, but wanting more space and easier access to central London, they moved early in 1961 to a largish Edwardian family house in Hampstead

Garden Suburb. Here Neville developed his secondary career as a historical writer with a wide readership in view. Yet alongside it, he never abandoned his services to local history. After a good deal of research within his native Norfolk, he allowed this side of his interests to shift south and west. For seven years he served as honorary editor of the Wiltshire Record Society in succession to Ralph Pugh. He also edited various volumes for the Surrey Record Society and for the Warwickshire County Council, the latter (in which Harold Johnson collaborated) on Quarter Sessions records in the late seventeenth century. As an editor Neville was competent, but perhaps he lacked the supreme patience demanded by greatness in this field. Editing documents proved no relief from his working day, which ran in closely similar grooves. All the time he really wanted to write for the many rather than edit for the few. Almost by way of a joke, he compiled a history of cosmetics, published by Longmans in 1957: it received some favourable notices, but did not sell so widely as anticipated. Two years later he had better luck with *Contraband Cargoes*, which, with the aid of a laudatory review by Jack Lambert in the *Sunday Times*, rapidly sold out. Then Longman's amazed him by failing to print a second edition, so he removed to Barrie and Jenkins, where he developed a great regard for its chief, Leopold Ullstein. They published a collection of short pieces: *Knaves and Fools* (1959); *Royal Residences of Great Britain* (1960); and a book on piracy, *Captains Outrageous* (1961). Neville was then less pleased with their treatment of his biography of the fourth Duke of Norfolk (1964), and though he honoured his agreement to edit for them a series of chronologies, he moved his main outlet to Sir George Weidenfeld. This new alliance produced several attractively written and well-illustrated volumes, including *Elizabeth I, Queen of England* (1967); *Henry VIII and his Court* (1971); and *All the Queen's Men* (1972). With the second of these books, Neville broke into the best-seller league, since it sold nearly 200,000 copies in hardback and then achieved further distribution in the series *Cardinal Books*. It lacked the originality of Lacy Baldwin-Smith's interpretation published about the same time, and its functions are more limited than those of the standard biography by Jack Scarisbrick. All the same, I myself remember finding it compulsively readable, since it not only brought to life the whole milling crowd of courtiers, but also exposed some unfamiliar aspects of the King himself. With the royalties from his *Henry VIII* Neville bought a holiday home at Ryall, near Bridport. As he fre-

quently stated, these illustrated books owed a good deal to Weidenfeld's art editor Margaret Willis, his own pictorial enthusiasm and expertise being limited to portraiture. For the same firm he also wrote the pilot volumes in the series *Kings and Queens* and *Great Lives*. These were respectively *The Life and Times of Elizabeth I* (1972) and *Francis Drake* (1973). To the former series he also contributed his *Life and Times of Henry VII* (1973). Most of the Tudor volumes were also published in the United States by MacMillan of New York. Meantime, under heavy pressure from Barrie, he produced the two voluminous handbooks, *The Chronology of the Modern World, 1763-1965* (1966) and *The Chronology of the Expanding World* (1969). As one would expect under these hectic conditions, there were too many slips in both volumes, but later editions enabled the compiler to iron out most of the faults. The original scope and lay-out of the volumes were Neville's own inventions, while he also insisted upon the enormous indices. He himself thought his best book to be *The Cardinal and the Secretary* (1975), a comparative analysis of the contrasting personalities and careers of Henry VIII's two great ministers. Besides being so smoothly written, this little work displays some penetrating insights and a cool avoidance of strain: it provides at the very least a pleasant introduction to some complex themes. Of course, some formidable underpinning was available to him—most especially from the labours of Geoffrey Elton and his disciples. In the same year Weidenfeld also published another illustrated and versatile survey, *The Sea Dogs*. Neville's last work was a long chapter which I asked him to write when I came to edit for Thames and Hudson that opulent collection *The Courts of Europe* (1977). Needless to say, he contributed the Tudor chapter to this international survey. Briefly, but without any sense of haste, it synthesizes his writings in that field, and I cannot help thinking it the most perfect piece he ever wrote. At all events it compared well with companion-essays by several outstanding specialists, and more than one reviewer placed it among the best items in the collection. In short, Neville did fulfill his ambition to write extensively for the intelligent general reader. He was not the first Record Office official to experience this vocation, and I suppose that inside many a would-be Hilary Jenkinson there is also a would-be Arthur Bryant, struggling to get free. Yet certainly I do not recall any professional archivist who has accomplished the dichotomy upon a comparable scale.

How will posterity judge this mass of semi-popular works

based upon their author's sound if not profoundly original scholarship? Surely not by the pallid standards of those who venture upon four or five articles in a decade, and who would rather teach sixty people in sheltered tutorials than 60,000 by writing a sound, lucid book on some broad field. Or to put the point more charitably, let us at least agree that in the house of historiography there are many mansions! It does remain true that most of this work lies not far from some heavily beaten tracks; again, that it might have been improved by some broader European perspectives. It hardly seeks major reinterpretations of the sixteenth century, and its strength does not lie in large-scale social ideas. In short, Neville Williams was both a man of learning and an able writer, yet he would never have claimed that he fused together into any single master-work those two distinct elements of his mind: the fundamental research of the scholar, the breadth and humanity of the man of letters. All the same, one has come to see that his 'popular' books deserve reading by specialists as well as by amateurs. At frequent intervals the former will encounter a passage which diverges from the conventional graces—some episode from an unfamiliar book, or perhaps some new insight upon Tudor administration gleaned directly from manuscript archives. Whatever the case, this generous and attractive body of writing will continue to be read with pleasure and enrichment for many years to come. Moreover, its sheer extent and range make it an astonishing monument of two decades in the life of a heavily burdened public official: he did it all in the evenings and weekends when most people are seeking relaxation, and he did it without the aid of study-leaves, sabbatical years, and research fellowships.

Neville was most adaptable to changing situations, and doubtless each Fellow of the Academy saw a different facet during his brief but fruitful three-and-a-half years of office. Not long before his death, he told me, with an intensity he seldom showed, how deeply he had become devoted to the Academy, and how thus far he had enjoyed every moment of his time at Burlington House. In all quarters, the feeling proved reciprocal. And though he so quickly settled into a background very different from that of the Record Office, it is fair to add that he had already served exacting committees and written memoirs on complicated subjects; and that he was also no stranger to budgets and accounts. Always urbane and unflappable, yet involved with manifest enthusiasm in each one of our fast-expanding functions, he will be remembered by the Fellowship

for his complete accessibility, for the unfailing good manners and zeal with which he sought to further their innumerable objectives. He did not relinquish his private reading and writing: in retrospect one supposes that he must have overworked, or rather continued that habit of overwork which his rapid sequence of books would suggest. However outwardly cool and even leisurely, Neville had always driven himself hard: it was his natural habit and he enjoyed moving at full throttle. Gregarious and sociable, he liked conversation as much as he liked the labour of his study. In various senses these last years formed a period of prosperity both official and personal. He held an important office and enjoyed a large readership. The birth of his first grandchild gave him immense pleasure: so, for equally obvious reasons, did the decision of his son Guy to make a full-time career in music.

In autumn 1976, just before his first coronary thrombosis, he insisted on accompanying an Academy delegation (consisting of the Assistant Secretary [Overseas], Michael Evans, and myself) on a visit to the Soviet Academy of Sciences, with the top officials of which we debated many issues and negotiated what should prove the most important of our Academy's many recent international agreements for the exchange of scholars. Both in Moscow and in Leningrad he obviously charmed groups of people he had never met before, people concerning whose outlook and culture he had little close knowledge. Quintessentially English he may have seemed, yet his antennae were long and sensitive: they account for no little part of his success both at the Record Office and at the Academy. At the end of the year his recovery from the first attack seemed rapid, and he was soon wanting to take up aspects of his work appropriate to the situation. Like his predecessor, the admirable Derek Allen, he had a strong interest in our Schools overseas and was always seeking to learn more about their problems and opportunities. Since he was already committed to visit the School at Nairobi, this seemed to him a flexible task during convalescence, especially since he could be accompanied by his wife. Nevertheless a few hours after their arrival on 29 January 1977 he was overtaken by a second attack and died almost instantaneously. The next day we found that he had written out a memoir concerning his family and his career: though brief it contained exactly the information required to complete this present memoir. The Fellowship, together with numerous friends from various walks of life, formed a large and distinguished

congregation at the service of remembrance and thanksgiving held on Saturday, 7 May, in St. James's Church, Piccadilly.

In Neville Williams one finds the very model of an all-rounder who, so far from relapsing into a series of amateurisms, had a wide range of genuine specialisms. Musician, archivist, historical researcher and writer, editor, and biographer, he resembled the versatile men of his own sixteenth century; yet the whole character in its integrity, its unforced and natural *pietas*, excelled the sum of its many parts. For many of his friends his premature death must have seemed yet another of those inscrutable events which continue to test belief in an acceptable universe. Yet one thing I can add with confidence: that his own Christian faith would have stood quite unmoved, even had he foreseen this hard fate. Standing upon the same firm basis of hope and belief, his life displayed nothing lurid or tormented, few quirks and foibles. Yet his cautious judgements were lit by a quick apprehension; his straightness did not lapse into squareness; a ready sense of humour pervaded his tact; his goodness always wore a human face. By temperament a gradualist, he was always preparing rational adaptation to change. He acted on the belief that in a society which still clings to gradualism a constructive life cannot arise from its fertility in devising brilliant but unpredictable schemes, any more than from its repetitive length and its multiplication of conventional achievements. He steered his life well between these limits: that it was amply redeemed by its ever-considerate yet ever-strenuous virtue, which of us can doubt?

A. G. DICKENS