PLATE IX

Peter Spreadbury

B. DICKINS

BRUCE DICKINS

1889–1978

THOSE of us who knew Bruce Dickins only in his later years, when his professional excitement in his own field had rather worn away, remember him as a Grand Old Man of early English studies; as a Cambridge character, gruff but loveable; a man of lively and wide-ranging mind, proud of a fine memory; a lover of the old and familiar, whose stories were of the past but who gladly made new acquaintances and was eager to hear their discoveries and promote their interests. His temper was disciplinarian, but he made easy contact with the undergraduates of his college, and when they returned to Cambridge in later life they remembered him with affection. A haunter of bookshops and libraries, he often deserted them for college and university playing fields. In his day he was a sportsman of modest talents, yet he admired athletic prowess in others. A loyal and pious churchman, his Christian charity sometimes faltered when he assessed his contemporaries and juniors. His figure was unmistakeable; burly, energetic, and ill-clad in an outfit for all seasons, he cycled with ponderous dignity through the Cambridge streets or progressed with a peculiar rolling gait, like the bear that many people thought him. Careless of many of the formalities of social life, he was meticulous in others, and criticized severely those who fell below his standards. Though he was often outspoken, in some subjects —notably in his family and private life—he was far more reticent than most men. For us, then, it is hard to get behind the man we knew in the enjoyment of his *otium cum dignitate* to find the working scholar of his prime. In writing this memoir I have been fortunate to have the help of a large number of colleagues, pupils, and friends of his who have shared with me their experiences of Bruce Dickins, and I have also had a short account that Dickins composed about his early life, full of the terse self-irony so typical of his writing as well as some of the regretful melancholy of his last years.

Dickins was born in Nottingham on 26 October 1889. His parents were of farming stock, and as a boy he spent a good deal of his time with grandparents in South Lincolnshire. From there he derived country lore of a popular kind, as well as the countryman's deep distrust of the amenities of rural life. Seen

from his last years his childhood was an unhappy one. Thence perhaps came his reluctance to speak of his family, and also perhaps his lifelong uncertainty in his achievement, which he revealed only to his close friends. He was a pupil at Nottingham High School, beginning as a classic and then, when he realized he would never get an open award at Oxford or Cambridge on the strength of his Latin and Greek, moving to history. Both studies fed his later work. It was as a historian that he won his exhibition at Magdalene College, Cambridge, in 1909. He was disappointed with the first part of his History Tripos, and the great H. M. Chadwick had no trouble in getting him to move to Section B of the Medieval and Modern Languages Tripos, to read Anglo-Saxon and related languages and literatures. Despite sickness and bereavement in his final year, his First with Distinction came, almost as a matter of course, in 1913.

In his eighties Dickins drew a picture of his undergraduate days. He saw himself as a poor, shabby, and graceless provincial entering a dazzling new world, but by his circumstances being unable to take much part in it. He spoke warmly of Magdalene, and particularly of the friendship and kindness of A. C. Benson and Stephen Gaselee; but he had to subsist on the small income from his scholarships and his meagre savings. He did without what he could not afford, took refuge in his work, reading and attending lectures far beyond the calls of his subject, and finished without a penny of debt; but the feeling of poverty lasted through his life.

On his graduation the college generously gave him, from its modest funds, a research studentship of £100 and this, together with a Nottinghamshire County Council award of £45, put him in comparative affluence, and allowed him to begin his first important piece of research, a comparative study of a group of poems in early Germanic languages. In 1914 he was offered a Cassel Studentship and planned to spend a year at the University of Heidelberg, but the Kaiser and Mr Asquith thwarted his plans. Not at first taken for military service he worked for the War Office in postal censorship, and there gained a deal of practice in foreign languages and a sound distrust of the administrative skills of the public service. In July 1917 he was at last accepted for the war, and in September was drafted to France where he served, as he himself said 'without distinction', seeing 'very little action and a good deal of discomfort', until January 1919. Perhaps at this time began his interest in the life and history of the British Army that

enriched his writings and his conversation many years after. On demobilization he came back to Magdalene which elected him to a Donaldson Bye-Fellowship. This gave him a stipend of £100 a year, but without rooms, halls, or commons. It was generous for a poor college, but not enough to live on at that expensive time, and Dickins determined to leave Cambridge. He used to tell how he applied for an assistant keepership in the British Museum; the museum delayed too long and he received its offer only after he had accepted a lectureship in the University of Edinburgh. It is a good tale, for Dickins would have been an excellent departmental keeper; for the biographer it is salutary to learn that the British Museum has no record of the application or offer. Edinburgh certainly took its opportunity and appointed him to an engagement that let him finish his teaching by March, and so complete his tenure of his fellowship by spending the summers of 1920 and 1921 in the libraries of Cambridge.

Dickins served Edinburgh University as lecturer and reader until 1931. His Cambridge reading and Edinburgh teaching, covering as both did an immense spread of topics, gave him the massive solidity of learning characteristic of the later man. At Edinburgh he taught the whole of the medieval and language syllabus of the English department, and years afterwards would chuckle over the number of teachers Edinburgh now employed to do what he had done alone. He introduced Old Norse to the syllabus, and developed his knowledge of Middle Scots, publishing notes on detailed readings in the texts as well as an edition of Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*. The Edinburgh atmosphere he found stimulating (though he was sceptical about some lauded aspects of Scottish education as well as the Scots claim to a sense of humour), and contributions to the *University of Edinburgh Journal* show his respect for colleagues in various fields. He married here his able and great-hearted wife Mollie, daughter of Professor H. J. C. (later Sir Herbert) Grierson. There were two children of the union, a son William whose early death in Uganda was a bitter distress to him, and a daughter Jane who was his joy throughout his life and his solace in his last years. The work at Edinburgh was full and tiring, and towards the end of his stay he was eager to leave. In 1930 he applied for the Chair of English Language at Liverpool to which, however, J. H. G. Grattan was elected. His application for the Chair of English Language at Leeds in 1931 succeeded.

Now began a great period in Dickins's scholarly life. He came to a department that already claimed distinction in the study of early English. F. W. Moorman, J. R. R. Tolkien, and E. V. Gordon had held the chair, R. M. Wilson and A. S. C. Ross (both of whom were to become professors) were junior staff members, and his co-professor in English Literature was F. P. Wilson. Dickins found the grimy but vigorous West Riding atmosphere exciting, and always spoke enthusiastically of the life of town and gown in Leeds, of the variety of urban life and the comradeship of eminent fellow-academics. With R. M. Wilson and Ross he founded *Leeds Studies in English and Kindred Languages*, which, in its six volumes issued between 1932 and 1937, set standards of meticulous and elegant scholarship. Its founders subsidized the journal, and ploughed back the profits into a series of texts and monographs, while exchange periodicals went to the University (Brotherton) Library. A flourishing research school produced work on a surprising range of subjects, with Dickins supervising dissertations on different aspects of the English language, Old, Middle, and Modern, and on Old and Middle English literature and place-names. University and society year-books and journals show him in vigorous action which must have made him an inspiring colleague and mentor, setting an example in his own work for the Leeds Literary and Philosophical Society, the Yorkshire Dialect Society, the Yorkshire Society for Celtic Studies, as well as national bodies like the Viking Society for Northern Research whose president he was in 1938–9. The Second World War added to his duties, reducing the number of his colleagues and engaging him in local defence.

Dickins's old teacher, H. M. Chadwick, retired from the Elrington and Bosworth Chair of Anglo-Saxon at Cambridge in 1941, but the wartime state of the university stopped the post being filled. The chair was not advertised until 1945, when his friends persuaded Dickins to apply for it—reluctantly, he afterwards claimed. He was elected, and took possession on 1 January 1946. Corpus Christi College, whose magnificent library makes it a gathering-point for medieval studies, chose him to be a professorial fellow, and he grew devoted to a college whose solid churchmanship and sound conservatism (now no more) so suited his disposition. He identified himself with its interests and its members, became an expert on its history and architecture, and for many years displayed and cared for its splendid collection of silver, on which he spoke with authority.

He was an urgent supporter of its athletic teams, and would often stalk the touch-line exhorting them on; indeed in his late seventies he would still referee soccer matches when the prescribed official failed. Though a married man he kept in college during term, thinking that only thus could he properly serve it, and it became one of the two foci of his intellectual life, the other being the University Library. On High Table he was a vigorous diner and an energetic raconteur, though over the years his stories gained an oral-formulaic spareness that was disconcerting to those who had not heard them before. His range of learning made him a court of appeal and sometimes a centre of controversy. One of the more amiable foibles of the fellows of Corpus Christi is to keep a book in which are preserved, out of context, the memorable and often outrageous sayings made unsuspectingly on High Table or in Combination Room. On one occasion a colleague had been so rash as to disagree with Dickins on a point of fact well outside the Professor of Anglo-Saxon's usual territory. It was checked. Dickins was right. His laconic comment is recorded for posterity, 'It is never wise to assume that I am ignorant of anything.'

College life became important to Dickins since his tenure of the Cambridge chair was not as happy as his time at Leeds, and he often spoke of his regret that he ever left the North of England. He had private griefs, and his son's death on an adventurous expedition in Uganda cut at his heart. In public life he often felt he failed. *The Times* obituarist speaks of him as endearingly maladroit in university politics, and this, I think, is true. Himself forthright in speech and thought, he did not appreciate guile in others, or understand why a clear argument, clearly expressed, might not convince all men of goodwill. But politics is the Art of the Plausible, and Cambridge's favourite treatise on the academic branch of that art is F. M. Cornford's *Microcosmographia Academica.* In consequence, Dickins did not have that influence on his colleagues that his talents and good sense deserved. One field in which he sadly admitted his failure affected the subject he professed. In Cambridge he found himself responsible for Old English within the Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology, a state largely the creation of his predecessor Chadwick. Dickins was sympathetic to the aims of archaeology, but his background was quite different from Chadwick's and for many years his experience had been in the whole range of English teaching, from the earliest records to his own day. The Cambridge set-up cut him off from the later

fields and their literatures. So throughout this part of his career one of the country's most distinguished Middle English scholars had no part in teaching or examining Middle English. He felt his rightful place and that of his department was in the English Faculty, and fought and spoke for that on several occasions, but he did not mount a planned campaign and it was left to his more adroit successor, Dorothy Whitelock, to bring Anglo-Saxon back into Cambridge English.

For all that these too were years of achievement. With Sir Cyril Fox he edited the Chadwick memorial volume, *The Early Cultures of North-West Europe* (Cambridge, 1950), contributing his felicitously named article, 'The Beheaded Manumission in the Exeter Book'. With R. M. Wilson he compiled an anthology, *Early Middle English Texts* (Cambridge, 1951) which became a standard undergraduate reader. He instituted a series of Occasional Papers of the Department of Anglo-Saxon, one of which was his own 'The Genealogical Preface to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle'. At this period too he brought out, as Honorary Director of the English Place-Name Survey, the three-volume *The Place-Names of Cumberland* (Cambridge, 1950–2), and supervised the preparation of the two succeeding volumes devoted to Oxfordshire. He continued the inspirer and support of many learned societies, as the Cambridge Bibliographical Society, the Medieval Group, the Cambridge Antiquarian Society, and the John Mason Neale Society, serving several of these in formal capacity. He retired from his chair in 1957, and two years later was deeply pleased when, on his seventieth birthday, his friends and pupils presented him with a *festschrift*, paying just tribute to 'the wide knowledge and exact scholarship . . . which he has always placed so unselfishly at the disposal of others'.

In the Corpus Christi, Cambridge, library readers' book for 1913–14—just before the first Great War halted scholarship and ended an era—the last three signatures are Bruce Dickins, Kenneth Sisam, and A. S. Napier. To his name Dickins, still at that time writing an easily legible hand, added 'To study runes'. He had already touched on the subject in his short memoir of the eighteenth-century Bristol bookman Amos Simon Cottle. In collaboration with his Clare colleague M. D. Forbes Dickins quickly wrote two articles on the great monuments of Ruthwell and Bewcastle, challenging the eccentric views the American philologist A. S. Cook had expressed on their dates. Shortly afterwards appeared his first extended work, *Runic and Heroic Poems of the Old Teutonic Peoples* (Cambridge, 1915),

providing annotated texts of the English, Norwegian, and Icelandic rune poems, as well as of a group of heroic poems in Old English and Old High German. Thereafter and for many years, runes were part of Dickins's life. When he moved to Edinburgh he planned a runic corpus with his senior colleague Professor G. Baldwin Brown, Dickins to supply the philology, Baldwin Brown the art history. They signed a contract with the Cambridge University Press in 1920, and began a vigorous pattern of journeys, recording, describing, and measuring. A mountain of notes survives, but the book was never completed. Baldwin Brown died in 1932, and Dickins did not push on with it. A second big project began in autumn 1936 with a course of lectures on runes at University College, London. Again, part of the text survives, and Dickins intended to prepare the series for book form. Again a Great War intervened and blocked the plan. What remains publicly of Dickins's rune work is his edition (with A. S. C. Ross) of *The Dream of the Rood* (London, 1934, several times reprinted), and a group of notes and short articles on individual aspects and inscriptions. Runes are notorious for attracting the crank, for appealing to the lover of fantasy rather than of fact. Dickins responded with shrewd common sense. In 1932 he published a practical system of transliteration for English runes, practical because, in those far-off pre-xerox days, an ordinary typewriter could reproduce it with only slight adaptation. He cut through the nonsense that the learned had built round a group of Anglo-Saxon ring legends by pointing out how they resembled the gibberish of certain Old English written charms. And he commented, always sensibly if not always definitively, on a variety of runic monuments, Norse and English: on the Maeshowe runes and those from Pennington and Conishead, the 'epa' coin legends (where his identification of Epa as the seventh-century East Anglian king Eorpwald found no favour with numismatists) and the inscriptions of the Sandwich stone, St Cuthbert's coffin and, again with A. S. C. Ross, the Alnmouth cross, as well as a couple of monuments less clearly runic. Dickins's work on runes was always distinguished. For my taste it was too kindly; though critical, not incisive enough. As an example, he explained the Sandwich text most ingeniously, linking this difficult inscription with the equally difficult recorded Kentish name form *Theabul*, but he did not question, as some later investigators have done, the long-accepted reading of the characters.

It is a fact that *Runic and Heroic Poems* was too ambitious a

work for a man as inexperienced as Dickins was in 1915. At that stage he needed tauter supervision by a mature scholar, as well as much more time to develop the complex subject he faced. Among the reviews of the book was an icy one by Allen Mawer, then Professor of English at King's College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. While admitting Dickins's erudition, vigour in translation, and innovative use of archaeological evidence, Mawer attacked the book's technical imperfections, its errors and unacknowledged emendations, mistakes or omissions in the notes, and inconsistencies in arranging the materials. Dickins learnt from this review, for thereafter his work showed him careful to avoid the weaknesses Mawer seized on; but he was deeply hurt by the criticism. Though in later life he admitted its justice, yet he added that, in consequence, he had vowed never to write another book. And he never did, save in collaboration. Perhaps this was a later rationalization, and the real effect of Mawer's comments was to push Dickins in the direction his talents and delights inclined to, towards the small enclosed problem and the careful and detailed citing of evidence, in which he could exploit 'the curious and intriguing byways of his knowledge'.

The result was that Dickins did not develop into the sort of scholar so often celebrated in the Academy's memoirs—H. M. Chadwick and R. W. Chambers stand out within his own field. They were famed, and swiftly recognized, for a relatively few great works that shaped anew early English studies. Dickins published freely, but as a miniaturist. 'Where somebody else would have written a book, he wrote an article. Where another would have produced an article, he composed a note.' Typical of his work during the next decade are the notes he sent to *The Times Literary Supplement*. He would take a disputed or obscure reading, often in a little-known text, and disclose the inadequacy of existing explanations. Then would come his alternative, and this he would support on evidence that few others would have come upon since it derived from his pleasure in out-of-the-way browsing. His exposition was always sensible and often revealing. For this type of writing he developed a crisp, laconic style and a no-nonsense tone, wasting no space on otiose words or observations.

Another typical Dickins study was the short monograph in which he put out the *editio princeps* of the Middle English alliterative poem, *The Conflict of Wit & Will*. This had all the qualities to attract him. It was obscure. It was fragmentary,

surviving only by chance—on parchment slips used to mend a rare printed book, a York Missal of *c.* 1507 in the Cambridge University Library. The text had no great literary merit, but considerable interest as recording a theme that the editor could trace from the early thirteenth-century tract *Sawles Warde* through a sequence of little-known writings down to the seventeenth century. The poem survived in a single hand which, if not exceedingly difficult, was tricky and obscure at times. The story needed piecing together, and the text needed supplementation, often from parallel phrasing in other Middle English poems. There were occasional corrections to suggest, and ample opportunity for lexical and semantic examination of unusual words.

Dickins's notes for this edition are extant, and his time-table of work shows how swiftly his mind responded to a challenge, and also perhaps how reluctantly he directed his thoughts towards publication. In the *Cambridge Review* for 3 May 1929 H. R. Creswick, then the Cambridge assistant under-librarian, announced the gift of the missal, with the comment, 'Among the fragments used to repair the edges of the leaves . . . are also several pieces of a Scottish alliterative composition which has not yet been identified.' Dickins, then in Edinburgh, sprang instantly upon this unknown Middle Scots poem. By 7 May Creswick was already writing back to him to define the text more precisely (it was 'Northern' rather than 'Scottish') and to offer rotographs of the fragments. By 21 October Dickins had produced provisional transcripts for Creswick's comment, as well as an introduction. He then took a long time to complete the job, partly I suppose because his production was slowed down by his move to the Leeds chair. He had to check details of the readings of this difficult manuscript, and made five visits altogether to examine it. He was dissatisfied with the introduction and recast it completely, remodelling the literary commentary and cutting out a detailed phonological examination of the dialect. It seems a lot of effort to put into an undistinguished piece of Middle English verse. Maybe Dickins thought so too, for the work languished until 1937 when he published it, alongside R. M. Wilson's edition of *Sawles Warde*, as a monograph of the Leeds School of English Language.

This central period of Dickins's scholarly life is full of good things, and several of his papers stand out as classics of their kind. 'The Cult of S. Olave in the British Isles', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* (1939), xii, 53–80, shows something of his formidable

range and curiosity. Briefly he traced the cult of Norway's patron saint from the battlefield of Stiklestad, through Adam of Bremen's history to the Scandinavian writers of the later Middle Ages, and then linked it to the British Isles by reference to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and early charters, citing service books, church dedications, martyr and relic lists, place-names, feast-days, seals, manuscript illuminations, church screen paintings, sculptures, painted glass, and even St Olave's Dock on the south bank of the Thames and St Olave's Railway Station in Suffolk, as evidence of the saintly royal bandit's impact on these islands. For the delightful 'Yorkshire Hobs', *Transactions of the Yorkshire Dialect Society* (1942), vii, 9–23, he gutted a mass of popular writings, medieval and modern, using his skills in philology, place-names, and textual criticism to illustrate north-country beliefs in the good-natured goblin who helped farmers and tradesmen with their toil. In 'The Day of Byrhtnoth's Death and Other Obits from a Twelfth-century Ely Kalendar', *Leeds Studies in English* (1937), vi, 14–24, he gave a precise demonstration of how to probe a text to make it give up its disguised historical information. 'J. M. Kemble and Old English Scholarship', the Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture for 1938, shows Dickins as biographer. He draws together the threads of family, political, social and scholarly history, and passes a shrewd critical judgment on Kemble's lasting contribution to Anglo-Saxon studies. And in 'English Names and Old English Heathenism', *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association* (1933), xix, 148–60, which *The Times* obituarist chose as his model paper, Dickins wrote a seminal study on the pagan religion of the Anglo-Saxons as the place-names record it.

Toponymics was a field that Dickins made peculiarly his own. The English Place-Name Society's first volume appeared, in two parts, in 1924. Dickins gave it a masterly review in *Modern Language Review* (1926), xxi. Though he had as yet written little on place-names, his comments revealed that he had read and thought deeply about them. He welcomed the project generously, but corrected and added to the second part of the volume in a group of notes that showed him ranging from Bede to Leland, from the cross at Oswestry to the gravelly beaches of Shetland; in short, which stressed how widely the place-name scholar must wander looking for his raw material. As a result the directors of the survey attached him closely to the project, wisely thinking it better that he should correct the

proofs from within than attack the books from without. Volume III of the series *Bedfordshire & Huntingdonshire*, published in 1926, is the first to acknowledge Dickins's contributions. From then until his death he served the society devotedly. He acted as Honorary Director in the difficult years 1946–51, and it was his determination that saw the three volumes of *Cumberland* through the press, with a typically wry introductory comment that 'the General Editor declines to take more than a modest share of the responsibility for the delay in publication'. The county is a difficult one, its early history only sporadically recorded. Dickins's introduction is a classic demonstration of how the name-scholar, with a close knowledge of the geographical, administrative, and ecclesiastical regions of the county and broad skills in philology and literature, can supplement the sparse information that historical writers give.

But this formal period of service is only a small part of the debt the society owes to Dickins. Right to the end of his life he read through the draft or proof entries of the county volumes, producing new examples from a well-stocked memory, and noting with hawklike eye any typographical solecisms. Most of these volumes show how his alert and flexible mind enriched the approach to the meaning and background of place-names. For instance, the Derbyshire volumes of his devoted friend and pupil Kenneth Cameron show Dickins deploying his knowledge of rare and specialized words, as in *Conjoint Lane* (*congeon*, 'dwarf, imbecile'), *Malmanyates* (*molman*, 'one who held land for which he paid rent in commutation of servile customs')and *Kaffehouse Croft* (*caff-house*, 'a compartment connected with a corn-threshing machine for receiving the chaff'); his recognition of well-known words in unusual meanings, as in *Deaf Hazzle Meadow* (*deaf hazel*, 'hazel that produces nuts without kernels'); his freedom in drawing examples from rarely read and early texts, as in *Bear Stake* (cf. *Lamentacio Sancti Anselmi*, l. 173); the way in which his work in one field overflowed into another, as in *Blakemoncros* (cf. the *Blæcmann* runic crosses of Maughold, Isle of Man). He would compare two place-names in the same neighbourhood to cast light on both, as in *Kempshill Farm* and *Marvel Stones*—did ME *kempe*, 'champion', in the first imply that the second were traditionally associated with some stupendous feat of strength? He would try out suggestions for new meanings—does the element *sceacol* in *Shallcross* (*Schakelcros*) *Manor* imply a wheelhead cross? For the West Riding volumes he used his Leeds experience of local dialect words and minor

street names. For the Lake Counties he pointed out how the toponymist can benefit from reading the Lake Poets; for the hunting counties how significant could be the works of the hunting essayists and novelists.

From his early years Dickins expressed his passion for books in a compulsive collecting. His first library was comprehensive. A provincial scholar, writing to ask him to check an abstruse reference in Cambridge University Library, would get a prompt reply because the book was on Dickins's own shelves. In its final state he housed his collection in his college rooms, to the terror of the fellow who kept beneath him and who feared the floor would not sustain the weight. When he moved out on retirement, his small flat had not space for such a library, and he had to sell it. At once he started again, and some claim to have seen him looming over David's book-stall in Cambridge market place, buying back volumes he had sold. In course of time this second library had to go, and Dickins set to a third time. When he left his flat to go to live with his daughter, Dickins generously let many of his books go to college and faculty libraries and to the shelves of his friends. Those housed in his presses were only a small part. Books were everywhere, piled in heaps on the floor and filling wardrobes and chests of drawers. It was more than a love of books, it was an infatuation, and the range was extraordinary, for everything in humane learning interested him.

The same is true of his knowledge, matched by his immense memory that allowed him to call up his information when it was asked for. 'Tell me, Bruce, which was Patrick Brontë's college in Cambridge?' A pause of about a second as his brow wrinkled, then, 'John's'; another pause, 'He was a sizar, I think.' And of course he was. This is an example from his eighties, when Dickins's memory remained unaffected by age. Right through his life he was able to use in this way the material he collected in his voracious reading, and this gave a distinctive flavour to his compositions. Not only could he illustrate the obscure from a little-known, often distant, source of light; he would also broaden his treatment—and delight his readers—by a recondite reference. A point in a Middle Scots text would gain from a knowledge of heraldry, or of Scots legal terminology, or of the introduction to Speght's *Chaucer*, or of Donne's *The Second Anniversary*.

Outstanding was the quality of Dickins's prose. His earliest publications show the beginnings of the sharp, clear written style that matched his directness of speech. From his manu-

scripts—when they can be read—it looks as though this way of writing came naturally to him, and that he had no need to recast and slim down his wording to achieve that spare effect. He was master of the throw-away phrase and the well-turned summary sentence. Of an early librarian of Corpus Christi, Cambridge, 'a Scot by origin and a drill-sergeant by temperament'; of a nineteenth-century Kingsman, 'he wore his hair too long and was critical of all authority'; of an idealist in politics, 'in Spain, striving to re-establish the constitution in a country where constitutions have never been robust'; of a fervent spiritualist who arranged to meet his family at a specified place after his death, 'They kept the appointment; he did not.'

Dickins was not, I think, a good lecturer for he did not project his generous and warm personality beyond the rostrum. His style was too dry, and he seemed determined to give his hearers not just the text of his paper but the footnotes and detailed bibliography as well. In teaching classes of students he was, as several of his pupils have painfully assured me, quite uncompromising. He expected a readier understanding and a greater original knowledge than some of them—and this includes men who later achieved repute as scholars—could bring to his classes. In consequence many of his pupils did not get from him as much as he should have given them. In fact it was as a supervisor, official or self-elected, that he was most successful in introducing the young to the essence of scholarship. Here his breadth of learning, supported by a massive bibliographical technique, made its impression. The beginner had first to convince Dickins that he was a conscientious and eager worker; once he had done it, Dickins became a ready and tireless helper, following up references and seeking out new and unexpected sources of information. And not only the novices; scholars of great experience and distinction came to him for help and advice. It has been said that, had he published nothing himself, the number of books whose introductions acknowledge his assistance would justify his reputation as a scholar. Here too the range is astounding: an edition of the itineraries of William of Worcester, a book on medieval graffiti, a history of the Cambridge University Press, an edition of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, a translation of *Orkneyinga saga*, a dictionary of English rock terms, a version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a history of the Cambridge University OTC; and the line stretches out almost to the crack of doom.

Late in his life the scholarly world recognized publicly

Dickins's excellence. The Universities of Edinburgh and Manchester gave him honorary doctorates. He was self-deprecating over such honours complaining that he would have to buy new clothes for the ceremonies, but his secret delight was unbounded and not so secret as to lie hidden from his friends. In 1955 the British Academy awarded him the Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Prize for his work in early English. In 1959 he was elected a Fellow of the Academy, and here his reaction was even more ambiguous. Though he accepted the honour he did not see why it should have been so long delayed, until well after his retirement and so, he felt, after the time in which he had vigour to pursue his own researches or assist those of younger men. To those of us outside the Academy, who cannot know how scrupulously its Fellows scrutinize those who might be thought worthy to join them, it is certainly hard to see why Dickins, acceptable in 1959, was not just as acceptable five years before, for he published nothing in the years between impressive enough to tip the balance.

The last two decades of his life show Dickins working freely in two fields. There are his many short articles on local and family history (which he often linked to the history of the army, navy, or the universities), and more important, his work in bibliography. He used to say he had taken up these studies because it would be discourteous to remain in Cambridge and embarrass his successor in the Elrington and Bosworth Chair by continuing in Anglo-Saxon, but this too was a rationalization. Both themes have roots in Dickins's past. His later historical and biographical studies were the natural successors of his earliest published writings on Magdalene worthies and of his British Academy lecture on John Mitchell Kemble. His bibliography developed from his love of scholarly detail and his passion for books and antiquity. As early as 1947, shortly after his return to Cambridge, he had arranged in the college library an exhibition of early books printed in Anglo-Saxon types, its catalogue replete with bibliographical minutiae and esoteric lore. Thereafter he printed a series of notes, often in the publications of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society which he helped to found, over which he presided from 1951 to 1958, and whose transactions he edited. His eminence in the field led the University to elect him Sandars Reader in Bibliography for 1968–9. This he welcomed as an honour and a recognition, but regretted it had come so late, in his 'eightieth year and subject to the frustrating infirmities of age, when one

knows perfectly well what ought to be done and lacks the power to do it'. For over twenty years he had worked regularly in the Parker Library of Corpus Christi College, and come to know its collections as few could. Many of its volumes show his annotations and cross-references. For his Sandars lectures he planned a set of three papers describing how the various groups of manuscripts and printed books came together in the library, and he set to amassing materials for this elaborate study. They proved too much for him. Having scoured widely for evidence, he found his slackening energies could not cope with sifting and presenting it, and at one time, despairing, he determined to give up the lectures altogether. His friends encouraged him, and as a last resort persuaded him to reduce his programme to a single paper, which was given on 25 April 1969 and printed as 'The Making of the Parker Library', *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* (1972), vi, 19–34. It surveyed Corpus Christi's earliest recorded books, and then defined Matthew Parker's collections and the circumstances whereby they came to the college, how the Elizabethan fellows built a library to hold them, and later librarians set about cataloguing them. The lecture has all of Dickins's old precision of detail and clarity of phrase and structure, but it was to be his swan-song. Though he published occasionally thereafter he felt too tired and discouraged to continue his own work. His memory, however, remained unimpaired by age, and his love of books lasted to the end. The last time I saw him I handed to him a new book on a topic I thought might interest him, but his attention was held by the printing. He scrutinized the opening page minutely. 'A very neat title-page that', he remarked. Then he pushed his glasses up to his forehead and peered at it for a time. 'The central device a shade too heavily inked perhaps. But otherwise you can hardly fault it.'

He still found an interest in his younger colleagues and friends and was ready to help and advise, but he gradually withdrew more and more into himself. During his wife's last long illness and after her death he lamented that he lingered so long in a world whose changes he deplored. For his last year he gave up his own home and was welcomed into that of his daughter who lived at Hilton, some miles outside Cambridge. He showed little of the insistent self-centredness that so often afflicts the old, and he changed his way of life so as not to intrude on that of the family he lived with. His modesty and his reluctance to impose on others' kindness meant that he came less and less

frequently into town, though his college and university friends were always glad to receive him. It was at Hilton that he died peacefully and with characteristically little fuss on 4 January 1978.

It was a long life, spent in the pursuit of humane learning. Looking over it and working through his writings I feel a mingling of admiration and regret. Admiration at the talent, and regret that the achievement did not quite match up to it. The interests were so broad and the scholarship so exact that they should have been brought together in a major work. This—apart perhaps from his contribution to name studies—Dickins was not capable of doing, and the full result of his enthusiastic devotion is probably best displayed in the works he encouraged. A younger Cambridge colleague of his has summed him up admirably, and the impression is one I have received from many of Dickins's friends: 'a kind, generous, learned man disguising himself as a disgruntled bull; not happy, I think, but undoubtedly helping where help was most needed.' It is no ignoble epitaph.

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