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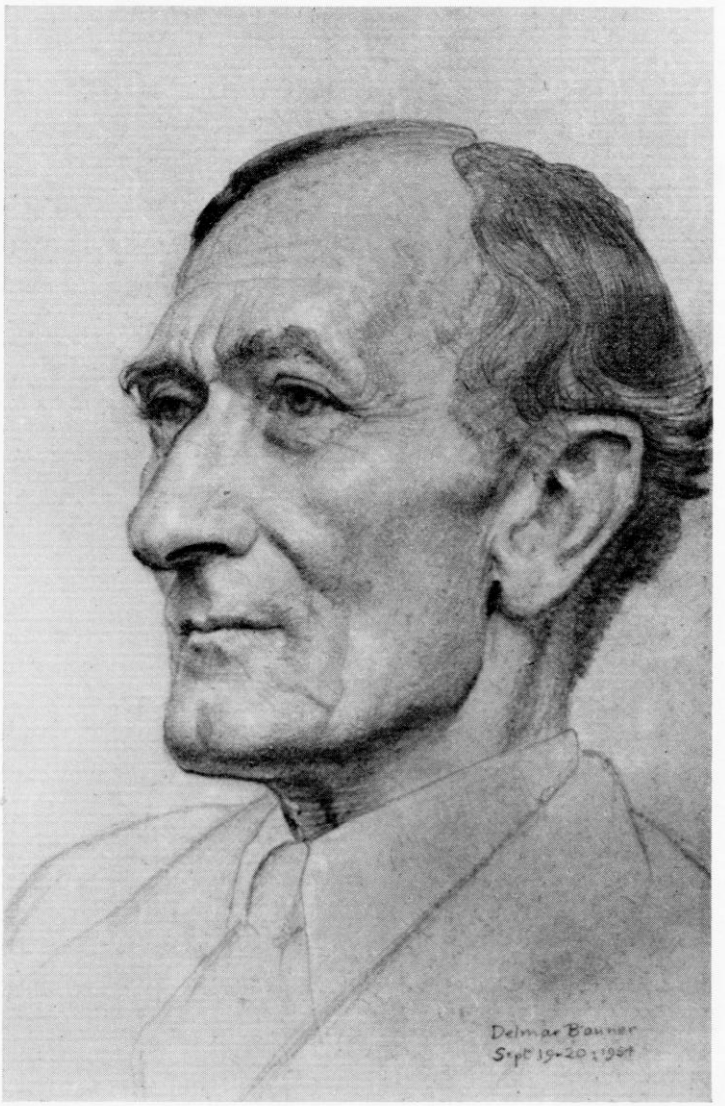

Zélie Willey

BASIL WILLEY

BASIL WILLEY[1]

1897–1978

To remember Basil Willey is to recall a certain kind of presence: a readiness of sympathy, a touch of mannered quirkiness, a quickness of mind, a kindly humour, all set against a profile which (Herbert Butterfield commented) had already been strong in his undergraduate days, 'cutting the air in a rather determined manner'. This was not a nature which would be memorable for setting human thought in a new direction or for startling innovation: the determinedness was rather that of a man who wished to remain true to everything he knew and to everything that his wide-ranging sympathies taught him. His quest was a quest for authentic continuity with the past, and so his life, particularly his inner life, was unusually integrated with his intellectual odyssey.

The early pages of the autobiography describe a childhood which, though not perhaps altogether uncommon at the time, must now be rare, since its keynote was a seclusion that relied upon such things as an absence of radio and television. The Willeys came of a long line of Protestants, with their steady traditional injunction to 'come out and be separate'. The result was an elected isolation which in turn placed great stress on the life of the family.

In such circumstances, domestic life could develop a fostering warmth of affection, but family tensions were likely to be correspondingly sharper. The latter were provided by the respective families behind his parents. His father, an unworldly

[1] In compiling this memoir I have drawn heavily upon Professor Willey's own two volumes of autobiography, *Spots of Time* (1965) and *Cambridge and other Memories* (1968). In addition, his widow, Mrs Zélie Willey, has kindly allowed me to see some of the many letters which were written after his death. These, which offer ample testimony to the affection in which he was held, include memories of incidents often dating from experiences many years before, and have provided further material. I am further indebted to a memorial address given by Professor Ian Jack in the chapel of Pembroke College and reprinted in the Pembroke College Society's Annual Gazette for September 1979; to Herbert Butterfield's preface to the collection of essays entitled *The English Mind* (edited by Hugh Sykes Davies and George Watson, 1964); and to the obituary in *The Times*. Extensive lists of Professor Willey's publications may be found in the entries under his name in *Who's Who* and in *Contemporary Authors*.

businessman, came from a family notable for a certain seriousness and academic refinement. Their most striking member (though he was often abroad) was Uncle Arthur, a distinguished zoologist of the time, who helped arouse the young boy's scientific interests. His work involved ardent pursuit and detailed study of specimens from far corners of the world, combined with continuous reflection on all questions concerning evolution. This too was perhaps not entirely irrelevant to the career of a man whose work on the development of English thought would bring him eventually to a study of Darwin.

While his father's family tended towards an intellectual sharpness and austerity, his mother, who was descended from a Jersey family which had dominated affairs on the island for many centuries, was of a simple and sweet disposition. She was a fine singer, particularly delighting in songs of strong feeling. The nature of her repertoire may have made for some tension with the Willeys, who were addicted to more strictly classical music. Certainly there was some feuding between the respective grandmothers, who both lived nearby, and Basil Willey, looking back, felt that he had been unfairly brought into their conflicts—forced, too young, to undertake the role of mediator and reconciler. The tensions do not seem to have extended to his parents themselves, however: there any differences resolved themselves into an interplay between the head and the heart that was to prove fruitful rather than otherwise for his intellectual and emotional development.

Although the isolation of his childhood cut him off from some of the simpler social pleasures, it also made him intensely aware of things which would have passed him by if he had been born into a large family. He took great pleasure in the beauty of the natural world, for instance, collecting silkworms and other creatures, and above all enjoyed solitary reading, taking the whole of Dickens in his stride before he was thirteen and losing himself in tales of romance. Though set in a suburban neighbourhood, the house the family lived in during most of his boyhood opened at the back on to the garden of a larger house, giving him a view from his back bedroom window which was more like the country than the town. Finchley itself was still a village, only just beginning its absorption into the London conurbation.

At school, meanwhile, his progress was steady and reasonably successful. One of his schoolmasters at University College School, S. W. Grose, recalled him as one of a bright generation which had included Vivian de Sola Pinto, later Professor of English at

Nottingham, T. W. Bullock, Reader in Spanish at Cambridge, and L. T. Muirhead, proprietor of the Blue Guides. Basil Willey told him later that he had first been decisively drawn to a love of English literature by his gift of a small volume of poems. If, as is probable, these were by Matthew Arnold, this would certainly have fed a temper which, like Arnold's, combined lyrical nostalgia for the past with a robust determination to make the best of the present. (He might also have known as early as this that his grandfather William Willey was the Wesleyan minister mentioned—rather slightingly—by Arnold in the preface to *St Paul and Protestantism*).

At the same time, a developing interest in geology gave him a lasting attentiveness to the kind of soil he was living on at any time, and made him constantly aware of the relationship between various strata and the corresponding landscape. (In a lecture given when he was a young officer he pointed out that if the General Staff of the belligerent nations had known more geology, including the well-known effects of high explosive on Upper Tertiary strata, they would have decided either not to hold the war in Northern France or else not to hold it at all.) Despite his academic tastes, however, his progress towards success was not always smooth. He was unsuccessful three times in the competitions for awards at Oxford Colleges before turning to Cambridge, where he was elected to a minor scholarship at Peterhouse. Oxford remained in his memory romantically as a place of bells and towers, and of music heard through chapel walls; in Cambridge he was to recall only his first arrival, on a black December night in 1915, before closed doors which were after a time opened by a watery-eyed porter who then conducted him through various 'zones of gloom' to the luxury of a Fellow's set. This experience, in a deserted quietness intensified by the war, remained in his mind as both awesome and pleasurable.

As with most young men of his generation, his adolescence was overshadowed by awareness of the war: by the following year, when he was called up, its full horrors had long been evident. For a dreamy nineteen-year-old the transition from peaceful England to wartime France was bound to be an extraordinary one. The change was softened in some respects, however, by the fact that he was selected for training as an officer and posted to his own college, Peterhouse, for initial training. It was a strange time to be in Cambridge, since the handful of genuine students in residence consisted mainly of foreigners, youngsters and those unfit for service. As on his previous visit, the enduring body of the

university, with its ancient buildings, was correspondingly more impressive—and not lost on him even when he had to rise at dawn to begin a day's training.

Military service at such an age was bound to be a memorable experience. In his case further aids to memory were provided by his journals and letters home, which between them left a store of materials to be worked over when he came to write his autobiography. Because of these origins his later account is truer than some to the day-to-day routine of war and its strange ordinariness even in times of action, resulting even in a blank registering of sights which might be recalled with horror only later—though then, as he comments, to haunt the imagination for years.

In March 1918, he was captured, and spent the later part of the war as a prisoner-of-war. His descriptions of life under these conditions are particularly interesting: the prisoners turn out to have been extremely well-informed (partly as a result of his own German studies) about the state of affairs inside and outside Germany; they learnt quickly of the state of revolution that was being established in Germany itself and of the Allied advances which were bringing the war to an end. He was also comparatively well treated: if he looked like a skeleton when he finally reached home, he points out, it was due not to privations as a captive but to the bout of Spanish influenza which he had suffered just before his release.

One feature that runs through all the accounts is a note of cheerfulness. This has to do partly with the fact that his letters home would have been designed to reassure his relatives as to his state of mind, but it was also a necessary quality if men were to survive at all under such conditions. Richard Yates, who was in two prisoner-of-war camps with him, remembered sixty years later the heartening effects of his even-temperedness, cheerfulness and kindness—and how he had contrived to study even in crowded conditions.

Another feature of these writings is the amount of attention given to nature. His notebooks before he joined the army were full of word-pictures of landscapes and sunsets, and this was by no means uncommon at the time: Paul Fussell quotes one or two of his descriptions in *The Great War and Modern Memory*; they appear alongside many more by other young men. Indeed, it was precisely the sensitivity that had been developed in such writing at the beginning of the century that was so lacerated by exposure to the horrors of battle, making the poetry of the time a good deal more memorable than its counterparts during the Second World

War. Later he came to look back on his early effusions as matters of some embarrassment. Despite the mannered literariness that sometimes flaws them, however, they are at their best evocative. There is a sharp accuracy of detail in his scenes of warfare, and when he later turned to other matters the habit of accurate observation so gained was to stand him in good stead; one of the reasons for his academic success lay in his willingness to see what, exactly, was there in the writers he was studying and render it accurately and faithfully for his readers.

After his demobilization he returned with relief to Cambridge and it was hardly surprising that once there, he decided to stay. His life as a Cambridge teacher in the 1920s was not so comfortable as one might now imagine, however, since he was one of those who, having neither College fellowship nor University appointment, had to make a living by such work as was available. For years his life was a long round of college supervisions, free-lance university lectures (paid for in direct ratio to the numbers attending), schools examining and WEA classes, which took him as far as Rugby. Yet it could at least be said for such a life that it consisted almost entirely in reading and teaching of one kind or another, rather than in the committee meetings and administration which might have fallen to his lot as a college officer.

The intellectual climate was also unusually stimulating. Under the guidance of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, the English Faculty was developing in a way of its own. Q saw English Literature as embodying a great movement towards the Christian liberalism which he believed to offer the chief hope for civilization in his time. In the robust course which he envisaged, the undergraduate (who would preferably have taken Part One of the Classical Tripos) would learn, through studying the best that had been thought and felt, to appreciate his fellow human beings and fit himself for a career of enlightened public service. This aim, set in conjunction with the newly awakening study of psychology, could be expanded into an ideal of 'the whole man' which could flourish through cultivation of wholeness of the psyche; equally, its respect for the older Classical values allowed those who did not share Quiller-Couch's beliefs in the potentialities of the individual to cultivate the more sceptical attitudes encouraged by T. S. Eliot's early writing. Over all, there brooded a dream of keeping alive the world that had existed before the First World War, coupled with a belief that England's role in world affairs could still be decisive. A determination to avoid at all costs any repetition of the war that

had intruded so grimly into that world was perhaps the most pressing concern of all.

For a decade his only published work was the piece with which he won the Le Bas prize for 1921–2, an essay entitled *Tendencies in Renaissance Literary Theory*. This was a work of considerable industry and organization, which may still be referred to with profit by anyone interested in its subject; for those seeking light on its author, it is the concluding paragraph which is the most interesting. At this time psychology was becoming a dominant intellectual force in many intellectual fields, including literary criticism. Willey, who, it must be remembered, had heard I. A. Richards lecture, was already choosing to look beyond the present tendency:

> The critic no longer dogmatizes or defends, but is content to try and indicate the psychological mainspring of each work he considers. Yet there are signs that the Crocean criticism, which merely registers the intuitions of others without estimating their relative value, has had its day. We may yet learn from the Renaissance that 'the true critic must have a humanistic philosophy . . . an ideal of the good life', whereby to distinguish which intuition-expressions are valuable and which are without significance.

A sense of this conflict between the pressing demands of psychological relativism and the more permanent possibilities of stable values can be traced throughout his later work. A still more penetrating insight into his development during the 1920s is to be gained from a two-part story which he contributed to the *Adelphi* in 1931, under the title 'Suburban Prelude'. Mr Peter Widdup, a man approaching middle age, revisits the London where he was brought up and tries to assess the value of his childhood experiences. Willey tells us that the story was 'an autobiographical fragment under a thin and very transparent fictional disguise'; just where the fiction stops and the autobiography beings is not altogether easy to assess, but the narrator's reflections are clearly close to the author's. Mr Widdup is a divided being who can 'neither follow God unreservedly, nor . . . domesticate himself in the present world.' In these circumstances, what can he rely on? Even seemingly stable judgements may shift unexpectedly. His grandmother has just died, and with her death he is surprised to find the whole profile of her personality changed:

> Not merely in a sentimental sense, or out of respect to the dead only, but with strict truth, it can be said that what was formerly lack of imagination has become fortitude; what was narrowness and bigotry, faith. What a living person believes may be superstition and folly, but it is no longer so when he has died in that belief. As long as we breathe

there is a presumption against us; when we expire this is removed; like all who have suffered defeat, we are thereby somehow put in the right.

Mr Widdup also examines his own wary reaction to the scenes which had entranced him as a boy, and is enabled to disregard it to some degree by virtue of another paradox:

> The present never held much significance for him; contemporary impressions in the light of common day were no more than exposed negatives till time had developed them. But he saw enough to understand that the 'palimpsest' image was inaccurate; the pictures were not simply stratified one above the other, but each successive picture modified all its predecessors; the process was continuous development, as of a musical theme; and by what modulations its final meaning would be unfolded, who could tell?
>
> 'Time and Death,' he thought, 'these are the great developers and meaning-givers. I have been relying so far on Time to develop my meanings; Death has given meaning to the life that just departed. But do I want to wait for Death to give meaning to mine? . . . '

The passage (which continues further) is worth dwelling upon, since it marks the dilemma in which Willey found himself at this time as he sought for significance in human experience. He could not abandon that quest, yet he must also acknowledge that there would always be an element of relativism in whatever he might think he had discovered. He was facing the ultimate paradox that events which at the time seem of greatest significance may fade over the years—that we cannot know at the time of experiences, or perhaps for long afterwards, what time will do to them. At the same time he was being visited by a sense that the years were passing with little accomplished. It is perhaps significant that this, the one excursion into fiction that he published, was followed by a return to academic writing, where he was on firmer ground.

For this work he could now draw not only upon accumulated resources of reading but upon the stimulus of the Faculty for which he was teaching. In the second volume of his autobiography, *Cambridge and other memories*, he gives an account of the way in which English studies had developed as a result of discussions towards the end of the War, when it seemed that they might provide a good course for young men who, returning after years of military service, might be expected to be impatient of more traditional subjects. As things turned out, the space created by the withdrawal of the subject from Modern Languages on the one side and Anglo-Saxon on the other turned into a fertile field for the intelligence of Richards and Mansfield Forbes, followed by

Empson and others, with the critical approaches of T. S. Eliot and Middleton Murry providing new ideas for them to work on. Literature, on this view, was the means to a living engagement between individual human beings; to those brought up on a more traditional approach such an atmosphere was exciting.

Despite many diversities of approach and assumption there was, therefore, a wholeness of ultimate vision among the participants in the school: the various cross-currents were largely fertilizing ones, and Basil Willey's writings of the time show that he profited from them. To write a book called *The Seventeenth Century Background* was itself a tribute to the attention that had been focused upon that period by Eliot and various members of the Cambridge school as a period of exceptional vitality in English culture. Yet it was not to literary critics that the book owed its ultimate inspiration but to A. N. Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World*, which he found himself reading one morning over a cup of coffee at Lyons' in Petty Cury. There for the first time he glimpsed that the contending intellectual beliefs of the seventeenth century were rooted in quite different metaphysical attitudes on the part of those who held them—metaphysical attitudes held not in some abstract region of the mind but bodying themselves forward in whole patterns of conduct. What had been lightly sketched out as a 'dissociation of sensibility' by T. S. Eliot could be seen in these terms as a profound intellectual movement which had laid the foundations for many modern attitudes.

In this respect, Willey was pursuing a path which, though not so spectacularly original as those of some of his contemporaries, would still be of permanent value. Quiller-Couch's vision of the whole man, admirable as it was in many respects, depended, far more than he had realized, upon certain structures of English life which could not easily be reproduced in other countries and which were to be steadily eroded in England herself, as she came under the pressures of international organizations and multi-national companies. An understanding of what had happened to Western literature and culture in general as a result of the intellectual revolution that produced modern science would become correspondingly more necessary. The rootlessness and aimlessness of the civilization that had been produced by technological advancement would come to stand out more and more in contrast to the steady rootedness of previous cultures, where shared beliefs had nurtured devotion to *quality* of living.

Willey's approach also had the advantage of drawing attention to the full complexity of human life. The central Cambridge

tradition of practical criticism provided an instrument which could be well handled by an individual of good intelligence without inducing a need to acquire extended historical knowledge. This could result in heavily foreshortened literary judgments which, while good and striking within their own terms, precluded the imaginative adventure of exploring the territory within which the texts had themselves been created. In extreme cases it might simply minister to a self-enclosing arrogance.

Historical imagination, and a belief that most men had something to be said for them were, by contrast, hallmarks of Basil Willey's approach. Methodicalness was another. To begin with the seventeenth century and then plough on through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, taking one writer after another in turn, might seem a rather obvious way of proceeding; but it gave him the opportunity to listen in turn to what each writer had to say in response to the dominant voices that preceded him or her so that each could be shown not only to flourish within a particular 'climate of opinion' (to use a favourite phrase of his), but to speak within the terms of a developing discussion. Patience and honesty of mind meant that there was hardly ever an intellectual short cut and that the lights and colours of an individual attitude were rendered accurately. A good example is to be found in his patient examination of Francis Newman's ideas. This is a good deal less entertaining than that of Lionel Trilling, who holds him up to mockery in a memorable passage of his book on Arnold; but by simply examining in turn each of the opinions which Trilling had held up to ridicule as eccentricities, Willey brought out the consistency and humanity of his attitudes, with the result that he emerged as a worthy brother to John Henry.

The Seventeenth Century Background (1934) was a pioneering work which can be seen to have inspired much later work in the branch of studies known as the History of Ideas. It was not a part of Willey's aims to pursue such studies in a separate discipline, however; for him, the history of thought played an essential part in the search for the significance revealed in literature. He thought for a time of pursuing his studies into medieval philosophy but soon realized that in trying to do so he would be betraying his natural bent; instead he moved forward into the eighteenth century and eventually to the Victorians.

The Eighteenth Century Background has never, perhaps, had quite the same standing as its predecessor, at least among English readers. It appeared in 1940, when many scholars were engaged in other activities; it also marked a move away from engagement

with the most specific concerns of the Cambridge English school, as it pursued the history of ideas into an age when they had become a subject for literature rather than an essential part of the literary enterprise. The particular idea which dominates the book is that of nature: Willey is concerned to demonstrate how throughout the century there was a long and steady engagement with the idea that the significance of the universe could be elicited by studying the workings of nature, accompanied by a belief that this method, while perhaps distancing the creator from his universe, did not necessarily involve a denial of God's existence.

As before, the study led to a concluding piece on Wordsworth. Where the piece on 'Wordsworth and the Locke Tradition' in *The Seventeenth Century Background* had been offered as no more than a 'Postscript', however, the chapter '"Nature" in Wordsworth' was a true culmination to the book in which it appeared. The various ambiguities inherent in the idea throughout the century could be seen to have been at once presented and transformed in the work of Wordsworth—and that knowledge in turn to illuminate the poetry. In England, however, such a study was likely to meet an unreceptive audience since, as Willey pointed out in the course of his discussion, the current way of reading Wordsworth was to look for the points when he was (to use I. A. Richards's distinction) 'feeling something', rather than 'feeling that so-and-so'. To read Wordsworth in this way could be exciting where the method worked, but it threw many passages out of focus by obscuring the degree of Wordsworth's devotion to reflective thought, and the amount of emotion and intellectual commitment that that entailed. To this day the 'expressionist' reading of Wordsworth has held sway, particularly in England; it has been left primarily to some distinguished transatlantic critics, such as Geoffrey Hartman, to show what emerges when one reads Wordsworth more metaphysically. Willey's study pointed the reader in this direction.

The first major turning-point in his academic career had come in 1934 when he was at last offered a College Fellowship, at Pembroke, and so crossed the road from his old college, following in the steps of Thomas Gray. The second followed in February 1946, when to his surprise he received a letter from the Prime Minister offering him the King Edward VII Professorship which had been vacant since Quiller-Couch's death in 1944. He confessed afterwards to a suspicion, unsupported, he said, by any evidence, that George Macaulay Trevelyan had something to do with the appointment; this would seem plausible in view of

Trevelyan's respect for his work and the likely weight of his influence in such matters.

He also expressed a doubt as to whether the appointment had been the best that could have been made in terms of the Faculty itself, in view of his own distaste for administration and his unwillingness to provide the 'leadership' that might have been thought desirable in the post. It is doubtful, however, whether such 'leadership' would have been either useful or effective at that juncture. For many members of the Faculty the relief of having come through a war in which many of them had found themselves taking up unexpected duties was suffused with a nostalgia for the heady pre-war days. There was, moreover, an unusually fruitful period initially, during which ex-servicemen who had returned to the university, sometimes after years of war, knew exactly what they wanted from the university and were determined to get it. But as the years passed, and new generations of undergraduates appeared, it became clear that the zest of former years could not fully revive. In the post-war world, English culture was being put firmly in its place as a single element in world literature, while the superior resources of American universities were making them leaders in the kind of scholarship which called for money and leisure to support it. The Cambridge faculty was now very much a collection of individual talents, with the Leavises as a source both of stimulus and contention. In the changed circumstances of the post-war world, discussions which might previously have proved fertilizing now became sterile and even acrimonious. Even *Scrutiny*, to Leavis's disappointment, had lost its intellectual momentum. During these years, therefore, the members of the Faculty flourished best when isolated from one another, as may be seen from the range of impressive but disparate books that they produced. In such a situation it is doubtful whether any attitude from the senior professor could have been better than Willey's passive fairmindedness; indeed, it could be argued that, short of the emergence of an organizing genius of a kind which is hard to envisage, his was the best attitude that could be hoped for, setting an example of courteousness and reasonableness which could become a model for the behaviour of others.

Willey made some attempts, in fact, to bring about a reconciliation between F. R. Leavis and the rest of the Faculty, but the task proved too much for his mediating powers. Yet while the two men might seem at first sight to have been polar opposites, they turn out to have had a surprising amount in common. They were, as it happens, exact contemporaries, their names having both appeared

in the First Class in the 1921 Tripos list. They were both fond of music; both, in their differing ways, were devoted to 'English', with all that that term might suggest: they stood strongly, that is, for the belief that English literature was valuable for its ability to teach human beings about the life they lived. For Leavis, however, the old tradition, based largely on the Classics and Christianity, was no longer valid: true moral guidance must now be sought in the qualities of great writers such as Shakespeare, Jane Austen or George Eliot, who had expressed a refined intelligence that transcended the limitations imposed by traditional codes, so offering human beings a way of living in the world which would be surer than that afforded by swimming along in the old European stream. Willey, by contrast, never lost his faith in the old ways, feeling it rather to be his task to rediscover links with the past and forge new ones if necessary.

The difference between the two may have had to do with their respective experiences of the War. Basil Willey saw the sights that most men of his generation saw, including the horrors of battle; he was also a prisoner-of-war for a long period. As an officer, however, he was shielded from some of the harshnesses of army life; his experience of trench warfare, though harrowing, was not finally overwhelming. The horrors of war haunted him for many years afterwards, but they did not undermine the beliefs with which he had grown up. Leavis's experience of the war as a member of the ambulance service, by contrast, meant long and continued exposure to all that was most horrible in the process—including the permanent effects of gas warfare on his own body. His rejection of the civilization that could bring men to such an inhuman hell was profound, leading him to probe all its products for what could still be seized upon as indubitably authentic. Willey was by nature a harmonizer, in whom the musical instinct was uppermost; Leavis was more himself when acting as a gadfly, attacking all that struck him as pretentious or insincere. So they developed in their own ways, the differences being recorded even in their faces. Each man had a strong profile, suggesting a Victorian stubbornness, but whereas Willey's was flecked with permanent lines of kindliness around the eyes and mouth, Leavis's expressions ranged between scowling appraisal and puckish mockery.

In many respects it was the opportunities that came to Willey from outside the faculty which made the years of his professorship most pleasurable. He was enabled to spend two long periods in the United States, lecturing and enjoying the hospitality of a range of

universities. Drawing again, in the autobiography, upon letters written at the time, he gives a lively account of his experiences, ranging from the pleasure of rising to successive occasions as they presented themselves to the sense of dreariness which sometimes assailed him in the depths of a North American winter where the snow seemed to lie on the ground for most of the year.

In his own university he had pleasant dealings with the Faculty of Music, which he served for many years both as member and as chairman, and with the Faculty of Divinity. A feature of the immediate post-war years in Cambridge was a strong interest in and renewed practice of Christianity, prompted partly by the moral issues that had been raised in and by the Second World War. College chapels were full, and the Faculty of Divinity found that a series of lectures entitled *Christianity and History*, given at its invitation by Herbert Butterfield, was impressively well attended. When in his turn Basil Willey gave a similar series, published as *Christianity Past and Present* (1952), he was gratified to find himself lecturing to the largest audience he had ever had; he also believed that the lectures, which enabled him to think out his own religious position at length and to reveal it as based on what he believed to be permanent human needs rather than on received dogmas, ranked among the best of his work.

Meanwhile his long study of English thought and literature had been continuing. *Nineteenth Century Studies* (1956) begins with a chapter on Coleridge; Coleridge's quest, that of keeping alive both head and heart while still trying to find a place for the moral sense in a world that was revealing its amoral qualities more and more, provides a key to this volume and its successor, *More Nineteenth Century Studies: A Group of Honest Doubters* (1956). These were to a large degree Willey's own problems, so that he could enter into the writings with a ready sympathy which also held the ring fairly for the various contenders. Gradually, the wheel of his thought was turning full circle: he was approaching more and more closely to the roots of his own upbringing, understanding more fully the tensions that had produced the intellectual conflicts of England during his childhood and youth.

Although these are less exacting volumes, lacking the intellectual unity of their predecessors, they remain of great value for their discerning guidance through the work of some major Victorian figures and the concerns that beset them. It was also natural, perhaps, that the rounding-off of the project turned out not to have been completed in these two volumes. For the Hibbert Lectures which he delivered in 1959 he chose the subject *Darwin*

and Butler: Two Versions of Evolution, proceeding to examine in some detail Darwin's challenging contribution and Butler's critique of it. Darwin was a natural focus for his attention, as the man who had dealt the most heavy blow to Christian faith in the nineteenth century, but Samuel Butler evidently teased his mind even more as being a fine critic of Darwin, with an enviably witty style, yet also a far more devastatingly direct critic of Christianity than Darwin ever aimed to be.

It is in the last chapter of the book that the intricate complexity of his response to Butler is finally revealed. With characteristic honesty he reveals that when he first read the ninth chapter of *The Fair Haven* (the one entitled 'The Christ Ideal') he was taken in by it, believing that Butler had now abandoned his ironic method in order to present the kind of Christianity that might be supposed to survive the assaults of nineteenth-century criticism. He also discovered that he was in good company, since E. A. Abbott, an old college acquaintance of Butler's, had asked its author whether he had not meant some of it seriously, asserting that he would find many to sympathize with him if he had.

Willey had in mind particularly the paragraph where Butler's character tries to define the essence of Christianity:

> After all, it is not belief in the facts which constitutes the essence of Christianity, but rather the being so impregnated with love at the contemplation of Christ that imitation becomes almost instinctive; this it is which draws the hearts of men to God the Father, far more than any intellectual belief that God sent our Lord into the world, ordaining that he should be crucified and rise from the dead. Christianity is addressed rather to the infinite spirit of man than to his finite intelligence, and the believing in Christ through love is more precious in the sight of God than any loving through belief.

'Where is the catch here?' he asks. It is not surprising that he should have been perplexed, since it corresponded to the kind of position which he himself might have put forward—and indeed *had* put forward in *Christianity Past and Present*: that the permanence of Christian values, outlasting the decay of historically founded dogmas, lay in their relevance to permanent human needs.

What is finally at issue here is that 'Christianity of the heart' which attracted so many apologists of the Victorian era, whereby Christianity was defined primarily as a religion of love, ratified wherever human beings loved one another in an unselfish manner. Even in the Victorian era, however, there had been as many to combat this belief as there were to support it. Despite its

attractiveness it could easily degenerate into an easy sentimentalism of the kind that Butler castigates with his irony. Butler, on the other hand, continued to honour Christianity according to his own conception of it: Willey records his summary of the points on which he believed it to be impregnable:

> faith in an unseen world, in doing one's duty, in speaking the truth, in finding the true life in others rather than in oneself, in the certain hope that he who loses his life on these behalfs finds more than he has lost.

With these tenets Butler was enabled to set forth a Christianity primarily conceived in terms of stoicism and intellectual honesty. If the appeal of Christianity to the heart was implicitly rejected, that was, after all, consonant with the themes of *The Way of all Flesh*, that satirical account of a Victorian upbringing in which the tyrannical power of domestic affection when used as a means of manipulating human beings was devastatingly exposed. Butler could never go back on his suspicion that all appeals to 'the heart' were suspect, and so could include even that most familiar of Christian defences among his targets, developing in substitution a sardonic carapace to cover and guard his underlying humaneness.

For Willey, brought up in the Methodist tradition, such an attitude must have been ultimately incomprehensible—hence his surprise that Butler should have claimed this part of his book, also, to be satiric. Yet there is another side to the matter, which helps to justify his surprise. For the chapter in question is also a fine piece of intellectual byplay, calling to mind the similar ingenious use of argument in Oscar Wilde's *The Critic as Artist*. Butler's false persona in the book argues that what appeals in Christianity is not so much the fact, as it would have struck those who met Jesus in the flesh, but the *impression* which was left to work upon the human imagination. And in support he draws upon the evidences of those works of art whose appeal is heightened by the effects upon them of historical decay or alteration.

The speciousness of the argument is obvious; yet (as Wilde's essay also shows) it is not altogether false either. One need only acknowledge the importance of the working of the imagination in human conduct and the argument from impressionism acquires a corresponding validity. And at this level, all writers are 'of the devil's party without knowing it'. The very use of wit in Butler's essay is appealing to a play of mind which operates in independence from the faculty which concentrates a sober attentiveness upon facts. Once admit the existence of a level of human consciousness which is not bound by the limits of organized

perception and which is necessary to the psychic health of human beings, and the assertion in *The Fair Haven* that 'Christianity is addressed rather to the infinite spirit of man than to his finite intelligence' becomes a matter of insight rather than gushing vagueness. And Butler's criticisms of Darwin do seem to involve some recognition of the kind, even if he was not willing to extend it very far.

The question lies at the heart of English romanticism, involving as it does the postulation of a human faculty which can complement the use of reason, as understood in the Enlightenment. The ultimate issue is whether that faculty is to be thought of as linking human beings with nature, or as a faculty essentially religious in quality—or both. One line of logical inquiry would lead naturally to some form of pantheism or vitalism—and this, clearly, was the form favoured by Butler. But there remains a question concerning the nature of human morality and a possible 'moral sense'. Butler made way for this by his stoicism, while a more common Victorian line of thought (to which Willey seems to have adhered) looked to the operation of love, mediated by the infinite spirit, as the ultimate motive power behind true moral action. In doing so he was aligning himself with the later Wordsworth and Coleridge; a deeper look at their early writings would have shown how fully they too were preoccupied by the problem involved, and how Wordsworth, in the 1790s, came close to adopting Butler's sardonic stance rather than the belief in love which (in association with Coleridge and his sister Dorothy) he allowed to dominate the poetry of his maturity.

Willey did not probe or dissect Wordsworth and Coleridge to this degree. Instead he turned to Coleridge for his last major study, presenting him once again in terms of a straightforward evolution. He took an issue which had always been waiting for treatment but which had not hitherto been rendered with the kind of common-sense clarity that he could bring to bear; that of Coleridge's Christianity and the means by which he had passed, after an orthodox upbringing, into the fashionable Unitarianism of his youth, veered temporarily towards a total pantheism (but without finally acceding to its claims) and then gradually made his way back step by step to an almost total allegiance to the Anglicanism of his childhood. Willey could find in Coleridge's appeal to human experience as a source of authority in religious matters a welcome source of support for his own attitudes.

Along with this work came the two volumes of his autobiography, which turned out to form an integral part of it. One

might have expected that so devoted a Wordsworthian would eventually have produced a long study of his favourite poet, but apart from the concluding essays in his two 'Background' books he remained silent on the subject. The key to this puzzle lies probably in the very depth of his involvement. 'He has so pervaded my life', he wrote, 'that I can hardly distinguish what is his from what is my own. It is not so much that I have learnt from him (though of course I have done so), as that he has given expression to the imaginative experiences which were already mine, unexpressed and inexpressible, before I knew him.' In these circumstances it would have been difficult to write a study that would have stood sufficiently apart from his author. Instead the true tribute came in the first volume of the autobiography, where the title, *Spots of Time*, provides not just a graceful literary reference, but an important indication of purpose. Underneath the book there lies a question: is it possible to write an equivalent to Wordsworth's *Prelude* in describing a suburban boyhood? In one sense, of course, the answer is no: the surroundings are too trivial and contingent by comparison with the unchanging hills and lakes of Wordsworth's landscape. The high points of emotion must be provided not by direct sights and sounds in the surroundings but by specific events, such as concerts at the Queen's Hall, which were set apart from the main culture and provided oases of passionate expression.

In one sense therefore the book was bound to fail in its primary purpose—nor did Willey conceive it as more than a questioning experiment. Yet there is also an interlinked demonstration that a solitary childhood anywhere may produce experiences of the intensity that Wordsworth enjoyed. The problem is rather a cultural one: the city suburb can give no general richness of context from which appropriate language may be drawn. Wordsworth's poetic distinction is not easily to be recreated, therefore.

The chapters on the First World War, which were in many ways the most rewarding in the book, did not prove altogether congenial to reviewers. Few events have so generated an agreed way of regarding them in those who were looking back on them, and it has seemed *de rigueur* for writers of recent times to adopt a mode which would communicate attitudes of disgust and pity as forcefully as possible. Willey's account, based largely on diaries and letters home, has a straightforwardness about it which must disconcert many readers. Willey himself was disturbed by suggestions that the war had not meant much to him, and printed a paragraph in the second volume of his memoirs, pointing out that

his readers understood nothing if they did not see how totally revolted he had been, and how the experience had coloured his attitudes for many years afterwards.

The fact to which his account was being faithful is that it was possible to retain some detachment from the horrors that were being enacted, and that many soldiers spent much more time out of action than in it. For Basil Willey, an officer in the signals, there were many hours when he could try to override his feelings about the conflict by reading deeply in literature or playing the piano. There were training courses behind the lines which took place in the depths of the French countryside, and entertainers which enabled the participants to forget for a time what might be in store for them the following week. And in the midst of it all he was making the discovery that his own self-cultivation, valuable as it might be in its own right, had proved an isolating factor and that it was possible for him, without abandoning his religious principles, to enter into genial relationship with people of very different beliefs. It is not that the horrors of war remain undescribed in these pages; simply that the record of the war as an educative process, following the contours of his letters and journals, gives some prominence to the times when he was not in action.

The wartime chapters also remain true to Willey's purpose of writing a twentieth-century version of *The Prelude*. Apart from suggesting that moments of heightened experience could come as easily on the battlefields as in Lakeland, it is, as with Wordsworth, the record of a humanizing process: like him, he had to learn how to retain his own individuality uncorrupted while opening himself to the demands of humanity at large. And finally (as in that earlier record) there is an insistence that the opening-out could never usurp the preservation of the individual stance.

Basil Willey modestly attributed any interest his autobiography might possess to the fact that he had not been allowed to live out his days as a simple 'late Victorian', but had been forced to make and remake his own vision in the face of the challenges he had to meet. If he was not born at an ideal time for one of his moralizing leanings he was able to see his own civilization change in dramatic ways—not so much in London, perhaps, for there the pattern of noise, advertisements, crowds and underground railways had already been laid down in his childhood, but in the country, where the coming of the car brought about a total revolution. The Lakes when he first knew them were still solitary and quiet: one could walk on the roads themselves in perfect peace. Similarly with Cambridge in 1916, or Cornwall, the scene of regular holidays: the

valley chosen for the family camp was on a then deserted part of the coast. During his lifetime all this had changed, almost beyond recognition. He did not resent the right of the crowds who descended on the Lakes and Cornwall to enjoy themselves in their own way: he simply could not understand why they came so far to do it, destroying in the process the peace that others valued. Yet it was still possible to escape the crowds by climbing on to the fells, or by walking boldly beyond the Cornish caravan sites to points where the cliffs were still deserted. Then, he said, the old magic would still reassert itself.

Like some other men of his time (E. M. Forster, for example) he was essentially a man who had developed secret resources. He had been brought up in sufficient isolation to know that there were moments when human beings could exist in a beneficial relationship with nature. Like Wordsworth he had come to acknowledge that the majority of men would never know about this, and that it was just as well for them, perhaps, that they did not; but for those who did it remained an important source of strength, not to be squandered in fruitless attempts to communicate it to others but to be drawn upon privately.

Those who knew Quiller-Couch used to say that part of his distinctive presence was the sense he gave of being most at home in Fowey among the sails and tackle of the boats there, so that he always brought to Cambridge a tang of the sea. Willey had a similar externality, but it was not displayed in the jaunty elegance that he admired in his predecessor—the full morning dress for his lectures, the loud check suit, the brown bowler rakishly tilted, the tie of carefully chosen hue and the brown leather gaiters for the tow-path. Like Forster, he dressed self-effacingly, and in his last years often looked at first sight 'like an old countryman', as Ian Jack has said. That was a Wordsworthian touch, authenticated by the fact that he spent long periods in his Lakeland cottage, walking the fells. But the distinction was also there in his appearance, making him (as another friend put it) 'a sort of cross between St John and Sherlock Holmes': it was the distinction of a man who had somehow managed to steer a steady course in an intellectual world where the old-fashioned values he liked most would normally find little place.

During his last years he published some of his Cambridge lectures as *The English Moralists* (1964) and continued to contribute other essays to collections and journals. There is a good piece on the making of the New English Bible, for which he served on the literary panel—good because he shows how some of the

readings were actually reached. The article includes a piece of typical dialogue around the committee table: as often with committees the process is helpful in detail but destructive of common style: unfortunate readings are ironed out, but the committee cannot afford to take too long over individual words, or linger over larger issues.

In these years he remained a devoted member of Pembroke, where he had been President from 1958 to 1964. Two further great pleasures remained to him: the scenery of Lakeland, where he could enjoy the seclusion of his cottage in Clappersgate while still serving the cause of literary studies through his work as Chairman of the Dove Cottage Trust, and music, which became steadily more important as a sustainer of his permanent being. He deplored much that was happening in the modern world but without rancour—feeling rather Coleridge's quite unpatronizing pity for the 'poor, loveless, ever-anxious crowd' who had never had the chance to know what he had known and so to acquire his kind of stability. Eventually his powers began to fail; after a period of suffering he died on 2 September 1978.

In 1923 he married Zélie Merlis Ricks and they had four children. The exceptional happiness of their married life was commented on by all who knew them and undoubtedly contributed to all his achievements.

My own contacts with Basil Willey were of a sporadic nature. I saw most of him when he was supervising my research at Cambridge, which he did by letting me develop as I wished and carefully reading everything I wrote. On the whole he was indulgent, but could occasionally be quietly but devastatingly dismissive. I once suggested to him that Coleridge might deliberately have constructed the name 'Christabel' to combine the names of the two great Biblical victims, Christ and Abel. His response was so immediate and quietly absolute that I never committed the idea to print—although I secretly continued to believe it might be true (in previous literature, the name had always been spelt in other ways). Normally, however, he showed nothing but encouragement. He was pleased when I was elected a fellow of his first college; I think he had forgiven them for not having found space for an English fellow in his time, but I doubt if he ever quite forgot it: much as he came to like Pembroke, of which in time he became President, his temperament was one that would naturally have adhered where it first alighted: I imagine he would have understood John Henry Newman's envy of the snapdragon that remained on the walls of *his* first college. On one occasion I

invited him back to a feast, which he much enjoyed. He recalled the delights of the college garden as it had been in his time ('a true *hortus conclusus*') and afterwards, as we emerged, mentioned that he would like to go and look at the staircase where he had lived when he was an undergraduate. We went off and found the spot, only to discover that the doorway had long since been blocked up as part of some college 'improvement'. He looked at the blank wall for a moment and then turned away, not looking particularly disappointed. It was as if he felt that this was, after all, the way things happened, and that, after all, *that* was not what really mattered.

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