



H. D. F. KITTO

HUMPHREY DAVY FINDLEY KITTO

1897-1982

HUMPHREY DAVY FINDLEY KITTO, the first of four children, was born in 1897 to Mr and Mrs H. D. Kitto, who were both school-teachers, in Stroud, Gloucestershire. The family came from one of the potteries in Cornwall, but Kitto was very much a Gloucestershire man; he was educated at his father's village school in Gloucestershire and then, on winning a scholarship, in Gloucester at the Crypt Grammar School, for which he had a lasting affection. He began to play the piano in his village days, and music became an integral part of his life from then on. When he reached the age of conscription, he was rejected for military service (he had an enlarged heart) and went up in 1916 to St John's College, Cambridge, where he distinguished himself by taking a First Class in the Classical Tripos. He spent the academic year 1919-20 in research on Greek papyri, but the study of disconnected fragments was not altogether to his taste. So in 1920 he set off to the University of Glasgow, where he started as Assistant to the Professor of Greek and continued as Lecturer in Greek from 1921 to 1944. There, in the congenial company of Arnold Gomme, Christian Fordyce, Barbara Fowler, and others, he was able to give his undivided attention to the two things he liked most, Greek literature and music. And it was through music that he had the good fortune to marry Ann Kraft in 1928.

The Kittos were inseparable. They worked together, travelled together, played duets on two grand pianos, and were constantly seen together, and you felt that if you were the friend of one you were automatically the friend of the other. They were both devoted to music, she teaching the piano and giving recitals, and he supporting her with his exceptional knowledge of musical theory. Their musical vitality was such that he started playing the 'cello at the age of forty-seven and continued for some twenty years, and Ann practised a piece by Shostakovich 'she hadn't quite mastered' at the age of ninety. Kitto's taste in music was very wide but not uncritical. After attending a lunchtime recital at which a sonata for two pianos by Hindemith was performed, Kitto remarked 'I am only glad that it was not two sonatas for one piano'. And when a friend's daughter was reported to be learning the organ, 'The most musical', he said, 'of the unmusical instruments'. His favourite Beethoven quartet was opus 131,

because it was more 'organic', and he regarded Bartók as a 'more intelligent' composer than others.

Kitto moved in 1944 from Glasgow to Bristol, where he held the Chair of Greek until he retired in 1962. During this period he went in 1954 as Visiting Professor to Cornell University and in 1959 to Brandeis University, and it was in America that he continued to teach, holding the Sather Professorship at Berkeley in 1960-1 and Visiting Professorships at Brandeis again in 1962-3 and at the University of California at Santa Barbara in 1963-4. Thereafter he established a routine of teaching for one semester at Santa Barbara and for the other semester for 'the College year' of students at the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, where he and Ann lived in a tiny flat on the side of Mt Lykabettos. They returned to Bristol in between the semesters to see their son and daughter and their many friends. They both retained their zest for teaching and playing until the end. Ann died in 1981, and Kitto on 21 January 1982. They were a model of marital bliss, entertaining one another as they entertained their guests with spontaneous humour and affection, and caring constantly for one another in their old age.

Teaching was an inherent, instinctive part of Kitto's personality. He had a birdlike alertness, a charming wit, and a love of literature, and the freshness of his mind was an enchantment to most students. And he looked the part, as well as acting it, of a kindly and somewhat absent-minded professor 'with his medieval face kindly beaming behind those bottle glasses', to quote a pupil's words. To him Greek poetry was modern poetry, alive with musical cadences and dance rhythms and full of contemporary significance, and he transported his pupils into new realms of appreciation. He envisaged Greek plays in action as drama and not just as literary texts, and he acted himself in productions at Glasgow and Bristol. The Alexandrian Society, as the Classical Society at Glasgow was called, produced many plays under his inspiration, and in the dark days of November 1943 the audience was cheered by the performance of 'My man Tiro', a farrago from Kitto's pen, in which he acted the part of Catullus. The play included a scene of metamorphosis which Cicero supposedly described in a hasty Kittoesque epic:

A worshipper invokes thee: answer now.
 Horror! His hair turns green, his arms to boughs,
 His toes to roots; giraffes commence to browse
 On his moustache, and from his veins the sap
 Eager prospectors soon begin to tap.

His sense of fun was unlimited, and on the stage he was ever coining extempore witticisms, as those will remember who saw him suspended in a basket as Socrates in the Bristol production of the *Clouds* in 1962. He had the same fascination for American students, to whom his teaching was a novel and entrancing experience. 'Why did Sophocles' *Antigone* not conform to the rules of tragedy?', asked a sophomore. 'Sophocles' knowledge of Aristotle,' said Kitto, 'was, at best, vestigial.' And on whichever side of the Atlantic he was teaching, students were apt to say 'Why didn't anyone else tell me that about the Greeks?'

Kitto both delighted and irritated his colleagues. He was uninterfering and unaligned in university politics, open-minded on any subject, unpretentious about himself, and always happy to spend time in conversation and the exchange of ideas on this and that. He showed great kindness to his younger colleagues, trusted them completely, and treated them as intellectually his equals. But he had a certain insouciance about the details of departmental existence. He enjoyed quoting an axiom of Lord Chesterfield: 'Nothing in this life matters very much and very few things matter at all.' Organizing a time-table or setting an examination paper mattered to Kitto not at all, and attending departmental meetings was not for him. That was the privilege of his close friend, William Beare, the Professor of Latin. In many ways Kitto and Beare complemented one another. Walking home together one evening when Ann was teaching in London, Beare said as they separated: 'And so we part, you to your empty house and I to the bosom of my family, each envying the other.' The two of them made a marvellous and almost invincible team in Senate, because they excelled all others in verbal wit and used it not to hurt but to entertain and challenge. They showed this when they combined together with D. G. James, then Professor of English, to form the Bristol School of Drama in 1946 and later created the first Chair of Drama in 1960. Its first holder, Glynne Wickham, and Kitto worked together from 1947 onwards on Greek and Elizabethan drama, discussing deep into the night and putting their ideas into practice on the stage. This was for both of them 'a singularly happy and creative period', which brought to birth Kitto's *Form and Meaning in Drama* (1956) and Wickham's *Early English Stages I and II* (1959 and 1962).

The first book which Kitto wrote, *In the Mountains of Greece* (1933), conveyed in a charming way his delight in modern Greece—the scenery, the peasant life, and the witty conversations. It was and is the best introduction to that country, but it was more

than that; for it expressed Kitto's sense of continuity between ancient Greece and modern Greece, especially in many aspects of comedy and tragedy. The same charm and freshness appeared in his best-selling Pelican book, *The Greeks* (1951), translated into many languages; for he wrote of ancient Greek life and literature with manifest enjoyment and original insights in a pointed and witty style. Imitators have fallen short of Kitto's *tour de force*. His greatest contribution to scholarship lay in his writings on Greek tragedy, which he treated as a living dramatic form with secular and religious ideas as enlightened and intelligent as any today—if not more so. A student once asked him why such a fine temple had been built on a deserted mountain at Bassae. 'We build our churches where the people are', he replied. 'The Greeks built them where the Gods are'. To him the religion of Aeschylus had more appeal than institutionalized Christianity, and the plays of Sophocles rivalled the greatest plays of Shakespeare in language and in thought. His appreciation came through vividly in *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study* (1939), which went into three editions, and his most original and stimulating assessments were in *Form and Meaning in Drama: a Study of Six Greek Plays and Hamlet* (1956). He believed ardently in the 'organic' form of any great poem, play, or symphony, wherein each part and each detail had its part and its message, and he had an almost personal conviction in the validity of the Sophoclean outlook, which he outlined in three lectures entitled *Sophocles, Dramatist and Philosopher* (1958). Scholars of his own and a later generation reacted against what they regarded as a sentimental idealization of Greek literature. But Kitto defended himself stoutly and with wit. For instance, when some scholars maintained that the tragedians put their own views into the mouth of the chorus, 'You might as well say', he remarked, 'the voice of Beethoven was the bassoon'.

In 1960–1 Kitto gave the Sather Classical Lectures, which were published in an enlarged form with the title *Poiesis: Structure and Thought* (1966). They were the fruit of a lifetime of thinking and teaching about his favourite writers: Aeschylus, Homer in the *Odyssey*, Sophocles, Pindar, Thucydides, Plato, and Shakespeare. He wanted to portray them as he saw them in terms of their own ideas and intentions and not through the distorting glass of our own conceptions. The key to understanding, he thought, lay in Aristotle's belief about *poiesis* (which we may inadequately call 'artistic creation'), that 'the foundation of the whole, the governing element is the choice and disposition of the material' in a literary work of art (these being Kitto's words). If the key

unlocked Greek literature better than English literature, that was because in the former 'the skeleton is more important and accordingly the flesh is less ample'. The long article on Thucydides is essentially an attempt to read the text of Thucydides objectively rather than to read modern ideas into it, and it succeeded through Kitto's long-matured ability to enter into the Greek outlook which had been shaped by the poetry of the Classical Age.

To a great extent Kitto enjoyed what he did, and did what he enjoyed. His delights in music and rhythm and literature, in *mimesis* and *poiesis*, came together in his translations of three of Sophocles' plays, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Electra*, which were published in Oxford Paperbacks in 1962. As Kitto said, two of them 'were written, like their originals, for immediate production on the stage', and we might add that Kitto, like Sophocles, had produced and acted and composed his own music for a number of Greek plays. He imposed on himself the formal restraints of a style, a diction, and a range of rhythms in English which in his opinion came closest to those of Sophocles. It is an original form of translation; indeed it is a recreation of 'form and meaning' which only a poet could attempt. Characteristically Kitto succeeds most where Sophocles is finest. Thus from *Electra's* speech after the report of Orestes' death:

My dear Orestes! You are dead; your death
Has killed me too, for it has torn from me
The only hope I had, that you would come
At last in might, to be the avenger of
Your father, and my champion. But now
Where can I turn? For I am left alone,
Robbed of my father, and of you. Henceforth
I must go back again, for ever, into bondage
To those whom most I hate, the murderers
Who killed my father. O, can this be justice?

And a strophe of the choral ode in glyconic metre, when Oedipus has realized the horror of what he has done:

Alas! you generations of men!
Even while you live you are next to nothing!
Has any man won for himself
More than the shadow of happiness,
A shadow that swiftly fades away?
Oedipus, now as I look on you,
See your ruin, how can I say that
Mortal man can be happy?

When retirement came, it meant for Kitto a welcome release from certain chores. Someone asked him in the following October what it felt like to be standing beside his successor in a passageway. The reply was instant. 'I am beside myself.' Young or old, he had an unlimited *joie de vivre*, and he shared it with his family, his pupils, and his friends in many places and countries. The honorary doctorates which were conferred on him by the University of Aix-Marseille and the University of Glasgow, and the volume of essays presented to him after his retirement (*Classical Drama and its Influence*, ed. M. J. Anderson, 1965) paid tribute to a life of scholarly accomplishment and to a poetic temperament which had its own defences of charm and wit.

N. G. L. HAMMOND