



ERIC JOHN DOBSON

Ramsey & Muspratt

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1913-1984

WITH the death of Eric Dobson on 31 March 1984, the British Academy and the learned world lost a first-class philologist, and the English Faculty of the University of Oxford a distinguished and much-loved professor. Eric John Dobson, the son of John and Lottie Dobson, was born on 16 August 1913, at Roseville, New South Wales. He received his secondary education at North Sydney (Boys') High School, a selective state school which had produced many distinguished academics. From here he went to Sydney University, living in Wesley College, a Methodist college in the university grounds, and not—like the majority of students—at home or in digs. At the end of the first year in the English Honours course students were able to specialize either in literature or in language and early literature, and already Eric Dobson knew where his interests lay and chose the latter course. His career in the English Department was a brilliant one, culminating in 1934 with an outstanding First and the university medal in English. Sydney University was a lively intellectual place, and the English Department in particular had at this period a number of excellent students passing through it. Contemporary with Eric Dobson were John Passmore, the distinguished philosopher (who remembers him as 'self-contained, reserved, knowing what he wanted to do and concentrating his attention on it'), D. J. A. Verco, later Director-General of Education in New South Wales, and Neil Burgess, who later became Professor of English Language in the University of New South Wales. The year ahead of him contained A. G. Mitchell, well-known later for his work on Australian English and on *Piers Plowman*, and Wes Milgate, the Donne scholar, the following year H. J. Oliver, the Shakespearean. Dobson now joined the full-time teaching members of the English Department—Professor E. R. Holme, A. G. Mitchell, R. G. Howard (later Professor of English Literature at Cape Town), and A. J. A. Waldock—as a Tutor. The post of 'Tutor'—the duties included the marking of written work and the advising of students—had been devised as a way of lightening the heavy burden which a large student body imposed on the energy and resources of a small full-time staff. Perhaps the versatility in

teaching which was (and is) demanded by a small Antipodean department helps to explain the rather surprising—at least to those later friends and colleagues who thought of Eric Dobson as a singularly ‘pure’ philologist—subject of his first published work, ‘The Hollow Men, and the Work of T. S. Eliot’, an extension lecture which appeared in 1935 together with two others by members of the department in a booklet entitled *Some Recent Developments in English Literature*. It is characteristically clear and well-ordered, and is, considering the time at which it was written, a sympathetic *apologia* for T. S. Eliot (‘The structure of *The Waste Land*’ he remarks, ‘resembles nothing so much as that of a dream, that is, of subconscious thought’) and for the experimental techniques of modern literature (it is again characteristic that he should single out for approval the fact that ‘diction is becoming limpid, clear, and precise’). But he found Eliot a limited poet: ‘The pity of it is that a man with so highly developed a power of expression should have so limited a range of things to express.’ Dobson held his Tutorship for only one year; in 1935 a Wentworth Travelling Fellowship (of £250 p.a.) took him overseas to England, where he was to spend the remainder of his working life. Although he lost all trace of Australian pronunciation, he never lost his affection for his homeland, and on his return visits to Sydney he would regularly give a lecture at the university.

Dobson came to Oxford, to Merton College, and took a First in the Final Honours School of English in 1937, completing a remarkable series of Antipodean philologists who passed through that college at that time—Jack Bennett had taken a First in 1935, Norman Davis in 1936. His tutors were C. L. Wrenn, later to become the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon, and Edmund Blunden, the poet, whose interests were in more modern periods of literature. Dobson chose to do ‘course ii’ of the English School, which allowed a concentration on medieval texts and philology together with the study of the language in the early modern period and of Renaissance literature—he was later to recall proudly that in Finals he had achieved an α -mark on his Shakespeare paper from no less a person than David Nichol Smith. Life was not all philology and examinations, however—he coxed a college boat in which Norman Davis rowed. He stayed on at Merton for two further years as a Harmsworth Senior Scholar, and began his D.Phil. under the supervision of C. T. Onions, the Reader in English Philology. He undertook an investigation of the evidence for the pronunciation of English in the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially in the writings of contemporary grammarians, spelling reformers and orthoepists. The interpretation of this kind of evidence demanded not only a profound knowledge of historical phonology and of phonetics but a remarkable delicacy and perceptiveness of mind. The thesis grew and grew into a vast and magisterial study, which was finally completed and examined by Wrenn and Tolkien twelve years later, and it formed the basis of his major book, *English Pronunciation 1500-1700*, which appeared in 1957. This work is justly described by *The Times* obituary as 'a massive study, combining learning and thoroughness with a sure, independent judgement of the value of evidence and an impressive power of lucid exposition . . . without question the most distinguished book on the history of English sounds that has appeared since Henry Sweet's famous treatise of 1888.' The year 1940 brought a move to a new job—to a lectureship in English at the University of Reading—and a marriage—to Margot Stinton—which was to prove a very long and happy one. But the war meant that the ordinary course of academic and scholarly life was disrupted; Dobson served until 1945 in Naval Intelligence, stationed in Oxford, at Jowett Walk, and occupying himself with such matters as the cartography of the Balkans.

In 1948 he left Reading for Oxford, coming to a lectureship in English at Jesus College and St Edmund Hall. He was to remain in Oxford for the rest of his life, and to have a great influence on the life and the work of the English Faculty. The beginning of this long period, however, was a time of intense and hectic activity. The Oxford to which he returned was crowded both with new undergraduates and with ex-servicemen (who frequently had a rather more detached view of the object of academic study and of the value of academic exercises) and tutors—especially in medieval and linguistic subjects—were in short supply. Dobson had to teach very long hours and to squeeze in his own research whenever he could. But this teaching was done with great devotion and conscientiousness, and it is not surprising that many of his most loyal ex-pupils first came to know him during this difficult time. His intellectual and scholarly qualities were recognized by the University in 1954, when he was made Reader in English Language, a post which he held until 1964, when he became Professor of English Language. From 1954 he was a Professorial Fellow of Jesus College, a college of which he was very fond. In 1973 he became a Fellow of the British Academy. A steady stream of scholarly publications now began to flow. The year 1954 saw

an edition of *The Hymn to the Virgin*, an important source of information on English pronunciation and in 1957 both *English Pronunciation 1500–1700* and *The Phonetic Writings of Robert Robinson*. He was never to abandon his interest in Early Modern English, but an important paper in 1962 signalled a new direction. This was a study of the affiliations of the manuscripts of *Ancrene Wisse*, an early Middle English prose text, which he contributed to *English and Medieval Studies*, a Festschrift presented to J. R. R. Tolkien on his seventieth birthday. It was an appropriate as well as a distinguished contribution, for Tolkien had drawn attention to the interest and importance of the language of this text and of a group of related treatises. Dobson continued his investigations into this text in a British Academy lecture on 'The Date and Composition of *Ancrene Wisse*' in 1966, with an edition of the Cotton Cleopatra version for the Early English Text Society in 1972, and with two further important studies—*Moralities on the Gospels* (1975) and *The Origins of Ancrene Wisse* (1976). In 1981 he produced in collaboration with Professor D'Ardenne of Liège, another old student of Tolkien, an edition of *Seinte Katerine*, and was busily engaged on a critical edition of *Ancrene Wisse* when he died. It is hoped that this may be completed by one of his former pupils. Another area of scholarly interest is reflected in a handsome book which he produced in collaboration with F. Ll. Harrison in 1979, *Medieval English Songs*. His work on the manuscripts of *Ancrene Wisse* had not only made him expert in the craft of editing but also deeply interested in the theory of textual criticism. This interest was extended and deepened through a course of lectures which he gave every year to incoming graduate students in medieval studies. He was strongly of the opinion that the standard editions of medieval English lyrics were mostly not really editions in the true sense of the word at all but simply reproductions of copies (and often poor copies) by scribes, and that these lyrics, left 'lame and deformed' by their editors, could be restored by the rigorous practice of traditional textual criticism. He does this with pages of carefully argued supporting commentary. Not all editors of these texts will follow him to the end in his bold use of conjectural emendation, but the work is a masterly display of editorial technique, and every page reveals a truly profound knowledge of Middle English. As one reviewer, justly hailing the book as 'a major achievement', remarks: 'The presentation of the musicological context is learned and comprehensive; the texts represent an important new departure in the editing of Middle English lyrics'—in which area, he also remarks:

'Professor Dobson is often convincing and never less than subtle and spell-binding.'

In the midst of all this intensive and productive scholarly career, Eric Dobson found time to continue a very happy and relaxed family life (he liked to reminisce about holidays spent driving round France in cars whose performance left much to be desired) and a very busy official and administrative life in the Oxford English Faculty. He served on many committees and as Chairman of the Faculty Board. He was a natural 'administrator', being not only wonderfully efficient and well-organized but clear and precise in expression. He was one of those extraordinary people who could draft a perfect entry for the *Examination Statutes* in his head in the middle of a meeting. But he was always patient when clearing up other peoples' muddles. One of the happier memories that some of his colleagues have of the troubled times of 1968 is of Eric Dobson, in the mass meetings then in vogue in the English Faculty, calmly and clearly explaining to passionate speakers why it was unlikely that the University could accede to such and such a radical demand. He was patient with the muddles of his colleagues, too. On one memorable occasion when he was in the chair at a meeting of the Faculty Board and the chairman of the graduate studies committee—a much loved and extremely learned man—was in difficulties with the papers he was attempting to explain, Eric leant forward and said: 'I think the paper you are looking for, James, is the one you are holding in your left hand.' Not surprisingly, he was an excellent lecturer: his material was beautifully ordered and presented—in a manner which was (and is) not altogether usual in the English Faculty. He was also an excellent supervisor and examiner of graduate students. One might have expected that a scholar whose own standards of accuracy were so remarkably high might have been altogether too severe a master for all but the really first-rate, but this was not the case. He was invariably kind and encouraging to those who were not natural scholars and to those who were struggling with the difficulties of a language which was not their own. Everything his students produced was carefully read and meticulously annotated. He often seemed to get on best with clever students who were unusual in some way or another. Of one he wrote very characteristically: 'I think that she has always been my favourite pupil, maybe because she was the naughtiest when she was young—or the most successful in shocking dons. And they were always so surprised to discover how able she was.' The last years of his life were clouded by bad health,

and he was for a long time confined to a wheelchair. For his friends and colleagues it was a harrowing sight to see a man who had been so active physically as well as intellectually and was so spruce and dapper in appearance literally withered away by intense pain. But he bore his long illness with great dignity and fortitude, supported to the end by his wife Margot. It was a great pleasure to us that it was possible to produce a Festschrift in honour of his seventieth birthday—*Five Hundred Years of Words and Sounds*—and to present it to him at a party in his house in Davenant Road. He will be remembered as one of the finest historical philologists, and as one of the most modest, whose works are remarkable not only for the depth and range of their scholarship but also for their limpid, clear, and precise style.

DOUGLAS GRAY

Note. I am indebted to Professors Norman Davis, A. G. Mitchell, John Passmore, and Leslie Rogers for information about Eric Dobson's earlier career.