



C. H. ROBERTS *St. John's College, Oxford*

Portrait by Sir John Everett Millais, 1871.

"W. E. Hill and Co. have just published in the German language a book (Stuttgart, 1906), p. 126."

Colin Henderson Roberts 1909–1990

COLIN HENDERSON ROBERTS who died on 11 February 1990, had been elected a Fellow of the Academy in 1947, and was one of those who resigned in 1979, in protest at the Academy's decision not to expel Anthony Blunt.

He was born in London, 8 June 1909, the second son of Robert Lewis Roberts (1876–1956), who, like his father before him, ran a building firm in North London, and of Muriel Grace Henderson. The family had strong literary and clerical connections. One uncle, Richard Ellis Roberts (1897–1953), became literary editor of the *New Statesman*, and wrote memoirs of Stella Benson and H. R. L. Sheppard. Through him Colin had the chance to meet W. B. Yeats, Walter de la Mare, Rose Macaulay, and other literary luminaries. The wife of another uncle (Revd W. C. Roberts (1892–1952)), Colin's Aunt Ursula, wrote novels under the name of Susan Miles. Colin's elder brother, Brian, whom he followed to Merchant Taylors' and St. John's College Oxford, and who (like Colin) became an Honorary Fellow of the college, had a notable career in journalism, and was editor of the *Sunday Telegraph*, 1961–76.

Merchant Taylors' preserves Greek and Latin compositions by both brothers. Colin's version of a passage of *Paradise Lost* is countersigned by the headmaster, J. A. Nairn, 9 December 1926, with the note 'half-holiday granted'. His other distinction at school seems to have been as an actor; a performance of Cassandra in scenes from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* is remembered. At St. John's, his career continued with

perfect smoothness, through Firsts in Mods and Greats to a Craven Fellowship (1932). Two of his tutors, J. U. Powell and F. W. Hall, were specially interested in the discoveries of the papyrologists and the transmission of ancient texts; in H. M. Last he had an ancient history tutor who could be extremely stimulating, and Colin had from boyhood always thought of himself as a historian rather than as a pure scholar. It may well have been Last who determined Colin's choice of career, as he was to do three years later with another young Oxford classic, Eric Turner (*Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 73 (1987), p. 687). Certainly Colin set about learning to be a papyrologist with great vigour. The founding genius of Oxford papyrology, A. S. Hunt, had little inclination for teaching (and was to die untimely in 1934). Colin went to Berlin, in 1932, to study with Wilhelm Schubart; there he met the great Ulrich Wilcken (he remembered that Wilcken would work the whole day in the Institute, a pile of papyri on one side and a pile of sandwiches on the other; by evening the papyri had been deciphered, and the sandwiches consumed). He was entrusted with the publication of a piece of hellenistic poetry from the Berlin collection, which duly appeared in *Aegyptus*, 14 (1934), 447. Betweenwhiles he spent two seasons (1932–4) excavating in Egypt, at Caranis, as part of the University of Michigan team; at home, there was the opportunity to learn from H. I. Bell, Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum (whose obituary memoir he wrote, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 53 (1967), 409). International contacts were strengthened in 1937, when Colin organised, jointly with T. C. Skeat of the British Museum, the Congress of Papyrologists in Oxford.

Shortly before his death, Hunt had proposed to the John Rylands Library that the task of publishing the remains of its splendid collection of papyri should be entrusted to Colin Roberts. In 1935–6 there appeared two slender volumes with biblical texts of exceptional interest: a fragment of Deuteronomy datable to the second century BC, and a fragment of the Fourth Gospel assignable to the early second century AD — the earliest witnesses respectively to the Greek Old Testament and to the New Testament. The other biblical and literary texts followed in a stately volume published in 1938.

During all this period, Colin had remained attached to St. John's, first as a Junior, then as a Senior, Research Fellow. In the early part of the war, he joined the Foreign Office, and spent the ensuing five years in intelligence work, in London and at Bletchley. He returned in 1945 as a tutorial Fellow of St. John's, and soon became Librarian, and

(from 1948) University Reader in Documentary Papyrology. In 1947 (the year in which he was elected to the Academy) he married Alison Barrow, daughter of R. H. Barrow, a Senior Inspector of Schools and the author of a number of books on classical subjects; their daughter, Rachel, was born the following year.

The next few years were divided between college work and research. As a tutor, Colin earned much devotion. He knew how to value and encourage the able, but he gave even more time and trouble to those who found the going hard, for whom he had a decidedly soft spot. In research, he took a lead in the post-war revival of papyrology. He had already collaborated with Bell on a first volume of Merton papyri, completed in 1939 but not published until 1948. He went on to collaborate with E. G. Turner in publishing the remaining documentary texts in the Rylands collection (1952). Closer to home, the splendid collections of the Egypt Exploration Society had languished in Hunt's last years. In 1941 the series came alive with a volume to which Lobel contributed the literary texts, Roberts the documentary; he continued to sustain, as contributor and general editor, the volumes which appeared with increasing rapidity after the war (1948–54). He began also a new series, devoted to the papyri of Antinoopolis, with a first volume (1950) which included a wide range of Christian and pagan literature and Byzantine documents.

But at the moment when his reputation was being established by all this, Colin, having rejected an opportunity to become Professor of Greek at Edinburgh, allowed himself to be appointed Secretary to the Delegates of the Oxford University Press, in succession to A. L. P. Norrington. This was perhaps not such a total change of life as it appeared. He had been involved in Press affairs as a Delegate for some years; Austin Lane Poole, then President of St. John's, who was an older friend with much influence over him, guided him in the same direction; and the great theme of 'the book' fascinated him in all its manifestations, modern as well as ancient. He remained at the Press for twenty years (1954–74), a distinguished member of the succession of 'scholar secretaries' who combined active participation in scholarly work with the administration of a huge and complex organisation. His own *Greek Literary Hands, 350 BC-AD 400* came out when he was already in office. All the major classical and theological enterprises of those years bear the mark of his informed concern and guidance: the completion of the Patristic Lexicon by Professor G. W. H. Lampe, the continuation of E. A. Lowe's *Codices Latini Antiquiores*, the

Oxford Latin Dictionary (of which a complete review had to be undertaken in the first year of his Secretaryship), and, above all, the *New English Bible*. But these were not easy times. Peter Sutcliffe (*The Oxford University Press: an informal history* (1987), p. 275) calls his reign 'the Press' most explosive period since the beginning of the century'. His administrative skills, discretion, and diplomacy were of a high order. He had an extraordinary capacity for remembering and mastering detail, and for the rapid analysis of a problem. But he had formidable difficulties to contend with: the impact of the Waldock Report (1970) on the relations of the Press with the University, labour troubles (especially at the Neasden depot), and a growing financial crisis. The move of the London publishing house to Oxford was planned under his auspices, though not carried out till later. There is no doubt that his heart was in the Press — its challenges were those he most wished to meet — as much as it was in scholarship, and more than it ever was in teaching.

His work did not of course cut him off from St. John's, where his counsel was much in demand both on financial issues and when some delicate matter arose that needed special diplomatic and personal skill; it is no secret that many would have wished to see him serve some time as President. When he retired from the Press in 1974, he modestly approached the College in the hope of becoming a Senior Research Fellow, the status he held in 1939. Characteristically, he submitted a plan of work, and carried it out in the appointed time. *Manuscript, Society, and Belief in Early Christian Egypt*, the Schweich Lectures of 1977, was published in 1979.

This book is a further example of his concern to use his verbal scholarship as a means to historical exploration, in this case exploration of the growth of the Church in Egypt. Thus he saw fresh importance in the abbreviations conventionally called *nomina sacra*: they were not merely a convenience or an economy, but 'a unique device that provides a summary theology in minimum space' and so a powerful tool of Christianisation. This concern with the book form as an expression of the society it serves had already led Colin to engage with one of the great unsolved problems of bibliography: the origin of the codex, that is, of the book as we know it. The brilliant essay 'The Codex' (*Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 40 (1954), pp. 169–204) established a crucial fact: among the papyri from Egypt (where alone early Greek books survive), almost all pagan texts were written on rolls, and almost all Christian texts in codices, until the fourth century AD: by

the fifth century the roll had disappeared, the codex remains as the sole medium of literary transmission. It appears, then, that in Egypt at least the Codex was a Christian form, and triumphed with the Christian triumph. But how to explain this? and how to include in the explanation the evidence for documentary and literary codices in the pagan Rome of the first century AD? Colin originally proposed that St. Mark had composed his gospel in the notebook form he had observed in Rome, and took it with him to Alexandria; pious copyists preserved the original format. This theory he later gave up. In his last book, a revised treatment in collaboration with his old friend T. C. Skeat (*The Birth of the Codex*, 1983), it is suggested that the Sayings of Jesus were written in notebooks to distinguish them from the Law which was copied on scrolls: a rabbinical practice, which the early Christians adopted. The evidence is disputed, and the argument continues; but it continues within the boundaries that Colin's brilliant intervention set.

No account of Colin Roberts' life would be complete without emphasis on his Christian spirituality and concern with the Anglican church. This showed in many ways: not only in the work just mentioned, but in his co-operation with the translators of the New English Bible, and, in his retirement at Broadwindsor in West Dorset, in his greatly valued activity as a lay reader.

Colin Roberts was a notable figure: tall, slight, retaining the elegance of his youthful good looks until a car accident, not long before his death, left him bent and shrunken. His physique and what it told of his character were well caught by artists: in the well-known Muirhead Bone view of Blackwell's, in which he is one of the browsing scholars, and by William Narraway in the drawing here reproduced. He was a man of gentle manners and great courtesy, always kind and considerate; at the same time he was possessed of untiring energy, sharp vision, and an inflexible obedience to the dictates of conscience.

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