



KENNETH MUIR

## Kenneth Arthur Muir 1907–1996

KENNETH MUIR was one of the most eminent Shakespearean scholars and critics of our time. As editor of five of the plays and author of a large number of books and essays on the plays and poems, he is read all over the world. His beautiful speaking of poetry and the lucid and witty presentation of his learning inspired lecture audiences at home and abroad. He generously promoted the work of others, not least as editor of *Shakespeare Survey* and as the first Chairman and later the President of the International Shakespeare Association. His own work was not limited to Shakespeare: the subjects of his more than fifty books and his almost innumerable articles range from Wyatt, through Renaissance and Romantic writers, to modern poetry and fiction. His range also extended beyond the confines of the English language, to translations of Racine and Corneille and of Golden Age Spanish drama. His zest and industry remained undiminished until shortly before his death, and in terms of publication he was as productive in the twenty years after his retirement from the King Alfred Chair of English Literature in the University of Liverpool as he had been during the forty-five years of his uncommonly active professional life in York, Leeds, and Liverpool. As the fell sergeant Death moves more swiftly than publishers, new essays by him are still appearing, more than a year after his death. The latest of these is a counter-blast to what he saw as ‘Base Uses’ of Shakespeare: characteristic of a scholar and man who, in the words of Ernst Honigmann, the recipient of the Festschrift to which this essay was contributed, was ‘an immense force on the side of sanity and goodness (I can think of no other word) in an increasingly wicked world’.

In the autobiography which he left for posthumous publication Kenneth Muir presented the story of his life under three headings: ‘Politics’, ‘Theatre’, ‘Academic’, in that order. In an earlier and shorter version of the autobiography which he deposited with the University soon after his retirement, a ‘Theatre’

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section comes first, and yet the conclusion to the entire manuscript establishes a different order of preference:

Although I hope to be remembered for some time as the editor of several of Shakespeare's plays and of *Shakespeare Survey*, as the author of several sound and sober books on Shakespeare, as the biographer of Sir Thomas Wyatt, and as the lucky discoverer of some splendid new poems of his, I believe that the English Department at Liverpool, one of the best and perhaps the happiest, is the best thing I have helped to create.

As all this indicates, the various categories under which his activities could be classified were not separate and discrete but mutually supportive. In this interdependency rests the unique quality of his achievements. The Preface to what is perhaps his most widely read work of criticism, *Shakespeare's Tragic Sequence* (1972), characteristically states: 'I have, perhaps, learnt more from performances of the tragedies than from the critics, and more still from those amateur groups with which I have been associated in one capacity or another.' When retiring from his Liverpool Chair, he welcomed the opportunity to close his academic and theatrical career in one symbolic gesture by appearing as Prospero in a production of *The Tempest*, directed by a young member of his Department. When, in October 1995, he wrote to Tony Blair to congratulate him on his speech to the Labour Party conference, he also felt bound to point out that a reference to the great writers of the past which Blair had made might be open to misinterpretation.<sup>1</sup> 'I know from personal experience', he wrote, 'that the writings of Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Dickens and many others can inspire rather than hinder one's political activity.' In *King Lear*, which he edited for the Arden Shakespeare (1952), the lines closest to his heart were Gloucester's discovery of social justice: 'So distribution should undo excess / And each man have enough'; and in a late essay on 'Dissident Poets' (1991) he praised Shelley for escaping, in *The Mask of Anarchy*, from mere abstraction and for presenting Freedom 'in concrete terms of bread, clothes and fire, as well as justice, peace and love'. A committed socialist throughout his life, he saw no difficulty in combining practical politics with literary scholarship. In day-to-day terms it meant correcting proofs while crossing the Mersey between committee meetings in Liverpool University and in Birkenhead Town Hall. On a deeper level it meant that, whether acting as an academic leader, a politician, or a literary critic, he was impelled by the same basic convictions, humane rather than doctrinaire. He was always proud of an early (1947) essay of his, on Marx discovering in lines from *Timon of Athens* the meaning of the cash-nexus—even though he also felt that the fact that the

<sup>1</sup> Blair had insisted 'I want us to be a young country again . . . not resting on our past glories.' Those included some of the world's 'finest literature, art, and poetry', but while 'we are proud of our history . . . its weight hangs heavy upon us'. (Leader's speech, Labour Party Annual Conference, 1995.)

essay had appeared in a Marxist journal nearly cost him his appointment to the King Alfred Chair. He never lost his belief in literature as the vehicle of truth and in the discipline of literary criticism as its servant—a belief that reached through Matthew Arnold and Shelley right back to Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*. The keystones of this belief remained those set down in his Liverpool Inaugural lecture, 'The Study of Literature' (1952): the proper end of criticism, informed by scholarship, is to demonstrate that 'if the immediate function of literature is delight, the ultimate end is nothing less than the Good Life or the Greater Glory of God'. Muir remained untouched by the theoretical approaches which came to dominate much of English Studies in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. In a world of relativity and deconstruction, he knew what truth was and what goodness was. If this made his work in these decades seem old-fashioned, it also gave it a wholeness and strength which appeal, and last, beyond fashion.

Characteristically, Kenneth Muir did not include a 'Personal' section in his autobiographical manuscript, although in the last few months of his life he planned, but did not write, a section on 'those I have loved'. He valued love and friendship, and would write as it were professionally of these phenomena: of, for example, how Shelley in *The Defence of Poetry* argues that 'poetry by stimulating the imagination increases our capacity to love' ('Shelley's Magnanimity', 1981). But, naturally reticent, and in keeping with an austerity of demeanour which, unless one knew him well, belied his own very real capacity for love and friendship, he would not write of personal relations. A reader of his autobiography would barely know that he married Mary Ewen in 1936 and would find no reference to the birth of a daughter, Katherine (1943), and a son, David (1951). The marriage was one of true minds; and he was deeply bereft by the death of Mary from leukaemia in 1975, followed by Katherine's death from the same illness, and only some six months after it had been diagnosed, in 1981. Ten years later he wrote a poem of emotion recollected in tranquillity—a poem which was not for publication at the time, but which may be cited here as evidence that the outward stoicism with which he faced his losses co-existed with profound inward grief, and that the sympathetic imagination was a fact of his life, not just a literary topic:

*The Missing Snapshot*

Ten years ago—a memory buried deep,  
Now disinterred—your terminal disease  
Gained a remission, offering fruitless hope.

You walked me off my feet along the steep  
And gravelly paths, in a mild Indian summer,  
Above the Pembroke sands, until we reached

A neolithic grave. At your request,  
 Pretending I was dead, I lay outstretched,  
 Arms crossed upon my chest with shuttered eyes.

The final photograph you took of me—  
 Entitled (and a camera never lies)—  
 ‘Grave portrait of a prehistoric man’.

But when they scanned (at last) all your effects—  
 Selected records, photos, diaries, notes—  
 They never found the print or negative.

Doubtless you feared this photo of your father,  
 After his spurious death once more alive,  
 Would leave an after-load of suffering,

Because he knew how brief was your reprieve.

Kenneth Muir was born in the parish of St James’s, Hatcham, south-east London, in a house in the New Cross Road that was later to be destroyed in the blitz. Years later he was thrilled to discover that his birthplace was only a mile or so from the tavern where Marlowe was stabbed to death. He was proud to say that he came of a long line of naval officers. His grandfather, George William Muir, had served with great distinction in the Crimean war at the age of seventeen and his grandmother was thought to be the granddaughter of the Dr Thomas who was called (too late) to attend Byron in his last illness. His uncle, Arthur Thomas Muir, commanded the *Niger*, one of the first gunboats to be torpedoed in World War I. Kenneth Muir’s father, Robert Douglas Muir (1869–1914), had been educated at the Royal Naval College, studied medicine in London and Brussels, and settled as a general practitioner in the New Cross area. His marriage, in 1899, to Edith Mary Barnes, who taught in the Sunday School where he was superintendent, was initially regarded by the Muir family as something of a *mésalliance*: she was the daughter of the manager of a brewery—a fact that was to be concealed from the children, who were always told that he was ‘a carpenter, like St Joseph’. But the family soon came to appreciate the remarkable intelligence and energy of the young woman who, on marriage, gave up the independence of a ‘New Woman’ (she was the buyer for a London dress store and went to Paris every year to study the fashions) and re-trained to become her husband’s dispenser and book-keeper. When he died of diabetes at the age of 45, leaving her with four young children, she coped courageously in severely reduced circumstances; and each of the children—of whom Kenneth was the third—was enabled to develop his or her own talents. Grace ended up as Vice-Principal of a College of Further Education, Douglas as an actor, and Alec as Chief Constable of County Durham.

Kenneth Muir was seven when his father died, and he remembered him chiefly as a devout Christian who presided daily at family prayers and a stern disciplinarian who did not spare the cane. His own first prize at school, at the age of eleven, was for his knowledge of the Bible. In later years he came to

feel that his father had acted 'as a conscience, a superego' throughout his life: 'It makes me feel guilty when I am not working. It drives me to work more than I should, and seldom to relax.' But he also came to discover that his father had been a member of two literary societies and the leading spirit in an all-male group that met monthly to read plays, mostly Shakespeare's but also Goldsmith's and Sheridan's; and he always knew that his love of Shakespeare began from the pocket editions his father used. Eventually, this love was to be developed at school, but only after some years of considerable misery.

In 1917 Kenneth Muir entered Epsom College, a boarding school for the sons of doctors, where he was to spend the next nine years. Earlier, he had been taught at home, by a governess who could no longer be afforded after the death of his father, and then in a local day school from which he mainly remembered a 'seedy' Latin master who taught the boys a pronunciation they had afterwards to unlearn. This was only one of his handicaps at Epsom. Holding a free place—a scholarship reserved for the sons of deceased doctors—he was looked down on by the sons of Harley Street consultants: 'To lose a father was regarded as tasteless.' Skinny, bookish, and bad at games, he met contempt in a school that valued physical prowess. In the Spartan regime that prevailed he suffered from chilblains and frostbite, and he was always to remember how, on two occasions, his hands were so swollen that the sleeves of his jacket had to be slit before he could undress. Most of all he remembered his otherness as a budding socialist in what was virtually an all-Tory environment. Years later, when his name first appeared in *Who's Who* and he received a letter from the then headmaster of his old school, asking him to become a fundraiser, he wrote back: 'Dear Sir, I am one of your failures.'

A failure in terms of the school's ethos, he was nonetheless an academic success, with School Certificate examination results good enough to gain him an offer of free medical education at University College Hospital. As this seemed the only way into higher education, he began to study for First MB but, though doing well in science subjects, he was desolate without the Arts and so transferred after a term to History, English Literature, French and Latin and, on the strength of his Higher Certificate results, gained a place, but not a scholarship, to read English at St Edmund Hall, Oxford. A bequest from his father's partner enabled him to take up the place. The last three years at Epsom had been happy: he had won prizes for verse-speaking and for debating and had been allowed to subscribe to *The Daily Herald*. The most formative experiences had been in the school's play-reading and acting society, run by an imaginative English master and known as 'The Mermaid Tavern'. Under its auspices he took part in readings of plays, from *Gammer Gurton's Needle* to *Arms and the Man*, and played the lead in productions of *The Way of the World*, *Venice Preserved*, *The Rivals*, Hardy's *Queen of Cornwall*, *Doctor Faustus* and *Macbeth*. And in the holidays he would spend twopence on the

fare from home to the Old Vic and five pence on a gallery seat, from which he admired Ion Swinley as Hamlet and Othello and in later seasons saw the young Gielgud as Hamlet, Richard II, Malvolio, and Antony, and Edith Evans as the Shrew and Rosalind.

He came up to Oxford as a devout Shavian, soon after the General Strike; but in his undergraduate years, he used to say, politics was less important than poetry. Much of his study of literature was extra-curricular, since English literature, as understood by the examinations system, ended in 1880. In the late 1920s Muir and his contemporaries were reading Lawrence, Joyce, Yeats, and Eliot, but when M. R. Ridley offered a course on modern poetry, he talked of Brooke, Flecker, and Bridges; and when the Professor of Poetry, H. W. Garrod, ventured into the modern field, he also chose to speak on Brooke, together with Bridges and Humbert Wolfe. Muir found some lectures brilliant—notably those given by C. S. Lewis, F. P. Wilson, and Brett Smith—but the rest of the teaching, as well as the syllabus, uninspiring. He graduated in 1929 with Second Class Honours, brought down in his Finals by his dislike of Anglo-Saxon when taught as a purely linguistic subject. Barred from the opportunity of doing research, he proceeded to take the Diploma in Education, which he later regarded as a blessing in disguise, both because he discovered that he loved teaching and because the course itself was not very demanding and left him plenty of time to read in Bodley, to begin to write his own poetry, and to act. As a graduate he was free to take part in performances at John Masefield's private theatre at Boar's Hill where earlier, in the autumn of 1928, he had been invited to play Antipholus of Syracuse in *The Comedy of Errors* because, Mrs Masefield wrote, 'we have heard so much of your speaking of verse'. The production nearly came to grief, when it was discovered at the last minute that undergraduates were allowed to act only in OUDS or College productions. But Mrs Masefield successfully appealed to the Vice-Chancellor for a special relaxation of the rule, and Kenneth Muir always treasured the note he received from Masefield after the last performance, thanking him in the words of Marvell for 'daring the prelate's rage'. In his last Oxford year, 1929–30, he acted at Boar's Hill in dramatisations of *The Iliad* and of Blake's *Jerusalem* (Book 4) and took the part of Satan in a rare performance of Blake's play *The Ghost of Abel*; and he was one of three finalists in the Oxford Recitations, run by Masefield to encourage verse-speaking, with his fellow-poets Binyon and Bottomley as judges.

Appointed in 1930—mainly, he believed, on the strength of a reference from John Masefield, by then Poet Laureate—to a lectureship at St John's College, York, an Anglican Training College for Teachers, Muir began an academic career deeply committed to teaching and theatre, to poetry and politics. His convictions made for an uneasy relationship with the College Principal who tried on three separate occasions to sack him—the last time for

encouraging students to come to his study to discuss religion, literature, and politics. On each occasion the sacking was rescinded on the insistence of the chairman of the College governors, Archbishop William Temple, who was a regular and enthusiastic attender of Muir's Shakespeare productions. Meanwhile, like so many of his contemporaries in the 1930s, Muir was driven to take an active part in politics by events at home and abroad: by the great Depression and unemployment; by the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, by the rise of Hitler and the persecution of the Jews. He read and was influenced by Auden and Spender; and he read *Christianity and Social Revolution*, a volume of essays to which Christians and Marxists had contributed, and was influenced particularly by the work of John Macmurray and Karl Polanyi. These two were the intellectual leaders of a group entitled The Christian Left, which he joined; and this led to an invitation to join a smaller splinter group who met monthly in London to discuss the future of socialism and the possibility of a reconciliation between Christianity and Marxism. He helped to edit a printed news sheet of the Christian Left which appeared at irregular intervals and included the great theologian Niebuhr among its contributors, and also to publish a number of cyclostyled pamphlets, on subjects such as working-class consciousness and the historical roots of British socialism.

It was a heady time to be a young intellectual and poet: not so much a dawn in which it was bliss to be alive as a dusk in which the encroaching darkness, of present miseries and wars to come, was shot through with the will to hope. It is reflected in the epigraph—Hotspur's 'I tell you, my lord fool, out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety'—of Kenneth Muir's first book, a collection of poems entitled *The Nettle and the Flower* and published by Oxford University Press in 1933. And it is reflected in the assertion which ends the long poem that gave the volume its title:

We need not fear the sorrow and the pain,  
we need not shrink from all that life may bring,  
from the harsh nettle we may pluck the flower,  
ignore the thorn and gather up the rose.

Blake, Shelley, and Keats, rather than Auden, are the young poet's masters; and the flower plucked is not Hotspur's 'safety' but a Romantic vision of how

All the sharp fragments of the broken mirror  
of life, are unified to form a glass,  
wherein we see the beauty that outlasts Time—  
the perfect vision of immortal art!

Resounding with echoes of past poets, the volume proclaims poetry as the salvation of the present. 'Poetry leads!' (that is, over 'philosophy', 'Church' and 'science') he exclaims in a poem addressed to Sean O'Loughlin, an Oxford friend with whom he was exchanging weekly letters in which each of them set out his ideas on each of Shakespeare's plays, in chronological order. Muir

continued to publish his poetry in periodicals and in a volume, *Jonah and the Whale* (1935), where verses of his accompanied a wood-engraving by Gertrud Hermes. But the next major publication, in joint authorship with O'Loughlin and the result of their correspondence, was also his first venture into Shakespeare criticism: *The Voyage to Illyria* (1937). In its sensitive attention to Shakespeare's poetry, it foreshadows his later work. In their preoccupation with imagery, the authors have learned from Caroline Spurgeon and the early writings of G. Wilson Knight. But, as a work of the 1930s, the book is also strangely old-fashioned, reading the sequence of plays and poems in a Downtonshire fashion as revelations of Shakespeare's inner life: an approach which Muir—but not O'Loughlin—was to denounce in the Preface to the second edition (1970).

In real life during these York years he was approaching Shakespeare in quite a different way, via the theatre. He directed two or three student productions at St John's College and—in a period that he was to remember as a kind of Golden Age—joined the York Settlement Community Players, with whom he played Orsino in *Twelfth Night*, the Ghost in *Hamlet*, and Agamemnon in *Troilus and Cressida*. He co-directed the last two and *King Lear*, as well as more modern drama: Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* and Lenormand's *Shadow of Evil* (in his own translation). As it happened, this activity also became his way into university employment, as Bonamy Dobrée, Professor of English Literature at Leeds, came to see the production of *Troilus and Cressida* and suggested that Muir apply for a lectureship in his department. He was duly appointed—luckily, he was to say later, *The Voyage to Illyria* had not yet appeared—and moved to Leeds in 1937. He had married Mary Ewen, a fellow socialist and teacher, in the previous year, and the salary-cut implied by the move (since the University would not give him credit for the seven years at St John's) was a serious matter. But his desire for a more academic environment prevailed. He and Mary bought a cookery book which had 100 recipes for sixpenny meals for two people, and he began to review eight novels a month for *The Yorkshire Post*, thus increasing his earnings by more than 50 per cent.

At the time, English Literature at Leeds was a very small unit. With Bonamy Dobrée, who remained Head of the Department throughout the 14 years Muir spent there, and whom he never ceased admiring, there were only two lecturers: Wilfred Childe and Douglas Jefferson. For part of the war years, as Dobrée went off to train artillery officers and to work for the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, and as Jefferson was called up, there were only Childe and Muir to cover the entire syllabus. And Muir had to combine lecturing to undergraduates with war work, first as officer in charge of the War Room, North East Regional Control, where his job was to train a dozen or so telephonists, clerks, and teleprinter operators to dispatch fire-engines, ambulances, and rescue parties from one town to another during an air raid,

and then in a Report Centre where he gave unappreciated lectures to army units.

After the war, the teaching staff expanded, with notable appointments of Harold Fisch, Arnold Kettle, and G. Wilson Knight. Kenneth Muir formed important and lasting friendships with each of these new colleagues. Leeds was an exciting centre for English studies. Drama flourished, too. It had been understood that one of Muir's functions at Leeds would be to direct for the students' dramatic society; on arrival he took over a production of *All for Love*, and later he directed *The Importance of being Earnest*, *Heartbreak House*, his own translation of *The Trojan Women*, and *Coriolanus*. He never really approved of modern dress productions of Shakespeare, but for this, mid-war, *Coriolanus* there was a desperate shortage of men for the battle scenes. So Volumnia and Virgilia listened to bulletins of the battles (in Shakespeare's words) on the six o'clock news, *Coriolanus* became a fascist dictator and the Tribunes were Labour politicians. When the students decided to direct their own productions, Muir became involved in the staff dramatic society and took a series of leading roles, among them Vershinin in *Three Sisters*, Cusins in *Major Barbara*, Rakitin in *A Month in the Country*, Mirabel in *The Way of the World*, Holofernes in *Love's Labour's Lost*, and Gloucester in a historic *King Lear* with Wilson Knight as Lear. Knight himself directed several productions, and one of the most successful was of Racine's *Athalie* in a translation by Muir. Its fame eventually reached the ears of Eric Bentley, who asked Muir, by this time in the University of Liverpool, to translate five of Racine's plays for Hill and Wang's Dramabooks. He translated the remaining four plays while serving as Dean of the Faculty of Arts. *Five Plays of Racine* (1960) has to compete, in this country, with the later Penguin translation, but is still a standard text in the United States. He liked to say that these translations gave him 'some compensation for not having been able to write viable poetic drama', and in the last two decades of his life he was to produce, in collaboration with Ann Mackenzie, some brilliant translations of Calderon.

Scholarly writing, and not poetic drama, came out of the Leeds years, once the lightening of the wartime teaching-load made research possible. During his last year at York he had written a study of Keats for which he had not found a publisher; parts of it were published many years later, in a volume of essays by members of the Liverpool English Department which he edited, entitled *John Keats: A Reassessment* (1958). He had also begun a book on the University Wits, which was interrupted by the war. This was set aside because, by the time he was able to return to research, he had been offered contracts to edit the poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt for the New Muses Library and *Macbeth* for the 'New' Arden. These commissions, to which was soon added the Arden *King Lear*, were to make his name as a scholar; and they were earned by his earlier work. He attributed the invitation to edit Wyatt to

Dobrée's patronage and literary connections; but Una Ellis-Fermor, General Editor of the Arden Shakespeare, sought him out as the author of *Voyage to Illyria* and—possibly more importantly—of an article on 'The Future of Shakespeare' in *Penguin New Writing* of July 1946. In this he had laid out a programme for what needed to be done in Shakespeare studies, personally prophetic insofar as it asks for 'an exhaustive study of Shakespeare's use of his sources', but above all demonstrating a close familiarity with, and stringent appraisal of, the state of Shakespeare scholarship at the time. The article had also attracted the attention of Allardyce Nicoll, who asked him to contribute a Retrospect on Shakespeare criticism to *Shakespeare Survey* 4, and thus began a lifelong association with that journal and with Nicoll's two other foundations, the Shakespeare Institute at Stratford-upon-Avon and the biennial International Shakespeare Conference held there. Muir was eventually to succeed Nicoll as editor of *Survey* and, after being responsible for fifteen annual volumes, to hand the editorship on to Stanley Wells.

Editing Wyatt was a case of teaching himself basic research skills on the job—a situation almost unimaginable nowadays, when a doctorate and the book that comes out of the thesis are virtually mandatory qualifications for the humblest post in higher education. He had to learn to read sixteenth-century handwriting and, besides, had only nine months for his work on the manuscripts. As always, he met the deadline. The resulting volume, *Collected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, was published in 1949, revised for a second impression, and then reprinted several times, despite Muir's pleas to the publishers to be allowed to make corrections and revisions and, after 1960, to incorporate the unpublished Wyatt poems which he had discovered in the Blage manuscript in the library of Trinity College, Dublin, and which he felt made it academically disreputable to call the Muses edition 'Collected'. Instead, he published the Blage manuscript poems through the Liverpool University Press (1961) and incorporated them in the new *Collected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt* which he co-edited with Patricia Thomson, for the same Press (1969). By that time he had also shed new light on the historical and personal context of the poems in a volume, *Life and Letters of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, published in the 'Liverpool Texts and Studies' series (1963). With the tact and humility of the true scholar he lets Wyatt speak for himself. Details of texts and attributions may continue to be debated, but Muir's lasting contribution is not only to have made a remarkable addition to the corpus of English Renaissance poetry but also to have made it once and for all impossible to dismiss the poetry of Wyatt as 'drab age verse', the way C. S. Lewis did in the *Oxford History of English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*.

Editing Shakespeare was less of a start from scratch, more congenial and also more likely to bring academic rewards, as indeed Muir's *Macbeth* and *King Lear* did, and justifiably so, when they appeared as the first and third of

the 'New' Arden Shakespeares in, respectively, 1951 and 1952. Spoiled for choice, as we now are, between competing multi-volume editions, each play text fully annotated and supplied with prefaces and appendices discussing the text, sources, stage history, critical fortunes, and other aspects, we may not always appreciate the impact of those editions in the 1950s. The 'New' Ardens had initially been meant to be simply revised versions of the Arden Shakespeare: the early instructions to editors were to preserve the form of each original page, which meant that only minimal alterations could be made in the text, and that new material in the commentary had to be of precisely the same length as any passage deleted. This soon proved unworkable but Muir, undoubtedly the most deadline-conscious of the editors, probably suffered the most from changing guidelines, as what had begun as a revision became a new edition. Nevertheless, and from within a work-schedule where sabbaticals were unheard of, he produced—on time, of course—two editions which have established themselves as classics, have been repeatedly reprinted and, if superseded in some respects by newer editions, will continue to be referred to. Not, perhaps, so much for the textual scholarship—Muir, for example, refused to consider the possibility of the Quarto and the Folio texts of *King Lear* having independent authority, and insisted on the legitimacy of a conflated text—as for the commentary, enriched by his work on the sources. Generations of students also owe much to the informative and critically balanced introductions to the texts. By the time he wrote them, he had abandoned the biographical approach of *The Voyage to Illyria* and in the introduction to *King Lear* he finds it 'intolerable' to suppose 'that Shakespeare had experienced the suffering that is at the heart of *King Lear*'. He had founded his critical position, which he would retain for the rest of his life, on Keats's assertion of Shakespeare's 'negative capability'. At the same time, the ultimate optimism of *The Nettle and the Flower* informs the view of *King Lear* on which he would insist throughout his later writings, against the pessimism of the 1960s—when, in Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* and Peter Brook's famous RSC production, the play became Shakespeare's *Endgame*—and against cultural materialist readings of more recent decades. With typical sanity and directness he states in his introduction that, if there is something gratuitous about the death of Cordelia, it 'does not mean that the gods kill us for their sport; it means simply that they do not intervene to prevent us from killing each other'.

In 1951 Kenneth Muir applied for, and was appointed to, the King Alfred Chair of English Literature in the University of Liverpool. He felt the time had come, he used to say, 'to run my own show'. But uprooting himself from Leeds, where he was singularly happy in his friends, in his colleagues, and in his municipal and theatrical activities, was not easy. By 1951 he had become a senior lecturer, a city councillor and chairman of the Leeds City Labour Party

as well as the Leeds Fabian Society, and had just ceased being the editor of a weekly newspaper. The years in which he had built his academic career had also been thronged with political activity. He had moved, via the Christian Left, into active membership of the Labour Party. Its Leeds secretary, Len Williams, was also the editor of the *Leeds Weekly Citizen*, the oldest surviving Labour Party paper, founded in 1911. When Williams denounced him for writing reviews for the conservative *Yorkshire Post*, Muir took this as an oblique invitation to write for the *Citizen*, and over the next twelve years he wrote some thousand (unpaid) articles, mostly of a thousand words each. Under his own name he wrote literary articles on practically every English writer, countering complaints from readers who thought literature was 'bourgeois' by concentrating on the political views of the writers discussed, or their Yorkshire connections. Writing on non-literary topics, he used a variety of pseudonyms, male and female. This enabled him to engage in dialectics: on controversial matters he would put forward opinions under one name and attack them under another. On one occasion five of these pseudonyms as well as he himself were all invited to address a local society in successive weeks: he accepted in his own person and got friends in different parts of the country to post polite refusals from the rest. Party politics, which had been suspended during the war, were resumed in 1945, and in the local elections Muir was returned as one of the Labour candidates for the Harehills ward. At much the same time, and though desperately busy electioneering for the General Election, he allowed himself to be persuaded to take over the editorship of the *Leeds Weekly Citizen*. Once the election had brought Labour into power, he set about trying to make the *Citizen* a more interesting paper, one which put issues under debate instead of merely churning out the party line. He published articles by Hugh Gaitskell and Hugh Dalton and roped in his friends from the Christian Left to write for the paper, but even so the main burden of filling the columns fell on himself. Thriving under pressure that would have overwhelmed most others, he persisted for four and a half years until, in the run-up to the 1950 election, the board of trustees of the paper instructed him to avoid all criticism of the government and to adopt a less 'intellectual' attitude. He resigned in protest against such censorship, not without a sense of relief. All the while he had also been heavily engaged in council work, not least as chairman of the Primary and Secondary Education Subcommittees. One of his tasks in this capacity was to explain the implementation of the 1944 Education Act to meetings of parents. In complete sincerity he would tell his audiences that in future every child—whether he or she went to a Grammar, Secondary Modern, or Technical School—would receive an education appropriate to age and ability. The gradual realisation that this was not happening turned him into an advocate of comprehensive education and left a nagging sense of guilt towards those crowds of parents he felt he had misled.

'It seems inevitable', Muir wrote in his 1991 essay on 'Dissident Poets', 'for Angry Young Men to move right as they get older and settle down.' He cannot have had himself in mind, partly because from the very beginning his socialism was more compassionate than angry, but mainly because, as he became a Professor and settled down in a Victorian house in Birkenhead, he certainly did not move right. Nor did his political activity cease. He was duly elected chairman of the constituency Labour Party and was for many years a member of its executive committee. For a while he was chairman of the Wirral Fabian Society. Within three years of moving to Birkenhead he was elected a councillor for Grange ward, and he spent thirteen years on the education committee. They were, though, often contentious, and ended with his resignation on a matter of principle. Altogether he found being a borough councillor in Birkenhead rather different from being a city councillor in Leeds: he felt, in his own words, that 'the bosses regarded a professor with suspicion, as a possible threat to their power'.

As a professor, heading the Liverpool English Department for 23 years, Kenneth Muir relished power: not for its own sake but because it enabled him to get things done. In the 1950s there were still not that many professors about, and the title conferred authority, which he exercised for the good of his department. Before long, he was also Dean of the Faculty of Arts—then a Faculty of thirty departments, including not only the Humanities and Ancient and Modern Languages but also Architecture and Civic Design, Social Science, Psychology, Political Theory, Economics, Geography, and even Education. He chaired endless meetings with brisk efficiency, while also carrying a full teaching-load and writing books and articles. Frustrated by the Faculty's resistance to his proposals for reform, he began but—perhaps fortunately—did not complete, a detective story entitled *Death of a Dean*. (He was himself an avid reader of detective fiction and an addict of television's *Maigret* series in the 1960s.) The reason why he abandoned it, he would say, was that he could not imagine any of his colleagues as potential murderers. Indeed, though he was a thorn in the flesh of the more conservative of those colleagues, he was also regarded with a great deal of affection, as no one could doubt his idealism and absolute integrity. There was much mutual respect between him and his Vice-Chancellor, Sir James Mountford. Muir dedicated to Mountford *The Life and Letters of Sir Thomas Wyatt* which he wrote during his deanship; and Mountford dubbed as 'paramuiral' a series of interdisciplinary courses which Muir had introduced to bridge the gap between Arts and Sciences at a time when there was much concern about the 'Two Cultures'. By the time he retired, there were not many responsible University offices which he had not held. He was Public Orator for four years, and of the forty-three orations he had to compose, the ones most congenial were for Harold Wilson (then Prime Minister) and for a great fellow-Shakespearean and friend, Muriel Bradbrook.

He was for years chairman of the Library Committee and of the Board of Extramural Studies—both areas close to his heart. As so often, his reform plans—such as the proposal for a ‘Birkbeck of the North’ for part-time adult students—were ahead of his time. His activities reached outside the University, both through teaching—he was a draw on extramural courses and always ready to give lectures to schools—and through committee-work, on the Joint Matriculation Board, the School’s Council and the Postgraduate Awards Committee of the Department of Education and Science.

In the midst of all this activity, and drawing benefit from his refusal to regard academia as an ivory tower, there was his own department, where he ruled by example rather than by decree. There was democracy, if you were around to take part in it: departmental meetings would begin at 12.15, and if your class overran, you were likely on arrival to find the chairman donning his hat and coat for an ineluctable 12.30 departure for staff-house lunch. There was a work-ethic based on the assumption that teaching and researching into literature were the most important and enjoyable things anyone could do—an assumption which made for a quality culture long before the term had been invented. In consequence there was little bureaucracy and much intellectual democracy: freedom for even the most junior member of staff to be listened to in the exchange of ideas, and to be encouraged to publish. There was occasionally a somewhat edgy relationship between representatives of English Literature and of English Language—debates about the place of Old English in the syllabus, and about the amount of Literature a Language student should read, which echoed back to Muir’s Leeds days and to his own undergraduate experience—but these were amicably resolved, especially after Simeon Potter, famous linguist, had been succeeded as Language Professor by Jimmy Cross, who wrote on Anglo-Saxon literature. In the 1960s and 1970s the Department steadily expanded—when Muir retired there were five times as many students graduating each year as when he was appointed—and there was a good deal of movement in and out of staff. Happily a core of those whom he had joined in 1951 remained, among them Kenneth Allott with whom, as another 1930s poet turned literary scholar, he had much in common, and Miriam Allott who, a scholar and editor in her own right, completed after his death her husband’s work on Matthew Arnold and in due course succeeded him in the A. C. Bradley Chair of English Literature. Muir was proud to say that his Department was a seedbed for professors: of his appointees, G. K. Hunter went to a foundation chair at Warwick, Ernest Schanzer to Munich, Norman Sherry to Lancaster, Inga-Stina Ewbank to Bedford College, London. He was also proud to have replaced these with a group of bright young graduates whom he rightly saw as future academic leaders: Vincent Newey, Nick Shrimpton, Hermione Lee, Janet Montefiori, Ann Thompson, Nick Grene. And a particular source of joy and pride into his retirement was to see first one and then another distinguished Shakespearean scholar appointed to the succession of the King

Alfred Chair: first his friend of many years, Philip Edwards, followed on his retirement by Jonathan Bate.

The example that Kenneth Muir set before his colleagues might nowadays be termed 'time-management': every letter replied to by return of post, every deadline met, every interstice of time between scheduled engagements used for essential reading, writing, and proof-correcting. These, though, were only the outward symptoms of the deep-seated devotion to scholarship which manifested itself in a prodigious output of publications during the Liverpool years (a period which includes his retirement, since the University allotted him a room to which he resorted, crossing the Mersey daily, until the last month of his life). In the early years his main work was on Shakespeare's sources, gathering what was known and adding new evidence of indebtednesses, echoes, and borrowings. As one discovery after another was chronicled in *Notes and Queries*, that journal came to be known affectionately in the Department as 'Old Muir's Almanac'. The resulting book, published in 1957, bore the title *Shakespeare's Sources I*, as it dealt only with the comedies and tragedies and he intended to deal with the histories in a second volume. But the urgent need (which Muir had demonstrated ten years earlier, in his *Penguin New Writing* article) to extend and complete our knowledge of Shakespeare's sources was now being served by the publication of Geoffrey Bullough's monumental eight-volume collection of *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (1957–75); and more pressing tasks intervened. When Muir's *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* appeared in 1977, it was not a second volume but a source study of all the plays, incorporating the first volume. Bullough's work remains an invaluable reference and research tool, and Muir's takes its place beside it as managing in a single volume to give a comprehensive view of Shakespeare's use of his source material. In its demonstration of the extent of Shakespeare's reading and of the complex ways in which that reading is transmuted in the texts, it remains the *Road to Xanadu* of Shakespeare studies.

Faced with the range and abundance of Muir's writings in the Liverpool years, one is forced to generalise; but in order to do so adequately one would need his own ability to be both comprehensive and trenchant. For his strength as a scholar and critic lay not in startling originality but in wisdom and sanity, in judicious balance, and in a pellucid prose that holds the reader by its flair for the precise, illuminating phrase. The source of that strength, it seems, was in a central wholeness where all he had read and done came together and nothing was lost. Past experience—not least the sheer fluency that *The Leeds Citizen* had forced upon him—conditioned present achievement. It gave him, as reviewers of his books tended to say, an extraordinary and catholic breadth of approach and an ability to cross-refer between different fields of knowledge. Most particularly, his experience of acting and directing fed directly into both

his textual and his critical work. He wrote on dramatic texts from a constant awareness that they are, above all, plays for the stage. From playing the Cardinal in a student production of *Women Beware Women* in 1967 grew an interest in Middleton which produced both an edition of *Three Plays of Middleton* (1975) and a number of essays that were to form the core of *Shakespeare: Contrasts and Controversies* (1985). He felt strongly about the value of this kind of interaction in his approach to Shakespeare. Not only did his York productions of *Macbeth* and *King Lear* lead naturally to the Arden editions of those plays, but when he edited the Oxford *Troilus and Cressida* in the early 1980s, he was both re-living his own Leeds production of that play nearly forty years earlier and drawing on accumulated textual expertise (which included editing the Signet *Richard II* and the New Penguin *Othello* in the 1960s). His involvement—in Epsom, Oxford, York, Leeds, and Liverpool—in productions of five of Shakespeare's comedies was, he felt, what prompted the writing of *Shakespeare's Comic Sequence* (1979). Similarly, his enjoyment of professional productions of Restoration comedy came together with long-term memories of playing Mirabel in *The Way of the World*, to inform his book, *The Comedy of Manners* (1970), where he can assert from first-hand experience that 'no dramatist has equalled Congreve in the creation of character by diction and rhythm'.

The wholeness of his work could also be traced to an unshakeable belief in the value of English Studies as a discipline and in his own place within it. This is not to say that he was self-sufficient: he was always ready generously to consider the opinions of others and could treat with a blend of wise tolerance and deadpan irony even those he regarded as belonging to the lunatic fringe—as in his book on *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1979). But it gave a confidence which enabled him to continue building on his own insights, so that lectures grew into books, and one book spawned another. Lectures on *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Edward III*, together with writings on *Pericles*, grew into the book on *Shakespeare as Collaborator* (1960), which planted the challenge to write on the uniqueness of Shakespeare in *Shakespeare the Professional* (1973) and *The Singularity of Shakespeare* (1977). Having launched, in his British Academy Shakespeare Lecture of 1958, his famous dictum that there is no such thing as Shakespearean Tragedy, only Shakespeare's tragedies, he proceeded to expand it in various publications, culminating in *Shakespeare's Tragic Sequence* (1972), which was almost bound to find its counterpart in *Shakespeare's Comic Sequence* (1979).

Kenneth Muir was naturally unostentatious, but he was quietly proud of his achievements and not afraid to show his enjoyment of the honours bestowed on him: the honorary doctorates from the Universities of Rouen and Dijon, the presidency of the International Shakespeare Association, and in particular the Fellowship of the British Academy, to which he was elected in 1970. He was a regular attender of Academy meetings and chaired many of the annual

Shakespeare Lectures with customary wit and elegance. He was himself a superb lecturer and—foreign audiences often showing their appreciation more volubly than British ones—enjoyed receiving standing ovations in the United States, which he visited many times from 1948 onwards, and in most countries in Europe. His work was his life, and it was not always easy for him to remember that not everybody lived at his level: when Mary, his wife, was in hospital after the birth of their son and asked him to bring her something to read, he brought a copy of his just-published edition of *Macbeth*. His utter lack of guile or malice won him loyal friends at every level, social and intellectual, but he enjoyed nothing so much as a friendly gossip with fellow-Shakespeareans from all over the world at the International Shakespeare Conferences. These have been held at the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon every other year since 1947, and Kenneth Muir did not miss a single one since he was first invited by Allardyce Nicoll, in 1949, to join what was then a small and select group. The sudden onset of his mortal illness happened just before the 1996 Conference, but he would go to Stratford, though barely able to speak. The paper he had prepared had to be delivered by Philip Edwards, but he would attend it and every other occasion, including theatre performances, during the Conference. He cut the cake to celebrate the fiftieth birthday of *Shakespeare Survey*. Within a few weeks he was gone, leaving the rest of us feeling that we ‘shall never see so much, nor live so long’.

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*Note.* There is a selective bibliography of Kenneth Muir’s writings, 1937–79, in the book of essays in his honour, *Shakespeare’s Styles*, ed. Philip Edwards, Inga-Stina Ewbank, and G. K. Hunter (Cambridge, 1980). A more comprehensive bibliography will appear in his Autobiography, forthcoming from Liverpool University Press.

In preparing this Memoir I have been able to draw on the manuscript autobiography and other papers left to me by direction in Kenneth Muir’s will. For information and help I am very grateful to Professor Philip Edwards and Professor Stanley Wells. If there are any mistakes, the responsibility is mine.

