CECIL GRAYSON

Cecil Grayson
1920–1998

THE DEATH ON 29 April 1998 of Professor Cecil Grayson, Emeritus Serena Professor of Italian at Oxford, left a void in the friendliest circles of the University, and a great chasm in Italian studies in the United Kingdom. Possessed of the sharpest intelligence he remained active to the end, occupied with one of his favourite academic pursuits: the editing of rare and unknown texts from the Italian Renaissance; in what now turn out to be his final researches he had just organised the publication of *inedita* to celebrate the five-hundredth anniversary of Piero della Francesca's death.

Some people were fortunate enough to see many sides of Cecil's multifaceted character and, however inadequately, some observations should be made to include a few of his many varied interests, even those outside the strictly academic sphere. A similar paper for specific consumption in the United States or in Australasia would have to be modified again in its approach. The truth is that Professor Grayson's character and achievements changed from environment to environment. Graduate students of his spoke with surprised admiration of his relaxed mood and joviality when they first met him in the less formal surroundings of his study at home or his room in college, when earlier that day they had seen him robed in his MA gown giving a lecture on Dante and Aristotle (until the late 1960s he was quite formal in his attitude to lectures at Oxford); later in the term his austere figure, in full academic dress would lead Magdalen's pupils forward for a degree ceremony in Oxford's Sheldonian Theatre. With similar surprise his American pupils could hardly believe

Proceedings of the British Academy, **105**, 461–470. © The British Academy 2000.

that their Professor Grayson, the archetypical English gentleman, the insouciant visiting professor of medieval literature and philosophy at UCLA, was Cecil Grayson the car enthusiast, who hired cars from *Rent-a-Wreck* in Los Angeles in order to experience vehicles other than the well-coiffured limousines of Hertz and Alamo. And when some of his Australian students propped their surf-boards against the wall of the lecture theatre, they little suspected that in England Cecil had been a national schoolboy swimming champion.

Cecil Grayson came a long way from his humble working-class Yorkshire background, and though he himself never spoke of this, some allusion needs to be made, if for no other reason, in order to pay tribute to the heroic efforts of his mother, who as a young widow struggled to make ends meet and see her two boys through school and on to university. His father, a boiler-maker by trade, had sustained head injuries in a motorcycle accident when Cecil was six years of age (and his brother Denis only eight); a misdiagnosis in Dewsbury Infirmary meant that Mr Grayson was sent home with a fractured skull which produced meningitis and death a few months later. The economic effects of such a bereavement in a poor family during the depression of the late 1920s can only be imagined, but instead of having her sons leave school to earn their keep at the accepted age of fourteen, Mrs Grayson worked hard at her trade of seamstress, maintaining the family by her sewing and keeping her boys in full time education for the following fourteen or so years. Her sons rewarded her by their academic successes and subsequent careers in the field of education.

Educated at Batley Grammar School, and St Edmund Hall, Oxford, Cecil Grayson obtained first-class honours in modern languages in 1947, his academic work having been interrupted by war service in the Army Pay Corps in India (1940–6), where, along with a lasting affection for that country, he also acquired Urdu, and a connoisseur's appreciation of Indian cuisine. At Oxford his teachers included Humphrey Whitfield and Carlo Dionisotti, certainly the two most outstanding Italianists of the time in Britain; there he won a Heath Harrison Scholarship to Italy in 1947, where he learned a remarkably authentic spoken Italian; indeed, to many who heard him, his splendid Italian accent gave the impression that his voice had been taken over by an Italian radio announcer. In 1948 he began his teaching career at Oxford when he took up the lecturership of Dionisotti, who had departed for the Chair of Italian at Bedford College. Those were palmy days for tutorial fellows at Oxbridge colleges, but fifty years ago lecturers in such outlandish disciplines as Renaissance literature

or Romance philology, were not admitted to the privileged ranks of the tutorial fellows. The future professor was given a non-stipendiary lecturership at his old college (1948–57), and he later had a brief spell as non-stipendiary lecturer at New College (1954–7). With no university or college accommodation available to him, he continued to do his teaching at home, declining the costlier alternative of paying to rent a room in the town centre as many of his contemporaries, living at greater distances, were forced to do.

Ten years after beginning his lecturing career, Cecil Grayson was elected in 1958 to Oxford's Serena Chair of Italian, which carried with it a non-stipendiary fellowship and a room at Magdalen College; there he replaced another friend and colleague of his, Professor Alessandro Passerin D'Entrèves, who had resigned the Chair to return to his native Turin. It took Cecil several years to become accustomed to having a room in college, and in fact for some five or six years he continued to work in libraries and at home, but he also entered as fully as he could into both the social and administrative life of the college, serving on those committees where the presence of a professor was required, and officiating as Dean of Degrees for several years; while at high table and on other social occasions in college it would not be an exaggeration to describe him as a well-loved companion, his wise counsel admired and appreciated as much as his urbane conversation, not least after he became emeritus in 1987. Outside the immediate confines of Magdalen, as chairman of the small sub-faculty of Italian, he was a perfect head of department—never imposing himself or interfering with the initiatives of his colleagues, but always ready to respond positively to their requests for help or advice. He hated bureaucracy and time-wasting, and often expressed relief that his retirement had come before the sterile and tedious excesses of these past fifteen years descended. He would have been very restless had he had to continue after 1987. The nearest he came to a public expletive was when a request was reported to him for a new form-filling exercise originating from the University Administration in Wellington Square. Cecil urged everyone to tell the official concerned 'to go jump in the lake'. He believed in quality rather than quantity; during his twenty-nine years as chairman of Italian, he increased the lecturing strength by only one appointment. But he was gratified by the influence and reputation which Oxford's small Italian section had. At his farewell dinner in Pembroke College, attended by some 100 colleagues, many of them former pupils, he spoke with pleasure of Italianists' achievements and noted, with a mixture of pride and amusement, that two of his

current colleagues occupied respectively the positions of Chairman of the Modern Languages Faculty Board and Chairman of Faculty. 'Italian', he said, 'has the Faculty in a stranglehold'.

Following his appointment to the Serena Chair of Italian, and to his Fellowship at Magdalen College, his academic record became unique and probably unsurpassable: forty years as a teacher in Oxford (including an unbroken thirty-one-year stint on the Board of the Faculty of Modern Languages), twenty-nine of them as Serena Professor and Fellow of Magdalen, latterly Senior Fellow and Dean of Degrees. During those forty years Cecil Grayson's pupils at one time filled some 45% of all Italian University teaching posts in Britain; and even when he retired, in 1987, twenty-seven out of the ninety-eight teachers of Italian in Britain were in that category. During the same period his influence on Italian studies throughout the British Isles developed considerably; he gave freely of his expertise and advice on boards for examinations, research awards, chair committees, editorial panels and the like. Most importantly he was for a quarter of a century after his election to the chair, an executive committee member of the British Society for Italian Studies, and editor of their journal *Italian Studies*; many young contributors remained unaware of the embarrassment saved them because of Cecil Grayson's corrective influence on an article, while others were later grateful to him for his unsolicited encouragement to continue their research on the topic published. Logically and naturally, a goodly proportion of Commonwealth and American university teachers of Italian also counted him as their mentor, either because they had been trained in Britain and had subsequently emigrated, or because he had taught them *in situ* during his many academic visits abroad. He was as well-known and equally at home not only in Italy but also in every Commonwealth country where Italian is taught, and he was especially recognised and admired in the United States, where he held several distinguished appointments over a long period of years.

When Professor Grayson was elected President of the Modern Humanities Research Association in 1987, he gave his presidential address on the advantages and disadvantages of a literary life, taking his title from Leon Battista Alberti's *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis*. It had been the first of Alberti's writings on which he worked, a splendidly cautionary introduction which warns against expecting too many material rewards from the academic life; but the work might also have confirmed him in his acquisition of the serenity which knowledge and intellectual self-fulfilment bring: 'Yet if you devote your labour most

diligently to all the advice I've given you, young man, you will discover that letters are glamorous, most useful for attaining honour and glory and appropriate for obtaining the fruit of posterity and immortality'. That treatise underpinned not only Alberti's life but also many of the moral and academic guidelines of Cecil Grayson's burgeoning career. His main research area reflected the influences of Whitfield and Dionisotti, both of whom worked, taught and published on Alberti and the Quattrocento during the late 1940s, lending him encouragement to direct his research into this fruitful channel. His work quickly became identified closely with the evolution of the so-called 'new philology' or *nuova filologia*, generated and developed by Italian scholars such as Michele Barbi, Vittorio Cian, and Carlo Dionisotti. It was a rigorous critical approach which depended upon verifiable literary and historical evidence by concentration on detailed textual analysis. That approach had its logical outcome in the 1960s in Cecil Grayson's production of more accurate editions of classic texts (such as the better known works of Alberti), and in his quest for previously unknown manuscripts which could substantiate the findings he made elsewhere.[1] He was reacting against the somewhat facile aesthetic criticism which had degenerated from Benedetto Croce's original brilliant intuition. Theoretical generalisations, and approximations in historical data were anathema to him; the rivalry between critical schools after World War Two left him cold; he considered it irrational, said that it was 'literally unbalanced' that critical theory should be seen to assume greater weight and self-importance than the literary work under discussion.

In 1949 he produced, with the late Professor Dionisotti, who became his life-long friend and collaborator, an edition with commentary of *Early Italian Texts*; the particular merit of this volume was to make it more easily possible to include in an Honours syllabus a study of Italian vernacular texts dating back in some cases to the tenth century. In the less rigorous academic climate which now operates, *Early Italian Texts* are no longer in such demand, but already by 1965 this useful book had run into a second edition. After the *De commodis*, it was Alberti's unpublished writings, the *Opuscoli inediti di Leon Battista Alberti* (1954), which firmly established his scholarly reputation, providing him with his first major edition and a break-through into the Italian academic hierarchy, where he

[1] See below; this obituary does not aim at a complete catalogue of Professor Grayson's writings; for a full listing of his publications see the bibliography by Dennis Rhodes in *Italian Studies*, LIV (1999), pp. 5–12; Professor Grayson himself supplied a similar bibliography and a brief biographical sketch to *Albertiana*, II (1999), pp. 9–20.

successfully promoted British Italian scholarship inside the Peninsula, notably by his active participation in many aspects of Italian academic life. He was a natural choice as one of Britain's vice-presidents of the International Association of Italianists (AISLLI) which first met in Cambridge in 1953 but subsequently (and with obvious logic) largely based itself thereafter in Italy. Despite certain doubts about the Association's hierarchical set-up in its latter days, he became the most active British participant in AISLLI's activities for over forty years, and his calm presence and persuasive influence at these international gatherings helped promote their success and at the same time seemed to focus world attention on Italian studies in these islands.

His strong interest in Alberti's more artistic writings—on painting and sculpture—found expression in his brief study of *inedita* concerned with Alberti's architectural designs for the Malatesta temple at Rimini, published in 1957 under the title *Alberti and the Tempio Malatestiano*. And shortly afterwards he discovered and edited manuscripts of Vincenzo Colli (alias 'Il Calmeta'), hardly known to scholarship before Grayson showed that here were the first pages of modern literary criticism; these he published as *Prose e lettere edite e inedite* in 1959. In 1960 his inaugural lecture appeared: *A Renaissance Controversy: Latin or Italian*. What began as an objective examination of the Italian *querelle de la langue* continued to rumble for a decade, though Cecil treated it as a casual side-line to his other work; the argument reached its apogee in 1971 with the essay 'Machiavelli and Dante' initiating a further international debate which still persists. This last paper concerned Dante's small treatise on vernacular rhetoric, *De vulgari eloquentia*, which had seemed to deny Florentines' claims to their glorious linguistic tradition. In the sixteenth century, chauvinistic Florentines and Tuscans, including (tradition had it) Machiavelli, cast doubt on the authenticity of Dante's treatise. Machiavelli, in particular (in a well-publicised discourse or dialogue on Tuscan), was alleged to show that Dante was self-confoundingly erroneous. Grayson in turn questioned the genuineness of Machiavelli's dialogue in that original essay of 1971 which subsequently provoked many articles and books by scholars trying to counter the Graysonian view of the spuriousness of Machiavelli's *Dialogo*. The debate continues today, though most reasonable critics grant that Grayson's views are unassailable. But this was incidental to his main research. During that same period Professor Grayson had been engaged on the massive task of editing what then became the national edition of the works of Alberti (*Opere volgari*), published in three ample volumes in 1960, 1966, and 1973

by Laterza in the *Scrittori d'Italia* series, the largest and most authoritative collection of Italian classics (to which no British scholar had previously contributed). These editions made the great humanist's vernacular writings finally accessible to a wider academic audience and continue to provide an indispensable starting point for all new editions. At the same time he began editing Alberti's vernacular grammar, the first of its kind in Italian, which he published in 1964 as *Leon Battista Alberti e la prima grammatica volgare*. He was among the founders of *Albertiana*, the journal of Alberti studies which published its first fascicule in the year of his death, a further tribute to his lasting influence.

Apart from his work on the Renaissance, Professor Grayson's essays on Dante's language and style, particularly in his *Cinque saggi su Dante*, and on the development of vernacular literature before the Renaissance proper, are regarded by most critics as minor classics. His enthusiasm for the works of Dante knew no bounds, and for a quarter of a century he was President-Secretary of the Oxford Dante Society; he edited their essays for Oxford University Press, notably in *The World of Dante* in 1980. He cherished the Dante Society, was an assiduous attender at its thrice-yearly meetings and lectures, contributed many papers, and kept meticulous hand-written minutes which were a model of their kind. The society offered Oxford further links with international scholars whom, as Secretary, Professor Grayson would periodically invite to address its gatherings. The foundation of the Oxford Dante Society in 1876 had predated its Italian equivalent by some twelve years, and during the centennial commemoration of the Società Dantesca Italiana in Florence's *Palazzo vecchio* in 1988, many recall that Professor Grayson was particularly delighted by the tributes paid to Oxford's older organisation; on that occasion he handed over to the Società Dantesca Italiana a copy of the Oxford society's minutes going back to 1876.

His interest in Italian history, which he shared with the Oxford historian Cecil Wroth, brought him into contact with Roberto Ridolfi, an old acquaintance of Wroth's. Ridolfi, who referred to the two scholars as 'I due Cecil', was also a fine philologist and contributor to the new 'discipline' of bibliophilia, for which he supported the founding of the now renowned journal *Bibliofilia*. Although Grayson's interests in Ridolfi's new discipline were always peripheral, as he admitted in his (1997) Conference tribute to the Florentine philologist, 'Ridolfi e il mondo anglosassone' (published in the commemorative volume *Roberto Ridolfi*), it was Ridolfi's historical researches which most gripped his imagination. An invitation from Routledge and Kegan Paul to translate Ridolfi's

biographies of *Savonarola*, *Machiavelli*, and *Guicciardini*, led to an extraordinary cooperation and a friendship with Ridolfi which endured until the latter's death. The translations came out respectively in 1959, 1963, and 1967, and helped create in the Anglophone world, above all in the United States great fame for Ridolfi and a greater interest in the history of the High Renaissance. This kind of work was part of Grayson's relaxation, but, thanks to his initiative, the Marchese Ridolfi was awarded an honorary D.Litt. by Oxford in 1961; the honour also symbolised and in its fashion crystallised the international connections of Oxford Italian.

The academic honours accorded Professor Grayson are a ringing endorsement of his achievements; he was a member of Italy's most prestigious academies: the Lincei, the Crusca, Arcadia, the Istituto Veneto, and Bologna's Commissione per i testi di lingua and Accademia delle Scienze; in 1974 he carried off Pisa's international Galileo Prize for Italian linguistic and philological studies, and in 1976 he was awarded the British Academy's Serena gold medal, three years before his election to the British Academy itself. His CBE in 1992 for services to Italian culture had been anticipated by Italy seventeen years earlier with the award of the Commenda, Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana. Of all the accolades, special mention must be made of the Honorary Fellowship at St Edmund Hall in 1986, which gave him tremendous pleasure, and, most recently, the conferment of Honorary Citizenship of Mantua; he was preparing to attend the ceremony when he was taken into hospital. In June 1998, a delegation from Mantua, which included the Mayor and the Chairman of the Alberti Centre, presented the posthumous honour in Magdalen College. It was only the third time that Mantua had ever given such honorary citizenship, the other honorands being Garibaldi and Mussolini. Cecil would have been amused at such an association. It is a further measure of his international prestige that major Italian institutions celebrated his life and career in 1998, including Bologna's Commissione per i testi di lingua, Mantua's Accademia virgiliana and the Centro studi albertiani, which produced with Olschki a substantial commemorative volume of his published essays on Alberti. These *Studi su Leon Battista Alberti*, edited by Paola Claut, include an interesting *Introduzione*, dated just a month before his death, in which Professor Grayson himself traced the path of his research on Alberti. The volume itself is a remarkable tribute to his assiduous and pioneering work, containing as it does no fewer than twenty-eight of his essays on Alberti, dating from 1952 to 1994.

In the United States Cecil Grayson had an equally imposing reput-

ation, and many of his ex-pupils over there have him to thank for their careers, so generous was the time and effort he gave in order to encourage the young to complete a thesis or a book; so much is borne out by their tributes to him. He had a long love-affair with America, and for nearly thirty years between 1965 and 1994 enjoyed fellowships or visiting professorships at various centres of learning: he was Fellow in Residence at Chicago's Newberry Library in 1965, a member, for two decades, of Harvard's governing body for the Centre for Renaissance Studies at the Villa I Tatti, and visiting professor at Yale (1966), Berkeley (1969 and 1973), UCLA (1980, 1984, 1987, and 1994) and New York University, where he taught for the whole of the academic year 1995–6 when he was already 76 years of age. Twice he undertook long stints as visiting professor at Cape Town (1980 and 1983) and Perth (1973 and 1980), and was a frequent visitor to South Africa and the Antipodes. America in particular offered the kind of luxury and courtesy which had perhaps been lacking in his earlier days as an unentitled lecturer in Oxford, before his election to the chair of Italian. He was never to be persuaded, however, to leave the Oxford chair, 'the best job in the world', a post which he consistently refused permanently to swap, but it was a natural reaction that he should return so often to that transatlantic warmth and friendliness. At his retirement dinner, held for convenience at Pembroke College, Oxford, he was presented with the nearest that Oxford University now approaches to a *Festschrift*: *The Languages of Literature in Renaissance Italy*, edited by his Oxford colleagues; ten years later, another OUP volume, *Dante and Governance* was dedicated to him marking the anniversary of his retirement.

Margaret Grayson was a great source of strength to her husband, and a multitude of scholars from all over the world will recall with pleasure a visit to the Grayson home in Norham Road at some time during the last fifty years. Margaret and Cecil shared all their experiences both in Britain and abroad, with mutual pleasure and satisfaction. The Graysons' zest for life beyond the academic confines manifested itself in many ways: travel was a particular delight for them, and they undertook some epic journeys, including a re-exploration of the railway system of the Indian subcontinent, which brought back nostalgic memories of Major Grayson's war service there. There were many unusual experiences, including one Christmas spent in the Mojave desert, when Cecil and Margaret, blissfully unaware that it was Christmas day (until they tried to find a store or a restaurant which was open) were forced to dine off a 'cuppasoup'. One of their less publicised activities was to drive across America's immense,

uncluttered highways. It began when at the end of a term's teaching at UCLA Professor Grayson and his wife had the idea of looking up car delivery firms in the American *Yellow Pages* and offering their services as driver and navigator. It allowed them to relax, combining for Cecil the delight he always took in driving powerful cars and his love of travel and exploration; the capricious variety of locations (and the often exotic vehicles) offered particular appeal. A month before he died, he telephoned to ask me if I knew of a good route to get to the Republic of Colombia and whether I could give him some reasonable addresses where they could stay.

In another, Welsh, existence, the Graysons spent as much time as their incredible schedules allowed in their cliff-top cottage in Pembrokeshire. Together they enjoyed music and cinema, read voraciously, and were at home in urbane cosmopolitan society, but they also loved walking the canyons of California and the cliffs of Cape Town, the lonely places of the world. Margaret Grayson died just a year after her husband. They are survived by their three daughters, and their son.

J. R. WOODHOUSE
Fellow of the Academy

Note. I am indebted to the family of Cecil Grayson, and particularly to his niece, Dr Jane Grayson, for help in certain areas of this obituary.