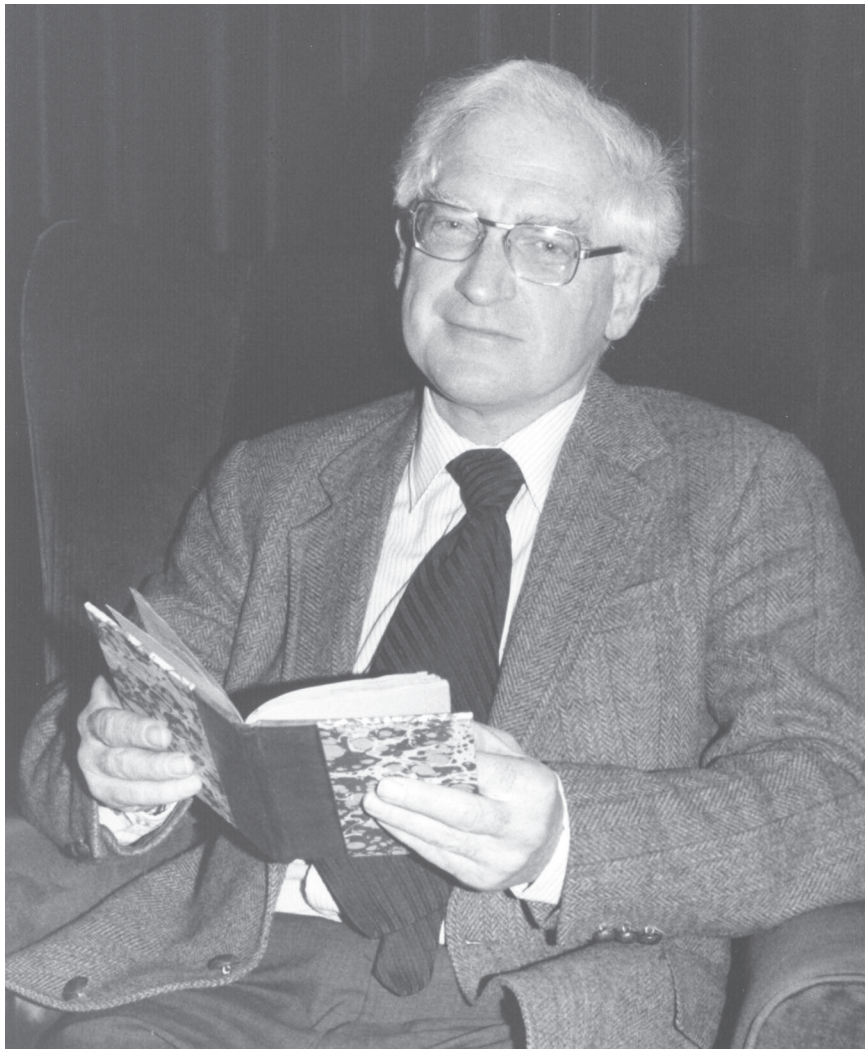

IAN JACK

Ian Robert James Jack
1923–2008

Ian Robert James Jack was born on 5 December 1923 in Edinburgh, the only child of John McGregor Bruce Jack, Writer to the Signet, and Helena Colburn Buchanan. His mother died early, when he was only eight, and he was then looked after by his paternal aunt. One anecdote only comes down from his earlier childhood. An uncle had bought a great house on the Black Isle, with stags' heads on the walls. When first going on holiday there he was sure (he said) that the rest of the stags' bodies must be on the other side of the walls.

He is likely to have had a relatively lonely childhood. He was afflicted, like his father, by asthma, which he suffered from all his life and which may have been the immediate cause of his death. 'Ventolin', the great palliative for asthmatics, was not much known before the early 1960s. He seems, however, to have been happy at his father's old school, George Watson's, which he attended from 1931 to 1942. Despite asthma he played cricket for the Second XI for three years, but scored a duck on his one appearance in the First XI.

The great importance of George Watson's for him was the study of Latin and Greek under the guidance of 'Ikey' Penman, his classics master, the son of a Fife miner, one of whose hobbies was watching all-in wrestling. Knowing that Ian's class would have learned nothing in their first year, under another master, Penman started them off with elementary Latin grammar and ended by teaching them Homeric Greek. We know this from a memoir of Mr Penman by Ian Jack himself, published in *The Watsonian* (1991–2, pp. 23–6; see also the following article, 'Laudari a viro laudato … laudatur temporis acti' by Christopher Rush, the editor of *The Watsonian*

Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy, XI, 411–418.

that year). At one point Ian fell out of the important 'U' class, to which Penman taught Classics, but managed (in his own words) 'to clamber back, rather ingeniously, by saying I wanted to take Greek'.[1] He hated science (as it was then taught) but had done well in Latin. Penman recommended to his class the words of Glaukos to Diomedes in Book VI of the *Iliad* (1. 208):

> always be best [bravest], and pre-eminent above all.

In the competition for university entrance scholarships Ian's friend Ronnie and he came first and second, in that order, in the John Welsh Classics List, each becoming a John Welsh Scholar: 'I shall never forget,' Ian wrote, 'the incredulous delight with which my father heard that I had been well placed, when I managed to ring him on a public telephone on the way home. He put it down to good teaching.' However Ian had already impressed his father by the 'relative fluency' with which he translated an unseen passage of Cicero.

Ian concludes his tribute to Mr Penman by noting that he hardly could have commented on the verse of Gray's *Elegy* or Tennyson's 'Crossing the Bar' without having known the different but often recalled rhythms of Latin verse. When he came to edit Robert Browning, his last major undertaking, he knew that this 'delightful task' could not be performed with success by an editor unacquainted with Greek, 'since Greek poetry was never far from Browning's mind'.

While it is clear that Ian Jack had particular satisfaction at his success in Latin and Greek, he must also have had good teaching in English literature from, among others no doubt, Edward Albert, author of a two-volume novel, *Kirk o'Fields*, on Mary Queen of Scots, the Earl of Bothwell, and the question of the Darnley murder. It seems likely that Ian Jack always intended to devote himself to the study of English literature, and he now was admitted to the University of Edinburgh to read English. He left George Watson's for university in 1942, became James Boswell Fellow in 1946, and took his MA in 1947. He was, to his disappointment, turned down for National Service on account of his asthma.

One would like to know more about Jack's undergraduate period reading English, but information is relatively sparse. I am the more grateful to Mr John McCann, a fellow student of Ian's, perhaps in the latter's fourth year at the university. From him we learn that Ian much admired the

[1] Other biographical quotes from Ian Jack in this memoir are taken from his piece in *The Watsonian*.

poetry of John Clare, a recondite subject then and not as now a popular subject of research. Ian was in those days interested in the theatre, amateur and professional, and persuaded John to join him in two walk-on parts in an amateur performance. Ian was passionately interested in the election of a new Rector of the University, persuading Sir William Beveridge, author of the Beveridge Report and one of the founders of the National Health Service, to stand and canvassing for him with energy, though without success in the end. Perhaps, however, John McCann's most interesting memory of Ian is of their rambles together: 'We used to go for long walks together, mostly on the Pentland Hills, and as fellow-asthmatics we understood each other's difficulties in climbing steep gradients. During these walks we talked nineteen to the dozen, about anything and everything, and a very stimulating companion he was … He knew I was hard up, so when he knew I was going to terminate my studies at Edinburgh without graduating he misinterpreted the reason and offered me the money from a bursary he had been awarded which he said he did not need. It was an extraordinarily generous offer (which I did not accept), but I have often thought about it, and have remembered it with gratitude' (Letter to Elizabeth Jack, 30 October 2008).

Ian Jack now won a place at Merton College, Oxford, to pursue research on English literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This was in 1947. On 8 July 1948 he and Jane Henderson MacDonald were married in the Parish Church of St Peter in the East, Oxford. Jane Jack became a scholar in her own right and the two continued to collaborate after their marriage was dissolved some twenty years later. Meanwhile Ian's research was supervised by Nichol Smith and, in his final year, Helen Gardner. This was the work which became his first book, *Augustan Satire* (London, 1952), a well-known and successful study. Meanwhile he had become Lecturer in English Literature at Brasenose (1950–5), and was later elected Senior Research Fellow there (1955–61). Jack could surely have made his career in Oxford, but Cambridge attracted him, partly perhaps as the home of the New Criticism. He successfully applied for a Lectureship in the Cambridge English Faculty in 1961. Professor Basil Willey encouraged him to come to Pembroke and (as Ian later told me) he gratefully agreed though he might have hankered after a larger and grander college than Pembroke then was.

Jack may have been impressed by the New Criticism, but he lacked the dogmatic intensity of F. R. Leavis, I. A. Richards's steely commitment to the words on the page, and the brilliant eccentricity of William Empson. (There was of course more to all these critics.) The Cambridge English

Faculty, for the most part, did not think Ian Jack was one of them. The Faculty set him down as a learned traditional scholar whose critical judgements were little better than common sense. While Ian, who had a high opinion of common sense, might have settled for this judgement, his coming work, both critical and editorial, would show that Cambridge was wrong. Meanwhile the difficulties of his adjustment were made more sad by the break-up of his marriage with Jane.

It was not long, however, before he met the lady who would become his second wife, Elizabeth Crone, a school-teacher who shared his literary interests. They were married on 12 August 1972, and soon after bought Highfield House, Fen Ditton, near Cambridge, a spacious and comfortable home which could accommodate all Ian's growing collection of antiquarian and modern books, and which had beautiful views over meadows and on to the river Cam. The many friends of Ian and Elizabeth, colleagues, students and former students, recall with delight the unfailing hospitality of Highfield House, and feel we can attest to a long period of happiness there, during which their son Rowland grew up, and Ian addressed himself to what one may think was the most important and successful part of his academic work.

In fact the new development may already have begun to happen. Those who recall Ian Jack's *English Literature, 1815–32* (Oxford, 1963), *Oxford History of English Literature*, Vol. X, and then turn to *Keats and the Mirror of Art* (Oxford, 1967) will immediately see a breakthrough and a fresh critical mode. This, it may be thought, is Ian Jack's finest work of criticism, and a brilliant example of the close reading of poetic texts in relation with painting—especially Nicholas Poussin and Claude—who meant so much to Keats.

Not long after this, however, Ian Jack seems to have turned away from the eighteenth century and Romantic period to the Victorians. He had for some time been General Editor of the Clarendon Edition of the Novels of the Brontës, *Jane Eyre* (edited by Jane Jack and Margaret Smith) having been published in 1969. In 1976 he published with Hilda Marsden the edition of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights.* His part of the Introduction, which he states as beginning on p. xxv, shows what a detailed and decisive grip he had on the notorious textual problems of that novel. He shines a new light on the obviously faulty text of T. C. Newby, the first edition, yet does not take the easy way out by choosing as copy-text the later, conventionalised, edition by Charlotte Brontë (1850). Jack wrote:

> Newby's text possesses some features which probably derive from the manuscript and which Emily Brontë may well have wished to see retained. The text is

> not so bad as to render it likely that an editor will get closer to the author's intention by adopting the punctuation and other accidentals of Charlotte (and Smith Elder) than by a careful recension of Newby's edition. (p. xxxi)

It would seem that Jack and Marsden have given us the first reliable text of this famous novel.

Jack may, at some moments, have been uncertain which way to proceed: back to the seventeenth century, perhaps to Jacobean drama, or forward into the high Victorians. The higher common sense prevailed. He had already edited a one-volume edition of Browning's *Poetical Works, 1833–64* (London, 1970) followed by his critical study, Browning's *Major Poetry* (1973). He decided to build on foundations already laid and become the general editor of a major Clarendon Press edition of the whole *Poetical Works of Robert Browning*.

This was a remarkable decision. Jack, always a practical and realistic man, was now nearing his sixties. Even with early retirement and a trusted team of collaborators, surely he could not have hoped to see this great edition completed? Perhaps as well as having laid down the guidelines of the edition, he expected to see at least Browning's well-known middle poetry done. In this he was not disappointed. Together with Rowena Fowler, Robert Inglesfield and Margaret Smith, he brought out the first five volumes—Volume V *Men and Women* (Oxford, 1995) being the one with which he was most engaged—within perhaps fourteen years of his original decision. *Men and Women* contains some of Browning's most well-known and moving poems: 'Childe Roland', 'Andrea del Sarto', 'Cleon', 'Two on the Campagna' and many others. Volume V was not an unfitting place for him to halt.

As an undergraduate in the mid-1950s, I absorbed the view that there was only one Victorian poet worthy of attention: Gerard Manley Hopkins. Christopher Ricks's edition of Tennyson taught me, later, that I had been wrong about this particular Poet Laureate. Ian Jack's *Poetical Works*, Vol. V, taught me that I was at least partly wrong about Browning. He did this by his annotations. Consider the last two lines of 'Childe Roland':

> Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set,
> And blew: 'Child Roland to the Dark Tower came.'

On the word 'slug-horn' Jack says, in a short note (n. 203), that Browning was misled by Thomas Chatterton. The word should mean something like 'slogan' or 'battlecry'. Chatterton was, on his part, misled by Thomas Ruddiman's 1710 edition of the fifteenth-century Scot, Gavin Douglas's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*. The modern reader is here taken away from

the intentionality of the fortunate Browning to contemplate the coalescence, in the poem, of the sound of the horn and the words of Roland's (no doubt) doomed challenge.

'Bishop Blougram's Apology'—to take a more difficult poem—is very long and fully annotated here. It deals with a revival of Catholicism in Victorian England, led partly by Cardinal Wiseman and also of course by Cardinal Newman. Browning, certainly not a Catholic, perhaps scarcely a Christian, disliked Wiseman, the subject and speaker of this protracted monologue. The other person present is allowed to say nothing. It must be admitted that Browning's depiction of the pleasantly drunk and interminably talkative Blougram, though the poet is not agreeing with him, does portray him as a shrewd, friendly and subtle man. The length of the poem enacts the confidence of the speaker and Browning's almost Shakespearian capacity to dramatise a character he distrusted, and most nineteenth-century Protestants loved to hate, leave the reader with a less than doctrinaire vision. Ian Jack's own view was probably close to Browning's, but the subtle learning of his commentary seems to leave Blougram still holding forth, untouched.

When this volume of Browning's *Poetical Works* was published, I followed Pembroke College tradition and asked permission for an entry to be made in Wine Book. It runs: 'Mr. Erskine-Hill gave a bottle to congratulate Mr. Jack on his conquering of the Tower and bringing out *Men and Women*.' Foolishly pleased with myself, I showed it, soon after, to Ian. 'Nobody will understand it' was all he said. Much chastened I obtained permission to add a footnote, and thus even the Wine Book entry was annotated.

Ian Jack had a very good reputation with the undergraduates he taught. It was certainly well deserved and yet in some respects surprising. Other supervisors at Cambridge at least would want to get an interesting conversation going, Ian tended to be curt and dismissive. Others urged their pupils to still greater efforts; Ian made up his mind early as to how well they would do. But all worked out well for several reasons. First, his pupils respected him for his learning and achievement. Secondly, they soon realised that he respected *them*, though not necessarily as high intellectuals. Thirdly, they understood, in due course, that he was a kind man. Professor Christopher Salveson, one of his earliest pupils, has a telling anecdote:

> As my tutor at Oxford, Ian had to deal with an ex-National Serviceman who, over two years had lost a good deal of scholarly momentum; he was supportive and sympathetic in helping me recover some proper sense of direction—I

> remember, in my first term, his abandoning a not particularly productive tutorial for a bracing walk round Christ Church Meadows and some constructive discussion of life in general. When I eventually became a University lecturer I gradually realised how much I owed to Ian's example in the business of reading, teaching and criticism. (Letter to Elizabeth Jack, 30 October 2008)

In his later years Ian frequently sought to pass his students over to other supervisors. In my first year as a lecturer in Cambridge I was surprised to be asked by him to take over all his first years for the Easter Term. I was glad to and they were an excellent group. I got to know one better than the others because he was interested, as I was, in the poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid (Christopher Murray Grieve). This undergraduate, Christopher Smith, became Minister for Culture, Arts and Sport in Tony Blair's first administration and was then responsible for restoring free access to art galleries and museums. As Lord Smith of Finsbury he is (at the time of writing) Chairman of the Wordsworth Dove Cottage Trust. Another example stands out. One day at High Table Ian spoke to me of an absolutely first-rate research student he had had for one year, but now wished to pass on to me. I tried to dissuade him but his mind was made up. This accomplished graduate student thus came to me, the subject of his thesis was then settled, and in due course he was elected into a Research Fellowship at Pembroke. The name of this graduate was Richard A. McCabe, now Fellow of Merton, Professor of English, and FBA.

Some have enquired where Professor Jack stood in the deconstructionist debates which so troubled the Arts Faculties in Cambridge in the 1980s. He did not play a part in the public controversy and was out of the country for some of this antagonistic period. When something of it was explained he set down deconstructionism as such an obvious folly that it could never prevail. A slightly younger generation was more troubled, since it appeared to them not just that established truths were being challenged, which happens continually and rightly, but rather that the philosophic *concept of truth* was being relegated from academic discourse. Of those who supported this trend, some were incredulous that any new idea could be unwelcome in Cambridge, while others thought that the concept of truth was the social tool of a middle-class hegemony. This last claim defeated itself, obviously, by deploying the concept of truth, as all political, historical and literary discourse is bound to do.

Since the question of religion has been touched on above in relation to Browning, a word of two more may be said. Ian once said to me that if God existed it was in the mind of man. He may have meant that God was a delusion or, possibly, a presupposition of the enquiring mind—as Kant

considered causality to be. On a related point Ian may, despite much talk about folly, have been a relatively hopeful humanist. Among his papers found after his death were two cuttings placed together. Each concerned accounts of children or youths marooned on a desert island. One, from the *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 September 1986, recounted the story of the first publication of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* in September 1954, a novel which Ian already knew well. The second, from *The Times*, 17 September 1966, recounted the story of six boy castaways from Tonga who lived for fifteen months on the uninhabited south Pacific island of Ata, living on raw seabirds to keep alive. They built a hut, drew up rules, managed to burn an area of scrub as a signal, said prayers morning and evening and, though completely naked, were reasonably healthy and cheerful when they were rescued. Ian set this cheerful narrative against the dark vision of Golding.

* * *

Ian Jack was Reader in English Poetry at Cambridge, 1973–6, and Professor 1976–89. He was elected FBA in 1986. He died on 3 September 2008.

HOWARD ERSKINE-HILL
Fellow of the Academy

Note. I am grateful to Elizabeth Jack for her assistance in the preparation of this memoir.