



JON HOWIE STALLWORTHY

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## 1935–2014

JON STALLWORTHY SAW HIMSELF FIRST and foremost as a poet. He had two successive careers, both of them crowned with success, first as a publisher with Oxford University Press (OUP), then as a professor at Cornell and at Oxford, producing groundbreaking work as critic, biographer, editor and anthologist—particularly in relation to the poets of the First World War. It was for this major contribution to scholarship that he was elected to the British Academy. But in the early 1980s, after his move to Cornell, Jon declared: ‘Everything else that I have written (...)—studies of Yeats’s poetry, translations of Blok and Pasternak, a biography and an edition of Wilfred Owen—has been undertaken with one end in view: to prepare myself for the challenge of making great poems, should life ever offer that challenge.’<sup>1</sup> He wrote poetry from an early age and throughout his life, achieving early and lasting recognition as the author of more than a dozen separate volumes. What is more, the poetry is intimately connected with the more academic work. So while the memoir that follows has a lot to say about his many scholarly achievements, the poetry remains at the heart of it.

### I

Jon Stallworthy grew up in Oxford, studied there, spent a large part of his life there, but still felt himself something of an outsider. In the note for

<sup>1</sup>Note written for *World Authors, 1975–1980* (New York, 1984).

*World Authors* just quoted, he wrote: ‘through the happiest of childhoods, I had an odd, exciting rather than disturbing, sense of not quite belonging in the middle-class world of my friends. My parents were New Zealanders, and their other world was always shimmering like a mirage at the edge of sight.’ He was born in London on 18 January 1935, his parents having just arrived from New Zealand by ship around Cape Horn (hence the title of his collected poems of 1998, *Rounding the Horn*). His father’s family history is the subject of a remarkable long poetic sequence of 1978, *A Familiar Tree*. His paternal grandfather, who was the grandson of a missionary on the Marquesas Islands, became a newspaper proprietor on North Island, New Zealand, and his father John (later Sir John) Arthur Stallworthy was an eminent surgeon and professor of obstetrics and gynaecology in Oxford. The father’s skill and devotion to his calling undoubtedly left a deep mark on the son, as can be seen from a number of his poems and from the memoir *Singing School*, published after his father’s death. His mother, Margaret (Peggy) Howie, came from the southern tip of the South Island, her father having emigrated from Scotland in 1887. In *Singing School*, Jon describes how her singing and reading of nursery rhymes opened up for him the world of poetry which was above all a world of sound: ‘I hadn’t inherited my mother’s ear for music, couldn’t hold in my head the sequence of notes in a vertical scale, but from the start I had a sense of rhythm, the sequence of stresses on a horizontal scale.’<sup>2</sup>

In 1938 John Stallworthy was appointed first assistant to Professor Moir in Oxford, and soon thereafter the family settled in Woodstock Close, at the northern edge of Oxford. They were to move from here in 1945 to their definitive home on Shotover Hill to the east of the city; by this time Jon had twin sisters, Sally and Wendy, born in 1942. The year before this, he had been enrolled at the Dragon School in North Oxford. He spent seven happy and enriching years there, developing his passion for poetry in a school which published its own *Dragon Book of Verse*, a collection of which he later wrote that despite its ‘male and martial bias’ (explicable enough in time of war), ‘no book I have ever owned has given me more pleasure, or, I believe, more profit’.<sup>3</sup> Concurrently, with his father’s encouragement or coaching, he was learning such physical skills as riding, sailing, tree surgery and above all rugby, at which he excelled both in school and university.

<sup>2</sup>J. Stallworthy, *Singing School: the Making of a Poet* (London, 1998), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 44.

Between 1948 and 1953, Jon studied at Rugby School. The move from the Dragon School he later described as a ‘transition from technicolour to monochrome’, finding the town drab, the school more formal and the teaching less dynamic. Even so, he continued to thrive as a rugby player, finding his place eventually as a hooker. At the same time, he was writing more and more poetry, encouraged by an appreciative but demanding teacher, T. D. Tosswill, to whom he continued to send his poems from Oxford. Tosswill ran the school’s English Club, and it was here that Jon first met one of the most important people in his life, Geoffrey Keynes (1887–1982), surgeon, bibliographer, book collector and friend. Keynes guided his steps as reader and writer, opening his eyes to many new aspects of English literature, from William Blake to Rupert Brooke (he was later to join Keynes as one of the trustees of the Rupert Brooke archive).

Shortly before leaving school, he took a term off to travel with his family to New Zealand. He had a taste for what he often described as the ‘round earth’s imagined corners’; during his life he was to visit many parts of the former British Empire, and his poetry often returns to themes of empire, conquest and decolonisation. On leaving Rugby to do his National Service, he was glad of an exciting posting to West Africa, where he served as a second lieutenant in the Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry on secondment to the Royal West African Frontier Force. As he later wrote, ‘this had a gratifyingly Kiplingesque ring to it’;<sup>4</sup> it turned out to involve routine soldiering, ceremonial and polo-playing, but gave him valuable experience of colonial relationships just before the end of empire.

After National Service, Jon went up to Magdalen College, Oxford, to read English. His intention had been to study with C. S. Lewis, but in the event he was glad to have as a tutor the young Emrys Jones, who inspired him and his cohort with the subtlety of his close reading.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, he lived a very full undergraduate life; with his striking good looks, ready wit and interest in other people, he was a prominent member of the college and was elected President of the Junior Common Room in his final year. He was also playing a great deal of rugby, achieving a place in the Greyhounds (the university second XV), and writing a great deal of poetry, from guitar songs for his friend Richard Sorabji to fully worked-out longer poems which he entered for the university’s Newdigate Prize;

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>5</sup>See J. Carey, ‘Emrys Lloyd Jones (1931–2012)’, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, XIII (Oxford, 2014), 273–91.

he won this in 1958 with 'The Earthly Paradise', a poem which he later judged quite severely.

On graduating in the summer of 1958, he made an adventurous visit to Greece with a group of friends, sleeping under the stars, climbing Mount Parnassus and falling in love with a country which he and his wife visited again and again over the coming decades. Returning to Oxford, he signed up for a B.Litt., not because he had any desire to write a thesis and pursue an academic career, but in order to try for a Blue in rugby. He just failed to achieve the Blue, but the scholarly pretext for it turned out to be a golden opportunity. Under the inspiring supervision of Sir Maurice Bowra, he embarked on a study of Yeats's variants, recently given prominence by the *Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*. As well as advising him, energising him and telling him about other poets, including the Russian poet Aleksandr Blok whom he was later to translate, Bowra helped him to meet Yeats's widow in Dublin. Mrs Yeats took to him and gave him access to manuscripts of many of the major poems. These at first seemed to him 'as impenetrable as Dead Sea scrolls',<sup>6</sup> but he learned to read them, and the result was the B.Litt. thesis which he had not originally wanted to write, but which turned out to be an important contribution to the understanding of Yeats and the making of poetry. It was published by Oxford University Press in 1963 as *Between the Lines: Yeats's Poetry in the Making*, followed in 1969 by *Vision and Revision in Yeats's Last Poems*.

The lesson of Yeats's manuscripts is summed up in *Singing School*:

As in a master-class, I saw and heard him building his musical structures and saw—what I had always sensed—that it is its musical structure that distinguishes poetry from prose. I learned how he balanced a sentence and built it into a stanza, and how sentence and stanza and poem were undergirded with rhetoric deployed like a sculptor's armature. I learned how he softened the outlines of his rhetorical framework, and freed his rhythms, as a poem took shape; concealing his artifice until the words on the page might pass for natural speech. I saw, in the unfolding of his career, the development of a fierce self-critical faculty ... He would cut and cut again, but seldom add, other than to replace a word or phrase with a better word or phrase.<sup>7</sup>

Much of what he writes here is clearly applicable to his own work as a poet; the student of the manuscripts is learning what Yeats called his 'trade'. At the same time, his analysis provides illumination for the common reader, who can follow in fine detail the emergence of the two

<sup>6</sup> Stallworthy, *Singing School*, p. 221.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

dozen great poems studied. Through the genesis of poems, interpretations emerge, though Jon did not greatly involve himself in critical debate around the poems, and only rarely cited the work of other critics. At the same time, he was insistent on the need to read any given poem in relation to Yeats's experience, his other poems and his reading.

What strikes one most is the teleological nature of Jon's enterprise in this early work. He was less interested in the other directions that Yeats's writing could have taken than in the purposeful work towards a final result, and was quite prepared to judge the master poet's success or failure in finding the right word or expression—he uses the analogy of a locksmith opening a safe, waiting to hear the 'click of cogs slipping into place'.<sup>8</sup> In relation to 'The Second Coming', he writes: 'Inexorably we observe Yeats's pen pursuing the poem's magnificent and sinister conclusion.'<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, however, in one crucial instance he changed his mind: having regretted in *Between the Lines* that Yeats had dropped his original 'Draw rein, draw breath' before the epitaph ('Cast a cold eye/ On life, on death./ Horseman, pass by!') that closes 'Under Ben Bulbin', he came to the view in *Vision and Revision* that 'this omission is necessary and an improvement' in that it allows the poet to suggest 'that he had a spiritual horseman in mind, or at any rate wanted to preserve the ambiguity'.<sup>10</sup> The young critic here displays the confidence of a fellow-poet.

Reading his own poetry of this and later periods, one is left in no doubt about the value of Yeats's example for Jon Stallworthy's own practice, his work with words and forms. But the great Irish poet brought him more than this. For one thing, immersion in the world of Irish independence and the Easter Rising sharpened his awareness of politics, particularly the politics of empire. He describes in *Singing School* his discovery of Yeats's introduction to the poems of Spenser, which quotes a shocking passage on Ireland and the Irish, before going on to talk of Cromwell in Ireland. All of this 'set [him] reading about the Maori Wars in New Zealand and wondering what it had been like in England under the Romans'.<sup>11</sup> Such explorations, together with more personal experience of the former British Empire, were to bear fruit in many of his later poems.

On a personal plane, the Yeats books led to invitations to take part in the Yeats International Summer School in Sligo. Beginning in 1963, he

<sup>8</sup> J. Stallworthy, *Between the Lines: Yeats's Poetry in the Making* (Oxford, 1963), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> J. Stallworthy, *Vision and Revision in Yeats's Last Poems* (Oxford, 1969), p. 170.

<sup>11</sup> Stallworthy, *Singing School*, p. 212.

was to return with pleasure for several years, and in doing so got to know more about the rising generation of Irish poets. Chief among these was Seamus Heaney, who became a close friend and for half a century his ‘prince of men and poets’.

## II

While working on his BLitt, Jon knew that he was not heading for an academic career: ‘when I finished as an undergraduate here [in Oxford] the only thing I was certain of was that I didn’t want to be a don’.<sup>12</sup> In the autumn of 1959, he joined the Oxford University Press, ‘because [he] wanted to see more of the world and publish some of the world’s best poets’.<sup>13</sup> He stayed with the Press for the next eighteen years, time enough to make a considerable mark.

Soon after beginning with the Press, and after a courtship of some three years, he married Gillian (Jill) Waldo, the daughter of the eminent international lawyer Sir Humphrey Waldo (who was later to produce an influential report on OUP<sup>14</sup>). Almost immediately, the young couple set off for Karachi, where Jon worked as Assistant General Manager; as he later put it in his contribution to Volume III of the *History of Oxford University Press*, promising young men were sent on such ‘imperial’ postings, returning to Britain like Roman proconsuls.<sup>15</sup> He profited greatly by the encounter with a different culture, observing the aftermath of empire and the politics of a newly independent Pakistan; all this is reflected in the poems of *Out of Bounds* (London, 1963), where public themes assume a new importance.

Returning to Britain in 1962, he worked in the London branch of OUP for the rest of the decade. In 1965, he and Jill had their first child, Jonathan, who was born with Down’s Syndrome; the deep emotions stirred up by this birth are the subject of what was to become Jon’s best-known, most anthologised and most studied poem, ‘The Almond Tree’, which closes on a vision of the tree of the title:

<sup>12</sup> Interview in *The Plum Review*, 4 (Fall/Winter 1992), 49.

<sup>13</sup> *World Authors 1975–80*.

<sup>14</sup> *Report of the Committee on the University Press* (Oxford, 1970).

<sup>15</sup> J. Stallworthy, ‘The editors’, in W. R. Louis (ed.) *The History of Oxford University Press*, vol. 3: 1896–1970 (Oxford, 2013), p. 571.

In labour the tree was becoming  
 itself. I, too, rooted in earth  
 and ringed in darkness, from the death  
 of myself saw myself blossoming,

wrenched from the caul of my thirty  
 years' growing, fathered by my son,  
 unkindly in a kind season  
 by love shattered and set free.<sup>16</sup>

In the years to come, Jon and Jill were much concerned by the need to provide a loving and supportive environment for Jonathan, first at home and then in a succession of residential homes. In the following years the family was happily completed by the birth of a daughter, Pippa, born in 1967, and a second son, Nick, born in 1970.

In London, Jon had the good fortune to work under the guidance of a great and forward-looking publisher, John Bell. It was Bell who entrusted him with his proudest task in these years, the development of OUP's poetry list until it was second only to Faber and Faber. At this stage he was influenced, like many others, by Ian Hamilton; he was also involved, with Ted Hughes, in the first ever Poetry International Festival of 1967. At a time when many poets and poetry lovers were looking beyond the borders of England and of the United Kingdom, the OUP poetry list was remarkable not just for the quality of its poets, but for the wide geographical spread it embraced, with names such as Fleur Adcock (New Zealand), Edward Brathwaite (Barbados), Anthony Hecht and Anne Stevenson (USA), Peter Porter (Australia) and Andrey Vosnesensky and Marina Tsvetaeva (USSR). At the same time, the British and Irish poets included Charles Tomlinson, Derek Mahon, Anthony Thwaite, David Harsent and Peter Scupham. Jon was an active editor, going out to find poets, then working with them to shape their poems and create memorable volumes (he wrote well about this in an article 'Poet and publisher' published in *A Review of English Literature*<sup>17</sup>).

In 1970 came a second foreign posting, when he was made the interim manager of the South African office of OUP. This involved moving the firm's warehouse, but also some politically sensitive editorial work. He had the idea of commissioning Alan Paton, author of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, to write a biography of Roy Campbell and, in his 'wide-eyed Oxbridge innocence', obtained a formal letter from the Press which

<sup>16</sup> J. Stallworthy, *Rounding the Horn: Collected Poems* (Manchester, 1998), p. 161.

<sup>17</sup> J. Stallworthy, 'Poet and publisher', in *A Review of English Literature* (Leeds, 1967), pp. 39–49.



allowed Paton against all odds to obtain a passport—though the biography was never completed. Similarly, he was one of those behind the provocative publication of OUP's history of South Africa, with blank pages replacing sections forbidden by the censor.

Returning from Johannesburg, he spent the next six years in Oxford. In 1971 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and in 1971–2 he enjoyed the unexpected luxury of a year's visiting fellowship at All Souls College to work on his biography of Wilfred Owen. Thereafter, the family settled in the Mill House by the river at Wolvercote, a place he described in a letter as 'about the most beautiful house I've ever seen'. From here, on fine days, he could walk to work over Port Meadow, revolving in his mind the text of poems and translations. At the Clarendon Press, he was now the senior editor in English literature, soon becoming deputy head of OUP's academic division. He was directly responsible here to his fellow New Zealander Dan Davin, whom he described in the *ODNB* as 'the greatest academic publisher of his time'.<sup>18</sup> Davin, who was far from happy with recent developments at OUP, saw Jon as an ally and potential successor. With his colleague Nicolas Barker, Jon had hopes and ambitions for the development of the Press, but these were largely frustrated by the internal problems of an institution which was facing the abrupt decline of the American market, and trying to economise by amalgamating the London and Oxford branches. In the end, he was glad to escape from promotion by a dramatic move to American academe.

But for the time being, Jon was fully committed to his work at OUP, as he was later to be in his academic positions. At the same time, he was amazingly busy and productive as a writer, using his time with professional efficiency. Sometimes he was involved in as many as four projects at once in such different fields as poetry, translation, anthologies, criticism and biography. But neither publishing nor writing took him away from the tasks and pleasures of family life and holidays. At home the Stallworthys loved welcoming guests with good food, firelight, wine and entertaining talk; on holiday Jon relaxed completely, soaking up the sun of Greece, navigating a narrowboat with Jonathan on the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal, exploring in detail medieval castles or prehistoric stone circles and always laughing, joking, telling stories.

<sup>18</sup>J. Stallworthy, 'Davin, Daniel Marcus (1913–1990)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/40201>> (accessed 21 January 2016). See also his discussion of Davin in Chapter 18 ('The editors') of Louis, *History of Oxford University Press*, vol. 3, p. 575. On Davin and Stallworthy, see K. Ovenden, *The Fighting Withdrawal: the Life of Dan Davin, Writer, Soldier, Publisher* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 311–17.

His literary production in the OUP years was remarkable. He came to the Press, still only twenty-four years old, with an impressive baggage: the first of his books on Yeats, and a collection of poems, *The Astronomy of Love* (London, 1961). Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, he wrote scores of poems, enough to make up three volumes, *Out of Bounds* (London, 1963), *Root and Branch* (London, 1969, dedicated to Margaret and Geoffrey Keynes) and *Hand in Hand* (London, 1974). There were also smaller pamphlets, and in 1974 a first ‘collected poems’, *The Apple Barrel: Selected Poems, 1955–63* (London). Most of these poems are short pieces, written out of his own pain or joy; the melancholy or tragic tone of many of them is strikingly at odds with the cheerful face he presented to the world. In a few cases, for instance ‘The Almond Tree’, we see him moving towards the longer, more cyclical creations that he favoured in his later poetry. There is also a move towards more public themes, as in two poems about the power and the disasters of empire, ‘Epilogue to an Empire, 1600–1900: an Ode for Trafalgar Day’ addressed to Nelson on his column, and ‘A Word with the Baas’, a reflection on Cecil Rhodes’s tragic legacy.<sup>19</sup> The Nelson poem was to be held against him in the polemic stirred up by his satirical ‘A Poem about Poems about Vietnam’, a provocative response to what he saw as the histrionics of the great Albert Hall ‘International Poetry Incarnation’ of 1965. He declared in this poem that ‘in love and war/ dispatches from the front are all’.<sup>20</sup> In his own ‘dispatches from the front’, it is love lyrics that dominate these early collections, especially *Hand in Hand*, and it is not surprising that Jon was invited to edit the *Penguin Book of Love Poetry* (London, 1973), a rich and varied collection that came out simultaneously with Geoffrey Grigson’s *Faber Book of Love Poems*—‘back to back like duellists on 29 October: God help us!’ he wrote in a letter.

Jon remained true to a traditional conception of the art of poetry, a conception reinforced by his work on Yeats’s manuscripts. For him, a poem had to be a ‘musical’ structure (though, like Yeats, he had no great ear for music as such, and as a guest on the Radio 3 music programme ‘Private Passions’ chose recordings of the spoken voice in preference to music). Most of his poems are composed of carefully crafted stanzas, with a perceptible metrical structure and often intricate rhyme schemes. At the same time, he learnt from Yeats, Owen and others to roughen his prosody,

<sup>19</sup> Stallworthy, *Rounding the Horn*, pp. 72–3, 80–1.

<sup>20</sup> The poem is in *Rounding the Horn*, p. 78. For the polemic with Mike Horowitz, see *The Poetry Review*, 77.2 (Autumn 1987).

and to use full rhyme sparingly, often preferring assonance, alliteration, or pararhyme. His poetic language is rich and challenging, like that of the much-admired Heaney, finding symbolic force in often unexpected words and images from all aspects of life.

Translation was for him in large part a means to the end of enriching his own poetic work. He said in an interview: ‘I think I learned a great deal from Pasternak and Blok.’<sup>21</sup> His translation work began with a bang when he worked with the brilliant linguist and translator, Max Hayward, on a version of Aleksandr Blok’s revolutionary cycle, ‘The Twelve’.<sup>22</sup> In *Singing School* he describes this work, a true collaboration rather than the exploitation of an anonymous crib:

Max would give me a literal line-by-line prose version of a poem, with an approximate metrical score (above the words), notes on rhyme and rhythm, tone, vocabulary, repetitions, ambiguities of meaning, and so on. This prose version I would then try to coax into the diction and rhythms of a twentieth-century English poem, with as little alteration as possible. Assuming that the general movement and tone of the English poem were a fair reflection of the Russian (which wasn’t always the case), Max would offer specific criticisms and I would try again. Our dialogue would continue for several exchanges, interspersed with readings from the Russian ...<sup>23</sup>

The resulting poem was published in 1965, but by this time Jon had persuaded me to take over where Max Hayward left off, following the same procedure; we went on to produce volumes of Blok (1970) and Boris Pasternak (1982), both of which achieved wide circulation in Penguin Books.<sup>24</sup> Of the two, Blok was probably more influential on his poetic production, but in some ways Pasternak was closer to his own vision and practice. The exposure to Russian poetry left its mark on him. Russian themes and forms appear in his later poems, and he later visited Russia, making friends with the poet Yevtushenko, who translated ‘The Almond Tree’.

<sup>21</sup> Interview in *Plum Review*, 53.

<sup>22</sup> This was first published in J. Stallworthy and M. Hayward, ‘Alexander Blok, The Twelve’, *The Critical Quarterly*, 7 (1965), 135–41, and in slightly revised form by Stallworthy and France: see note 23.

<sup>23</sup> Stallworthy, *Singing School*, p. 205, a slightly altered version of a passage in the introduction to Alexander Blok, *The Twelve and Other Poems*, translated by J. Stallworthy and P. France (London, 1970), pp. 12–15, where an example from a different Blok poem is used.

<sup>24</sup> *Selected Poems by Alexander Blok*, translated from the Russian by J. Stallworthy and P. France (Harmondsworth, 1974); *Selected Poems of Boris Pasternak*, translated from the Russian by J. Stallworthy and P. France (London, 1982).

The most significant development of the OUP years, however, and the one that made the greatest impact on Jon's subsequent career, was his move to biography—and to Wilfred Owen. At first he continued to work on Yeats, writing critical essays as well as *Vision and Revision in Yeats's Last Poems* (1969) and an edited casebook, *Yeats Last Poems: a Casebook* (London, 1968). For one of his essays, 'Yeats as anthologist',<sup>25</sup> he had occasion to study the Clarendon Press archive for Yeats's *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. As he tells it:

The old Arch-Poet's brilliant polemical introduction to the *Oxford Book* introduced me to my favourite poet's unfavourite poet, and prompted me to open—for the first time—*The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*. When I asked myself why the Old Man, celebrant of conflict and heroism, should have so detested the work of the Young, the answer was inescapable: they represented competing value-systems—Ancient and Modern, Homeric and humane—and in the 1930s, let alone the 1960s, there could be no competition.<sup>26</sup>

In the 1960s, OUP published both Wilfred Owen's *Collected Letters* and Harold Owen's three-volume memoir of his brother, *Journey from Obscurity*. The editor responsible was John Bell, and Bell soon introduced Jon to Harold Owen. This was enough to whet his appetite, and when he was invited to give the 1970 British Academy Chatterton Lecture, he chose as his subject Wilfred Owen. The text, written 'in a seaside cottage some miles north-east of the Cape of Good Hope', anticipates his coming biography of Owen, focusing on the making of the poet and analysing at length some of his early poems. It was delivered in London to some acclaim;<sup>27</sup> in the front row of the audience was Harold Owen, who invited Jon to be in effect Owen's official biographer, with access to previously unknown archival material and to Owen's own well-preserved small library, a touching collection later housed in the English Faculty Library in Oxford. Simply entitled *Wilfred Owen*, and dedicated to Harold's memory, the biography was published by OUP in 1974.

Apart from *Journey from Obscurity*, there had been no full-scale life of Owen; indeed, although figuring prominently in the *Faber Book of Modern Verse*, he was at this time far from having the status he later attained. Jon inevitably drew heavily on Harold Owen's book, especially for the early years, but saw his own work as 'complementary', his aim being to produce 'a portrait of the man as artist to balance Harold Owen's portrait of the

<sup>25</sup> J. Stallworthy, 'Yeats as anthologist', in N. Jeffares and K. G. W. Cross (eds.), *In Excited Reverie: a Centenary Tribute to William Butler Yeats* (New York, 1965), pp. 171–92.

<sup>26</sup> J. Stallworthy, 'Biography and poetry', *Wolfson College Record* (2009), p. 95.

<sup>27</sup> J. Stallworthy, 'Wilfred Owen', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 56 (1972), pp. 241–62.

artist as elder brother, and Wilfred's own careful self-portrait—in his letters (four-fifths of them to his mother)—of the artist as son'.<sup>28</sup> In a sense, the book resembles the studies of Yeats, its most striking aspect being the detailed examination of the poems, both early and late, and their development towards a final version. This is shown graphically by photographs of the manuscript drafts; in some particularly memorable pages, the reader is shown five successive versions, first prose, then verse, of 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'.<sup>29</sup> Jon remarked more than once that Owen was a 'poet's poet', who had attracted the attention of editors such as Siegfried Sassoon, Edith Sitwell, Edmund Blunden and C. Day Lewis. This biography too is a poet's biography, written with empathy and understanding, and in its mingling of narration, quotation and critical discussion it is eminently readable.

A difficulty facing the biographer at this time was uncertainty about the chronology of Owen's manuscripts. Subsequently, in his critical edition, Jon was able to establish this relatively firmly, and he himself regretted that for publishing reasons the biography had to precede the edition. Nevertheless, *Wilfred Owen* is a scrupulously careful account of the poet's life and writings. Indeed, in everything he did, he showed the same respect for accuracy and completeness. With these went a publisher's care for all aspects of composition, paragraph and sentence construction, grammar, syntax and spelling—all of these emblematised by his enviably clear and elegant handwriting, black ink flowing freely from a good pen.

The Owen biography was much praised (Graham Greene called it 'surely one the finest biographies of our time'); it won three different literary awards, and became a standard work. Naturally, there were dissenting voices—some thought that Jon remained too close to Harold Owen's 'family' view of his brother and that he presented his hero in too rosy a light. Dominic Hibberd, publishing a full and well-researched biography of Owen in 2002, said of his predecessor's work: 'In due course, however, the book came to be seen as incomplete. Important areas of Wilfred's life were not discussed. He emerged as rather innocent, not yet quite free from the controls that had been imposed by his brother.'<sup>30</sup> The disagreement centred on the difficult question of Owen's sexuality. Whereas Hibberd writes bluntly that 'he was gay', Jon argued in 2005 that there is no evidence to prove more than that Owen had a strongly

<sup>28</sup> J. Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen* (Oxford, 1974), p. vii.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 216–22.

<sup>30</sup> D. Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: a New Biography* (London, 2002), p. 465.

homoerotic disposition (clearly identified in his own biography), and that assertions about his alleged sexual relations are speculations, the product of ‘authorial imagination’. He realised, however, that all biography is inflected by the preoccupations of the biographer, admitting that his own interest in Owen and the ‘secrets of his trade’ had been ‘subjective’ and that ‘to that (limited) extent my biography was—as I believe most biographies are—an exercise in crypto-autobiography’.<sup>31</sup>

### III

By 1977 Jon was in line for promotion to a senior post at OUP, a career advancement that he anticipated with some foreboding. Fortunately, an unexpected way out and a major change of direction came to him from across the Atlantic. This is how he tells the story in an interview of 1992:

I ... was getting increasingly frustrated because I was having less and less time for writing and thinking about writing. Then a letter came out of a blue sky asking if I would be interested in a teaching job at Cornell. I didn’t for a moment think I would be, but I said: ‘Tell me more’. I went over to talk to them and the job seemed so nice, the people so intelligent, that it seemed madness to do anything but accept.<sup>32</sup>

So began, for the man who hadn’t wanted to be a don, a stay of nine years as Anderson Professor of English Literature at Cornell University.

It was a happy stay. The university offered an intense, but relaxed and relatively unhierarchical, social life and the company of many interesting people from a variety of disciplines. Jon and Jill found a lovely small farmhouse where they could entertain friends, and from which they could explore the forests and lakes of upstate New York. Jill was able to indulge her passions for natural history, especially botany and bird-watching, and Jon, in many letters, spoke of the changing seasons and the snow geese flying north or south through a clear blue sky. During this period, Jonathan remained in a special school in England in the interests of stability and because he was refused an American visa; Pippa and Nick joined them in America at first, later moving to boarding schools in England.

It was Jon’s first experience of teaching, and he took to it immediately. He had the good fortune of being guided by M. H. Abrams, author of *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*

<sup>31</sup> Stallworthy, ‘Biography and poetry’, pp. 98–9.

<sup>32</sup> *Plum Review*, 48–9.

(New York, 1953), who was to become a close friend, and whose 100th birthday celebrations he attended in Cornell in 2012. Under Abrams's direction, he lectured in wide-ranging survey courses, but also had freedom to devise his own more specialised courses. For him, this meant jumping in at the deep end. In the interview just quoted, he remembers his first offering: 'I said one thing I do know something about is "war literature", so I could teach a course on war poetry from Homer to Heaney'—thus sowing the seeds for many subsequent publications, anthologies, essays and editions. Students appreciated the enthusiasm and generosity of his teaching; in particular, as an ex-publisher and writer, he gave huge amounts of time to the guidance of graduate students, young colleagues, writers and poets, both within the university and outside it.

In the 1970s, Cornell, like many other American universities, had welcomed the new literary theory. This was at the opposite pole from Jon's more traditional approach to literature, but it did not get in the way of cooperation and friendship. His relation with the teaching of poetry seems to have been somewhat less easy, although he numbered many Cornell writers, notably Anthony Hecht, among his friends. In the university's creative writing programme, his concerns for form, rhyme and metre were out of favour. He remarked later: 'When I got to Cornell, the orthodoxy was that if you wrote in rhyme and meter you were back in the Middle Ages, and that was not just foolish but almost morally unacceptable.'<sup>33</sup> He himself was a great admirer of many contemporary American poets and had given them unusual prominence in the OUP poetry list, but he came to believe that in the USA poetry was too much institutionalised in the universities, so that creative writing classes tended to stifle poetic individuality.

For his own poetry, the years at Cornell were a rather lean period. Most of his American poems were gathered together after his return to Britain in *The Anzac Sonata: New and Selected Poems* (London, 1986), but they have more to do with his familial past than with his Cornell experience. The title poem, a cunningly wrought sequence of shorter pieces in different forms, is a moving requiem both for his mother, who died in 1980, and for her brother, Bill Howie, who was killed at Gallipoli in 1915. This poem, with its composite musical structure and concern for family history, continues a line begun in one of his best poems, published separately as *A Familiar Tree* in 1978 (London and Oxford), shortly after his arrival in Cornell, but mostly written in his last OUP years. This is a

<sup>33</sup> *Plum Review*, 50.

‘mosaic’ made up of many shorter poems, in many different voices, imagined letters, thoughts, prayers, songs, journal notes—a complex and interesting form that owes a good deal to his earlier immersion in Blok’s ‘The Twelve’. The poem sprang from his recent discovery of an obscure volume of New Zealand local history; it follows the Stallworthy family from a Buckinghamshire yeoman family in the eighteenth century, via missionary work on the Marquesas Islands and pioneering life in New Zealand, back to England with John and Peggy Stallworthy, and finally to Jon and his children (‘The Almond Tree’ finds its place here). The poet projects himself into the minds of his ancestors, recreating a whole variety of voices—the peasants protesting against enclosure, the agonised but steadfast missionary and his long-suffering wife, the adventurous doctor rounding the Horn and confronting the outbreak of war. Individual histories are intertwined with a broader history of empire and conflict.

Jon’s principal scholarly achievement in these years was his edition of the *Complete Poems and Fragments* of Wilfred Owen, which appeared in two volumes in 1983 (London). Almost none of the poems had been published at the time of Owen’s death, and the principal problem an editor had to face was the chronology of the mainly undated manuscripts. The answer was to be found in the paper Owen used, and above all in the watermarks. Jon had noticed that the same paper was often used for the undated manuscripts and the carefully dated letters, and was able to take the manuscripts to Austin, Texas, where the letters were held, and compare them. The result was a scrupulously scholarly edition which broke new methodological ground; as he put it, ‘when so many of an author’s texts are, of necessity, editorial constructions, a sceptical reader needs to see the raw material from which they’re constructed’.<sup>34</sup> So poems and fragments are arranged in chronological sequence, the successive stages of composition being detailed and dated in a footnote to every poem. Some redating contradicted the accepted view of Owen’s development as a poet (for example, the date of his first use of pararhyme). Overall, while there was still inevitably a degree of ‘editorial construction’, the resultant edition established for the first time a reliable text for an author whom Jon had helped to place in the front rank of twentieth-century English poets.

Work on Owen necessarily involved him more and more in the subject of war poetry, the theme of one of his first courses at Cornell. He had grown up surrounded by war talk and war pictures, with an uncle killed at Gallipoli, and war was one of his poetic preoccupations. All of this led to

<sup>34</sup> Stallworthy, ‘Biography and poetry’, p. 96.



a second anthology, *The Oxford Book of War Poetry*, first published in 1984. It is a substantial volume, ranging from Homer and the Bible to Heaney and Fenton, covering both the heroic and the anti-heroic strands in war poetry. The selection, covering several centuries, necessarily includes more of the heroic than the anti-heroic, but the Introduction stresses the ‘new kind of poetry’ that has been produced by the ‘new kind of conflict’ inaugurated by the American Civil War. The editor argues that ‘the one hope for the human race’ lies in the universal acceptance of the ‘poets’ perception that we are all civilians’.<sup>35</sup>

Cornell also brought involvement in two very much larger anthologies. His friend and mentor, M. H. Abrams, was the founding editor of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, the massive and dependable *vade mecum* for generations of American teachers and students. In 1983, Jon was brought into the editorial team, working with the retired David Daiches to revise the twentieth-century section for the fifth edition, published in 1986. He continued in that role after the death of Daiches, and in the meantime, in 1991, was invited to become one of the three editors of *The Norton Anthology of English Poetry* (New York: 4th edition, 1996; 5th edition, 2005), another authoritative volume of over 2,000 pages. Here he was responsible in particular for British and post-colonial poetry from Blake to the present.

The Norton anthologies provided a useful supplement of income, and Jon brought to them his customary commitment and enthusiasm, searching actively to bring in new poets from many countries. He was particularly proud of the part he played in persuading Seamus Heaney to make the bestselling translation of *Beowulf* that was launched in the seventh edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (New York, 2000)—a probably unique example of a major translation being presented to the world in a student anthology. In addition to finding and editing poems, he wrote an important essay on versification for the poetry anthology, laying out the forms of verse that seemed to him so lacking in much contemporary poetry, but also insisting on poetry as something to be *performed*, an invaluable insight for succeeding generations of students.

<sup>35</sup>J. Stallworthy (ed.), *The New Oxford Book of War Poetry* (Oxford, 2014), p. xxxiii. The same sentence is in the edition of 1984.

## IV

Jon and his family had been happy at Cornell, but eventually he decided it was time to return to Britain, an important factor being the need for him and Jill to be closer to the children. In 1985 he was appointed to a newly created post of Reader in English Literature (twentieth century) at Oxford University; he took up the post a year later. The return proved more difficult than might have been expected; he was at first not happy with various aspects of Oxford life and toyed with the idea of retiring to live in Greece to write. But fortunately his Readership was attached to the quite recently founded Wolfson College; he was elected to a Professorial Fellowship in the college, and in 1992 was made an *ad hominem* Professor of English Literature in the University. Wolfson was to be the main focus of his academic life, indeed a second home for him. He loved the informal, unstuffy atmosphere of the college, with the presence of many graduate students from around the world.

The family home had already for some years been an old stone house in the village of Old Marston, just a mile or so from Wolfson. It was a comfortable, welcoming house and the Stallworthys received many guests round their hospitable table. They liked village life, with the bells ringing from the old church across the road, and Jill devoted herself to creating a beautiful large garden, dominated by a great walnut tree much loved by Jon. And once again he could walk to work, revolving poems in his head, this time across the water meadows by the Cherwell.

From 1986 until the year of his death, he played a very full part in Wolfson life. He was one of the relatively few fellows on the Governing Body whose office was in the college, a modern penthouse eyrie overlooking the Cherwell; he came in to work there almost every day, both before and after his formal retirement. He attended Governing Body meetings with great regularity and in 1999 was made Vicegerent (Vice-President) of the college. Although he retired from his university post the following year, his presence was greatly valued at Wolfson, where he was made a Senior Research Fellow, and then in 2001 elected to an Extraordinary Fellowship. This carried membership of the Governing Body and had no age limit; the election was for a five-year period, normally renewable once only, but an exception was made for Jon, which would have carried him past his eightieth birthday had he lived. During what would normally have been his retirement, therefore, he worked tirelessly for the college. He served twice as Acting President; the second time, between the death of one President and the arrival of the next, he occupied this position for a

year and a half. While holding the fort, he had some trying cases to deal with; his courtesy and charm, combined with his firmness of purpose, allowed him to hand over the college in good shape to the incoming President.

Administrative cares took up a fair amount of his energy then, but, as at Cornell, he seemed to have inexhaustible time to devote to the numerous students and colleagues—and indeed people from outside the university—who sought his advice on academic or literary matters. Many are the authors of theses, books and poems who have expressed their gratitude for the care, firmness and sympathy with which he helped them to improve their work; he retained his editor's eye for style and presentation. Sociable, witty and interested in other people, he relished conversation, particularly enjoying the entertaining and revealing anecdote, and he was greatly liked by members of the college, both academic and non-academic, for his friendly courtesy and cheerful manner. Though youthful in bearing, he in some respects seemed like a sage from an earlier generation, steadfastly refusing the blandishments of computers, email and the internet, continuing to write letters and revise poems in his distinctive and legible hand.

Outside the college, he took a full part in the work of the English Faculty, lecturing, supervising graduate students and attending Faculty Board meetings. He was for many years on the Council of Friends of the Bodleian, having been instrumental in bringing to the library the literary archive of Louis MacNeice; between 2001 and 2009 he chaired the Council. His last public appearance was a lecture given at the Friends' AGM in the Sheldonian on 26 June 2014. He also continued to serve on the Rupert Brooke Trust, and became Senior Trustee in the Wilfred Owen Literary Trust, of which he had been a member since the 1970s; in the latter role, he was much concerned with questions of copyright and preserving the integrity of the Owen archive. Poetry was always at the centre of his concerns. He campaigned actively, generally on the winning side, in elections to the Oxford Professorship of Poetry, and in 1998 went public in his opposition to the discontinuing by OUP of the poetry list that he had done so much to create.<sup>36</sup> Over these years, he was often invited to give lectures, talks and readings all over the world. In 1990 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy, serving on the Publications Committee from 1997 to 2002, and subsequently bringing his publisher's perspective to the Academy's working party on questions of copyright.

<sup>36</sup>See his article 'Vandalism', *Oxford Magazine*, 160 (1998) and the ensuing polemic.

Oxford life could be burdensome, and Jon certainly felt that he hadn't enough time for writing. Even so, the years before and after his retirement were as fruitful in publications as earlier periods. In 1991 he produced for Carcanet a new edition of the rather neglected poet Henry Reed (*Henry Reed: Collected Poems*, Manchester, 2007), but his most significant single book of these years was no doubt his second literary biography, *Louis MacNeice*, begun at Cornell and published in 1995 (London). Surprisingly, this was the first biography of MacNeice, a quasi-official biography in that Jon was asked to write it by the poet's executor, E. R. Dodds. It has remained the standard work, though it made less of a splash than the Owen biography. Given the greater length of MacNeice's life, it is both longer and denser than the Owen book, following the twists and turns of its subject's career, and embodying the result of many interviews with MacNeice's surviving relations, friends and lovers. It reveals Jon's taste for the racy anecdote, but it is above all the story of a poet and his poems, going back to the beginnings of MacNeice's poetic work, tracing the origin of poems, quoting extensively and offering astute personal comments on an admired poet whose prosody was in some ways like his own, and for whom he clearly had considerable fellow-feeling. He centres his account on the lasting influence of MacNeice's parents, representing opposite urges of 'cliff and water, fixity and flux';<sup>37</sup> he shows the poet being educated out of an early aestheticism by the knocks of life, and he warms to MacNeice's love of language and of the sheer variety of things and of people.

In studying Yeats, Owen and MacNeice, Jon had tended to focus on the 'becoming' of poetry, the authors' creative processes and the first springs of their work. It is not surprising, then, that he edited yet another anthology, *First Lines: Poems Written in Youth from Herbert to Heaney* (Manchester, 1987), an unusual and illuminating one, dedicated to the very early poems of fifty-eight well-known poets. Some ten years later he published an account of his own poetic apprenticeship, *Singing School* (1998). In an afterword to this, he notes the lack of testimony on such matters by poets, a lack which led him to conduct an 'experiment' which might 'encourage better poets to write better accounts of their apprenticeship'.<sup>38</sup> This experiment taught him lessons about the fragility of the biographer's constructions; it also produced a very readable, if colourful, account of its subject's early life, as well as a revealing view of the many

<sup>37</sup> Stallworthy, 'Biography and poetry', p. 105.

<sup>38</sup> Stallworthy, *Singing School*, p. 230.

different streams that flowed into the adult poet's work, from the nursery rhymes of his mother, by way of the school-room classics, to Yeats and Blok. His own youthful poems are quoted at length, often with rueful comments on their perceived inadequacies, but seen as steps on his chosen way of poetry.

At the same time, he remained active in the study of war poetry, where he was by now an acknowledged authority. The 1984 *Oxford Book of War Poetry* was republished for the centenary of 1914, with new poems and a supplementary preface, 'Thirty Years On', where Jon once again takes up the theme of his poem about the Vietnam War and sets out what he sees as the difference between 'first-hand witness' and 'second-hand witness'.<sup>39</sup> Before this he had produced (for the Imperial War Museum) a popular account of twelve British soldier-poets of the First World War, *Anthem for Doomed Youth: Twelve Soldier Poets of the First World War* (London, 2002). He was often invited to write essays and give lectures on war poetry, some of the best of which are gathered together in his only collection of critical essays, *Survivors' Songs: from Maldon to the Somme* (Cambridge, 2008). The subtitle is misleading in that the book extends further into the present than the Somme. Jon felt that it was a mistake to regard the poetry of the Second World War as inferior to that of the First: 'There are wonderful, terrible poems of the later war, too little known on this side of the Atlantic because half are American; too little known in America because half are British.'<sup>40</sup>

The book discusses a great deal of war-related writing, both prose and poetry, insisting on the power of imaginative works to bring out the symbolic force of war narratives. The title piece, one of the most substantial, focuses on Welsh war poetry, from the *Gododdin* to Alun Lewis, with a measured discussion of the conflict of heroic and anti-heroic elements in David Jones's *In Parenthesis*. The heroic strain in war writing is recognised, but in most of the essays here the emphasis is on the horrors of modern war and the way writers have responded to this 'Golgotha' (the term is used in a striking piece on 'The iconography of the Waste Land', ranging from Sassoon, Conrad and Eliot, to Beckett and Hughes). The final essay, 'The fury and the mire', first given as a Laurie Lee Memorial Lecture, alters Owen's famous dictum, 'The poetry is in the pity', to assert that 'the poetry is in the fury',<sup>41</sup> the rejection of war's inhumanity. In this

<sup>39</sup> Stallworthy, *New Oxford Book of War Poetry*, pp. xxxv–xl.

<sup>40</sup> J. Stallworthy, *Survivors' Songs: from Maldon to the Somme* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 181.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

perspective, ‘Rupert Brooke is not a war poet. He is the poet of peace, a celebrant of friendship, love, and laughter’.<sup>42</sup>

The essays of *Survivors’ Songs* are echoed in the poetry which Jon continued to write and which in 2010 won him the Wilfred Owen Poetry Award, given for ‘a sustained body of work that includes memorable war poems’. While he continued to write shorter lyrics, the striking thing about his later poetry is the turn to narrative, the telling of stories in which individual destiny and love are caught up in the movement of history and conflict. Several such poems appeared in *The Guest from the Future* (Manchester, 1995). The title poem, inspired by the famous and ill-fated visit made by Isaiah Berlin to the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova in 1945, is spoken in Akhmatova’s voice, the central section being a translation of her ‘Poem without a Hero’, done as before in collaboration, and showing again a remarkable ability to penetrate to the essence of the original. Wartime Russia is also evoked in ‘The Nutcracker’, a poem dedicated to Isaiah Berlin; here Jon adopts Pushkin’s ‘Onegin stanza’, which he had admired in translations and in Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate*, to tell the story of a love affair star-crossed by the Second World War.

His most remarkable late poetic sequence is *Skyhorse*, published as a separate pamphlet in 2002 (Oxford). The horse of the title is the White Horse of Uffington, and the poem consists, like the earlier *A Familiar Tree*, of fragments spoken by different men and women, from the ‘first priest’ 3,000 years ago to a Home Guard in 1940, and concluding with a dream sequence in the voice of the poet. The different scenes make up a historical fresco of English history, like a more intense *Puck of Pook’s Hill*; war and battle figure prominently, relieved by a goliardic lyric voice inspired by Helen Waddell’s *The Wandering Scholars*.

*Skyhorse* was later included in Jon’s last book of poetry, *War Poet* (Manchester, 2014), which brings together poems of all periods, but takes its title from a new narrative poem, a poem of love and war spoken by a wounded soldier of the First World War. This draws explicitly on the classical myth of the descent to the underworld and the difficult return to life; its image of war corresponds to the Golgotha of *Survivors’ Songs*. It is striking to observe how Jon’s poetic trajectory, beginning with the youthful ‘Earthly Paradise’, leads to the hell of modern war, which is in part a symbolic representation of the inner conflicts and torments that haunted his poetry from the start. Characteristically, though, ‘War Poet’

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

ends with the triumph of love and poetry, itself placed in a context of impermanence; the soldier, deserted by the nurse who has been his ministering angel, now speaks to a singing blackbird:

Why should I  
be granted a ticket of leave  
  
if not to honour her and learn  
from you—singing through rain or sun  
your Edensong, till a dark wind  
blows out the chestnut candles, one  
  
by one?<sup>43</sup>

For Jon the last candle was blown out all too soon. In 2013 Jill died, her life being commemorated in Old Marston in the summer of that year with a large gathering of the family's friends, including many poets. Jon was given support by friends and family and by the college; he continued to work and write, remaining active in Wolfson. In 2014 he was much in demand for the centenary of the Great War, and there was a rush of publications, including *War Poet* and revised editions of the Owen biography, the *Complete Poems and Fragments* and the *Oxford Book of War Poetry*. But in the summer of that year he was unexpectedly diagnosed with cancer of the oesophagus. He refused radiotherapy and prepared himself for the end, suffering considerable pain with courage and cheerfulness, and attentively cared for by his former OUP colleague and friend, Carol O'Brien. He died on 19 November 2014.

Illness had prevented him from attending First World War centenary conferences in the autumn of 2014, but his spirit was palpably present in the words of those for whom his work had been an inspiration. Shortly after his death, the BBC broadcast a programme on the First World War, for which he had been interviewed in his final months. It was a moving occasion for those who had known and loved him. Physically diminished, but still handsome, he spoke with the quiet assurance, humour and charm that had made him so many friends. He was, as his obituarist Nicolas Barker remembered, an 'electric presence'.<sup>44</sup> He left a formidable legacy in his biographical and critical work on three major English-language poets, in his seminal investigations of the poetry of war, in particular the First World War, in his wide-ranging work as

<sup>43</sup> J. Stallworthy, *War Poet* (Manchester, 2014), pp. 31–2.

<sup>44</sup> Obituary in the *Independent*, 1 December 2014.

editor, anthologist and translator, and in a masterful body of poetry that casts a bright light on the interplay between personal love and pain and the movement of history.

PETER FRANCE  
*Fellow of the Academy*

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