



ALAN RAITT

Alan William Raitt 1930–2006

ALAN RAITT died on 2 September 2006, a few weeks short of his seventy-sixth birthday, while on holiday in Portugal.

A Northumbrian by birth (at Morpeth on 21 September 1930), Alan went up to Magdalen College, Oxford, from King Edward's Grammar School, Morpeth, in 1948, and, with the exception of the years between 1955 and 1966 when he was a Fellow of Exeter College, and from 1956 until 1959 its sub-Rector, spent all his academic life in Magdalen. He progressed from being an undergraduate there to graduate student, Fellow by Examination, Fellow, Tutor and Senior Tutor, as well as serving the college as a distinguished Vice-President from 1983 to 1985. He had by then already been named in 1976 Special Lecturer in French Literature for the University and, three years later, University Reader. In 1992 he received the accolade of an *ad hominem* Chair.

As an undergraduate and graduate, he won many honours, among them Heath Harrison Travelling Scholarships in French and German in successive years, a First Class Honours degree in 1951, followed by a Zaharoff Travelling Scholarship. His tutor and mentor at Magdalen was Austin Gill, a specialist in Mallarmé and late nineteenth-century poetry (later to become Professor of French at the University of Glasgow). In 1957 Alan was awarded his D.Phil. for his thesis on 'Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and the Symbolist Movement', by which time he was already a lecturer and tutor. His thesis, which he translated into French himself, was published in Paris by the highly respected publisher José Corti, and inevitably became a ground-breaking book, *Villiers de l'Isle-Adam et le mouvement symboliste* (1965; second edition 1986). Villiers was the eccentric aristocrat who came to epitomise 'la vie de bohème' in mid-nineteenth-century Paris.

He is still best known for his 'Vivre? Les serviteurs feront cela pour nous' ('Living? The servants will do that for us': *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*). Because his work was so original and difficult to analyse, however, he had gone through a long period of critical neglect until Alan Raitt rehabilitated him. In the words of Pierre Castex: 'A. W. Raitt a restitué le premier, et de façon décisive, l'image véritable de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam.' Villiers straddles the gothic novel, the macabre, and science fiction. He is also a precursor of modernism. Not for nothing had Edmund Wilson entitled his 1931 study of major Symbolist and post-Symbolist writers *Axel's Castle*, a reference to Villiers's *Axël*, a play which centres on the love of the young German nobleman Axël d'Auersperg and a rich young heiress, Sara de Maupers, and their discovery of a buried treasure in Axël's castle. Rather than bring them happiness, the treasure opens their eyes to the realisation that their dreams are too wonderful to be debased by the banalities of every-day life and they decide to kill themselves at dawn. This apparently perverse conclusion draws on some of the clichés of Romantic theatre and of Wagner (a major influence), but the play encapsulates the Symbolist aesthetic, with its rejection of mundane reality in favour of an unattainable, other-worldly ideal. At all events, Villiers finds his place in Wilson's canon of iconoclasm alongside Arthur Rimbaud, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, W. B. Yeats, and Paul Valéry. He remained, nevertheless, more read about than read. It was largely due to Raitt's scholarly and meticulous study that other scholars were encouraged to renew our knowledge and appreciation of Villiers, among them Professor Alain Néry, who remained a life-long friend.

Alan Raitt had in fact a gift for friendship. Many of those who were working in his field would contact him and find themselves welcomed into a fraternity of enthusiastic researchers. When the editors of his *Festschrift* came to organise the volume in his honour (*The Process of Art. Studies in Nineteenth-century Literature and Art offered to Alan Raitt*, Oxford, 1998), they were confronted with a veritable 'embarras du choix', as so many colleagues, friends, and former pupils wished to show their gratitude and appreciation.

One of his greatest friends was Pierre Castex. They had met in Paris in 1953, while Alan was working on his D.Phil. under the supervision of Dr Enid Starkie. Castex remarked that he was immediately struck by the young Englishman's 'précocité' and 'efficacité exceptionnelle' and especially by his knack of unearthing manuscripts and inedita which were instrumental in casting a new light on Villiers and his work. This friend-

ship blossomed into a life-long collaboration which led to their joint edition in two volumes amounting to some 3,500 pages of Villiers's *Œuvres complètes* in the prestigious Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, published by Gallimard (Paris, 1986). Before that they had collaborated on an edition of Villiers's play *Le Prétendant* (Paris, 1965). It was thanks to Alan's close friendship with the Leclercq family, who possessed important Villiers manuscripts, that they were able to publish a definitive version of the play. Fittingly, Raitt's role in this enterprise has a lot to do with his gift for friendship. In the early 1950s, when French academics, librarians, and intellectuals often tended to adopt a supercilious and unhelpful tone when dealing with scholars from abroad, he was able to make contacts and strike up friendships (many of them, as with the Leclercqs, life-long) which, by frequent visits and correspondence, widened his knowledge not only of Villiers but also, later, of Gustave Flaubert. One of the reasons for this easy acceptance into a world which others have found forbidding and inaccessible was due to Alan Raitt's command of the French language, both written and spoken, literary and colloquial. Sadly, this ability was not shared by a majority of his Oxford contemporaries. It was, quite naturally, much appreciated by the French. This attention to the language in all its nuances and registers also helped to establish his authority as a textual critic and as a perceptive interpreter of shifts in style and emphasis in his favoured authors. The list of his Francophone friends is endless, from André Lorant to Bertrand Marchal, Jacques Noiray, Jean Dérens, Claudine Gothot-Mersch, Madeleine Ambrière and Jean-Yves Tadié. When Pierre Castex died in 1995, Alan wrote movingly in his obituary in *French Studies* (50, 1996, 373–4) of his late friend: 'Those who had the joy and privilege of knowing him personally will always remember a man of immense intellectual and personal generosity, and those who knew him only through his writings will continue to see in him an inspiring example of discriminating but undogmatic strictness of method and of impeccable but unostentatious erudition at the service of an outstandingly humane conception of literature and the study of literature.' Alan Raitt is defining here in effect what is his own vision of scholarly rigour and integrity. These words apply to himself as much as to his friend and mentor.

Alan Raitt's reputation as an international authority on nineteenth-century French literature is second to none. Unlike some British and American scholars, he is widely read and admired by the French themselves, and his name figures prominently in all bibliographies devoted to Villiers and Flaubert. Although these two authors have remained a constant

during his career as a critic, others have come within his range: an impressive 453-page volume in English on *Prosper Mérimée* (London, 1970), for example. He also wrote on Balzac, Mallarmé, Baudelaire, Maeterlinck and Nerval. He was in great demand in Britain and abroad as a visiting speaker. While on sabbatical from Oxford he taught at the Sorbonne and at the University of Georgia, and lectured at Vanderbilt University and the University of the South. In the late 1980s, he was an associate professor at the Sorbonne. He presented papers by invitation in the universities of Aberdeen, Barcelona, Birmingham, Exeter, Glasgow, Paris XII, Reading, Rennes, St Andrews, Tours, Trinity College Dublin, and Warwick, *et j'en passe*. He was a guest speaker at the Institut Français in London and the Maison de Balzac, the Centre Flaubert and the Centre Culturel Suisse in Paris, and chaired sessions at conferences in Paris, Reims, Dublin and London. He also regularly contributed to seminars at Oxford's Maison Française, where he was among the first of the university's student residents when it opened over fifty years ago. Its director for many years, Henri Fluchère, the distinguished Shakespeare scholar, soon became a very good friend.

Another close associate and friend from the Maison Française was Henri Orteu. Quoting Montaigne's famous words on the value of friendship, he spoke movingly—on behalf of the French community of scholars—at the Memorial Service held by Magdalen in January 2007 along with former pupils of Alan's who had become firm friends such as Patrick McGuinness and the novelist Julian Barnes. So many people wished to attend the service that they spilled out of the college chapel into the vestibule and various nooks and crannies. This is in itself a measure of the esteem and affection in which he was held.

His legacy is a long and rich one. Forty years on, the clear, concise commentaries in his volume in the *Life and Letters in France: the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1965) retain all their freshness of expression and vision. As we have seen, his contributions to literary biography (*The Life of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam* published in Oxford, 1981, and his further study of *Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, exorciste du réel*, entrusted again to José Corti and published in Paris in 1987), his critical editions, his numerous scholarly books and articles bear witness to a lively mind and an impressive range. The international scholarly community recognised his achievements, and his name became synonymous with high standards and immense erudition. In 1987 the Académie Française honoured him with the Grand Prix du Rayonnement de la Langue Française in recognition of his knowledge of French language and literature and his role in promot-

ing French culture. That same year he was made an Officier de l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques. In 1995 he was promoted Commandeur de l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques. He was proud to be made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1972, and in 1992 to be elected as a Fellow of the British Academy.

He will be most remembered as the leading specialist of his day on Gustave Flaubert. He started to publish on Flaubert in the 1970s and was still doing so at the time of his death. He will be best remembered not only by specialists in the field but also generally among *les gens cultivés* in France for his monumental edition, published in two volumes (some 730 pages; Paris, 1979) with the imprint of the Imprimerie nationale, of Flaubert's classic *L'Éducation sentimentale*. His elegant French style, his attention to detail, and typical thoroughness won widespread admiration.

As well as producing definitive editions of works from the French canon, he was perfectly at ease with writing and editing works essentially aimed at a student audience. His 'critical guide' to Flaubert's *Trois contes* (London, 1991) has proved a boon to generations of students of French in Britain. His 1993 edition for the paperback collection Folio of Villiers's *L'Ève future* (Paris, 1993) brought the author to the attention of a wider public in France and elsewhere. He provided the introduction to the late Robert Baldick's translation of Villiers's *Cruel Tales* (Oxford, 1963) and edited texts (by Mallarmé and Flaubert) for the sensibly priced Exeter University Press series. There was no intellectual snobbery about Alan's approach to literature and no sense of restricting it to a self-elected coterie of the 'happy few'. The many undergraduates who were tutored by him testified to that in the letters dozens of them wrote to his widow, Lia, on hearing the news of his death. Because of his shyness he could appear aloof at times, but the atmosphere quickly melted to give way to a relationship in which he was both tutor and friend. Those who were supervised by him as postgraduates spoke warmly of his advice and willingness to provide them with introductions to researchers and contacts in France who might help them. His advice would also run to the names of places to stay and where to eat.

The careers of Raitt's students, whether undergraduate or postgraduate, were important to him. He had a remarkable memory for names, and could recall at the drop of a hat the qualifications and later development of those who had graduated years earlier. Many of them still kept in touch.

In 1987 he succeeded Professor Malcolm Bowie as General Editor of the internationally respected journal *French Studies*, overseeing its move

to its present home in the Taylorian in Oxford. With the support of his co-editors, Professor Terence Cave and Dr Rhiannon Goldthorpe, and Editorial Assistant Janis Spurlock, he successfully steered the journal through the different crises of the 1990s until his retirement in 1997. He made a point of reading himself all articles submitted to the journal, referring them out to specialists and never failing to consult his co-editors. His own attention to points of style, grammar, and punctuation helped add extra polish to many a contributor's prose. He was very much a team player and was more than happy to take on the (often thankless) task of proofreading and seeing to it that each issue came out punctually and more or less error-free.

Despite his many commitments, both in the University of Oxford and in the sphere of French studies generally, he remained a consistently prolific scholar. Not just weighty and influential books and editions, but also over fifty significant articles on nineteenth-century French authors. His retirement in no way interfered with his desire to research and to publish. The tag 'nulla dies sine linea', which both Honoré de Balzac and Émile Zola had adopted as their motto, applied to him equally well. By this time his health was poor. He none the less overcame his increasing disability to become founding editor of a new academic series, *Romanticism and after in French Literature*, published by Peter Lang, producing himself books for the series in the last ten years on *Flaubert et le théâtre* (Bern, 1998), *The Originality of Madame Bovary* (Bern, 2002), and *Gustavus Flaubertus Bourgeoisophobus. Flaubert and the Bourgeois Mentality* (Oxford, 2005). All three shed new light on Flaubert's methods and preoccupations. Flaubert's interest in the theatre had never been fully explored before, and in *The Originality of Madame Bovary* he was also able to find new ways to approach what is one of the most read and analysed novels in the French language. It has long been recognised that *Madame Bovary* marks a turning point in the history of the novel but Raitt endeavours to show us just how. He rightly stresses its innovatory features, not only in its potentially scandalous subject-matter but also in its style and narrative techniques, including the famous 'style indirect libre' and pervasive biting irony. Similarly, in *Gustavus Flaubertus Bourgeoisophobus*, he brings new insights to Flaubert's much discussed love-hate (or perhaps, more precisely, the love-to-hate) relationship with the bourgeois society of his day. He traces the development of anti-bourgeois feeling among the artists and writers before Flaubert and examines their influence on his writing. Drawing on the author's voluminous correspondence as well as his published fiction,

Raitt delineates and illuminates what would appear to be an obsession on the part of this deeply complex writer.

At the time of his death Alan Raitt was working on a new book, examining in depth the first *L'Éducation sentimentale*, one of Flaubert's earliest forays into fiction and one which is still posing problems to readers and critics. In *Flaubert's First Novel. A Study of the 1845 Éducation sentimentale*, Raitt demonstrates that this first novel, which Flaubert never saw in print, is not, as some critics would have it, merely a dry-run for later work but 'a text of crucial importance in Flaubert's development' and a pivotal work. It is based on his experiences, in particular his involvement with Madame Élise Schlesinger, on his early struggles with ill-health and, significantly, his break with Romanticism and its mind-set. Raitt argues convincingly 'that the relative "realism" of *L'Éducation* was an attempt to produce a substantial work which would be worthy of publication alongside various popular novels of the day but that the disapproval voiced by Du Camp and Le Poittevin induced him to consign *L'Éducation* to oblivion, even though the lessons he had learned from it proved valuable when he came to write *Madame Bovary*'. This important new study, edited by Lia Raitt—a real labour of love, deciphering Alan's hand-written texts and consulting scholars such as André Lorant and Yvan Leclerc, only too willing to be able to proffer advice—was published by Peter Lang in 2009.

Alan Raitt had a varied life beyond books, and a hinterland which often surprised those who knew him only superficially. He was an accomplished pianist who had played daily since childhood; music and opera were very close to his heart. Most telephone calls to and from him would be accompanied by background music provided by Schubert, Debussy, Sibelius or Brahms, from Radio 3 or his own collection. He had, in fact, grown up surrounded by music. His mother was an accomplished organist who had played regularly in a local church.

Many friends and colleagues know of his enthusiasm for sport, both as a participant in earlier years (he was a keen and gifted tennis player) and as a spectator. Football was a life-long passion. It was perhaps in his genes: his father, a headmaster, was also a part-time football referee. Although by place of birth and family tradition a natural Newcastle United supporter, he felt compelled with his move to Oxford to transfer his allegiance, suffering stoically—and sometimes not so stoically—in recent years as the fortunes of Oxford United waned. His knowledge of football, from Jackie Milburn to José Mourinho, was encyclopedic.

Undergraduates who under-performed in essays or translation classes were gently but firmly encouraged to improve their game. No such leniency was shown to football referees who were arrogant or incompetent or both. Fortunately, his growls got no further than his television screen. Although something of a technophobe, preferring to write in long hand as a first step, he had found his way around all the sports channels he required. Another great passion was the crime novel, on which he spoke as knowledgeably (from the classics of the genre to the latest Henning Mankell and Michael Connelly) as he did about sport, wine, malt whisky, westerns, and great literature.

After his marriage in 1974 to Lia, a scholar in her own right who taught Portuguese in the University of Oxford, Portugal and all things Portuguese also became part of his life. He knew his fados, read *Eça de Queirós* in the original, could find his way with ease around the menus and wine-lists of the restaurants in the vicinity of their charming flat in Parede, near Lisbon, and along the Cascais coast. He was an excellent cook, specialising in Chinese food. A born raconteur, he would invariably—and with Lia's help—see to it, whether at their homes in Portugal or North Oxford, that his guests enjoyed a pleasant evening of good food and good conversation.

Alan's influence spread far and wide. Many who were taught by him as undergraduates or postgraduates now occupy prominent posts in British and foreign universities. In her bereavement, Lia Raitt has been comforted by scores of letters from scholars and friends in countries all over the world. Perhaps his most significant influence for the non-university public was on his former pupil, Julian Barnes, who has spoken eloquently elsewhere of the debt he owed Alan, especially when writing *Flaubert's Parrot*. Julian also tells the story of how at the party held in Magdalen to celebrate his Festschrift in 1997, Alan quipped mischievously (and typically) that he now knew how it felt to be at one's own funeral. The Festschrift gave him great pleasure. As a man who treasured friendship and the company of *gentilz compaignons*, he was delighted to be honoured with a collection of essays, and touched and embarrassed that, for obvious reasons of space, many would-be contributors could not be accommodated.

He leaves his wife Lia, and two daughters by a first marriage, Suzanne, who read English at Cambridge and completed a Ph.D. there before going on to publish widely on Virginia Woolf and Victorian writing, and Claire, who graduated with a First in French and Italian from the

University of Bristol and who is now a successful lawyer. He was naturally immensely proud of them and of his three grandchildren. With his passing, the world of French studies loses not only an eminent scholar who was a credit to his profession, but also a generous, unpretentious, and admirable man who lived a full life with humour, integrity, and fortitude.

M. J. FREEMAN

University of Bristol

Note. It is with regret that we note the death of the author during the production of this volume. We are extremely grateful to his widow, Manuela Freeman, for her assistance in bringing the memoir to publication.