



*Photograph by Walter Stoneman, 1954*

FRANK PERCY WILSON

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1889-1963

FRANK PERCY WILSON was born on 11 October 1889, the youngest child of a family of nine; and, treasuring the proverb—‘the younger brother hath the more wit’—he found later to his great satisfaction that his father, John Wilson, was the only son of a youngest child, who had himself been the youngest child of a youngest child. He liked to remember that his father, who founded a family business in Birmingham, had been born at ‘Wilson’s farm’ in the parish of Chipping Warden in Northamptonshire, where his grandfather had been tenant farmer of a mixed farm of 400 acres. He himself had a happy boyhood in the midst of a tolerant family of varied temperaments, if we may judge from a letter he wrote in November 1923 just after the death of his father at the age of seventy-seven, where he had tried to give expression to the affection they had felt for him:

He was one of the quietest of men and hated formality and publicity. Simplicity and integrity were his great qualities. In business and out of business he never once went back on his word or did a dishonest thing. And the things he loved most were simple natural things—family life, his garden, a country walk, farming. He came from a race of Northamptonshire farmers and the country was in his blood. He never prated about the picturesque though he felt the beauties of nature as much as anyone. His talk would mostly be about rain and the sun, the wealth of the soil, harvesting and cattle and so on. . . . We were very different in tastes and temperament, but he was a wonderfully good father to me, always so tolerant and so generous.

He was educated in Birmingham, at King Edward’s, Camp Hill, and afterwards at King Edward’s School; and the first indication of his promise is to be found in a letter from the French master there recommending him for a teaching post in a lycée in France. Nothing came of this, however, and in 1908 he entered the University of Birmingham, where Ernest de Selincourt had recently been appointed Professor of English.

In 1911 he distinguished himself by giving such an outstanding performance as Falstaff at a Birmingham University production

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Mrs. Joanna Wilson, Helen Gardner, Stanley Bennett, J. I. M. Stewart, and the Secretary to the Delegates of the University Press.

that Drinkwater persuaded him to join the Pilgrim Players, when they toured the Midlands, but was unsuccessful in his efforts to retain him for the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, which the Pilgrim Players subsequently became.

After taking a First Class in the Honour School of English, he went on to Lincoln College, Oxford, as a candidate for the B.Litt. degree, and began his research on Dekker, which led ultimately to two very important associations destined to play a large part in shaping his future—first with David Nichol Smith, and later with the Clarendon Press. He presented 'a thesis of unusual skill and industry' and won the John Oldham Scholarship, which enabled him to remain for another year at Oxford, to continue his work on Dekker; and early in 1914 he was a candidate for a King Edward VIIth Scholarship, which would have given him a year at a German university. He received the award in March 1914, and though events were so soon to make it impossible for him to accept it, it must be mentioned here if only on account of the remarkable letter written on his behalf by Sir Walter Raleigh, the Merton Professor, who had early perceived his real bent:

We have never had a man here who shewed a more complete instinct (genius it might be called) for the learned handling of books. In every library that he visits he seems to find out something new. He was born to be a scholar, . . . I like him very much, and have the highest esteem for his character.

His decision in September 1914 to volunteer for military service would certainly have had Raleigh's approval, as it did de Selincourt's who was about to invite him to teach at the University of Birmingham. On 16 March 1915 he received his commission and was posted to the 12th Service Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment. He went out to France with his regiment and was badly wounded on the Somme in July 1916. He was brought back to England and was in hospital for a year in Birmingham, undergoing a series of not wholly successful operations; he was then transferred to a hospital at Somerville College, Oxford, for convalescence, and was able after a time to get about on a bicycle, although he only had the use of one leg. Finally he was well enough—though left with a permanent disability, and always subject to the danger of very troublesome infections—to take an appointment as an official in the Ministry of Food, and found himself in 1918 with Walter de la Mare in charge of supplies of margarine. When it was reported early



in 1919 that this rationing would soon be ended, Professor de Selincourt wrote to ask him when he would be free. He wanted to provide extra classes in the summer vacation at the University of Birmingham for men who had returned from war service; and hoped to be able after that to offer him a full appointment for the following term.

He accepted at once and thus found himself at home again in Birmingham, lecturing at his old university, where he remained until the summer of 1921, when he returned to Oxford for the Michaelmas Term and was appointed to a lecturership at University College, and later also at Exeter and New College. Some of his pupils, however, came from the women's colleges, and among them Joanna Perry Keene of St. Hilda's, who took a First in the English Schools in the summer of 1923. A few months later they became engaged, and were married in the following year.

The future course of his professional career had perhaps already been set with the publication in 1920 of a reprint of the earliest quarto of Ben Jonson's *Every Man out of his Humour*, 1600, prepared in collaboration with W. W. Greg for the Malone Society.

'Collaborate' is hardly the right word. It was he who identified for the first time the first edition and who drafted the Introduction, and I remember how he overrode my protest that my name had no business to be mentioned on a level with his.

The importance of this friendship with Greg, which dates from their work together in 1919, can hardly be over-estimated. As a member of the Bibliographical Society since 1913, he had had an opportunity of becoming acquainted with the new work which was being done and the lively discussions caused by the discoveries of Pollard and the various activities of Greg and McKerrow.

His own main concern for some time was to be with the prose works of Thomas Dekker: in 1924 he edited for Basil Blackwell a reprint of the *Four Birds of Noah's Arke*, which he considered the best of his non-dramatic works; and the following year he produced an edition of his *Plague Pamphlets* for the Clarendon Press. Of the six pieces in this volume, three were reprinted for the first time. His attribution of these pieces to Dekker is based on a careful and cautious study of vocabulary and style, and a comparison of passages which are paralleled in other parts of his work. In his acknowledgements he mentions his indebtedness

in bibliography to Dr. McKerrow's edition of Nashe, which he was later to describe as 'one of the best editions of any English author, completed while the editor was still under forty'; though he had himself made an early start, he probably realized that he would be a good deal older before he had completed the work for a similar edition of the prose works of Dekker which he was hoping to undertake. He was sometimes a little envious of those of his friends whose time was not occupied with teaching and lecturing; but he recognized the benefits that he had received from consulting his colleagues at Oxford, C. T. Onions, Percy Simpson, and D. Nichol Smith. Two years later the Clarendon Press published his book on *The Plague in Shakespeare's London*. The materials had been in his hands for a long time and he had written a first draft before the war. He had gathered up a good deal as a result of his necessary consultation of the records of the plague while he was editing Dekker's pamphlets. But he rewrote the book in 1921, finding that 'as the materials grew in my hands I became more ambitious, and from a commentary proceeded to a book'. The commentator had found himself turned into a historian, who was led to give a detailed account of the two most serious outbreaks in 1603 and 1625, and to trace the course of the plague during the intervening years. He also discusses the contemporary theories of the causes and cures of the plague, with fascinating examples quoted from plays and sermons and medical pamphlets and the Public Orders. His book has remained an authoritative work which does not need to be done again; and it gave him great pleasure to know that a paperback reprint was being prepared, which has been published since his death.

The quality of his work was recognized in the university, and he was appointed Reader in English Literature in 1927 at the same time as his senior colleagues Percy Simpson and H. F. B. Brett-Smith.

His next book, published by the Clarendon Press in 1929, was an edition of the *Batchelar's Banquet*, 1603, which had generally been attributed to Dekker but which he showed to be more probably written by Robert Tofte, a diligent translator from the French and the Italian, who had a taste for satirical works on women. Here is the same thorough research, bringing to light all the available facts, the same critical judgement dealing with the examination of a writer's style and vocabulary; and here is established a pattern which seems to me to conform to the features of his mind and to reveal the good sense, the modesty

and humanity of his scholarship. Hidden away at the end of these books is his own commentary, explanatory or illustrative; giving us succinctly just what information we need or adding from the riches of his reading fascinating details of the manners and fashions of the time and especially drawing attention to the slang and the proverbial sayings of the Elizabethans. His special interest in words and phrases led him to provide valuable indexes which contained a surprising amount of new material for the philologist and the lexicographer. This was the foundation of that rare understanding of the spoken and written language of the period, which was to give him such a sure protection in all his editing against the dangers and follies of some textual emendations.

In 1929, at the age of forty, he was appointed Professor of English in the University of Leeds. The department was still a small one, not much changed from the time when George Gordon had been the head of it just after the war. It must have seemed to provide an opportunity to get away from the increasing demands made upon his time by his undergraduate pupils, though he might miss the proximity to the Bodleian and the Clarendon Press. But he found himself caught up in the various public duties of his professorship as well as in the ordinary routine of lecturing and administration. He proved to be an admirable chairman and a good committee man, but was never one to take a delight in academic politics, though it must have been difficult for him at Leeds in those years to keep entirely out of them. He made some good friends among his colleagues in other faculties in the university, especially with Professor Paul Barbier, that stimulating French philologist with whom he tracked down the origins of many words; and with the Professor of Spanish, which led to his continued interest in Spanish literature and painting and to a number of delightful visits to Spain after Professor Penzol's retirement there. He lectured a good deal outside the university, particularly at training colleges in different parts of Yorkshire; and he grew very fond of its moors and coasts and inland valleys. Though the stream of his publications almost ceased during his years at Leeds, he was of course continuing his work on Dekker. And in 1933 he was able to pay his first visit to the United States, where he spent most of the time at the Huntington Library as Research Fellow without having his work hampered by the necessity of giving lectures and classes. Professor Hardin Craig, still happily at work in the library, tells me of his impression of him then:



I met F. P. Wilson at the Huntington Library in 1933. He was then a Professor at Leeds. I found it no trouble to get acquainted with him, although he was not in the least effusive. We simply became friends. . . . I recognized in him a certain human trait, which since then has been elevated into a primary trait of human greatness, an instinct for working together as part of the effort of the human race to civilize itself. People were readily acquainted with such a man, for there was no barrier; no idle curiosity, no censoriousness. This showed itself not only in his work and in his teaching; but in his larger interest in human life which drove him to go and see for himself as much of the southwestern states as he could, not as a tourist but as an unobtrusive investigator of humanity and how and where it lives.

In his professional work he was never hurried and had no self-consciousness; he seemed merely to see the things that needed doing, and took them on. I remember reading his book, *The Plague in Shakespeare's London* (1927) after I had been with him at the Huntington Library. It told me without sentimentality what it was like to endure an epidemic of plague in a city some three hundred and fifty years ago; and I have known about that ever since.

This visit to California led to his friendship with a number of his colleagues at various universities on the west coast, and to an increasing awareness of the researches that were being carried on there in Renaissance studies. And when he was invited to lecture before the Mathematical Association in Yorkshire in November 1934, after his return, he was able to quote from the latest work of two of his Californian friends to show the importance of that English mathematician, Thomas Digges, who already in 1576 had ardently proclaimed his belief in the Copernican theory; and had indeed gone further than Copernicus in maintaining that 'the universe is infinite, that the stars are numberless, that they are located at various distances from the centre, the sun, and extend through infinite space.'

While he was still at Leeds he undertook another task, for which he was admirably fitted, but which some may feel interfered too much with the progress of his own writing. In March 1935 he was invited by R. W. Chapman, then at the Clarendon Press, to meet him and discuss plans for an *Oxford History of English Literature*. He was asked to be General Editor, with Bonamy Dobrée to assist him. He welcomed the collaboration of Dobrée, remarking in a letter to Kenneth Sisam 'if it is a fault with Dobrée (and I don't say it is) that he moves too fast, it is a fault with me that I move too slow. Together our pace should be equable and sure.' Nevertheless, once he had made the decision, he was quickly at work, as indicated in a letter written in September

1935: 'I shall not feel the series is properly under weigh until at least half the volumes are arranged for.' In the next month the History was publicly announced. It was a formidable undertaking and he must have realized that it would require a great deal of his attention for many years; when the plans were completed he found himself also committed to undertake one of the volumes himself, which was to deal with English Drama from 1485 to 1642, a task certainly not less arduous than any he had set his collaborators. But he chose it for himself perhaps because of that lifelong love of the theatre which he shared with his master, W. W. Greg. In 1936, with things well started, he was still happily unaware of the delays and difficulties and the changes of plan that were later to beset this enterprise. And in that year he was invited once again to succeed Lascelles Abercrombie, who was retiring from the Hildred Carlisle Professorship at Bedford College, London.

It was after he had been settled for one year at Bedford College, some time during the Michaelmas Term of 1937, that I first became acquainted with him and his family, then living at Hampstead where we spent the winter as close neighbours. He was obviously pleased to be in London, with time to spend some of his days undisturbed in the North Library of the British Museum. I used to drive in most mornings, and whenever he could he would accompany me. Though he limped a little, he seemed to me at that time vigorous and well; and I was later to be surprised at his agility when he would occasionally play a game of tennis. He was still occupied with his edition of Dekker, though he did not often mention it to me. But he was always ready to talk about his search for proverbs and to instruct me in such matters as the mock Prognostications of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the Jest books, which he was to make the subjects of papers later to appear in the *Library* and in the *Huntington Library Quarterly*. I had heard a good deal about him since that day in 1919, when I had once caught a glimpse of him as I was calling to see Nichol Smith; for he had gained the reputation of a scholar whose work could always be relied upon, a man of wide knowledge and good judgement, a kind and generous person. I soon found that my expectations would not be disappointed; though he was in some ways reserved, and could be cautious and deliberate in manner, he lacked all pretensions and delighted me by his ease and kindness and gaiety, whether I found him alone or among his children, the youngest of whom was then only three years old.



In 1938 he was awarded a Leverhulme Research Fellowship, which provided a personal grant to be used over a period of two years to enable him to complete his work on Dekker. In the following summer he was invited by de Selincourt to become one of the Trustees of Dove Cottage. This he readily accepted and always took pleasure in his visit there every September for annual meetings.

He had settled very happily at Bedford College, and was beginning to enjoy the benefits of living in London when war again spread over the face of Europe and brought all the catastrophes of 1940. He did not underestimate the possibilities, and in spite of his lameness he joined the Home Guard, finished off the text of his Dekker and put it away until such time as there might again be a chance of getting such things printed. In the summer of 1940 he made the very difficult decision to risk sending his four young children across the Atlantic; in the face of invasion it seemed to him a sensible policy to remove those who were too young to be of use, and yet needed to be fed. It was part of an operation which has sometimes been criticized; but it might well have been carried out on a larger scale. Even with its limited scope it did no harm in drawing forth a very warm response in those parts of the United States where English children were given hospitality. After listening to Churchill's broadcast of 10 September 1940 about the probabilities of invasion, he sent me—in case they should both be wiped out—information about his next of kin, and his will and testament. He put it very succinctly in half a page, adding the remark: 'I don't see that there's anything else to say, but I am conscious that I have said very little. It all comes of being a mere scholar, and not a man of business.'

At the end of the year he was still finding it hard to start work on his Academy lecture for April 1941—'it's very difficult not to persuade myself that the invasion will certainly be attempted before then and that there will be more important things to do.' It was the annual Shakespeare Lecture and he chose as his title 'Shakespeare and the Diction of Common Life'. The circumstances in which he was writing must have added weight to his plea that 'while we strive to make ourselves Shakespeare's contemporaries it is even more important to make Shakespeare our contemporary, to keep him level with life and with our lives'. It was not merely the title that he had borrowed from Johnson. There is a gravity and dignity in his language and a depth of understanding which enables him, while drawing upon his wide knowledge of the language of the Elizabethans, their favourite rhetorical figures,

catch-phrases, and proverbs, to approach the mysteries of Shakespeare's art, and reveal something of his 'vision of good and evil' in all the tragicomic confusion of the human spectacle. W. W. Greg was in the chair and had evidently listened with approval; for in a letter to me, written a few months later, I found this pleasant little note of triumph:

Yesterday Joanna asked me why my head was up in the air. I'd just been reading Greg's notice of McKerrow for the British Academy and was startled to find myself called 'One of the ablest of our Elizabethan scholars'. She complained that she'd always said so and that I never took any notice of her, and I had to explain that while I am much fonder of her than of Walter Greg I did attach more value to his opinion than to hers on a point of this kind.

What indeed he had begun to demonstrate was that he possessed in a marked degree qualities which are not always found together. He had shown in his careful review of McKerrow's *Prolegomena for the Oxford Shakespeare* that he was sufficiently at home among the complexities of modern bibliography and experienced as an editor of Elizabethan texts that his name was the first to be mentioned as 'the ideal person' to carry on the Oxford Shakespeare, if he had not been already too much involved with so many other things. For he had commented upon McKerrow's surprising omission of any reference to the need for the recording of variants in different copies of the same edition; and, recognizing the appalling task involved, had envisaged the possibility of some optical device being invented, which would be more infallible than the human eye, just about the time I suppose when the first experiments were being made to provide such a machine.

He was naturally invited to contribute to the volume of 'Studies in Retrospect' to be published by the Bibliographical Society in celebration of its fiftieth birthday in 1945, and before he left for America he completed his study of 'Shakespeare and the new Bibliography'. He was largely concerned with the work of three men, whom he had been to some extent in touch with since he had himself become a member of the society thirty years before. In talking about them he could not but be aware that they had had the most powerful influence in shaping and fixing the character of his own studies and research. But his survey was of course to extend a good deal further and to take in the work of many Elizabethan scholars in England and America. This led him to provide us with what is an authoritative account of

what had been learned in the last half-century about the publication of plays, the nature of copyright, of licence and entry in the register, and the problems of piracy; of the different types of dramatic manuscripts which lie behind the printed texts; and finally to deal with the problems of textual criticism and the change in editorial practice shown in recent editions of Shakespeare. Though it was his task to write a panegyric on the achievement of the Bibliographical Society, he also reminds us that bibliography by itself is not enough—'the ideal editor is at once bibliographer and critic, historian and antiquary, palaeographer, philologist and philosopher'. Perhaps he allowed his own preference to appear when he even ventured to point to a blemish in the hero of his story in having neglected a gift he had for writing literary history, ever since the time when he brought out his book on the Pastoral.

While he had been writing this in the early part of 1943 plans had been going forward to obtain the necessary permission for him to accept an invitation to spend six months as Visiting Carnegie Professor at Columbia University, New York, and also to give the Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto. He welcomed especially the opportunity this provided to come and stay with us at Smith College, to join his children, who had been with us since 1940, and to make arrangements for their immediate return to England.

The Alexander Lectures were later published under the title *Elizabethan and Jacobean*. His special interests in the drama were not allowed to intrude until the last two chapters, but he claimed the 'privilege of a lecturer to speak only on those matters that interest him or on which he believes he may usefully express an opinion'. His subject also invited him to deal with such general topics as the inheritance of the Elizabethans and Jacobeans and their differing characteristics—matters which would necessarily be the concern of one who was preparing a history of the drama of these periods. But even here he never allowed himself to be lured into what he regarded as profitless generalities, disguised under such specious terms as 'baroque' and the like; he preferred to keep always before us certain poets and playwrights and preachers, and to illustrate all his general remarks by examples from their works, delighting especially if he had occasion to remind us of such neglected works as Sir Henry Savile's translation of Tacitus. He always possessed the never-satisfied curiosity of the genuine historian who is glad to find something growing at a season and in a place where it would not be expected to flourish—and



is therefore ready to adjust his calendar and modify the accepted cartography.

Indeed, among all the qualifications which he had set down for the proper performance of the duties of an editor, there is only one which he could not have laid claim to; at least, he would never himself have professed to be a philosopher. Nor perhaps, technically, a philologist, even though in his own field of Renaissance studies he had made himself an expert on the development of the English language, on the meaning of words and phrases and especially on proverbial usage. In a paper read before the Bibliographical Society in January 1945 and printed in a volume of the *Library*, presented the following year to W. W. Greg, he insists on counting himself 'an amateur in proverb literature'. Nevertheless, he admits that for about twelve years he had made the practice of entering into an interleaved copy of Apperson, whose Dictionary had appeared in 1929, such proverbs as he had come across which were not cited there at all and as many earlier examples of those which were cited as he had been able to find in his own reading, or had been reported to him by friends. He notes with pleasure their survival in current speech, remembering the effective use his sergeant in the Home Guard in 1942 had made of a proverb which had been noted as a recent importation in *Select Italian Proverbs*, 1642—'An emptie cask cannot stand upright'. But he was mainly concerned to set his hearers to work to aid him in his search, and to explain the value of this for the student of literature of that time, citing some telling examples of mistaken conclusions in the study of sources and influences, which were due simply to an ignorance of common proverbial usage.

It was his very miscellaneous reading in pursuit of such common wisdom embodied in proverbial phrases or in favourite homely images, and his life-long interest in tracing such phrases back to their earliest appearance in print, that gave him his sure and lively understanding of the language of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. This led him sometimes into undue caution in matters of the interpretation and emendation of texts, though it did not lessen his admiration for the work of some of his more adventurous and daring colleagues. In one of his very latest reviews, which was about the volume presented to Dover Wilson on his eightieth birthday, he remarked:

If the present writer once observed that Dover Wilson preferred to live dangerously, he meant it as a compliment. And if he now says that

Dover Wilson is a young incendiary, he means that too as a compliment. After all, how many octogenarians can we so describe? To show in one's writings an unflagging curiosity and a generous ardency and boldness of spirit is given to few: the gift of remaining young while growing old is still rarer.

Since his return from America at the beginning of 1944 he had been kept busy with these articles and lectures in addition to his duties at Bedford College, as well as with the proofs of Douglas Bush's volume of the Oxford History. He had remarked to Sisam that it would be a welcome change to get back to the business of editing—'for I have not done any since 1939. "Dost work i' the earth so slow?" say you'. But he never seemed to hesitate about loading himself with further burdens, and in a letter to me of June 1945, he wrote with some satisfaction:

Something may come of my extraordinary interest in proverbs. Sisam has suggested that I revise the *Oxford Book of Proverbs* for the next edition. What I ought to do is to read Dante instead.

This was a reference to yet another task he had lightly undertaken: to provide a supplement to Paget Toynbee's *Dante Allusions*. Meantime he had been elected a Fellow of the British Academy, where he soon became influential in the committee work of his Section, and was later for several years on the Council.

He was soon to be subjected to more serious disturbances, when some of his friends began to urge him to allow his name to be put forward as a candidate for the Merton Chair at Oxford, which would become vacant with the retirement of David Nichol Smith. He would have been quite content to stay in London: 'with my niche in the Museum—which is as it was and even better—and my rooms in the new Regency house the College has acquired have the most magnificent view over lake and lawn.' But in April 1947 the move was made, and he had the satisfaction of a room in the Fellows Quad at Merton and a return to old friends and associations at the Bodleian and the Press.

He was now fifty-seven, and could look forward to ten years in which I think he felt it would be his main concern to carry on the tradition which had been established by his predecessor, which had made the English School at Oxford widely known as a centre for advanced study in literary history and in the editing of English texts. But he lectured to large audiences of undergraduates and took his full share of examining for Schools. In 1950 he succeeded Greg as General Editor of the Malone Society and was himself largely responsible for the unabated

stream of publications which the Society continued to produce. Anyone who has edited a volume under his supervision will remember how much of a partnership, sometimes a very unequal partnership, it became. All his experience and his knowledge was at one's disposal. He was concerned only that the job should be well done. Some were inclined to be jealous of the devotion he lavished on that severe and formidable society. In his account of its first fifty years, printed in 1956, he rather proudly boasts that it was not a society that needed rooms and a library to fulfil its functions—'its members neither dined together nor attended the Annual Meetings'. But the secret of his loyalty is easily discernible in the record which he sets down of its debt to the first General Editor whose duties he was proud to assume and whose devotion he was content to try and match.

But it must still be regretted that he had so little time left for the writing of his *History of the Drama*, though he was in many ways continuing his preparation for this main task. How well prepared he was is shown in his little book on *Marlowe and the early Shakespeare*, the Clark Lectures which he gave at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1951. For here he writes not only as a competent scholar, who was well aware of all the difficult problems in dealing with some of these plays, but shows in his concern with dramatic art and poetry a delicate and sensitive perception of the effect of the spoken lines as they fall upon the ear. He wrote about plays as one who had always delighted to enjoy them in the theatre and had in his younger days gained a reputation in amateur acting; and on the rare occasions on which he broadcast it was remarked that he had a gift for the spoken word.

I find it characteristic of him that in these lectures before his distinguished Cambridge audience he resisted any temptation to display his special learning and refused to enter into controversial matters, preferring to adopt the attitude of Lawrence Rooke, 'an original member of the Royal Society' of whom astronomer Thomas Pope tells this story:

I never knew him affirm anything positively, that was dubious. I have said to him, Mr. Rooke, I have found out the reason of such a Phenomenon, and given him my Arguments for it, which when he had heard, he has often replied in this manner; And why may it not as well be thus, bringing his reasons for another Hypothesis. Lord, said I then to him, now you confound me, pray tell me, what is your Opinion? To which his usual Answer was, *I have no Opinion*.

The preference that he thus states for the caution of Lawrence Rooke throws light on much that was admirable in his scholarship



and perhaps provides some explanation why he knew more and wrote less than many of his colleagues. He was always aware that other hypotheses might be possible, and was unwilling to set down an opinion until they had been considered, even though this meant that he must take the time to go back and read a play or a pamphlet over again so that the matter under discussion would be fresh in his mind. Thus, if he challenges us to say what plays we could praise which were written in the quarter of a century before 1580 it is not a rhetorical flourish; but we can be sure that he has read (and in fact, edited) some of them before coming to the decision that Sir Philip Sidney was justified in rejecting all of them, except *Gorboduc*. In like manner he deals with the legend that it was Shakespeare or Marlowe who first raised the popular history play above the level of a chronicle, by simply pointing to the fact, so easily forgotten, that there are no early chronicle plays based on English history before the year of the Armada. All the earlier historical plays were based on biblical or classical themes. On the basis of these known facts he is forced to conclude, though still surprised at his own rashness, that 'for all we know there were no popular plays on English history before the Armada and Shakespeare may have been the first to write one'. He never delighted in controversy and was rarely tempted to speak with the tone of authority. Nevertheless, his words counted, when after the careful examination of some new theory he said: 'This view has its attractions. All that is wanting is the evidence.'

In letters that he wrote to me from Oxford in the first years of his tenure of the Merton Chair, he admitted that there was much that he enjoyed; but he did not hide his feeling that he was not managing to keep himself free enough to have time and energy to write:

When I think how much work I might have accomplished if I'd stayed in London, I begin to feel rather frustrated. . . . If I don't manage better, you will never see my edition of Thomas Dekker's non-dramatic works in 4 volumes or my volume on the secular drama to 1642 for *OHEL*. All you will see are a few notes—such a thing I have just written for the Quincy Adams Memorial volume—and a few small editions for the Luttrell Society or the Malone Society.

It was probably because of this feeling of frustration that, after he had completed his term of examining for Schools and had been back for five years, he accepted an invitation to return to the Huntington Library as Senior Fellow from October to the

following June, setting out immediately the Trinity Term was over so as to put in first a summer term's teaching at Stanford University. This was followed by visits to Baltimore and Maryland and Indiana, where he lectured. But before the end of October 1952 he was settled at the Huntington and enjoying the regular undisturbed hours in the library, where he could go on with his own work. It was there that he really began to write his history of Tudor and Stuart Drama.

When he returned to Oxford for the Michaelmas Term of 1953, it had for the most part to be put aside. He assumed again his manifold activities, his lectures, his direction of advanced studies, his control of the Malone Society; and he undertook the work of bringing out a revised edition of McKerrow's *Nashe*, which appeared in 1958.

Some of his colleagues in Oxford were inclined to regret that in his tenure of the Merton Professorship he was so much concerned with what might be called the business of scholarship that he had not time enough, even if he had had the ambition, to set his mark on the English School as a whole. They felt that in spite of his acuteness and gaiety, he was too cautious and deliberative, almost harassed by the discipline which he imposed upon himself. Hating every kind of fraud, he distrusted within and without the academic world many who were eager to pronounce their judgements on art and literature and drew back into that world of scholarship where he was sure of his ground and knew his standards.

On his retirement in 1957 he was made a senior Research Fellow of Merton College for three years. He was invited to give the Ewing Lectures at the University of California at Los Angeles, and remained for another period working at the Huntington. In 1960 these lectures were published by the Cambridge University Press under the title *Seventeenth Century Prose* and the volume contained also two of his earlier lectures on Burton and Browne. In these lectures when he is speaking of the glories of seventeenth-century prose, he does not allow his deliberation or his caution to hamper him; he lets us share his understanding and his appreciation of that splendid oratory in which he continued to delight.

Those who have ever heard him lecture will not forget the lively enjoyment with which he read those memorable passages and the perfect understanding of tone and measure and accent as he quoted from poems and plays and sermons.

He had visited and lectured at a good many universities and colleges in the United States. He liked to drive about and explore

the country, especially on the west coast and in the desert. He felt particularly at home in California where he had many friends, who delighted in his ease and geniality and admired him for the weight of learning which he seemed to be able to carry so lightly. He entertained them and amused himself by engaging in elaborate researches into the history of the song 'Clementine'—a subject he considered very suitable for a Californian audience, since her father was a 'forty-niner'. He seemed to be able to throw off a burden of responsibility which he could never forget when he was at home. He could enjoy himself in doing work that he wanted to do; and he could even lecture or take a seminar in a sort of holiday mood. Of his reputation in America it is better that I should let another speak who can do it with greater authority. Douglas Bush writes:

He was widely known in the U.S. through his writings and as a person, and he was liked wherever he went; his blend of learning, integrity and geniality had a very special flavour. Also, he was one of those visitors who were rather attracted and interested than upset by finding many things different from what they were at home; he seemed to enjoy himself in any setting. There is no need of speaking of what everyone knows, the most unusual degree to which he spent himself in helping others. I had full first-hand knowledge of that in regard to both the first and second edition of my *OHEL* volume, and when the second was going through the press he was already somewhat battered; but he helped me in many details of the bibliography. This was only one of the multitudinous things of that kind. One story he told on himself I have always cherished (to come back to the U.S.): the president of a college, an old Oxford pupil, was so very eulogistic in introducing him that he felt the need of deprecation, and, by way of showing off what he thought was his command of American slang, said, 'I might say, in your vernacular, that your president has said a mouthful'; he was surprised by the volume of the reaction.

His seventieth birthday was suitably celebrated on the eleventh of October 1959 by a dinner in his honour at Merton College, at which he was presented with a volume of Elizabethan and Jacobean studies by some of his closest friends and colleagues in England and the United States. They could only be a token of the affection and gratitude of a far larger circle of pupils and admirers all over the world who were sending him their congratulations and good wishes 'that his retirement would give him the leisure to crown a life devoted to literary scholarship with the book which only he can write on Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Drama'.



In his last visit to the Huntington, and in those months that remained after he had returned home before his final illnesses, he was mainly occupied with this book. He worked steadily chapter by chapter, revising his manuscript until he was content with it and finally allowing the fair copy to be made. In this way he had brought his account of the drama from 1485 down to 1600, and was preparing to finish off this history of Elizabethan drama, so that it might be printed as a separate volume.

There were also other things still to be done. In 1960 he had given up the General Editorship of the Malone Society, and had become its President. But three volumes of the Oxford History were going through the press, requiring his attention; and he continued almost as a relaxation to occupy himself with proverbs and, with the collaboration of his wife, to prepare the material for the revised edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*. Finally, almost at the end of 1962, he was still helping me with the proofs of the reprint of *Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare*, which David Nichol Smith had been revising and had almost completed at the time of his death.

In February 1963 he went into the hospital again; he recovered and was able to return home, but had little strength left. When spring came he was sometimes able to enjoy a short drive. But he could not write any more, though he took out the typescript of what he had done, and began to make a few further improvements. He died on 29 May; and the book which only he could have written was left unfinished.

Nevertheless it would be wrong to feel that his life was not fulfilled. However long he had lived, his desk would always have remained piled up with fresh tasks, because he was capable of so much and because all his interests remained active. He had moreover successfully completed a very full academic career, in which he had lavishly spent himself and used up all his energies to the benefit of his pupils and his colleagues. But he will be remembered not only for his scholarship, or even his wisdom and the excellence of his judgement. Some of those who knew him best will continue to delight in him as one who could wear his learning lightly and gaily, and was not afraid on occasion to make fun of it and laugh at its pretensions; and as one whom they could always count upon outside the precincts of colleges and libraries, as well as within, to respond in his own gentle and generous fashion wherever he met sincerity and warmth and truth.

HERBERT DAVIS