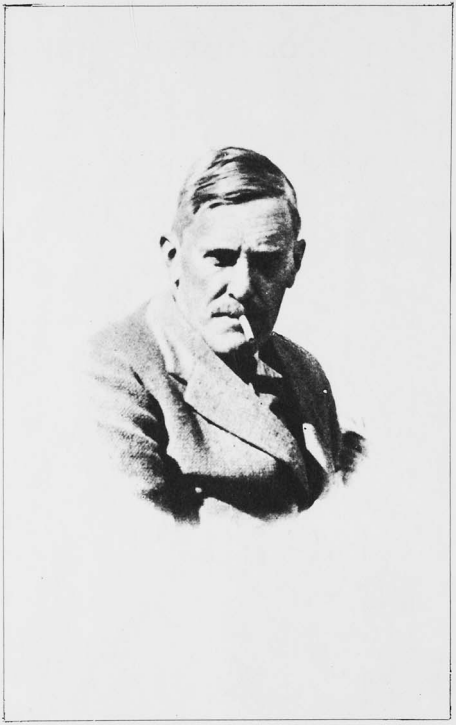
PLATE 10



JOHN DEWAR DENNISTON

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1887–1949

ANYONE who knew John Dewar Denniston was sure to be impressed by the remarkable consistency of his life and character. Free from paradoxes or contradictions, he gave himself with a whole-hearted devotion to a few chosen aims and was deflected from them only by the call of his country in two wars. Almost from the beginning his education fitted him to be a classical scholar. Born in India in 1887, he never knew his father, but was brought up, largely in Oxford, by his mother, who imparted to him her own taste for books and music. At the Dragon School, which he attended from 1896 to 1899, he received the nickname of 'Denny' by which his friends called him all through his life, won most of the classical prizes, wrote a charming and remarkably mature poem on Jephtha, and had a quick temper which other boys liked to provoke. At Winchester, where he won a scholarship at the age of twelve and stayed until 1906, he began shakily with a form-master who found him 'inattentive and troublesome' but was fortunate in being better understood by the then Second Master, M. J. Rendall, who fostered his gift for Latin and Greek Composition until he won the chief prizes for them. Among his contemporaries were many who afterwards rose to distinction, and his chief friends were H. A. de Montmorency, Cyril Asquith, R. Y. Gleadowe, Arnold Toynbee, David Davies, and H. T. Wade-Gery. He entered fully into Winchester life, played football in the College VI, broke the record for the Junior Half-Mile, and became a College Officer. At the same time he discovered the taste for music, which was to remain with him as second only to his love for the classics. In the company of his friends, L. W. Hunter and F. G. Schuster, and encouraged by W. A. Pickard-Cambridge, who was then a master, Denniston began to listen to all the music that he could, to study scores with a scholar's attention, and even to play the cello himself with a skill which he always derided but which enabled him to take a reputable part in performances of chamber-music. From Winchester he took a classical scholarship to New College, Oxford, where in due course he was awarded a first class in Classical Moderations and won a Craven Scholarship. 'Greats' was not so much to his liking, and it is

perhaps not surprising that, with his mind full of classical scholarship and music, he got no more than a second class. After a short period of teaching at University College, Oxford, and some months of study in Germany, where he mastered the language and made his first acquaintance with German learning, he was elected in 1913 to a tutorial fellowship at Hertford College, and kept it till his death.

Denniston had just settled in to his new work when war was declared. He joined up at once and was commissioned in the King's Own Scottish Borderers. He went to France in 1915, was twice wounded, and, after his second convalescence, was appointed to a post in the War Office which he kept till the end of the war. He had been an excellent fighting soldier and now turned his experience to good purpose on the Staff. His department was concerned with the conduct of the Salonica campaign, and Denniston found the work much to his liking. Just as at school he had studied Napoleon's first campaign with a passionate concentration and made good use of it in the scholarship examination at New College, so now his remarkable grasp of detail and his imaginative insight into major problems of strategy won him the respect and trust of his superiors, and it was appropriate that in due course he received the O.B.E. (Mil.) and the Belgian Croix de Guerre. He was at home with intellectual soldiers, whose directness and simplicity responded to something in himself, and he had a particular regard for General Sir Frederick Maurice, with whom he was in close contact. Indeed his military colleagues so accepted him that they forgot that he was a 'don', as is shown by a story which he liked to tell. He was told to prepare for the War Cabinet an appreciation of the military situation in the Near East. He submitted his draft to his superior officer, a general, who congratulated him on his remarkable grasp of military principles but added that 'as a piece of composition, its style and grammar left a good deal to be desired'. In the autumn of 1918 Denniston went on a mission to the Near East and saw Greece for the first and last time. Soon after the armistice he was demobilized and returned to Oxford.

On 5 July 1919 Denniston married Mary Morgan and began thirty years of unbroken happiness with her. At Hertford he had plenty to do. The number of undergraduates was much greater than in 1914, and tutors were in short supply. Denniston did his full share of work. He taught for Classical Moderations, lectured in most terms, especially on Greek Prose Composition and

Aristophanes' *Frogs*, and did a large amount of examining. If his main business was to teach composition and translation, he was not one to complain of any monotony, since for him these were the foundation of all sound classical learning. Though he could be formidable to any pupils who idled or were not interested, there was little which he would not do for those who wished to learn, even if their natural gifts were of no high order. He would go through a composition with great care, correct 'howlers' with a dashing disdain, explain exactly what a word meant or a construction implied, suggest alternative and better ways of doing it, quote relevant passages from ancient authors, and raise delightful points of controversy on the uses of language. His pupils liked and admired him because they knew that he was a master of his craft, who would pass nothing shoddy and would spare himself no pains to get the right answer to a problem. Tutors of other colleges soon realized his worth and would send their best pupils to him for a final polish before University scholarships. This meant that many of the ablest classical scholars between 1919 and 1938 came directly under Denniston's influence and profited greatly by it.

In Denniston's approach to classical studies composition had a central place. He believed that you cannot claim to know a language unless you can write it, and insisted that a proper understanding of classical literature is impossible without the exact discipline provided by composition. He was not, however, an uncritical advocate of composition as it was taught at schools and universities in his early years. Indeed he felt that its practitioners tended to move away from the study of classical texts and actual usage to that of modern versions and to produce inbred, artificial results, which might look elegant but were fundamentally unsound. Even so respected a book as *Cambridge Compositions* received his strictures on the ground that too often its contributors shirked real difficulties by a showy brilliance. Much though he admired the work of H. A. J. Munro and R. C. Jebb, he thought that even they did not fully satisfy the highest standards of accuracy and faithfulness to actual usage. He believed that the first duty of anyone who translates from English into Latin or Greek is to reproduce as exactly as possible the meaning of the English as a Roman or a Greek would have expressed it. His first aim was scientific. Once this demand was met, he was more than ready to give a place to elegance, but he would never allow it to be a substitute for exactness.

This interest in composition led Denniston into a productive

liked but why he liked it. His Introduction reveals both the independence of his judgements and his complete fairness of mind. It is characteristic of him that he found Aristotle too formalistic and had a great admiration for the treatise *On the Sublime*. It is hardly less characteristic that, though he loved all technical questions of style, he was fully aware of the limitations of Demetrius and Dionysius and felt that they did not get to the heart of their problems.

In 1926 Denniston published a more solid work, his commentary on the first two *Philippics* of Cicero. It is perhaps not a book that one would have expected him to write, since it is concerned more with historical than with linguistic matters. But once Denniston became interested in the *Philippics*, he saw that any full appreciation of them as literature demanded a knowledge of their historical background. So he set about to reconstruct this and to provide a full historical commentary to the two speeches. His notes are rich in information about the complex history of the time, and his intellectual grasp is well displayed in the thorough discussion of such topics as the Roman auspices, the distribution of provincial governorships, and the equestrian juries. Nor does he neglect wider issues but debates the possibility that Antony was turning into a tyrant and asks if Cicero's opposition to him was based on any consistent principles. The edition proved that, when Denniston turned to historical study, he was well equipped for it and gave to it the same thoroughness and openness of mind which characterized his other work.

Denniston's next venture in scholarship reflected his most central tastes. In his love of the Greek language and his desire to understand its workings as fully as possible, he had for some time been interested in the particles, and now he set to work on a comprehensive book about them. With prodigious industry he read the whole of Greek literature down to 320 B.C., analysed its use of particles, and recorded his results in a series of immaculate note-books. He read slowly and carefully, determined always to find out what a sentence meant and what the particles did for its meaning. If he was in any uncertainty, he would consult all available commentaries or send post-cards to anyone who might be able to answer his questions. As he collected the material, he would analyse and arrange it, until the whole vast mass of material fell into order and was presented to the world in 1934 in *The Greek Particles*.

Though the subject had been treated before, it had never received anything comparable to the care and detailed handling

which Denniston gave to it. Nor indeed had it been treated in quite the same way. Denniston's first and main concern was not with the history of words but with their actual usage, and for this reason he cut down etymological discussion to the minimum. He professed to have no competence in it and was in fact sceptical of it, but his real reason was a sound conviction that, even if we can discover the origin of a word, what matters is how it is actually used. For this lack of theoretical speculation Denniston provided a magnificent compensation by his rich citation of examples, claiming in his Preface that 'the reader should be enabled to *bathe* in examples'. His first aim was to show actual usage in all its variety and abundance; when this was done, he was ready to provide such explanations as might be useful. If translation was necessary to explain the meaning of a passage, he would give it, but always on the understanding that its first use is to make the meaning clear. He kept his mind throughout on the main topic, the usage of particles and the clarification of this by massed examples. This massing is done with great discrimination and grasp. The book, despite its 600 pages, is well constructed, and the transition from one subject to another follows a logical plan. The whole performance leaves an indelible impression of great intellectual power and accomplishment, and it is not surprising that in reviewing it for the *Classical Review* Professor W. L. Lorimer concluded by saying that 'this is not merely an unusually good and important book, but a really great work of scholarship'.

The great contribution of *The Greek Particles* to scholarship is that it enables us to understand more fully and more exactly than ever before a very large number of passages in which particles play a part. Even so innocent-looking a word as καί receives 40 pages, which show how various its workings are and justify a story, no doubt apocryphal, that Denniston was once heard saying to a pupil 'Of course, καί *can* mean "and" '. Denniston often proves traditional dogma to be wrong and in so doing throws a new light on many passages. Thus it used to be assumed that there is always a distinction of meaning between εἰ καί and καὶ εἰ, but Denniston, while admitting that such a distinction may be made, proves that it is not universal, as anyone must admit who looks at such Homeric variants as *Il.* v. 410 and xiii. 316. More far-reaching in its results is his discussion of γάρ, which, as he shows, may be used not to follow the clause which it explains but to anticipate it. In the same way δέ, which is normally just connective, can be used with many differences

of nuance and may even have the force of γάρ or οὖν or ἦ. Denniston would have been the last to claim that these were entirely his own discoveries and liked to show how good editors had anticipated him on this or that point. But what Denniston did was to show that many cases, which the grammarians had thought corrupt or abnormal, were right and that the whole use of particles was both more orderly and more elastic than had hitherto been recognized. His work settles the meaning of many passages in which an insufficient knowledge of particles had permitted interpretations against Greek usage, and for countless others it provides a new point and precision.

Of course *The Greek Particles* does much more than this. It is an anatomical study of an important part of the Greek language and, as all such studies should, shows how the language actually worked. Those who once felt that the particles are on the whole rather tiresome and unnecessary now saw that they are an indispensable element in providing Greek with its clarity and ease. Through them it has a far greater fluency than is possible even for Latin. Not only do they help the construction of an argument or a paragraph; they allow a remarkable degree of precision in single sentences and phrases. In any comparative study of languages Denniston's book is indispensable, since it illustrates with powerful scholarship a linguistic feature which Greek possesses to a remarkable degree, and which may now be used to provide a standard of comparison for other languages in which particles exist but not with the same richness and variety.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the intellectual power and distinction of *The Greek Particles* is to quote a characteristic passage from it. In discussing ἆρα μή Denniston shows that the traditional views are wrong and proposes his own solution:

> It is commonly, but wrongly, said that ἆρα μή expects a negative answer. Now the questions which, *par excellence*, expect an answer of a particular kind, positive or negative, are rhetorical questions: and it is significant that the orators never use ἆρα μή, though they use ἆρ' οὖν very freely. ἆρα μή is in fact exceedingly rare altogether. In classical Greek, there is one (doubtful) example in Aeschylus, two in Sophocles, eight in Plato, four in Xenophon (three of them in Socratic writings): none in any other author. The force of ἆρα μή is not *num*, but 'Can it be that . . .?' ('Doch nicht etwa', Stallbaum on Pl. *Ly.* 213D). It does not necessarily imply the expectation of a negative reply, but merely that the suggestion made it difficult of acceptance (though the alternative may be even more difficult or actually impossible). It expresses, in fact, an antinomy, a

dilemma, an *impasse* of thought, or, at the least, a certain hesitancy. This interpretation is excluded in none of the passages, and is imperiously demanded in some. As a cautious and tentative form of expression, ἆρα μή questions, like μή questions, are naturally commoner in Plato than elsewhere. (pp. 47–8.)

This passage is typical of Denniston's temper and method. After a close study of all the examples he is able to dismiss the traditional view and to put forward his own alternative to it. He is at once original, neat, fair, and modest, and his argument is irresistible.

The publication of *The Greek Particles* proved that Denniston was, as his friends already knew, one of the best Greek scholars of his time. It was therefore only natural that, when Professor Gilbert Murray retired from the Regius Chair of Greek in 1936, many expected that Denniston would succeed him. There is no doubt that Denniston would have made an admirable professor, since he was not only a distinguished scholar in his own field but had by his personal influence and character found a special place in Oxford, where many classical scholars discussed their problems with him and relied greatly on his judgement and learning. He would also have liked the post, since it would have given him more time for research and for writing the books which he hoped to write. But the Crown, with whom the appointment lay, decided otherwise, and Denniston accepted the result with perfect good humour and a characteristic humility, continuing to be a college tutor as before.

After the publication of *The Greek Particles* Denniston began an edition of the *Electra* of Euripides, which was eventually published by the Clarendon Press in 1939. The book is one of a series in which various scholars edited plays from the text of Gilbert Murray in the Oxford Classical Texts. It is not easy to edit another man's text, and Denniston solved the difficulty simply and candidly by stating his own points of disagreement whenever they occurred. The book gave Denniston opportunities, denied by the nature of *The Greek Particles*, of showing his ability in textual and literary criticism. As a textual critic he thought that emendation had more or less reached its limit in Greek tragedy and that the critic's task was mainly to choose the most probable of corrections already made. His choice on such matters was made after a careful examination of the relevant facts, and his judgement was remarkably sound. If at times he seemed somewhat obstinate in keeping a reading which others disliked, he was always ready to produce good reasons for doing

so. He maintained throughout his ample commentary a sanity and a common sense which enabled him to be right where other more renowned scholars are wrong. He was particularly competent in dealing with choral passages, since he knew Greek metric as few editors of Euripides have known it. Above all he gave special attention to the precise meaning of the Greek words and elucidated many fine points of language.

In these respects Denniston did what might have been expected of him, but he did more than this. He was interested in the *Electra* not merely as a text but as a poem and a play. His Introduction shows how well aware he was of the way in which a Greek play was produced and what liberties Euripides took with the old story. Succinctly and quietly he sketches the points of comparison between Euripides' play and the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles. He has much of interest to say on the treatment of moral issues and on the delineation of the characters. Points merely mentioned in the Introduction are developed in the commentary with care and learning. Denniston does not indulge in rash fancies or over-subtle interpretations but assumes that Euripides wrote for an audience of average Athenians who would understand his words in their normal and natural sense. He saw that a sequence of thoughts which is logically unsound may be quite sound psychologically, and did his best to explain what a speech or a dialogue means in human, dramatic terms. Though Denniston himself regarded his *Electra* as rather a by-product, it remains an excellent book which faces serious problems and answers them with abundant scholarship and keen literary insight.

In 1939 Denniston's career of scholarship was again interrupted by war. Though he was well above the age for national service, he felt that he must play his part. He had always been a keen and critical student of international affairs and kept himself remarkably well informed about them. He had never had any illusions about Hitler's ambitions, and was not surprised when war came. He was given a civilian post in the War Office and threw himself into his new duties with great energy and enthusiasm. He was fortunate in being able to work near Oxford and to live in his own house. His duties were of a confidential character, but his colleagues all speak with admiration of his industry, acuteness, and capacity for absorbing details. He liked his work, but the strain of the war years told on him. When he came back to his old work in 1945, he had aged considerably and seemed for a time to have lost some of his fire. He

had in the years after 1919 suffered acutely from arthritis in the hip, and though he bore it with heroic fortitude, it cannot but have impaired his strength. Fortunately in 1936 he found a treatment which greatly alleviated the pain and after that was not troubled much by it. He survived his war duties with all his powers intact and was delighted to leave the War Office and to return to various projects which he had been forced to abandon during the war.

The chief of these was a study of Greek lyric metres. For this he was admirably qualified not merely by his scholarship but by his excellent ear and knowledge of music. He had for long been dissatisfied with current books on the subject, and, though he admired Wilamowitz's *Griechische Verskunst* as a great pioneering work, he felt that it was often too dogmatic and even too slapdash to be the final word on so complex a subject. He derived much of his own theory from Wilamowitz, but worked out the implications with a far greater care and precision. With his usual thoroughness he began by analysing all the extant passages of lyrical metres and then proceeded to form his ideas about them. He did not live to write the book, and his notebooks, rich though they are as a collection of material and comments, too seldom show what his final views would have been. Fortunately his article on 'Greek Metre' in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* is a model of clarity and shows that he had solved some of the main problems to his own satisfaction. It is certain that if he had finished the book, he would have done for lyric metres something comparable in its own way to what he had already done for the particles.

Denniston also worked at an edition of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and left a manuscript sufficiently complete for possible publication. In this he set himself a limited aim. He knew that it would be useless to produce anything comparable in scale or intention to Professor E. Fraenkel's monumental commentary, but he felt that something simpler was needed, in which the main movements, ideas, and characters of the play could be explained shortly and clearly. He did something similar for Aristophanes' *Frogs* and also put into literary form his notes on Greek prose style, a subject which had interested him for many years and on which he had many illuminating things to say. In the intervals of working on these subjects he gave gallant service to *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, in which he was responsible for the entries on Greek literature. He settled what articles should be written, and by whom; when they came in, he went through

them with great care, suggesting many improvements and corrections. No trouble was too much for him if he thought that the book would in the end benefit by it. With all these activities he was busy and happy in his work when on 16 February 1949 he had a stroke. After a few weeks of careful nursing he seemed to have regained much of his old self and looked well on the mend when he went away for a short holiday at Church Stretton and died suddenly from thrombosis on 2 May. The book, *Some Oxford Compositions*, which he had guided through the press and to which he looked forward during his illness, came out too late for him to see it.

Though Denniston was primarily a classical scholar, he had other interests to which he gave much time and devotion. The chief of these was music. He carried to Oxford the tastes which he had formed at Winchester and made his knowledge ever wider and deeper. As a young man, he helped his friend, George Butterworth, to record folk-songs in Oxfordshire and took part in village concerts at Heyford, organized by R. V. Lennard. He was an assiduous attendant at concerts and kept a neat record of what he heard at them. He had a large collection of gramophone records to which he would listen with rapt attention. He would study scores as if they were Greek texts, and his knowledge of some composers equalled his knowledge of Greek literature. He was conscious that not all composers were equally to his taste, but he did not dismiss as worthless those whom he did not happen to like. Indeed with some, as with Bela Bartok, he made a heroic effort and only admitted after prolonged study that they were not for him. His chief love was for the great German composers of the classical tradition—for Beethoven, Mozart, Schubert, and Haydn, with Brahms following closely on them. It was perhaps his devotion to these masters and his unremitting study of them that made him less sympathetic to Wagner and Chopin and pay little attention to members of the French and Italian schools. It would however be wrong to say that his tastes were narrow or that he did not care for modern music. The truth is rather that he was passionately interested in all music but, since he had to limit the time given to it, preferred to devote himself to certain masters of whose worth he had no doubts and in whose company he was entirely at home.

Though Denniston had no great taste for administration or committees, he took his full share of them. He was librarian at Hertford College and carried out his duties with great efficiency. He edited *The Classical Quarterly* for five years, and contributors

will remember the unfailing care and wisdom with which he would go through their articles before publication. He took an active part in Faculty meetings and was largely responsible for important changes in the curriculum of Honour Moderations. His keen interest in international affairs was by no means confined to its study but made him an active member of the League of Nations Union, who did not shrink from canvassing his neighbours to join it. A life-long Liberal, he watched with horror the growth of tyranny in Europe and was among the first to offer a refuge in his house to exiles from Austria. He had, too, his lighter forms of relaxation. After his athletic youth, he kept up his taste for exercise, was a vigorous tennis-player, and was for a time interested in mountaineering. When his arthritis made such pursuits impossible, he took to watching cricket and greatly enjoyed its moments of style or drama.

Perhaps, however, his chief relaxation was conversation. Both in college and at home he liked to settle down after a good dinner for a long talk. In college he would take off a guest to his room and keep him there till midnight, while they discussed points of scholarship; at home he would engage the whole company in dispute on some question of literature or music or politics. He enjoyed debate and often assumed a deceptive air of truculence which greatly enlivened the proceedings. Indeed an evening in his company was incomplete unless he had disagreed with at least one guest on some important issue. When he did this, he would advance in perfect good humour and with full consciousness of what he was doing, statements of remarkable violence which he expected to be countered in a like spirit. The give and take of dispute was one of his chief delights, and it is characteristic of him that, after an old friend had spent a week-end with him without provoking any strong disagreement, Denniston said: 'This has been a most disappointing week-end. We seem to have been in complete agreement on almost everything.'

Denniston was a man of strong affections and loyalties. If he liked anyone, especially if they were scholars of his own kind, there was little that he would not do for them, and they, for their part, always left him feeling that they had not only had their knowledge increased and their minds cleared but their whole faith in learning strengthened by his inspiring example. His occasional truculence was partly good-humoured play, partly the natural reaction of a sensitive and high-minded man to what he thought foolish or wrong, as when he said of a distinguished scholar who

was not prepared to think his views out carefully: 'He suffers from sclerosis of the intellect.' Denniston was always something of a fighter, who knew that even in academic warfare it is wise to take the offensive and keep the initiative. He had a great fund of gaiety and could on occasion be delightfully frivolous and irresponsible. He shared most of his interests with his wife, and at their house in Polstead Road he was always at his best. No one who enjoyed that experience could fail to see that this was a most remarkable man, who combined the highest intellectual integrity with the most winning warmth of heart.

C. M. Bowra

Note. I am deeply indebted to Mrs. Denniston, Sir H. A. de Montmorency, Professor D. L. Page, and *The Draconian* for information and help.