W. J. COURTHOPE

1842–1917

William John Courthope came by descent from that core of the English stock, the high-minded, unpretending country families whose roots were deep in the soil, who belonged in the fullest sense not only to England but to their native county, and who went on from generation to generation contributing to the learned professions and the public service, but remaining centrally attached to their familiar soil, and moving on the quiet current of rural life. The Courthopes have been since the Middle Ages a Sussex family, landowners on a modest scale. They have been settled at Whiligh, in the parish of Ticehurst, near the Kentish border, continuously since the beginning of the sixteenth century; and the records of the family in Sussex date back to Edward I. Courthope's father, a cadet of this family, was Rector of South Malling, Lewes. His mother was a sister of J. C. Ryle, one of the Evangelical leaders in the Church of England, and first Bishop of Liverpool. He was born at South Malling on July 17, 1842. His father died seven years later: and he and his brother and sister were, from 1849, brought up in the guardianship and largely in the house of their uncle, Mr. Courthope of Whiligh. But Courthope's own childish impressions of Lewes and the South Downs were indelible, and remained through his life as deep and fresh as at first. Forty years later, they were beautifully recorded by him in his poem *The Country Town*, one of the most graceful of English descriptive and reflective poems. It draws a picture not only of rural England as it was and of the continuity of its evolution from the Norman Conquest onwards, but of the author's own character, his faith and his ideals.

Courthope, first at school at Blackheath, went to Harrow in 1856, and was there for five years in the head master's house, first under Vaughan and then under Butler. The dedication of his *Life of Pope* in 1889, to his two old head masters, shows the strong attachment he felt to them both. Butler, only nine years older than himself, became a lifelong friend; and outlived his pupil, of whose early promise he would speak till the end with affectionate admiration. The lines of Courthope's character were already formed when he was still a school-

boy; though they may (as most people's do) have contracted as well as deepened later. His permanent attitude towards political and social movements is visible in the Essay on Chivalry which won the Head Master's Prize in 1860.

From Harrow he proceeded to Oxford in 1861, entering as a Commoner at Corpus, and migrating the next year to New College on election to one of two open exhibitions then created. They carried the emoluments and status of a Scholar, and were a step towards enlarging the scope of the foundation beyond those who passed into it from Winchester. There he had a distinguished record: a first class in Moderations in 1863, the Newdigate Prize, for a poem on the three-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Shakespeare, in 1864, and a first class in Literae Humaniores in 1865. The First Class that year included with him P. A. Henderson, afterwards Warden of Wadham, E. S. Talbot, Bishop of Winchester, and W. Sanday of Corpus, who likewise became later a Fellow of the British Academy. Two of his closest lifelong friends, James Leigh Strachan-Davidson, the late Master of Balliol, and P. F. Willert, *amicis amicissimus*, took theirs six months later. The wider circle of his contemporaries at New College included among others Dr. Spooner, the present Warden, Archdeacon Fearon, afterwards Head Master of Winchester, and John Wordsworth, the late Bishop of Salisbury.

He was precluded from the Fellowship of his College to which otherwise he might have confidently looked forward by the Statute under which the modest property which he had inherited on the death of his father disqualified him. But in 1868 he was awarded the Chancellor's Prize for an Essay on 'The Genius of Spenser', a subject peculiarly suited to his tastes and to his already wide knowledge of English poetry. His literary predilections, and his doctrines as to the function of poetry and the true criteria of its excellence, were then already formed, and underwent but little change afterwards. Much of the substance of this Essay reappears, in a more fully developed form, in the chapter on 'The Poetry of Spenser' which he contributed, forty years later, to the Cambridge History of English Literature. In both, the thesis is that the work of the greatest poets is the harmonious blending of opposite tendencies enforced on them by the conditions of national history. Spenser's position as highest in the second rank, but not belonging to the first rank, of our poets is assigned to him in respect of the degree to which he comes short of meeting this test.

After taking his degree, Courthope was called to the Bar; but before he had begun to practise, the course of his professional life

was settled in the public service by his acceptance of an Examinership in the Education Department. He married the next year, and after five or six years' residence in London, settled at West Wickham in Kent for the twelve years 1875–87. Those years were busy and fertile. The demands of official duty were not then all-engrossing; the hours were shorter, the pressure at which the machine was worked was very much less. He was able to pursue his favourite studies, to carry almost to completion the laborious and scholarly edition of Pope's works, to lay the foundations for his *magnum opus*, the *History of English Poetry*, and to make other valuable contributions to English literature. During this period he concentrated largely on the eighteenth century and became an exponent and champion of the 'classical' tradition. He had not been unaffected by the romantic movement. As an undergraduate he had been an admirer of both Shelley and Browning; and it is worth noting that in his Newdigate Prize Poem the handling of the couplet is free, and does not observe the rigorous Augustan tradition. His earliest published works were not only lighter, but in a way more modern, than those of his maturity. The first of these, *Ludibria Lunae, or The Wars of the Women and the Gods* (1869), was inscribed to John Addington Symonds, who was a couple of years his senior, but his intimate friend both at Harrow and at Oxford. Whether or not it was a deflection from his own natural bent, it was received both by his friends and by the public with doubtful appreciation. It called forth anxious and uneasy criticism from Conington, who while allowing merit to its tenderer or more playful passages, called it on the whole 'genius misdirected'. Conington's prestige, in Oxford and beyond it, was very great, and his authority as a director of genius was accepted without much question. But its successor, *The Paradise of Birds*—written mainly in 1869, but not published until late in 1870, during the Franco-Prussian War—had more than a success of esteem. Its conception is larger, its touch lighter and more skilful. It brought him something like fame; and when it was republished in 1889, it was found to have stood the test of time and to have lost little or none of its fresh charm. It is by virtue of *The Paradise of Birds*, perhaps more than by any of his later and maturer reflective poems—though these have an estimation rather below their value—that he ranks as an original creative writer.

What determined his concentration on the eighteenth century was his conjunction with Elwin as editor of Pope's works. This edition had been undertaken a good many years before he became associated in it. The first two volumes had appeared as long ago as

1871. Ten years later, the third volume was published under their joint names, with the intimation that Courthope had become responsible for completion of the work. Not until 1889 was the full scheme made out by the tenth and final volume (numbered V in consequence of the concurrent issue of the two halves of the whole work, containing the poems and the letters respectively). The main substance of that volume is Courthope's *Life of Pope*; and in it only does his name appear alone on the title-page, though Elwin's effective collaboration had come to an end long before. The labour that had to be spent on this work, the minute research it required, was very great. Since Warburton's edition of 1751, Pope's poetry, as the battle-ground of contending schools of criticism no less than for its own sake, has passed through many editorial hands. But no serious attempt had been made either to collate the various texts issued by Pope himself, or to elucidate the poems, crowded as they are with personal and political allusions, by a scholarly commentary. In dealing with the prose works, the task was still more intricate and laborious; not only were there the problems (often insoluble) of joint authorship with Swift and Arbuthnot, and to some extent with others belonging to the same circle, but throughout the voluminous correspondence, the work of tracing Pope's own systematic and inveterate garbling for publication both of his own letters and of those addressed to him. Elwin and Courthope's edition may be regarded as definitive; at least it is not likely that the ground, as a whole, will ever be so minutely traversed again. It is an important contribution to English literary history, and to the study of the whole Augustan period.

A by-product of these years was the monograph on Addison contributed by Courthope in 1884 to the *English Men of Letters* Series. Leslie Stephen's own monograph on Pope had appeared in the same series four years earlier. Courthope did not carry such heavy guns as Stephen. But of his Addison as of Stephen's Pope it may be fairly said that it is a classic. In it, the colour of Addison's own limpid style passed through intellectual and moral sympathy to his exponent. The little volume has a charm beyond the virtue of 'correctness'. Its Addisonian temper gives it a quality higher than that of his larger and generally more laboured works.

On the foundation of the *National Review* in 1883, Courthope accepted the post of joint-editor, and took an active part in its management for about four years, besides making many contributions to it in both prose and verse. Of the latter, one at least deserves special record, the poem of *The Country Town* to which allusion has already been made.

In 1885 the Professorship of Poetry at Oxford became vacant by the death of Shairp. The two candidates put forward for the chair were, by a curious chance, both officials in the Education Department. Francis Palgrave, the elder by eighteen years, was also the more widely known; his *Golden Treasury* had already passed through numerous editions and was familiar to many thousands of readers. Courthope, when he became a candidate, felt the need of bringing his name, and the way in which he regarded both the development and the function of poetry, more prominently before the Oxford electorate; the Professor of Poetry being chosen by Convocation. It was primarily with this object in view that he brought out the volume of Essays entitled *The Liberal Movement in English Literature*. It is not one of his happiest achievements. He seems in it to be defending a thesis rather than appreciating an art. It is in effect an attack on the excessive predominance, in the poetry of the nineteenth century, of the lyric, defined by him as the poetical vehicle of individualism. This he names as an index and contributing cause of poetical anarchy. The fact, as well as the reason assigned for it, is disputable; and it was felt that he insisted too much on a single element in a highly complex problem, if he did not even attempt to merge two things which are essentially disparate, and to apply the criteria of politics to the product of creative art. The fact was that Courthope felt himself out of sympathy with the actual movement of poetry in his own time; he argued backwards from that feeling, and thereby involved himself in great difficulties. A single typical sentence may be cited in illustration. 'Wordsworth's great and truly conservative achievement', he writes, 'consists in his having given to the poetry of romance, the existence of which during the eighteenth century had come to be almost forgotten, a large and surprising development.' One sees what he is driving at here; but one could do with clearer thinking, as well as with a finer historical sense. Palgrave was elected to the chair by a considerable though not overwhelming majority of votes, and held it for the next ten years.

In 1887, Courthope was appointed a Civil Service Commissioner. This change of work was welcomed by him; it withdrew him from congenial society in the Education Department, but his new duties, though important and responsible, allowed him a good deal of leisure during portions of the year. At the same time he came to live in London, within easy reach of the British Museum Library. His long labours on Pope were approaching completion, and he soon found himself able to take up what he destined for the chief work of his life, a *History of English Poetry*. He became First Com-

missioner in 1892, and was made C.B. in 1895. In the same year he succeeded Palgrave as Professor of Poetry. The statutory lectures which he gave during his tenure of the chair, now limited to five years by a new statute, were published by him in 1901. The title of the volume, *Life in Poetry and Law in Taste*, indicates with sufficient clearness his fundamental principles, and his attitude towards poetry and poetical criticism. These may be summarized, in his own words, pretty much as follows.

His object is to search for and define 'the perfect law of liberty', and thus determine a stable foundation of judgement amid the infinity of tastes and opinions. Genius is not a law to itself, but is subject to law which is both universal and discoverable. This is the law of national life and character. The highest art is a faithful reflection of the life of the society out of which it springs. The national life of England is to be traced in the operation of four great forces, Catholicism, Feudalism, Humanism, and Protestantism. To be able to bring any work of art to the test, we must acknowledge authority; not the authority of an academy, which is arbitrary, but the authority of principles expounded by oecumenical criticism. The anarchic influences to be contended against, at the present time more particularly, are the passion for novelty; the instinct of democracy to make the majority of the moment the final court of appeal; and the commercial interest of supply and demand. Lovers of liberty must rally round an authoritative standard of taste, and withstand the overwhelming pressure of the forces of materialism. Taste becomes effeminate when divorced from the life of action. Against the objection that this doctrine 'merges poetics in ethics', the rejoinder is that man, on this side of his nature as on others, is essentially a πολιτικὸν ζῷον, a social being; hence the proper pleasure of art must be such as to promote the health and well-being of the State. To regard it as an instrument of self-culture is to impede or destroy its function. The study of English poetry is in effect the study of the continuous growth of our institutions as reflected in our literature. The ideal towards which it advances is that of imperial culture.

These doctrines indicate the aim and spirit in which Courthope approached his project of writing the *History of English Poetry*. This arose directly out of his special studies in the national literature of the eighteenth century; and in entering upon it he was taking up what had been originated, and left unaccomplished, by his predecessors in the tradition which it was his desire to reinstate. The scheme of writing such a history had been entertained by Pope. The notes he made for it passed on to Gray, the best qualified man

of his period to have executed it. Gray's knowledge of poetry and of history was unusually great. His insight and judgement were unsurpassed. He had, beyond all his contemporaries, the historical instinct as well as fine scholarship and imaginative sympathy. But his fastidiousness and his low vitality prevented him from doing much. It was with obvious relief that, when he found that Thomas Warton had a similar design, he turned over the task to him, together with the notes he had himself made for it. 'Relinquishing the prosecution of a design', Warton writes in his preface, 'which would have detained him from his own noble inventions, he most obligingly condescended to favour me with the substance of his plan, which I found to be that of Mr. Pope considerably enlarged, extended, and improved.'

Warton's own *History* remained a fragment. It is a monument of research which does the highest credit to his industry and patience. But the 'complication, variety and extent of materials' which he emphasizes were overwhelming. The labyrinth was unmapped, and largely untrodden. No single life, however long and laborious, would have sufficed for the execution of his vast scheme. He had the double duty to perform, as his biographer justly observes, of discovering his subject and writing its history; and he thus became committed to episodic exploration, to the spade-work that had to be performed before constructive architecture could be attempted.

More than a century had since elapsed. By the labours of countless men of letters and antiquarians, the subject-matter had been explored and rendered accessible. The foundations had been laid, and the material was there. Even so, the task remained immense. Courthope's six volumes, the first of which appeared in 1895 and the last in 1910, review, and in some sense cover, the poetical annals of England up to the beginning of the nineteenth century. His introduction sets forth what had been done by his predecessors, and lays down the lines on which he proposed to treat the subject himself. No History of Poetry, he observes, can be satisfactory which has not unity of design, which does not exhibit the principle of growth and movement, and which does not deal fully and specifically with the development of technique. English poetry is the reflection, as it was the product, of national character and institutions, as these grew and changed, and as they were modified by external influences, both those of the ancient civilization, and those of the political, religious, and intellectual movement of western Europe from age to age. In the successive volumes, he traces the effects produced by the encyclopaedic education of the mediaeval Church, by feudal institutions,

and by the slow growth of civil order: the expansion of Humanism, and the period of the Renaissance and Reformation, and of the influence of Courts and Universities: the intellectual conflict of the seventeenth century: the development and decline of the poetic drama, from the predecessors of Shakespeare to the final collapse of Dryden's effort to create a new romanticism; the compromise or temporary settlement of the eighteenth century, with the decline of Augustan classicism, the origins of the romantic revival, and the appeal to a new court, that of educated public opinion: and lastly, the revolutionary movement; the exhaustion of the classical influence, the influence on poetry and poetical criticism of the new whigs and the anti-jacobin reaction, the Lake school, romanticism as embodied in the work of Byron, Shelley, and Keats, and the revivification of minstrelsy and romance in Scott, the consummation of which he characteristically finds not in Scott's poems but in his novels.

At this point he regarded his task as completed, for two reasons. Not only did he consider that if it were extended to more recent times, personal tastes and preferences intruded themselves on the judgement, and there was no security for right perspective. He also held, with as full a conviction, that at this point it ceased to be possible to trace any correspondence of English poetry with the history of political and constitutional development. 'The disappearance of political ideals', so he puts it, 'left a void which has not been filled.' The new principles (so far as he could accept them as principles at all) 'have not proved equal to the construction of any social ideal'. Hence it followed that 'the last result of the romantic movement has been a separation of poetry from the organized course of national life and action'. In other words, English poetry as he defined it ceased to exist, and its history therefore came to an end.

It will be clear from this summarized sketch that the history of English poetry is restricted by him within certain limits consequent on a particular schematization of its subject-matter, as this in turn is consequent on a particular philosophy of history, a particular envisagement of the relation of art to life. These limits are in a sense arbitrary or even conventional. But all works of art—and history is an art—must be based on a convention; and some restriction or delimitation of scope is in any case a duty as well as a necessity for the historian. Courthope's *History* is a work not so much of profound research or of minute accumulated detail as of applying collected and arranged material towards a theory of the nature and function of poetry. An exhaustive history of technique on the one hand, a complete chronicle of English poets and their

works on the other, would be separate undertakings. Courthope's work, if it is in these and in other respects neither complete nor final, and if it seems to fall short of eliciting and fixing the quintessential quality of English poets as artists, claims high respect both for its conscientious workmanship and for the degree of success with which it steers a course through the triple shoals of technical detail, of annalistic biography, and of merely aesthetic or bellettristic appreciation.

Courthope retired from official work in 1907. In the years during which he was First Commissioner, he had an important voice in determining the scope and contents of examinations for posts both in the Home and in the Indian Civil Service, and thus in giving a bent to the whole national system of advanced school and university studies. His influence was steadily exercised towards due recognition being given to the type of education embodied most fully in the Oxford School of Literae Humaniores. It was his conviction, confirmed by his experience, that this type had an educative value superior to, and not replaceable by, any other for the purposes of national and imperial service.

On his retirement, he settled down near his early home at Wadhurst. He had been elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1906, and during 1908–11 served on the Council. During his tenure of the Oxford Chair of Poetry he had the highly prized distinction of being made an Honorary Fellow of his own college, and also received honorary degrees of D.Litt. from the University of Durham, and of LL.D. from the University of Edinburgh. In concert with the late E. H. Pember he initiated in 1905 a scheme for an association of scholars and men of letters whose object should be to maintain a standard of literary taste and to be, to some extent, a corresponding body to the French Academy in function and influence. The project was never fully carried out. It took partial shape a year or two later in the reorganization of the Royal Society of Literature, of which Courthope then became a Fellow and Vice-President, and the formation in it of an Academic Committee.

Courthope's further contributions to letters, and to literary history and criticism, during and after the completion of his *magnum opus*, may be briefly noted. He contributed two valuable chapters to the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, one on the Poetry of Spenser, the other on the Revolution in English Poetry and Fiction. At the celebration of Milton's tercentenary in 1908, organized by the British Academy, he delivered an address on Milton and Dante. Starting from a consideration of Macaulay's crude and famous com-

parison of the two poets in the Essay by which he made his reputation in 1825, he finds their poetic kinship in 'the perfection of the form by means of which each of them produces an organic representation of all the contrary influences operating alike on his own nature and on the spirit of his age'. In 1911 he gave the second Warton Lecture, taking for his subject the connexion between Ancient and Modern Romance. In that lecture he dwells once more on his central and consistent doctrine that the character of poetry is due to, and reflects, the taste of contemporary society. He utters a grave warning against the fallacious search for 'Celtic' or other racial influences in the work of poets. He draws a distinction between mediaeval romance, presupposing real events which gradually dissolve into fiction, and modern romance, employing conscious fiction to decorate or disguise the outline of real objects. He traces the growth of romanticism as a self-conscious temper, and its overflow from court circles and the idealized life of knights or shepherds to middle-class society and the life of ordinary people. And he ends with a fine plea for a truly scientific study of poetry, avoiding on one side humanistic formalism, and on the other, the merely archaeological spirit characteristic of the present age. Mention should also be made of his 'modern Georgic', *The Hop Garden*, which appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* for September and October 1908. It is to be hoped that this delightful piece, with others, will be reprinted in a selection of his original poetry.

With advancing years he became only a rare visitor to London, and while fully retaining his keen delight in literature, wrote but little. His last published work was the pleasant volume of *Select Epigrams of Martial translated or imitated in English Verse*, 1914. He then still showed no serious signs of flagging health, though an inherited strain of temperamental melancholy was perhaps becoming more pronounced. During 1916 he obviously began to fail; and he died at Wadhurst, in his seventy-fifth year, on April 17, 1917. He had lived to see the native country that he loved so devotedly make the choice of honour and prove herself the inheritress of her ancient tradition; it was not allowed him to see the daylight of her victory. To his friends he left a memory and a pattern of high principle, fine courtesy, and unassuming kindness.

J. W. MACKAIL.

[I desire to acknowledge with gratitude the great help I have received in writing this notice from Mr. A. O. Prickard, Fellow of New College, one of Courthope's oldest and closest friends.]