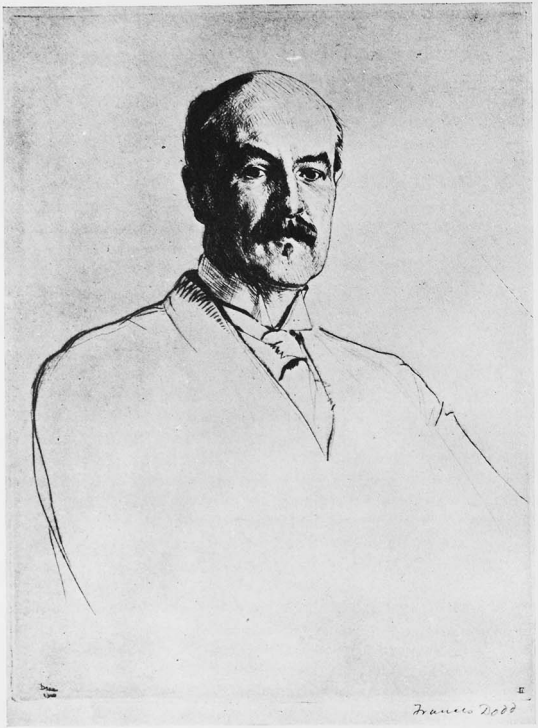

OLIVER ELTON

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1861–1945

OLIVER ELTON was the only child of the Rev. Charles Allen Elton, B.D., and of Sarah Amelia, daughter of John Ransom, solicitor, of Holt, Norfolk. He was born on 3 June 1861, at Gresham Grammar School, Holt, where his father, sometime Fellow of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, was headmaster. His grandfather, James Elton (1791–1863), Recorder of Tiverton, had married Emily Freeman Oliver, daughter of Thomas Oliver, the last royal Lieutenant-Governor of Massachusetts, of whom Oliver Elton contributed a full biography to the *Proceedings of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* for 1931 (1932). Here it is suggested that one or more of Thomas Oliver's forebears may have emigrated from Bristol, 'where Olivers had long abounded'; here also, in a footnote, there is a genealogy of James and Emily Elton's descendants, with the direction 'For Elton family previously see the (incomplete) account in Burke's Landed Gentry'.

Oliver Elton was not to remain long in Norfolk. When he was about five years old his father had to resign his post as the result of a grave illness, and the family removed to London. From 1870 to 1887 (when his father died) they lived in Kent, latterly at Belvedere. Except for one term at a private school he was taught at home by his father until he went to Marlborough College, which he entered as a Foundation Scholar in 1873, afterwards winning a Senior Scholarship. Among various prizes was one for English Literature. Here there began a lifelong friendship with Sir Edmund Chambers. He left Marlborough in 1880 with an open classical Scholarship at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and a School Leaving Exhibition. At Oxford he followed the classics curriculum, obtaining a Second Class in Moderations in 1882 and a First in 'Greats' in 1884. Arthur Sidgwick, Frederick York Powell, Michael Sadler, Charles Eliot, Leonard Huxley, and D. S. MacColl, whose sister he afterwards married, were some of his Oxford friends. 'He was already noted by the discerning as one of the keenest critical minds among youthful members of the University'; at this period too he read widely, and with thorough assimilation, outside the prescribed syllabus and in more than one language. To the *Oxford Magazine*, started in 1883, he contributed some articles and reviews, but chiefly verse, original and translated.

From 1884 to 1890 he lived by tutoring privately in London and by working for Captain James's coaching academy, where he taught chiefly Latin. His marriage with Letitia Maynard MacColl, fourth daughter of the Rev. Dugald MacColl, of the Free Kirk, and his wife Janet (born Matheson), of Glasgow, took place in 1888, and they went to live in Bedford Park, West London, where many teachers, artists, and writers had gathered, including York Powell and J. B. Yeats, with whom the Eltons formed a close friendship. There was a society called the 'Calumet', devoted to all kinds of free discussion and long after remembered with pleasure.

In 1890 Elton was appointed independent lecturer in English Literature at Owens College, Manchester, and held the post for ten years, until his election to the Chair at Liverpool. It was also in 1890 that C. E. Montague came to Manchester and another firm friendship was begun. There was much intercourse between the writing staff of the *Manchester Guardian*, to which Montague was attached, and the teaching staff at Owens College; groups who took their meals, exercise, and leisure in company were formed, and again there was a small private talking society, which lasted more than a decade. At the *Guardian* office were also W. T. Arnold and Arthur Johnstone, the music critic. It was, for Elton, a time of much happy acquaintanceship and varied activity, including in the Easter vacation of 1892 a visit to Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, where he lectured. During the Manchester years his three sons, Geoffrey (died 1927), Leonard, and Charles were born.

Between 1889 and 1903 he produced several editions, suited to the class-room, of Shakespeare's plays (*1 Henry IV*, 1889, *King John*, 1890), and of Milton's early poems (five separate booklets, subsequently brought together). These remained long in print although much later he was heard to speak deprecatingly of them as *péchés de jeunesse*. By the date when the latest of them appeared (*Comus*, 1893) he must have been well advanced with his translation of the mythical matter (Books i–ix) in the *Historia Danica* of Saxo Grammaticus, which he essayed at the instance of York Powell and which was published for the Folk-Lore Society in 1894. As is well known, the original presents, besides much other legend, the story of the Danish prince Amlethus in its earliest form, and Elton contributes a substantial appendix on 'Saxo's Hamlet', with reference to possible sources, and with speculation upon Saxo's use of them. The translation as a whole was a considerable service to all students

of Scandinavian mythology, the more because of Saxo's odd and troublesome Latin and because no previous translation had been made save into Danish. The greater part of the long introduction to this volume, 'a full statement', as Elton said later, 'of Saxo's contribution to Northern lore', was written by York Powell, and apart from some pages on Saxo's life and the nature and value of his work, Elton's task was to provide linguistic rather than critical or historical interpretation.

In this regard it is easy to recognize his next undertaking as one of greater pith and moment, more congenial too, and giving fuller play to his gifts. This was his study of Michael Drayton, prepared at the invitation of the Spenser Society and printed for them in 1895 with their selection from Drayton's writings. It was published separately by Messrs. Constable, with enlargements and revisions, ten years later. 'Nearly everything as yet known about this poet ought to be found in this brief volume', brief, but still authoritative. By 1905 Elton was able to clear up some doubts concerning Drayton's personal character entertained meanwhile by W. J. Courthope, and the critical pages are distinguished by the command of just reflections, apt phrasing, and enlightening metaphor which marks all the later work. The biographer was inherently well qualified to appreciate Drayton's bent and capacity for 'high emprise', the resourcefulness of his spirit, and the scope and variety of his output. The torch of Draytonian scholarship has since been taken up by a band of Elizabethan investigators and when at last, in 1941, the great Shakespeare Head edition of the Works, begun by the late J. W. Hebel, was completed by Mrs. Tillotson and Mr. B. H. Newdigate, the collaborators showed a grateful consciousness of their debt to Elton's pioneering labours and perceptions.

It must have been about 1895 also that he was asked to contribute a volume on *The Augustan Ages* to the series known as *Periods of European Literature* and edited by George Saintsbury. Here was a more formidable task. For who at thirty-five could undertake without misgiving to decide, and then condense within the compass of about four hundred pages, what may and what must be said about 'the age of reason' in its multitudinous aspects, and with due regard for national *differentiae*? As Elton says himself, 'the bibliography of a few decades . . . is enough to damp the freshest vanity'. Yet his knowledge of the various literatures, especially in the English, French, and Germanic tongues, was at the outset, or soon was made, adequate, and he was well served by his training in philosophy and the ancient

classics. Thus he could write helpfully on the systems of Descartes and Leibniz in relation to contemporary thought; and make glancing comparisons of Henry More or Malebranche with Plato, of Boileau with Longinus, of Holberg with Molière, or of Filicaia with Gray. There is a wealth of comment, making for precision and perspective, and a firm grasp of the intellectual and aesthetic background; and under the author's guidance the reader is led towards a conception of the Augustan achievement which is itself Augustan in its tempered verve, its clearness of vision, and its balance of sense and sensibility. The deficiencies of the age are not overlooked, but neither are the compensations and positive virtues. For though 'the saving process of human thought was forced for generations to beggar the sense of beauty' (a sentence marked as containing the chief general idea of this book), the strength and greatness of Bossuet or Swift, the importance of Racine or Locke, are duly asserted. There are delicate Paterian impressions, too, of styles or atmosphere, as where praise is given to Racine's 'steadiness of sweet and open sonority' or where the breath of fresh woods and pastures new is felt in the writings of Anne, Countess of Winchelsea:

> The poetry of a tree, its service rendered of shelter and shadow, its honourable fate, when its stock is spent, of falling by the winds that prevent the woodman's axe,—to hear of these things, amidst the full swing of the urban literature, is to sit refreshed, with a presentiment of change, outside the clamour and vapour and opulence of Rome.

Like other volumes in the same series this one has an assured standing; and in its layout and method it has a bearing upon the later surveys in that it is rather a conspectus than a history, affording opportunities for personal estimates and *aperçus*. This volume was published in 1899.

While he was at Manchester Elton gave much attention to the theatre and was drawn into the writing of dramatic reviews. After a time it was decided to collect, under the editorship of W. T. Arnold, the notices which he and Elton, with Allan Monkhouse and C. E. Montague, had contributed to the *Manchester Guardian*, and a volume called *The Manchester Stage* resulted in 1903. For this Elton wrote also an introduction on the relations of theatre and press besides six of the notices. This venture was not very successful, largely, it may be supposed, because the interest of a performance, as distinct from the play performed, does not often long survive the moment of the passing show. Here and elsewhere Elton showed his respect for

the actor's craft and his appreciation of stage performances as generally necessary for the full understanding of the dramatist's intentions; yet it is easy to believe him in agreement with Aristotle in thinking 'spectacle' the least among the elements of dramatic composition or 'the least concerned with the art of poetry'; and like many others of his time, and later too, he often preferred the imagined to the observed rendering of plays with any strong measure of poetic value and intensity. It was not merely that he could suffer under the inadequacies and ineptitudes which frequently mar the public representation; it was rather that in the more exalted forms of drama there is so much that in the hurry of the accumulating business must escape the interpretation of even the best actors. This explains his sympathy with Lamb's reflections on the acting of Shakespeare, which he put subsequently with his own modification: 'the actor tells us much we did not know, but he can never dream in our stead; and the essence of Shakespeare's or Marlowe's poetry is to set up reverie unconnected with its actual subject.' These are words which might carelessly be taken to underrate the value of the communal experience, the mutual give-and-take between actors and audience, whereby even the element of poetry, when present, may gain power and instancy. But the actor receives his due again in another later observation: 'audiences will for ever watch Hamlet and Falstaff; and here the best critic is the player; he comes nearer to the poet than the writer can ever do.'

One of Elton's closest friends at Manchester was Arthur Johnstone, musical critic to the *Guardian*, who died in 1904; and Elton collaborated with Henry Reece to produce the book of Johnstone's *Musical Criticisms* (1905), writing part of the memoir.

In 1900 he was elected to the King Alfred Chair of English Literature at Liverpool in succession to Walter Raleigh, recently appointed to the corresponding chair at Glasgow. He began the new work in January 1901, and for the next twenty-five years he was mainly absorbed in teaching and administrative duties, and in the writing of the three two-volumed surveys of English Literature which appeared in 1912, 1920, and 1928, respectively. These two occupations, academic and authorial, will have separate attention below; but first it will be convenient to speak of two other works, the *Life of Frederick York Powell* (1906) and *Modern Studies* (1907).

The last-mentioned was a gathering of material already

published over a number of years. The inaugural lecture at Liverpool on Tennyson is included. 'Modern' has the larger connotation which allows the volume to open with an account of 'Giordano Bruno in England', and to continue with 'Literary Fame, A Renaissance Note', and a paper on 'Colour and Imagery in Spenser'. There is also 'A Word on Mysticism' which ranges widely. But most of the subjects were modern also in the more restricted sense, for five of the eleven papers are devoted to literature of the day or the day before, Tennyson, Swinburne, Meredith, Henry James, and 'Living Irish Literature', and two are largely concerned with recent academic studies, 'The Meaning of Literary History' and 'Recent Shakespeare Criticism'. In this volume Elton's critical abilities are revealed in something like full expansion and security, partly, it may be guessed, because the themes are of his own choosing, and not least because the fair assessment of performances which have yet to be 'placed' must call out all a critic's power to distinguish between the transient and the enduring. Not all the views and judgements here put forward are unassailable to-day, forty years on; but there is no mistaking the liveliness of response, the connoisseurship or 'sense of varieties in accent and gesture', and the gifts of imagery and resilient phrasing by which those varieties can be discriminated. Elton had the rare gift which enables a critic to enter so fully into the minds of his subjects that their inspiration seems to be born again, their notes re-echoed, and their craftsmanship not merely described but re-enacted. There is much indeed in these papers that bespeaks the 'critic as artist'. But there is more than can be wrought by a versatile impressionism, there is a pervasive sanity of judgement, issuing in many perceptions and pronouncements which have stood the test of time.

One other feature must be recorded. The criticisms are firmly based in knowledge and scholarship, and the scholar shows his respect and gratitude for the aid supplied by earlier investigators, with little in them sometimes beyond the gust for investigation. Whatever else Elton is remembered for it should be for this. His ready acknowledgements are connected with his passion for fair play, which he thought these predecessors did not always receive, and violations of which in the field of learning, as elsewhere, he was quick to notice and resist. This is well illustrated in some reflections on a sentence by one of his contemporaries, who had commended 'the rapid, alert reading' of Shakespeare's plays, and rather thoughtlessly and unluckily

added a fling at 'all the faithful, laudable business of the antiquary and the commentator'. To this it is replied that in so far as the implied doctrine is not obvious 'it will not do'.

> Many of them have felt the poetry of Shakespeare. Theobald read the poet's text 'alertly' though perhaps not 'rapidly', and his emendations have the stamp of genius, if they are sometimes better than the truth. They would not be stigmatized as 'laudable'. Moreover, the antiquaries and commentators are as mixed a company as any that inhabits a play of Shakespeare. They number forgers and pedants, lunatics and Baconians, pulpiteers and Ulricis and Rymers. Among them also are Delius and Malone, and some living men who deserve well. They are modest men and benefactors in their time, and it is a poor thing to step carelessly among their prostrate forms, especially when we cannot do our work without their help.

Accordingly, when the scholar York Powell died in 1904, there was fitness in the decision that Elton should write his biography. Elton had been much impressed by the Scandinavian labours of Powell and Vigfusson (to whose memory this Life is inscribed), had caught their zeal, and no doubt learnt something from their methods. He was also qualified by a personal friendship of nearly twenty years' standing and the task was surely the more agreeable not only because of this, but because Powell was in so many ways an inspiring subject, a great humanist, a man of character and wit, with a lovable and inspiriting personality; he was one who, as Elton put it, 'radiated encouragement and affection with the help of a rich intelligence'. The planning of this work is characteristically spacious, the life and letters in one substantial volume and the 'occasional writings' in a second; and Powell lives again in these pages partly because he is thus freely allowed to speak for himself, but also in no small degree because of the lucid portraiture and apt comments of the biographer. The comments are important in the present connexion for what they can tell us of Elton's own character and views. Thus having mentioned the first class which Powell obtained in the School of Law and History, and the satisfaction which such an honour gives, he adds his own estimate of what it means:

> So highly does our custom rate the average worth of fifty short and hasty essays, done under cruel pressure of time, by a young man just of age, as the fruit of a few years' training. It is indeed not strictly a training for any occupation except journalism, where the conditions of the schools are nightly more or less reproduced. However enlightened

the tutor, of the Schools he has to think. The real discipline in the craft of research comes later, if at all, and its first step is to unlearn undergraduate method.

It would be wrong to conclude that Elton thought little of undergraduate curricula and their possibilities. He taught undergraduates at Liverpool for twenty-five years with devotion and great success. This, however, was but one item in his academic stewardship while he held the Liverpool Chair of English Literature; and of that stewardship a more general account will now be in place.

In January 1901, when he took up his duties, Liverpool still had no more than a University College affiliated to Manchester and Leeds, but the anti-federal movement in Liverpool, which under the staunch guidance and advocacy of John Macdonald Mackay, Professor of History, had been gathering weight, was now culminating; and in 1902 the College became a University with full rights to shape its own destinies and determine its own procedures. Elton had thrown his strength into the fray on the side of independence, and, when that was secured, was of those who did most to work out the constitution and settle the character of the new University, having great regard for the principle of self-government and for that of freedom for the Faculties to manage their own affairs without mandarin interference. Naturally he had a particular affection for the Faculty of Arts as a special focus of liberal notions and humane enlightenment, and after his retirement remained a very attentive observer of its fortunes.

With York Powell he had watched with keen approval the emergence at Oxford of the Honours School of English Language and Literature, though he never lost his respect for a classical training as a preparation for a literary career. When the corresponding school at Liverpool was instituted it had its own character, which it has retained, providing for examination in two parts and, in the final year, for certain special studies, which included the making of a longish essay or miniature thesis on some subject allowing for a measure of fresh investigation and of individual appraisement. There was thus even at the undergraduate stage some grounding in the 'craft of research'. By the time of Elton's retirement the Liverpool School had attracted a number of promising students whose subsequent history often showed the benefits of their pupilage. In the work of teaching Elton secured the help of such active spirits as Dora Yates, W. T. Young, J. D. Sloss, J. P. R. Wallis, Grace Treney,

(all trained in the School), Dixon Scott, Lascelles Abercrombie, and Robert Hope Case. Another collaborating scholar and friend was John Sampson, the University Librarian, whose unsurpassed edition of Blake's poems was admirably supplemented by the edition of the 'Prophetic Books' prepared, on Elton's initiative, by Sloss and Wallis. With his colleague in the Chair of English Language, Henry Cecil Wyld, Elton had some difference of opinion (without loss of personal harmony) about the academic programme and, for a time, the two Departments went separate ways. But soon after 1921, when Wyld was succeeded by Allen Mawer, the separation was repealed and since then the School of English has been a unity, all its students partaking of both disciplines, though with emphasis, at choice, on either the linguistic or the literary side.

As a lecturer Elton was somewhat impassive, facing his respectful auditors with an appearance of aloofness, and refusing to court their favour by displays of facile brilliance. In the memory of one who heard him 'his theme was so much present to him that he himself seemed almost absent. All the light was concentrated on the subject for dissection and the surgeon was in the shadow, self-forgotten.' As a tutor he was eagerly on the watch for signs of life, while setting his face against all flummery or slapdash, especially against any failure to acknowledge indebtedness to authority. His students recognized the worth of what he gave them in both capacities. They recognized also the benefits of the personal friendship he offered them and many will still remember gratefully the hospitality they received from him and from Mrs. Elton in their home.

But perhaps his colleagues had the fullest opportunities for appreciating his human sympathy, his strong support of all good causes and of all wise departures from precedent, and his sense of honour. He could be fierce in combat and his rectitude was all the less vulnerable because it had no flavour of self-righteousness. His physical presence alone would have made him a conspicuous figure in the University, but he stood out even more by these gifts of character and by the wit which gave buoyancy to his advice. Because of his willingness to serve the University and his marked capacity for business, he held various administrative offices connected with the Faculty of Arts, the Senate, and the Council; but he kept business in its place, heeding more the ends it is meant to serve, and feeling, as he once put it, that the presence of University students in the community, 'their power of will, their fair behaviour, and the

effectual or the gracious part that they may play in life, should be our best credential'.

All this time the fabric of the three Surveys of English Literature was slowly being erected. They appeared at regular intervals, further evidence, it may be, of Elton's systematic habits: *1780–1830* in 1912 ('nearly five years' work, he noted), *1830–1880* in 1920, and *1730–1780* in 1928. There is system also (not too slavishly observed) in the construction of each, and in the treatment of individual authors: first a *curriculum vitae*, with a list of writings, then an interpretation of the salient works, with appreciative comments, and finally a tentative discovery of general characteristics, with special reference to style, always one of Elton's major interests. For the more important writers, a brief bibliography is given. Nothing quite like these Surveys had been attempted before. The nearest English analogue perhaps is provided by Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, especially for the method. Two other names suggest themselves: Sainte-Beuve and Pater; for the *Causeries du Lundi* are recalled by the constant endeavour to perceive and define the relations between the work and the personality which informs it, and by the sympathetic but carefully balanced estimates; and there is also not a little of Pater's delicate probing, and deliberate but sensitive style. The work as a whole is that on which Elton's repute as scholar and critic most firmly rests and it is needless here to dilate on merits which so many students of English literature have had occasion to observe for themselves. A few isolated reflections may, however, be in place:

1. The tide of respect and admiration for the literature belonging to the first decades of the nineteenth century was culminating towards its close and in the earliest years of the twentieth. There was a substantial body of biographical, historical, and critical writing on the 'romantic' period, but still room for a fresh and comprehensive assessment. To this period then, by an easy choice, the first of the Surveys was devoted, yet in no spirit of unchastened enthusiasm. The epigraph (from Hazlitt) is significant: 'I have endeavoured to give a reason for the faith that is in me;' and the reason presides, without prejudice to the claims of the other faculties concerned. The same period becomes a sort of touchstone in the tracing and evaluation of what went before and after, the matter of the two succeeding works; but in these other motives were at work, like the desire to offer the great Victorian performance a tribute from one born too late to admire it unquestioningly, and too soon to under-

estimate its importance or fail to mark the diversity of gifts which it implies; or the desire again to assert the positive, and not merely the relative, virtues of our literature in the middle and later years of the eighteenth century.

2. A survey, as here conceived, and as opposed to a history, implies a certain freedom from the temptation besetting the historian, to fit his material into a theoretical scheme, so that each event may be seen as a recognizable feature in a line of development; such efforts being sometimes frustrated by the unexpected and unaccountable vagaries of genius. Elton considers qualities and values without neglecting idiosyncrasy or forcing explanations; and is thus enabled to bring out the complexity of English literature in any of the periods under examination.

3. While the surveyor is thus at liberty, on suitable occasions, to 'number the streaks of the tulip' he does not fail to 'mark general properties and large appearances'; so that the reader of these volumes can take from them a heightened awareness of trends and meanings. Often help is afforded by summary statements occurring in introductory or concluding chapters, or thrown out elsewhere by the way. Thus in a retrospect of eighteenth-century poetry Elton offers both a brief definition of the more progressive phases and a kind of profit-and-loss account of what was involved in the new developments, with an appropriate emphasis on the loss:

> If we look back over this great body of verse, or through any good anthology, we are naturally struck by the slow, sure invasion of a new style and temper, more intense, more exalted, and taking fresh account of the face of nature, of the nature of man, and of whatever may lie behind them both. It is a change in the 'shaping spirit of imagination', and is in no way confined to poetry. If it does us any good, we can call this the 'romantic movement'. There is no need to question the traditional valuation of this great event. We all know what poetry gained by it. It is more needful to-day to realise what she lost. She lost a certain sober, delicate ideal of form, and a peculiar just correspondence between form, tone, and thinking, which has never been recovered and is only now being properly valued. The ideal is always there, if only we will go back to it. To do so is to refine our sense of measure when we are being carried away by greater and more splendid things which do not possess that virtue.

4. We for our part may do well to consider in the light of Elton's work what has been gained and lost in the field of critical and historical investigation through the attentions of

younger labourers. We have gained knowledge about the intellectual circumstances, the 'climate of opinion' which in so many ways affected our Elizabethan and our seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers. We have learnt more about the psychological processes involved in the making and appreciation of literature. New light has been thrown upon the inner coherences and correspondences, the various manifestations of likeness in difference, perceivable in single works or passages. What we have lost, or are at least in danger of losing, is a certain power of imaginative response and critical balance, assisted by versatile taste and wide reading in European literature; of which the results used to appear in an ability not only to read English literature with alertness and freshness of mind, but to see it steadily and see it whole. Of this ability in Elton his Surveys provide sufficient proof; and if these are taken in conjunction with his book on the Augustan Ages and his later account of English poetry, *The English Muse*, it is plain that there is not much of the first moment in our literature which he has left untouched.

Still within the period of his Professorship at Liverpool there were other activities: his editorship of the *Festschrift* presented to Professor Mackay on his retirement in 1914 after thirty years' service, a volume to which Elton contributed a Preface and a humorous address in an appropriate Burnsian style and metre; his visit as lecturer to the Punjab University in the winter of 1917–18, on the return from which four vessels in the same convoy were lost; and the writing of various lectures, essays and reviews, some of which were brought together in *A Sheaf of Papers* (1922). Among these not the least notable is the discussion of 'English Prose Numbers', originally published in *Essays and Studies* (English Association), vol. iv (1913), and now revised. Elton had a sensitive ear for rhythm, perhaps to make up for an almost complete deafness to musical pitch; and here he took the opportunity offered by the wide neglect of this subject to analyse and summarize the modes in which prose rhythm seems to make itself felt, in gradations of feet, invasions of metre, and concluding 'cadences'.

The same volume contains the Warton Lecture of 1914, on 'Poetic Romancers after 1850', 'Milton and Parties' (another English Association piece), and papers on 'Hamlet the Elizabethan' and certain French and Russian writers. Elton's study of Russian began during the War of 1914–18.

Towards the end of 1925 he was invited to go as visiting

professor to the University of Harvard. He therefore gave up his occupancy of the King Alfred Chair a few months before he was to retire under the limit of age and exactly twenty-five years since his tenure began. On leaving he received handsome tribute from his colleagues, pupils, and friends, who presented him with his portrait, painted by Augustus John, and with a cheque for over £300, which he at once devoted to the founding in the University of the 'Oliver Elton Prize' (for an essay). Very soon he became a Professor Emeritus.

He was in America from January 1926 for the remainder of the session, during which he was also Lowell Lecturer at Boston. On returning he and Mrs. Elton settled at 293, Woodstock Road, Oxford, a convenient house with a pleasant garden and a view from his study at the back over Port Meadow to Wytham Woods.

On retirement there was no remission of activity. There was first the third Survey (*1730–1780*) to be finished, and after that, time allowed for many fresh occupations. He had no thoughts of a 'modern' survey, 1880–1930, partly no doubt because he did not care to express himself on the work of living authors, some of whom might not yet have shown their full capacities. But a stronger reason may be gathered from the Epilogue to the Victorian Survey, where he justifies the closure at 1880 as 'a genuine date in our literature'. In nineteenth-century literature up to about that date he found 'nobleness' to be the salient quality. Now it begins to fail and with it the liberal enthusiasm of spirit and amplitude of style in prose. About the succeeding fifty years he would have spoken with generous recognition of the positive achievements, but also, inevitably, in the mood of one who notes with regret the passing of that noble temper and who, in his words, 'sighs as he seems to watch the last rays, and the lordly pillar, of that lighthouse-landmark receding in the mist'.

But there were large tracts of English literature about which he had written comparatively little: the pre-Renaissance field, the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, the seventeenth century generally up to 1680; all of which with more (including twentieth-century writers no longer living) is covered, so far as poetry is concerned, in *The English Muse* (1933). Here there is greater compression than in the Surveys because more than a thousand years are compassed within a single volume; but the spirit and method are similar, with the stressing of individual qualities and values, and with judgement rather by a poet's intention than

by rule, although absolute standards are not set aside. Here again is the pervasive gusto and discrimination, and the characteristic crispness of phrase. Some of the *comptes rendus* are brief indeed; but this is inherent in the design: 'the book is meant as an introduction; or as a companion to an imaginary, and most imperfect, anthology'. As such it is more than sufficient, and even the expert will enjoy fresh illuminations. Thus, to go no farther, no one has displayed with more sensitive recognition the artistry of the Old and Middle-English verse-writers; and who has better described the mood and quality of the *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*?

> No other work that has sunk into the general memory is so full of abstract phrases; but these suit the inscriptional character of the whole; and also the timeless, universal nature of the sentiment. This is lasting, like the churchyards themselves, elm-hung and history-haunted, of the South and Midlands. He gives voice to our feeling, so hard to define, for the stranger dead who are there and yet not there, and for whom we are neither happy nor unhappy. The reflection on what the departed villagers might have been under brighter stars is not tragical, and hardly pathetic; it is pure reverie; it is only the poet, not they themselves, who are disappointed. We are made, for some reason, to learn the *Elegy* by heart at an age when this sentiment is all Greek to us; but there is no harm in that, for experience only brings out its power.

Meanwhile, in 1928, a friendship of nearly forty years' standing was terminated by the death of C. E. Montague; and in the following year Elton's biography of him was published. This is a characteristically self-effacing work, with much quotation from Montague's letters and other writings, and with much material supplied by relatives and friends. Yet here again the biographer's personality can be discerned in the choice of material and in the lines of the portraiture. Indeed, some of the sentences might be self-portraiture, where the vigour of Montague's mind or his native modesty and reticence are remarked. The two men had much in common and Elton gives a just impression of Montague's high attainments as journalist and man of letters, although 'no full-dress criticism is attempted of his style or his writings'.

Elton's special interest in Slavonic poetry, Russian and then Serbo-Croatian, was much fostered during his retirement, and this, with his talent for verse, led to renderings in English metre which appeared in the *Slavonic Review* and which are reproduced and supplemented in *Verse from Pushkin and Others* (1935). Here there is an introduction which explains his principles and prac-

tices in translation, describes the poets concerned, and invites the reader not to let his views of Russian life and character be too exclusively dictated by the novelists. Theirs, it is suggested, is a too partial presentation of the darker or more ineffectual elements. 'The soul and genius of the race are best seen in the poetry.' This volume was followed by Pushkin's *Evgeny Onegin in English Verse* (1938) and by *Verse from Mickiewicz's Pan Tadeusz* (1940). Quotation must here be kept within bounds, but there is room for one example, Pushkin's verses 'To the Brownie':

To thee, our peaceful ground invisibly defending,
  Here is my prayer, O Brownie kind and good:—
  Keep safe my hamlet, and my garden wild, and wood,
And all my cloistered household unpretending!

May never rainstorm hurt these fields with perilous cold;
  May no belated autumn hurricane assail them!
  But helpful, timely snowfall veil them
Above the moist, manuring mould!

By these ancestral shades stay secret sentinel;
  See thou intimidate the midnight robber spying;
  Guard from all ill unfriendly eyeing
The happy cottage where we dwell!

Patrol it watchfully about; thy love betoken
  To my small plot, and stream embankt that drowsy flows,
  And this sequestered kitchen-close
With ancient crumbling wicket-gate and fences broken!

—Love, too, the hillock's slope of green
  And meadows that I tread in idle rumination,
  The cool lime-shades, the maples' murmuring screen:—
These are the haunts of inspiration!

He did not give up teaching, although this was now more sporadic. He lectured at Bedford College in 1927–8 and was Lecturer in Rhetoric at Gresham College in 1929–30. He returned to Harvard for the session 1930–1. There were also some single lectures, which, with other material, are gathered in *Essays and Addresses* (1939). Here will be found more Slavonic studies (Pushkin, Chekhov, Čapek); the British Academy Shakespeare Lecture of 1936 on 'Style in Shakespeare'; the presidential address to the English Association on 'Robert Bridges and *The Testament of Beauty*' (1932); an article on 'The Present Value of Byron', two recent Manchester lectures, 'Reason and

Enthusiasm in the Eighteenth Century', and 'The Nature of Literary Criticism'. The volume ends with memoirs *in piam memoriam* of George Saintsbury and James Fitzmaurice-Kelly. Elton also wrote the memoirs of Saintsbury and of Lascelles Abercrombie for the Academy *Proceedings* (1933 and 1939). Among his latest publications was his biographical account of J. B. Yeats prefixed to the collection of *Letters* which appeared in 1944.

Besides his Fellowship of the British Academy (1924) Elton received many academic rewards, an honorary Fellowship of his own Oxford College, and honorary doctorates of Durham, Manchester, Edinburgh, Oxford, Liverpool, and Reading.

During some of his later years he suffered from a dangerous condition of the heart which forebade strenuous physical exertion; but he had fortitude and a sound constitution; and remained in full possession of his faculties until the end. He died, after a short illness, at Oxford on 4 June 1945, having reached the age of eighty-four on the preceding day.

It would be rash for me to attempt any full delineation of so rich a character and personality, and it is unnecessary too, for the work he has left behind exhibits the man himself no less than his gifts of scholarship, insight, judgement, and craftsmanship. *Abeunt studia in mores*, but, equally in this instance, *mores in studia*; and in his concern for the accurate analysis, the just estimate, even for the just word and the right rhythm, we need not try to distinguish artistic from ethical allegiances. The same exactness and faithful dealing appeared in his management of ordinary affairs, in which he took for granted an answering honesty of purpose in his associates. He was genuinely surprised when this expectation was disappointed. He was a loyal and patient friend and he was eager to help younger scholars with advice or encouragement, which he would offer unassumingly, as from one labourer in the vineyard to another with similar interests and capacities. There was no hint of condescension or parade. His nature precluded the unprovoked stridencies which can be mistaken for signs of strength, though it precluded also the ineffectiveness which sometimes goes with modesty. In conversation there might be some initial reserve, and he was embarrassed by displays of unregulated emotion. But once common ground had been established, as it could be very quickly, there was no check to the warmth and lambency of his spirit, the gaiety of his wit, and the lively returns of sympathetic understanding. He admired the French

type of civilization more than the Germanic and there was a French poise and deftness of touch in his personal intercourse as in his writing.

There was something French also in his abiding respect for the reason, which he upheld as the safest guide towards the right conduct and understanding of human affairs. It was not narrowly conceived, for it included 'Reason in her more exalted mood', which admits of vision. The limits of the logical reason were fully admitted; the claims of vision, as of the affections and the moral emotions, must be allowed; but reason must decide upon their validity. 'At the worst, it must keep the position of a co-partner whose signature is requisite if the cheque is to be honoured.' And in the Epilogue to the Victorian Survey there are remarks on the function of reason in modern life which have their relevance to-day. Referring to the late nineteenth-century change of spirit making for reaction towards *a priori* philosophy and mysticism Elton observes, by way of explanation:

> That reason, and science, and the enthusiasm of humanity, which spoke out so bravely in the third quarter of the last century, left many facts of human nature, emotional and spiritual, out of their reckoning, and made too hasty a synthesis; that these facts, as always happens, revenged themselves upon the theories which overlooked them; that reason, in consequence, became awhile discredited; that the task of reason is to catch up with the facts that she had ignored, and to reassert her natural supremacy; and that to do this service for reason is the business of that coming age which most of us will not live to see.

Elton's own gift of reasoning and of scientific precision is palpable in his critical writing, though his other gifts made him an artist as well. How he saw his special province is perhaps best indicated in what he wrote on 'The Nature of Literary Criticism': an activity which he distinguishes from scholarship, or theorizing, or psychological inquiry, whatever help it may willingly derive from these quarters.

> Criticism is none of these things, for it is *practical*; an art or craft like drawing; and all these other kinds of knowledge may serve it as drawing may be served by a knowledge of anatomy. It is also a *product*, like the poems which are its subject-matter; and it may itself be an art-product, if the critic, as so often has happened, is himself a poet or has a poetic soul.

And it is because Elton had such a soul that he is in the true line of succession represented in English criticism by Sidney, Dryden, Johnson, Coleridge, Arnold, and Pater.

He did not often expose his views on ultimate questions of

philosophy, and when he did it was apt to be with some apology for amateur procedure and with avoidance of abstruseness. His attitude to religious doctrine was avowedly agnostic and he lost the chance of at least one Oxford Fellowship because this attitude was known. Yet he well understood various types of religious experience and sympathized with the mystical temper, especially the kind which favours hopefulness and buoyancy, and offers no hindrance to 'sanguine and creative energy'; and now and then there are hints, as in parenthesis, of a personal metaphysic, which, whatever it may owe to other minds, carries the authority of fresh and reasoned pondering. Thus in the dialogue on 'Poetry and Life' (in *A Sheaf of Papers*) there is a glimpse of tentative speculation on the mystery of evil and suffering: the kind of poetry which admits, but in the end resolves, pain and discord 'follows the law which in our sanguine moments we discern may somehow be obeyed in the order of things. Not a mere happy ending; but an ending, a final effect, a total progress, which on retrospect gives satisfaction on the whole. We have been through an imaginative experience, which we would rather have had than not have had.'

And perhaps the kind of summary tribute which Elton would like best, because it does not sound too pretentious, is to say that he has helped us, in spite of all distress, to take satisfaction in 'the order of things', and that we gratefully enter his life and works on the credit side of the cosmic balance-sheet. He persuades us to 'think nobly of the soul'.

L. C. MARTIN

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