ERNEST DE SELINCOURT

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1870–1943

ERNEST DE SELINCOURT, third son of Charles Alexandre de Selincourt, was born in Streatham on 24 September 1870. As a young man Charles Alexandre had come over from France to London with his mother: little is known of his progenitors; it is supposed that they were of an aristocratic Roman Catholic family whose place was in the village of Selincourt, thirty miles west of Abbeville. The family estate, whatever it was, had been lost in the Revolution of '48, and the young Charles maintained a living in his first years in London by the skill of his mother, a gifted needlewoman, who designed and executed shawls and mantles which he sold to London firms. From this humble beginning sprang the clothing manufactory of Selincourt & Sons which he built up into a substantial business. At the King's Weigh House Chapel Charles met Miss Theodora Bruce Bendall, whom he married in 1862. He was a man of unbounded energy, great organizing ability, and an unusual gift of speech. His wife was a woman of quiet beauty both of person and character and of strong religious faith. He became an enthusiastic member of the Congregational Church and built a Mission Hall for his workpeople, where he preached himself with an eloquence that is still remembered.

Ernest inherited from his father a temperamental vigour and driving force, together with a strong bent for practical affairs, from his mother an inward gentleness and perhaps also that fundamental, though not superficial, tranquillity of temper which accompanied an undisturbed spiritual faith. His grandmother Mrs. Bendall gave him an early and never-forgotten draught of literature, reading aloud to him *Paradise Lost* during a bout of illness.

His brothers and sisters were exceptional people, characterized by abundant vitality and by unusual intellectual gifts. His elder brother Martin became the distinguished head of the family business; Muriel (Mrs. Lee Mathews) was a gifted musician; Agnes, his closest companion in childhood, whom he thought the ablest of them all, was Principal of the Bombay Settlement and afterwards of Westfield College; his youngest sister, Theodora (Mrs. McKeown), had a brilliant University career; Basil and Hugh won repute as writers.

For his schooling he went first to Huddersfield College, where he won the Lower School Prize for Good Conduct, voted by masters and boys, and then in 1885 to Dulwich College. Here the headmaster, A. H. Gilkes, won his enduring admiration and affection and was a decisive influence upon his mind and character. Dulwich[1] had at that time a brilliant staff and many able boys: there was a strong current of intellectual life in the upper forms; in the VI the boys had the privilege of being taught by William Trevor Lendrum (he afterwards took the name of Vesey), whose fine scholarship, taste in literature, and passion for poetry—especially Wordsworth's—made a lasting impression. De Selincourt struck his contemporaries as quiet and meditative with already a literary flavour and a subtle humour in his talk, in which they delighted. He played Rugby football for the school in four seasons: his energy as a forward was striking.

In October 1890 he went up to University College, Oxford. At school he had not been outstanding as a scholar, and had laboured under difficulties from ill health. At college he found full scope for his intellectual powers and tastes, and became the centre and moving spirit of an interesting circle of friends, among whom were E. T. Campagnac, James E. Hales, and John Shawcross. His enthusiasm for literature and the Arts impressed his contemporaries, on whom, one of them records, he had 'an educative influence, in which his uncompromising character and contempt for affectation or pretentiousness played a part'. Through his initiative two College Societies were founded, which still survive: the Durham Society for reading Shakespeare, and the Martletts for essays and discussion on 'Arts' subjects. His interest in and knowledge of English Literature were warmly recognized by members of the Senior Common Room, in particular the Master, Dr. Bright, Sir A. Selby-Bigge, and Dr. A. J. Carlyle, and in 1893 a College Prize was offered for English, which he won. He was placed in the Second Class in Honour Moderations and again in Literae Humaniores. He was 'Proxime' for the Chancellor's Prize for English Essay.

He had now made up his mind to aim at a University post in English Literature, an adventurous decision at the time, and he spent the next two years working at Anglo-Saxon with Professor Napier, preparing lectures which he delivered at Bedford College, and in tutorial work in Oxford. The Honour School of English Language and Literature was in embryo. In 1896,

[1] I am indebted here to his contemporaries Sir Henry McAnally and Mr. R. G. Routh for reminiscences.

the year of his marriage to Ethel Shawcross, he was appointed Lecturer in English Literature by his college, and in 1899 University Lecturer in Modern English Literature, the first appointments of their kind in Oxford. The English School in its first years owed more to him than can easily be estimated. Almost single-handed he provided the necessary courses of lectures in literature, and gave tuition to most of the men and women reading the School.

He was a great teacher, stirring the minds of his pupils, setting before them a scholar's standard of accuracy and thoroughness, giving them full measure from his own store of knowledge and experience. His criticism could be pungent—annihilating to a slovenly essay—but it sprang from a breadth and certainty of knowledge and a purity of taste which commanded respect, and, besides, his humour or a touch of lively sympathy could draw out the sting. He taught his pupils to respect the English language: his own use of it had a notable precision and distinction. He liked the young, treated them with a friendly courtesy, and though he seldom praised, was quick to recognize ability or insight. For a student who really cared about his subject he could not do enough. To many of his pupils he became a life-long friend.

In lecturing his habit was to read from a carefully prepared script. He could never bring himself to speak extempore or without full notes: he thought he owed too much to his subject. Each lecture was a well-constructed whole, packed with matter, finely—not brilliantly—phrased. Its effect was to send the listener back to his author with a new understanding both of his thought and art, an effect much enhanced by the power and 'inwardness' of the lecturer's reading. Passages of Milton or of Wordsworth read by him would reverberate in the memory long after. In spite of a temperamental reserve he could not but communicate something of his own deep feeling for great literature and his sense of its power to quicken the spirit.

As a hard-worked tutor he still found time for the steady pursuit of scholarship, which it was to be his happiness to follow with a characteristic dogged industry till the last week of his life. His first considerable work, his edition of the Poems of Keats, published in 1905,[1] was recognized as setting a new standard in the editing of a modern poet, and won praise at once from such critics as Dowden, Bradley, and Herford. His aim was to provide

[1] *The Poems of John Keats*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by E. de S., March 1905. Revised editions in 1907, 1912, 1921, and 1926.

a sound text with sufficient textual apparatus and full commentary, and in his introduction, notes, and appendix to elucidate Keats's poetic development by establishing his relation with his predecessors. His investigation of the influence upon Keats of the literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries brought a new understanding of the poet's style and art. A flood of light was thrown upon *Hyperion* by the discovery, as the book was going to press, of two important manuscripts,[1] the holograph of the poem and Woodhouse's transcript of *The Fall of Hyperion*. Throughout he handled his material with a fine balance of critical judgement and sensitive perception. He gave without pedantry what the scholar wanted, and at the same time what could stimulate and delight the general reader. The book has a glow about it, yet its practical purpose is never forgotten. It remains an outstanding edition of Keats, which has rendered to the poet the critic's best service in a true labour of love: it has cleared away the rubbish of false estimates and has given the reader the necessary knowledge to follow the poet's inner development and to read his text aright.

In 1906 he published an edition of Wordsworth's *Guide to the Lakes*, once more a model of scholarly editing and the pledge of a confirmed devotion.[2] His love of the Lake country and of Wordsworth led him in 1904, when the way was opened by a legacy to his wife, to build his country home at a chosen spot between Rydal and Grasmere. Here at Ladywood from now onwards the happiest months of his life were spent.

During his Oxford years he lectured for the University Extension, at the Ladies' College, Cheltenham (1898–1907), and for the Royal Holloway College (1901–5).

His work as lecturer and tutor in Oxford came to an end in 1908. Walter Raleigh had been elected Merton Professor of English Literature in 1904, and David Nichol Smith to the Goldsmith Readership in 1908. In December of that year de Selincourt was elected to the Chair of English Literature in the University of Birmingham, recently vacated by Churton Collins. A very different field of activity was now opened to him. In Oxford his time had been divided between the congenial tasks of teacher and scholar: in Birmingham he realized at once that

[1] *Hyperion, a Facsimile of Keats's Autograph MS., with a transliteration of the MS. of the Fall of Hyperion*, with Introduction and Notes by E. de S., published in 1905.

[2] *Wordsworth's Guide to the Lakes*, fifth edition (1835) with an introduction, &c., by E. de S., 1906.

the method and scope of his teaching must be altered and that his energies could not be confined to the academic sphere.

Birmingham University, the first of our great civic universities to be created in the provinces, was in process of emerging out of the Mason College of Science. The Arts Faculty had, as it still has, its seat in the old Mason College building in Edmund Street, 'an almost perfect example', as de Selincourt described it, 'of mid-Victorian Gothic', grimy without and dingy within. By contrast the first instalment of the fine new buildings of the Science Faculty just completed at Edgbaston symbolized the predominant position of Science in the University. The Mason College of Science, as de Selincourt noted, had only admitted the Arts by a back door, because a smattering of Latin and English was required for the London Matriculation; and the old Mason College tradition was not dead. From his first arrival he put the full force of his mind and personality into the struggle for the recognition of humane studies in their rightful place in the University, and further for the recognition of the University as the centre of intellectual life in the city. The opening of the new University Buildings at Edgbaston was commemorated in a special issue of the *Birmingham Post*, 7 July 1909: de Selincourt contributed an article on 'The Ideal of the University'. His views here expressed on the function and scope of the University as it might and ought to be are based on a shrewd practical estimate of local needs no less than upon a generous idealism. The University must be the recognized centre of the intellectual life of the midlands. 'It desires not merely to conduct research but to inspire interest in it, not merely to be learned but to disseminate learning.' Whilst it will emphasize those studies which local conditions favour, it will aim at being complete and self-contained, so as to leave no worthy intellectual aspiration uncared for. It should permeate the society which surrounds it with its ideal of learning and culture. The scientific schools were in a state of hopeful progress: the humaner studies were stunted and the possibilities of their development needed unfolding. De Selincourt set out the desiderata in concise practical form: There was a Chair of Classics: separate Chairs of Greek and Latin were required; there was only one Professor and one Lecturer in History, no Lecturer in English Language. There was a Faculty of Commerce, no Faculty of Law. A Chair of Music had been endowed, a companion Chair of Fine Arts ought to be added; a Professorship of Comparative Religion was a desideratum. There should be a Lecturer in Journalism. The

Library should be greatly expanded. Before he retired in 1935 nearly all these requirements had been met: a separate Chair of Latin was founded in 1919, of Greek in 1924; in History there was a Reader and three full-time lecturers by 1922; a Lecturer in English Language was appointed in 1920: the Chair of Law was established in 1924; the Barber Chair of Fine Arts in 1934, and the Chair of Theology followed in 1941. The idea—which was in fact Churton Collins's and perhaps put forward in deference to his memory—of a Lectureship in Journalism died a natural death. For the rest the University developed on the lines he had forecast, and he played himself a vigorous part in shaping its destinies. The Principal, Sir Oliver Lodge, and John Henry Muirhead, Professor of Philosophy, won his admiration and loyal devotion: they stood, as he did, for learning and education in their broadest interpretation. His own department grew and flourished, coming to stand in the forefront of the Arts Faculty both in prestige and in number and quality of students. He believed in the tutorial system and was a pioneer in introducing it in Birmingham; from the first he offered tuition to all his Honour students. His contacts with them necessarily lacked the intimacy of the Oxford tutorial hours, but the best of them came to know him and to value what one of them (a rebel at the time to his Wordsworthian teaching) calls his 'ironic wisdom' and another his 'aristocracy of mind'. The least intellectual caught from him some sense of the living and human values of literature. He required all his students to read aloud to him; if they failed to pass the test, they were sent on to a course of speech training. There was no pedantry in his conception of English Literature as an academic subject: he liked his students to profit by such teaching in other departments as he could induce his colleagues to offer, so that, for example, Professor Walter Moberly regularly gave a course in Philosophy to fit in with the current courses in English Literature. The truth was that unlike many academic people he believed in education, and, what is more unusual, saw it habitually as a whole, looking across departmental barriers. 'The noble calling of a teacher' implied for him professional training and the highest possible status. All was not well with the Department of Education: he saw that the right way to lift and strengthen it was to incorporate it in the main structure of the University. He was instrumental in ensuring the status of University Lecturer to the lecturers in Arts subjects in the Education Department, and set an example by inviting the lecturers in English to join his own

staff and to give regular tuition to his Honours students; at the same time students of the Department of Education were admitted to his Honours lectures. Later he was for many years an active force on the Midland Board of Training Colleges. He entered with energy and gusto into the editing of a series of School Readers under the title of *The Way of Literature*, designed to stimulate both in teachers and pupils a taste for a variety of literature and 'a hunger for the best'. He was a valued member of the Teachers' Registration Council and gave his mind ungrudgingly to its problems, seeing in its organization a means of establishing the teacher's calling on a properly professional basis. With Professor Muirhead he saw the importance of the growing movement for adult education and welcomed in the Workers' Educational Association a body which could be brought into fruitful relation with the University to the benefit of each. He was an active member from its inception of a joint committee set up by the Senate to organize University work in connexion with the W.E.A., and he took a new step in appointing a lecturer in his own department who was to give half her time to teaching for that association. He gave an occasional address himself in a Labour Church, and from time to time full courses of lectures to the W.E.A. He also acted as educational adviser to the Winson Green Prison, arranging for suitable teachers, and sometimes lecturing there himself. He believed in women and was a vigorous advocate of their higher education. He was Chairman for some years of the Edgbaston High School, and later member of the Council of Westfield College, of which he was elected Honorary Fellow. He welcomed the foundation of the English Association as a means of quickening and spreading the love of good literature, and the Birmingham branch, under his chairmanship (1909–32), grew and flourished exceedingly. He drew to Birmingham such lecturers as W. P. Ker, Arthur Sidgwick, Andrew Bradley, Walter de la Mare, Laurence Binyon, E. M. Forster, H. J. C. Grierson, Rose Macaulay; but the courses he gave himself each winter, ranging over the best of English literature from Chaucer to Bridges, drew the largest audiences, and his influence spread widely through this channel to hosts of elementary and secondary school teachers, and to many Birmingham and Edgbaston citizens. His lectures on the Bible as Literature, repeated to the W.E.A., made a stir, provoking some earnest protests, as well as much enthusiasm. Many hearers found in them a real awakening and a new approach to the Bible.

A true lover of the Arts, he felt bound to devote time and pains

to any project that would bring good music or good drama within the reach of citizens and students. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the City Orchestra, and as Chairman for many years of its Executive Committee he exerted a strong influence upon both its artistic and administrative activities. His critical mind and eclectic taste (his own preference was for the classical, but he was tolerant and even adventurous in the choice of music for programmes) entitled him to offer suggestions which were of constructive value. He had a hand in the appointment of Adrian Boult as the Conductor of the Orchestra, and later in the choice of his successor, Leslie Heward. He was himself an ardent concert-goer, seldom missed an occasion, and every year took the whole of his English staff and students to a concert of the City Orchestra.

He prized the Drama as another source of intelligent delight, and put much energy and enthusiasm into a scheme for securing good drama for Birmingham and educating the taste of the city by the creation of a Drama Society, sponsored by City and University in 1911. This led on to a still better venture, which had his vigorous support, the foundation of the Repertory Theatre through the generosity of Sir Barry Jackson in 1913. His interest in the Repertory was close and personal; John Drinkwater, then both actor and playwright, became an intimate friend, and de Selincourt was an habitué of the theatre.

He exercised his critical judgement with salutary effect as University representative on the Public Libraries Committee of the City. The late Vice-Chancellor tells me that on one occasion a book under consideration costing seven guineas was objected to as too expensive, and his opinion was invited. 'This,' he said, 'I am informed by those who know, is the best book on the subject. If you want the Library to be a real Library of Reference and of use to scholars you will buy it: if you want it to be a superior Railway Book-stall you will not.' The book was passed in silence. Sir Charles Grant Robertson adds: 'When I reproached him later for being rather "fierce", he looked at me quite simply, and then said "Fierce? Was I?" ' His acceptance of the highest standards was a matter of course: his scorn of Philistinism, of stupidity and ignorance in 'educated' people ingrained in his nature.

The war years 1914–18 put a severe strain upon him. His eldest son fought in France: he himself went over to lecture to the troops in 1917 under the auspices of the Y.M.C.A. His literary work took the only possible direction in a series of

lectures on English poets and the national crisis—Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and later poets.[1] In 1918 his strength was sapped by a severe illness, and in the winter of 1919–20 he took a necessary rest and holiday in a six months' stay in Italy. Here he found solace and delight in climate and country as well as in the society of young writers and literary critics at Rome and Florence, in particular Emilio Cecchi, Papini, Piero Jahier, Francesco Porchi Diano.

On his return he plunged once more into University politics, full of plans and ideas and with renewed driving power. He took a leading part in the fight for better salaries for the University staff, especially for its junior members, and had influence in securing increased Government grants for the provincial universities. Sir Charles Grant Robertson had succeeded Sir Oliver Lodge as Principal in 1919, and de Selincourt found in him a great and liberal-minded administrator with whom he was happy to work. Grant Robertson on his side recognized de Selincourt's administrative gifts and intellectual power and saw to it that these gifts were fully used in the service of the University. He was now Dean of the Faculty of Arts and naturally stood as champion of his faculty in matters of University policy, but as Professor Boulton, then Dean of the Faculty of Science, testifies, he was a trustworthy colleague, sane, fair, and tolerant over issues which concerned both faculties. 'True learning and ripe Scholarship were his constant aim. He could be brusque and even caustic when it seemed to him narrow or petty or selfish views were aired.' The breach between Science and the Humanities was in a fair way to be healed. From Dean he was promoted in 1931 to be Vice-Principal, and in this position he habitually attended meetings of the Science Faculty, entering further into an understanding of its needs and aims; and he was also *ex-officio* member of the Council's Finance Committee, the real 'cabinet' of University policy. He was far-seeing and insistently progressive in his ideas for the development of the University; his leading aim not only to enlarge but to liberalize and humanize, so that the University as true centre of learning and enlightenment might spread its influence through the community in widening circles. He did his best to promote social intercourse among his colleagues, and was instrumental in starting a Staff Social Club; he worked to extend the hostel system for students, having at heart their need of civilizing social influences.

[1] Published by the Oxford University Press under the title of *English Poets and the National Ideal*, 1915.

At the time of his retirement, looking back over the progress of the University in the twenty-seven years of his office, he noted as even more important than the extension of the faculties in number and diversity the growth of the faculties within themselves by the accession of staff—he welcomed in particular the young lecturers—and he recognized as most important of all the development of a true co-operation between the faculties and the growth of a 'University spirit'. He took a keen interest and exercised a telling influence in the election of professors and lecturers. In the staffing of his own department he prided himself on never having made a mistake. His relations with his staff were of the friendliest. He delighted in the appointment of his successor, Mr. A. M. D. Hughes, whom he held in the highest respect, and who, as his Senior Lecturer for many years, helped him to create one of the finest Schools of English in the country.

A Birmingham colleague, Professor E. R. Dodds, writes:

De Selincourt deserves to be remembered not only as a great English scholar but as one of the men whose obstinate idealism and creative vision transformed a group of unimportant provincial institutions, originally little more than glorified 'Techs.', into the Modern Universities as we know them to-day.

At the period when I knew Birmingham, de Selincourt was easily the most powerful personality in the university. Before he became Vice-Principal in 1931, he was for many years perpetual Dean of the Faculty of Arts, not because he desired this burdensome office (he was always trying in vain to retire from it), but because no one else was prepared to accept it while de Selincourt was available. His swift grasp of essentials, his detestation of time-wasters, and the fact that he always knew his own mind made him an admirable if rather dictatorial chairman; and if slower minds on the Faculty occasionally resented his curt rulings, they trusted him absolutely to state their case and fight their cause in higher quarters. As a debater he was formidable: he was a master of quietly savage sarcasm, and possessed in a unique degree the dangerous gift of making his opponent feel a fool. He knew its dangers, and did his best, I think, to keep it under control, but he could not hide his contempt for mediocrity, especially for pretentious mediocrity, and it earned him the reputation of arrogance. Arrogant I suppose he was; but he had complete intellectual integrity and was singularly free from the meaner vanities and jealousies. And he was no bully: he liked people who had enough wit and courage to stand up to him; and in his later years he was both surprised and genuinely distressed to find that many of his colleagues were afraid of him. He was quick to recognize both personal quality and intellectual promise, whether in students or in younger colleagues; and when once his confidence had been gained, he proved himself the most generous and the most loyal of friends. On social

occasions he was incalculable: when his company pleased him, his conversation was memorable for its mellow charm and its ironic, slightly impish humour; when it did not please him, he would retire into a disconcerting silence or even take refuge in sleep.

Recognition outside Birmingham brought him many honours: among these he prized most of all his election to the Professorship of Poetry in his old University in 1928. In 1929 he was made Hon. LL.D. of Edinburgh, in 1927 was elected Fellow of the British Academy, in 1930 Honorary Fellow of University College.

In 1927 he spent three months in America in response to an invitation to lecture in the University of Michigan: he lectured also at Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Swarthmore, Cornell, Madison, Chicago, and Toronto. He thoroughly enjoyed the experience. The prestige of his scholarship, the distinction of his presence and his conversation, and the unfailing effect of his well-composed, quietly delivered lectures brought him a recognition which stimulated and refreshed him. The colleagues with whom he worked felt an immediate respect for his integrity of mind and crystal clarity of judgement, and he was refreshed also by the response he got from a new kind of student audience.[1] In the winter of 1927–8 he lectured at the Sorbonne on the invitation of Legouis, and afterwards at the University of Aix-Marseille. In 1931 he lectured to the Marburg Institute in Hamburg; in 1934 gave the Clark Lectures in Cambridge, and in 1937 held the Lectureship in Fine Arts in the University of Belfast. In 1935, the year of his retirement from Birmingham, he was elected President of the English Association, and gave his characteristically impersonal Presidential Address at Stratford the following summer on 'The Early Wordsworth', a gift to Wordsworthians of interesting new material from unpublished manuscripts. In 1938 he delivered the Huxley Lecture in Birmingham on the theme 'The Interplay of Literature and Science in the last three Centuries'.

His reputation as an authority on his subject, now well established on the Continent, had been steadily strengthened by published work. The same discerning judgement of imaginative literature in diverse fields, and the same workmanlike scholarship are evident in his edition of Spenser's *Minor Poems* in 1910, and his compendious and illuminating Introduction[2] to the

[1] He was pleased by a student's comment on one of his lectures on Shelley: 'He sure delivered all the groceries.'

[2] An Oxford critic of a younger generation, C. S. Lewis, has called it 'noble', and the tribute pleased him.

Oxford *Spenser* in 1912; his editions for the World's Classics of *Imaginary Conversations* by W. S. Landor (a selection with introduction), 1915, and of *Selected Poems* by Walt Whitman with introductory essay, 1920. His Warton Lecture on Keats for the centenary, 1921, was a happy solution of a difficult problem: how to find anything further to say about Keats. He simply went back to him with the intent to understand more deeply the way in which his life shaped his art. The result was a new interpretation of the growth of Keats's poetic genius by a mind finely sensitive to human personality and the human element in literature.

Throughout these years his devotion to Wordsworth was the spring of literary labours carried on as time served in busy terms at Birmingham, and with a completer and serener absorption in vacations at Grasmere. His knowledge of Wordsworth's poetry and life and country-side and his interest in all his local associations were steadily growing. As Chairman of the Dove Cottage Trustees he took the closest interest in the Cottage, and was energetic, along with Mrs. Rawnsley, in promoting a scheme for a museum, in a converted barn nearby, to accommodate both manuscripts, portraits, and other relics of interest in connexion with the poet, and also a collection of objects illustrating the life of the country-side in Wordsworth's day. His friendship with Mr. Gordon Wordsworth, the poet's grandson, brought him access to the rich collection of Wordsworth manuscripts handed down in the family, as well as to the store of knowledge inherited and garnered by their owner. His edition of *The Prelude* from the early manuscripts, published in 1926,[1] was the fruit of patient unremitting labours discharged with the practical sagacity and the imaginative concentration which alone could bring into intelligible order the mass and confusion of detail presented: there are five complete manuscripts of the poem and eight others containing large portions or scraps. No one who has not wrestled with these manuscript note-books can appreciate the magnitude and complexity of the task: Wordsworth was parsimonious of paper, he suffered from bad eyesight, and his handwriting is often quite indecipherable to the uninitiate. De Selincourt printed the text of the earliest complete manuscripts of 1805 (from fair copies by Dorothy and

[1] *The Prelude* or *Growth of a Poet's Mind* by William Wordsworth, edited from the Manuscripts with textual and critical notes by E. de S., 1926. Second Impression with Addenda to Notes, 1928: further Addenda and Corrigenda, 1932.

Sarah Hutchinson) page by page opposite to the 1850 text, and arranged the readings from the rest in his apparatus criticus according to their relation to the one or the other. The clarity and symmetry of the result is a masterly achievement of technical scholarship. Not only so, the whole work is carried out both here and in the learned introduction and exegetical notes under a presiding sense of fundamental values, so that technical scholarship is directed to its proper end, the revelation of the poet's mind and meaning. Herford wrote: 'If Dr. de Selincourt has given us an edition comparable with the finest achievements of classical scholarship, it is because this "spiritual auto-biography" is for him in the line of succession to *The Iliad* and *The Æneid*.'

De Selincourt's next enterprise was a biography of Dorothy Wordsworth undertaken at the suggestion of Mr. Gordon Wordsworth, who put at his disposal all the family papers. This book, published in 1933, 'bore more resemblance', as its author confessed, 'to the old-fashioned *Life and Letters* than to a biography in the approved modern manner'. He admired Dorothy's rare gift of expressing herself, and was content to let her tell her own story, in so far as it could be told, in her own words. The self-effacement of the biographer does not blind the intelligent reader to the skill and judgement and still more the sensitive understanding of personalities, which make this book something much more than a scholarly compilation of interesting material. He had lived long at the heart of his subject, and he wrote with a warmth and delicacy and a pervading quietness that are in keeping with it: the result is an imaginative study from life with its own integrity and abiding appeal.

His next task, one of prolonged and exacting labour, was a worthy edition, long overdue, of the letters of William and Dorothy. Professor William Knight's *Letters of the Wordsworth Family* was incomplete and faulty. Many of the letters that passed through his hands were dispersed and untraceable. De Selincourt set himself to collect all known letters and to seek further for any that survived. His excellent and indispensable edition in six volumes was completed before the war broke out in 1939.[1]

Two more services he found time to render to Dorothy: the publication of her moving narrative of *George and Sarah Green* in

[1] *The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, 1935; *The Letters of W. and D. W.: The Middle Years*, Vols. I and II, 1937; *The Letters of W. and D. W.: The Later Years*, Vols. I, II, and III, 1939.

1936, and in 1941 a fuller edition of her Journals, from the original manuscripts, than had yet been attempted.[1]

In 1935, the year of his retirement from Birmingham, the Museum attached to Dove Cottage was opened. Mr. Gordon Wordsworth had given to the Dove Cottage Trust the whole of his valuable collection of the poet's manuscripts and family letters. These de Selincourt set himself to sift and arrange and catalogue, a service for which posterity will thank him. He was now at work upon his last great enterprise, a critical edition of Wordsworth's *Poetical Works*. The first volume published in 1940 and the second in 1944 are an earnest of the definitive edition which will be completed in five volumes from the material he has left ready in all essentials for publication.[2] The critical apparatus is based on the editions printed in Wordsworth's lifetime as well as upon a mass of manuscript material, the bulk of which first sees the light here: the notes, drawing upon a wide range of learning, are strictly limited to necessary exegesis and pertinent illustration. The result is an edition which for completeness, accuracy, and lucid construction will take its place permanently among the worthy editions of the great English classics.

When he died he had done for Wordsworth and Dorothy Wordsworth as much as any scholar can do for any author; he had transformed our knowledge and understanding of Wordsworth, and his name will always be associated with the poet who from early manhood had been nearest his heart and most congenial to his mind. The bulk of his editorial work, measured by the massive volumes that carry it, is impressive: its quality admirable. His learning was free from pedantry and dogmatism —its sole use in his view to make his author better understood. In steady concentration on this end he was able to disregard irrelevant or insignificant detail, so that his editing is a model of clarity and economy.

As literary critic he published little: writing never came easily to him, and what he wrote he did not value highly. He would have said himself that if it had any merit it sprang from an intense devotion to his subject. Literature was a part of his life. He had the power of living in the poet's mind. Edmund Blunden writes: 'I once heard him lecture on Blake, and interpret among other things *Mad Song* in what struck me as a truly

[1] *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, edited by E. de Selincourt. 2 Vols. 1941.

[2] *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, edited from the manuscripts with textual and critical notes, by E. de S. Vol. I, 1940; Vol. II, 1944.

poetical way, and then he read the poem with perfect sympathy for its music and the thing said.' His preference was for literature which gave the most authentic revelation of the human heart and the human spirit. The great things seemed to him greatest and most worthy of study. He might have taken as his motto an assertion which he quotes from Blake: 'enthusiastic admiration is the first principle of knowledge, and its last.' But he had learning and ripe judgement and he was nothing if not critical; humour and a searching common sense, no less than a trained severity of taste, saved him from the pitfalls of enthusiasm. His enjoyment of contemporary poetry was, within its range, generous, but it did not extend to the latest developments. He thought wisely that no critic over the age of 45 should pronounce judgement on new poetry, which he was probably incapable of understanding. His published criticism, which has no axe to grind, no paradox to float, may outlast more brilliant writing simply by virtue of its integrity: he had no other aim than true interpretation of what he knew and loved.

The Oxford lectures[1] delivered from the Chair of Poetry give the measure of his mature powers. His eloquent inaugural 'On Poetry' is both a lucid statement of thought and a confession of faith. He insists upon the universal range of poetry and finds the key to the nature of 'pure poetry' not in its alliance with music, nor with prayer (according to a recent pronouncement by the Abbé Bremond), but in 'the perfect rightness of its language to convey a passionate experience'. For the purpose of communication the poet must use all his powers to clarify and define. 'Only through beauty can the poet give life to his creation. . . . And the value of poetry lies simply in its power to communicate a sense of life in all its infinite variety and significance.' These ideas are brought home less by subtle argument than by happy quotation from a wide range of reading so that the stress is left not upon what the critic has to say but upon what poetry itself means. Of the lectures that followed, those on Bridges, on Chaucer's *Troilus and Creseyde*, and on Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* illustrate well the range of his powers of insight into the poetical subject. Approaching the two great variations on the theme of Troilus from a thorough knowledge of the medieval and Elizabethan backgrounds, he penetrates to the heart both of Chaucer's tender, humorous, and passionate rendering and of Shakespeare's ruthlessly cynical yet withal poetical inversion of the same subject. Both interpretations

[1] *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*. Oxford University Press, 1934.

must offer new light to the most seasoned reader. His lectures on Robert Bridges drew large audiences and bore fruit in a better understanding of a poet who will never be popular but for him had an irresistible appeal. He ended his second lecture, on *The Testament of Beauty*, with the line that voices the poet's inmost faith and his own:

Verily by Beauty it is that we come at Wisdom.

And he praised his 'lofty gift of selection'. . . 'Of what good', he asks, 'is judgement if it does not choose the best?' A colleague writes of de Selincourt: 'He had a lively and sometimes an angry sense of whatever is spurious or vapid or vulgar in business or in morals or in art, and carried it with salutary effect into all these fields, not least into his literary criticism: he had the fire and he had the phrase.'

His influence as teacher, administrator, and human being sprang from a powerful personality, clear-cut yet many-sided. With a generous strain of the artist in him, imaginative, sensitive to beauty, he was throughout life a hard worker, urged by a strong sense of public duty, answering with zest as well as assiduity every reasonable call upon his services. One of his students of the early years at Birmingham pays him a tribute that would have amused him: 'I used to think that his dignity, eloquence, business capacity, powers of organization, and steady fulfilment of routine duties would have made him an admirable bishop.' His was a rare nature, richly endowed: his family and his friends knew its warmth and strength and had glimpses of its spiritual depth. He was shy and reserved and did not express his feelings easily: he belonged, he said, to the species of dumb animal. He belonged also to the *genus irritabile*: he was a man of moods, melancholy or it might be morose—formidable to those who did not know him, even at times to those who did—but irresistible in his happier hours, a delightful companion, wise and witty, able with the play of his light irony and the flavour of his phrasing to make the ordinary details of daily life amusing and significant; a caustic critic; a true and understanding friend with a power of imaginative sympathy only perhaps fully known to those who came to him in trouble; a lover of children, trusted and loved by them.

He retained his vigour and his ability for public affairs to the end. He was active in the last year of his life on an Advisory Committee on Adult Education under the Westmorland County Council; he travelled regularly to London for meetings of the

University Grants Committee, and only a few weeks before his death accepted an invitation to serve on a Government Committee appointed to investigate a subject in which he took a lively interest, the need for State Aid to Institutions for musical education. Such excursions into the public sphere made no serious encroachment on his time. The eight years of his retirement in his beautiful home among the mountains, where his working hours were divided between his garden, to which he became more and more devoted, and the manuscripts of his beloved poet, and where he could often enjoy the companionship of his children and grandchildren, these peaceful years of industry and leisure among surroundings he had chosen long ago were the right close to a life lived from boyhood with a singular integrity of purpose. He died after a few days' illness on 22 May 1943.

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