



ALLEN MAWER

SIR ALLEN MAWER

1879-1942

ALLEN MAWER was born at Bow on 8 May 1879. He was the elder son, and second of the five children, of George Henry Mawer and Clara Isabella Allen. His parents were people of strong religious feeling of a humane evangelical cast, which respected learning, and was entirely free from intolerance. It may be said that the whole character of Mawer's life was determined by the nature of his upbringing in childhood. The first stages of his education were undertaken by his father and mother, from whom he acquired an abiding love of literature and a sound elementary training in Greek and Latin grammar and in the details of history. He also acquired, though unconsciously, a sense of intellectual responsibility and a conviction that a life devoted to study was well spent.

His more regular instruction began at the age of ten, when he entered the Coopers' Company Grammar School. At the end of his first term he won a scholarship, with which event his education ceased to be a charge upon his parents. In 1897, after preparation by private study, he sat as an External candidate for the Honours Degree in English of London University, and obtained a First Class in the examination. In the autumn of 1898, as a graduate, he entered University College, London, where for the first time he came into association with a group of contemporaries engaged in the studies which attracted him. To the end of his life he was grateful to University College for this experience. In October 1901 he entered Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, as a foundation scholar, and resided there for three years, obtaining what was then the unprecedented honour of a double mark of distinction in the English sections of the Medieval and Modern Languages Tripos. With the support of a Research Studentship awarded him by the College, he spent the next year on an inquiry into the history of the Scandinavian invasions of England. In October 1905, on the report of the experts who had examined his thesis on this subject, the College elected him to a Fellowship. A few weeks earlier he had been appointed Lecturer in English in the University of Sheffield, where he remained until his election in 1908 to the Joseph Cowen Professorship of Language and Literature in Armstrong College, Newcastle.

During the thirteen years of his professorship in Newcastle the future course of his life and work was in all essential respects decided. In 1909 he married Lettice, daughter of the Rev. C. Heath of Cheltenham, by whom he had four daughters, and a son who died in infancy. For much of this period his home was Steel Hall among the hills to the west of Newcastle. It was a happy choice, for it gave him abundant opportunity for the expeditions on foot or bicycle which were among his greatest pleasures, and a knowledge of country life and habits which he could have obtained in no other way. It was at Newcastle that he first acquired responsible experience of the details of university administration with which his later years were increasingly occupied. Before the end of his Newcastle professorship he was already marked out as a man to whom high academic office was bound to come.

But the most significant feature of this phase of his career was the gradual concentration of his studies upon the field of research offered by English place-names. The thesis by which he had obtained his fellowship had been in effect a preliminary sketch for a large-scale work on the effects of the Scandinavian settlements in England. It was to run on historical lines, and to show the colonies in their proper relation to the Scandinavian world from which they arose. The historical interest was always strong in Mawer, and was expressed in a number of publications which in the last resort go back to this large design. They include two chapters on early Scandinavian history in the *Cambridge Medieval History* (vol. iii, 1922), an admirable survey of early Scandinavian expeditions entitled *The Vikings* (Cambridge, 1913), and above all a remarkable article entitled 'The Redemption of the Five Boroughs' (*English Historical Review*, xxxviii, 1923), which showed that the distinction between Danes and Norwegians was an important political factor in tenth-century England. On the other hand, the idea of a general survey of Anglo-Scandinavian history gradually receded as the complexities of the field became plainer. In particular, it was clear that a systematic review of the evidence supplied by place-names would be an essential preliminary to the larger scheme, and that this review would in itself be more than enough to occupy a working lifetime. In order to obtain the roughest estimate of the strength of Scandinavian influence in different parts of England, it would be necessary to study the place-names of each district as a whole, and to take account of the innumerable English names which everywhere survived the age of Scandinavian immigration. For

historical reasons studies of this kind are most easily organized county by county, and in 1920 Mawer published the results of eight years' investigations in a volume on the Place-Names of Northumberland and Durham.

In the preface to this volume he laid down the principle that 'no single county can be dealt with satisfactorily apart from a survey of the field of English place-nomenclature as a whole'. He expressed the same idea more elaborately in a paper entitled *English Place-Name Study* which he read before this Academy in 1922. It was the main object of this paper to bring the conception of a national place-name survey within the range of practical discussion, and in this it was remarkably successful. Mawer, who had already been in communication with historians and philologists likely to be sympathetic, obtained both the formal and the financial support of the Academy for the projected survey. Within a year he had brought into being a society composed of interested persons, provided it with a constitution, and laid down the lines of its future activities. The head-quarters of the Society were fixed in the University of Liverpool, where Mawer in 1921 had become Baines Professor of the English Language. The publications of the Society began in 1924 with two preliminary volumes; one, a collection of essays by various hands, the other, a dictionary of the chief elements found in English place-names, which was intended to be used as a companion to the volumes issued by the Society on individual counties. Thenceforward until his death Mawer remained the Honorary Director and Secretary of the Society, sharing the management of its finances with a succession of Honorary Treasurers, but retaining the sole responsibility for the maintenance of its organization. Throughout this period he and the present writer acted together as General Editors of the volumes containing the Survey which it was the purpose of the Society to undertake. From the start it was Mawer's object to attract all scholars interested in place-names into co-operation with the scheme, for he was convinced that only so could a succession of annual volumes be maintained on the projected scale. Four of the eighteen county volumes which have so far been produced were the work of other hands. Dr. A. H. Smith was responsible for the volumes on the Place-Names of the North and East Ridings of Yorkshire, and Dr. P. H. Reany for those on Essex and Cambridgeshire.

Before the first county volumes could be compiled it was necessary to reach an important decision about the range of the

material which should be brought under review. There were a few counties where the bulk of the records needed for the Survey had already been published. But at a very early date in the history of the Survey it became evident that, if its aims were to be realized, manuscript sources must be used on a scale far larger than had ever been attempted before. This conclusion greatly increased the cost of producing the Survey, and it was at this point that the financial aid which the Academy has always afforded to its work was of the greatest value. For a few years the collection of forms from manuscripts was undertaken by unpaid workers, but the Academy's grant soon made it possible to engage professional assistance. In the years before the war the investigation of manuscript sources—a task covering private collections as well as records in public custody—was mainly in the hands of Mr. J. E. B. Gover, who had carried out the researches needed for the volumes on the Place-Names of Devon. From 1929 until the association was broken by the war Mr. Gover was Sub-Editor of the Survey. Mawer was thus freed from anxiety about the provision of the material needed for the Survey and enabled to concentrate upon the work of interpretation and local inquiry. Even so, the burden was heavy. Mawer always approached the linguistic problems raised by the Survey with the topographical situation in the background of his mind. He was keenly alert to the risk of advancing explanations which, though philologically possible, were contradicted by the nature of the ground. He was indefatigable in resort to persons who knew the country with which the Survey at the time was dealing, and he never missed an opportunity of testing interpretations by personal visits to sites.

Looking back across the eighteen years which Mawer devoted to the undertaking, one can see that its course began at a propitious moment. General interest in the subject was widespread; the fundamental principles of place-name study had been established earlier in the century, and a number of scholars were endeavouring to carry them into effect. Mawer's own volume on Northumberland and Durham and Professor Ekwall's *Place-Names of Lancashire* were illustrations of this tendency. Nevertheless, a survey which should cover in detail the place-names of all England was a formidable undertaking, and no one but a man of signal determination would have attempted it. For one thing, it entailed a vast correspondence. The Survey lacked the advantages, if it escaped the inconveniences, of an enterprise maintained by the Government. It was necessary to enlist the

support of a large number of subscribers before the scheme could go forward. The whole burden of this task fell on Mawer, although before long the future of the project was so far secured that he could engage secretarial help. He was always careful to keep in touch with interested persons. He was punctilious in answering the questions which they put to him by letter. He lectured to local societies in all parts of England, and he indicated the aims and illustrated the methods of the Survey in two short publications which had a wide circulation—*Place-Names and History* (1922) and *Problems of Place-Name Study* (1929). Amid academic responsibilities, which steadily became heavier as time went on, he took every occasion of explaining the work of the Society to those who might be interested in its results.

Mawer's attitude towards the central problems of place-name study may fairly be described as conservative. He followed the work of other scholars, foreign and English, with the closest attention, and was quick to appreciate the significance of their discoveries. He had the sincerest admiration for the intensive study devoted to English place-names in the Universities of Lund and Uppsala, and in particular, for the brilliant and massive achievement of Professor Ekwall, to whom the Place-Name Survey was indebted for invaluable assistance on detailed points of interpretation. Nevertheless, to the end of his life, Mawer himself retained an outlook on place-name study which was natural to one who had been a pupil of Skeat, and had come as a young man under the influence of Bradley, Stevenson, and other pioneer investigators. He was unwilling to introduce into the interpretation of place-names any *a priori* generalizations, such as the assumption that personal names are only compounded with terminations denoting sites of habitation. His own familiarity with the manner in which place-names arise to-day made him disinclined to accept interpretations which presupposed the currency of words unknown to the written language or to dialect. He disliked what he called 'dredging the etymological dictionary' for explanations of hard names which further evidence might simplify. On the vexed question of the extent to which unrecorded personal names are preserved in place-names, Mawer, again, stood in line with earlier English scholars. Like them he was always conscious of the inadequate range of the authorities from which knowledge of Old English personal nomenclature is mainly derived. He was impressed by the variety of the forms produced by different types of hypocoristic development, and was convinced that they are most imperfectly represented in the

heroic poems, the formal witness-lists, the historical writings, and the necrologies which are the basic materials for this study. His opinion was confirmed by the names of this class, previously unrecorded, which have come to light during the past thirty years. Here, as throughout his work, Mawer was unwilling to dogmatize. Few scholars as learned as he can have been readier to admit the limitations of the available evidence, or the necessity of keeping an open mind towards the possibility of an alternative explanation.

In 1929 the current of Mawer's activities was suddenly changed by his election as Provost of University College, London. It gave him unqualified pleasure to return in this way to the place where the nature of his career had been determined. He identified himself with the life of the College, and devoted his fullest energies to its interests. Those who followed the course of his Provostship within the College have elsewhere recorded their appreciation of his devotion to its fortunes, and their sense of the humanity with which he interpreted his official duties. One who was not thus placed can merely note that the well-being of the College was obviously Mawer's primary interest in his later years, and that there was no aspect of the College which did not at one time or another fill the centre of his thought. That, despite practical responsibilities so heavy and so gladly accepted, Mawer continued to the end the studies of his earlier life, proves at once the resilience of his personality and the depth of his regard for learning. However pressing the issues with which he was required to deal as Provost, he always swung back, when they were decided, to the familiar problems of place-name study. The accumulation of knowledge was resumed, and its results were put out year by year in volumes which increased in range and detail with the passage of time.

A twofold responsibility like this would have been a strain upon the strongest worker. Mawer possessed great physical energy and took little thought for its conservation. In reality he was less strong than was sometimes inferred from his appearance and his way of life. The action of his heart was irregular. In 1936 he had a serious heart attack while on a cycling holiday in France. In 1938 he lost consciousness for a considerable time at the end of a day in College. Some intermission of work was clearly becoming necessary when the outbreak of war brought a new series of duties upon him. The College was dispersed to various parts of England and Wales. For a time Mawer lived at Aberystwyth, to which place a large section of the College was

evacuated. An attempt to reunite the College in London was ended by serious damage to the fabric and the destruction of part of the library in September 1940. In November Mawer, with his administrative staff, removed to Stanstead Bury in the east of Hertfordshire. There, as formerly at Aberystwyth, Mawer exerted himself to the utmost in the task of holding together the scattered fragments of the College. He held himself ready at any time to travel for long distances with this object, and there can be no question that these journeys, often undertaken at night and in extreme discomfort, placed him under a strain to which his constitution was unequal. In addition to the activities which centred upon the College, Mawer was unremitting in his attendance at the various University committees of which he was a member. On 22 July 1942, without any warning of imminent danger, he collapsed and died while on his way from Stanstead Bury to a meeting of a committee in London.

The importance of Mawer's work received various forms of recognition. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1930. He received the honour of knighthood in 1937, and became an Honorary D.C.L. of the University of Durham in the same year. His reputation among those throughout the country who respond to the interest of its past was in some ways more significant. He was everywhere regarded as an unfailing source of information about place-names, and it would be hard to overestimate the value of the service to sound learning which he rendered by his replies to his innumerable correspondents. But he was more than a learned consultant in the background. He knew the face of England intimately, and the travels by which he came to this knowledge gave him many friends. He was among the best-known scholars of his generation, and the memory of his personal qualities—his humour and kindness, his generosity and tolerance—will reinforce for years the influence of the books which bulk so largely in the record of his life.

For help in the preparation of this Memoir, I am indebted to Miss Millicent and Miss Irene Mawer, to Mr. E. L. Tanner, Secretary of University College, London, and to Miss Aileen Armstrong, now Secretary of the English Place-Name Society, who was closely associated with Sir Allen Mawer in the preparation of the volumes issued during his later years.

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