DOUGLAS GRAY

Douglas Gray

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Summary. Douglas Gray, the first J.R.R. Tolkien Professor of English Literature and Language at Oxford, was widely esteemed as a pre-eminent medievalist, who transformed scholarly understanding of the little known late medieval English period, the 'long 15th century', and the early modern one, through his many publications and editions. He held the chair with great distinction from 1980 to his retirement in 1997, while also a Professorial Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall. Before that, he had been a Fellow of Pembroke College (1961–1980) and University Lecturer in English Language (1976–1980).

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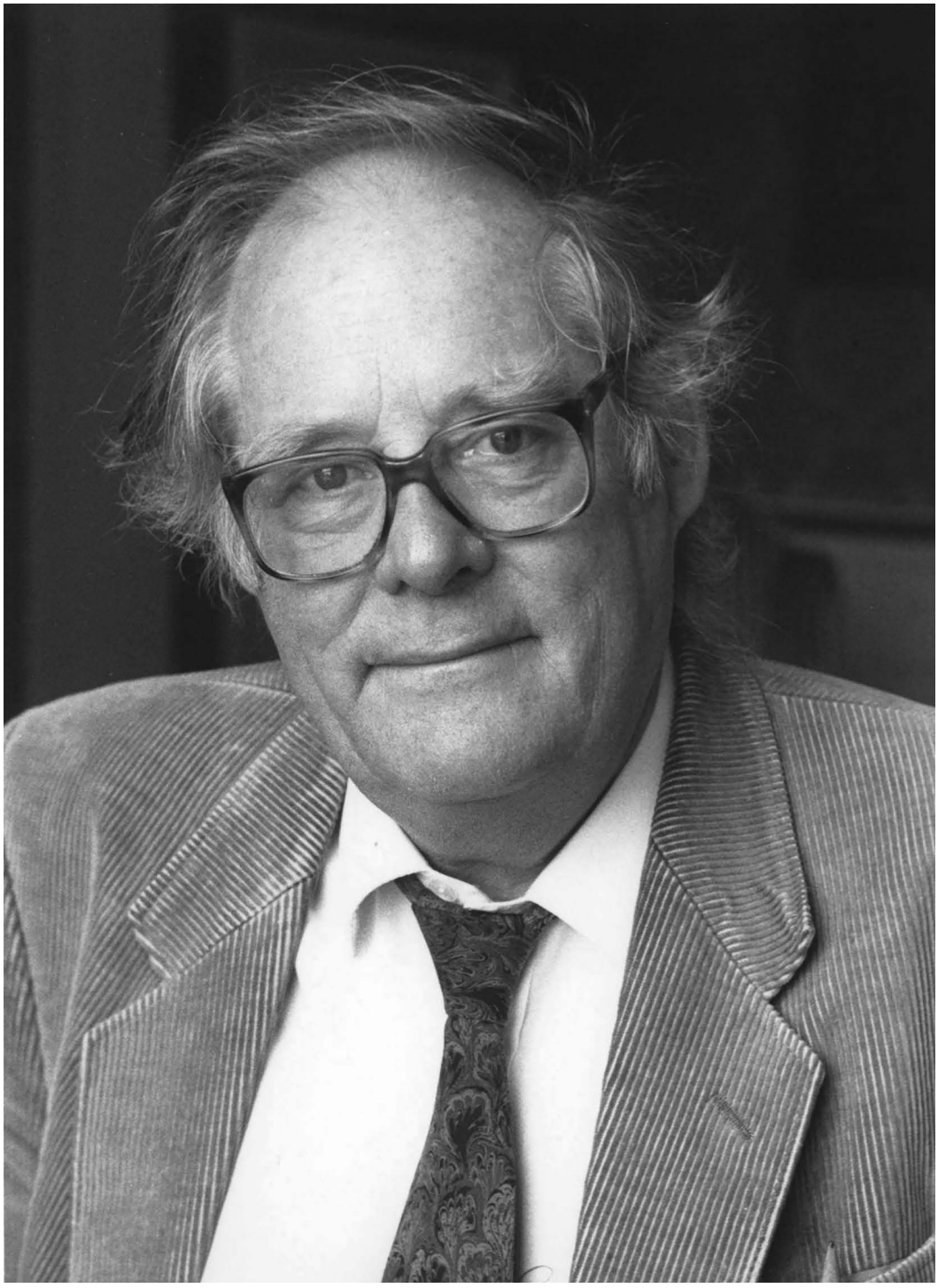

Douglas Gray

With his academic beginnings at Victoria University College, Wellington, in those days a regional constituent of the University of New Zealand (disbanded from January 1962), Gray was one of the last of a great cadre of New Zealanders who illuminated and enhanced English medieval studies in Oxbridge in the second half of the 20th century. A deeply modest, wry, and self-effacing giant of his field, Douglas had not only read everything, but also remembered everything. As a distinguished and much-loved medieval scholar, he was greatly in demand as a tutor and supervisor, and adored by his students, not only for his profound learning and sensitive support, but also for his delightful sense of humour.

Gray wrote widely and extensively on all European medieval literatures, especially on texts written and read in England, and he continued to publish deep into retirement: his major publications included *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric* (1972); *A Selection of English Religious Lyrics* (1975); *Robert Henryson* (1979); *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose* (1985); *Middle English Literature* (with J.A.W. Bennett, 1986); *The Oxford Companion to Chaucer* (2003); *Later Medieval English Literature* (2008); *The Phoenix and the Parrot: Skelton and the Language of Satire* (2012); *Simple Forms: Essays on Medieval English Popular Literature* (2015). The first book he published was an edition of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (Bk. 1), in 1969. Much of his following work was on the religious lyric. His many books came in various forms: critical studies of authors and their works, editions of texts, wide-ranging literary histories, and capacious anthologies. He published a large number of works with Oxford University Press, including *From the Norman Conquest to the Black Death: An Anthology of Writings from England* (2011). From his posthumous papers Jane Bliss has rescued for publication two further anthologies, *Make We Merry More and Less* (2019), and a study of medievalism 1500–1900, *From Fingal's Cave to Camelot* (2020), which together confirm that his scholarly momentum remained undiminished.

Indicative of his deep learning and historical understanding of the medieval as a scholarly field as well as a multifaceted culture that remains powerfully influential in the contemporary era, Gray's inaugural lecture as Tolkien Professor explored medieval studies from approximately 1400 up until 1900. He took his title, *The Marriage of Mercury and Philology,* from Martianus Capella as a template: the figure of Philology represents the antiquarians who seek out medieval texts to edit and publish; Mercury represents the creative writers who use medieval texts as inspiration for their imaginative writings. Some of these key figures did both. This theme stayed with him: his last posthumous book, *From Fingal's Cave to Camelot*, uses it to stitch his history of medieval studies together.

Life and career

Douglas Gray (called Doug by family, friends, and colleagues) was born at Melbourne, Australia, in February 1930, the first son of Emmerson Walton Gray and Daisy Marley, who had emigrated from County Durham in 1927.[1] His maternal grandparents, Matthew Marley and Elizabeth May Ashe, who emigrated to Australia about the same time, lived nearby, as did other Marley aunts and uncles. Douglas would regularly be taken visiting. On one subject he was adamant. 'I'm never, never, never going to school!', he would declare. In the end he did, attending Preston Primary School in Tyler Street in Melbourne.

In 1938, the family moved to Wellington, New Zealand, where his father had a textile worker's job at Prestige Hosiery, and Doug started at nearby Newtown School.[2] Later, the family home was established at Papawai Terrace, Newtown, and he went to Mount Cook School. Wellington's coastline was a favourite place for weekend walks, including fishing off the rocks at Island Bay. He also had an impressive collection of lead soldiers, and would make ships and aeroplanes with his Meccano set. His room, shared with his brother Godfrey, 11 years younger, was known to the rest of the family as The Dump![3]

In 1944, Douglas went to Wellington College where his love of English language and literature began to blossom. The following year, he was awarded the Levin Language Bursary, and the first three prizes of a series which was to run throughout his college life. The prizes flowed in at the end of 1947. Doug was awarded the James Mackay Bursary, the Edward Espy Martin prizes for French, German, and Latin, the Eichelbaum Prize for English, and the Liverton Prize for History. In 1948 (in Upper 6th, 6A), he was one of three boys from Wellington College awarded a University Entrance Scholarship. He again won the Edward Espy Martin and Eichelbaum Prizes, was also awarded the Barnicoat Memorial Prize for English Composition, and became Dux of the school. He was a Staff Sergeant in the college Cadet Battalion, and also Head Librarian. At Wellington College, his nickname was Rupert. According to classmate Michael (later Sir Michael) Hardie Boys, the origin of this was uncertain. It probably came from the children's page in the *English Women's Weekly* magazine, which arrived regularly at home. The star of these stories was Rupert Bear.

Meanwhile, the family was going through an unsettling time because of a postwar housing shortage in Wellington. They lived in a room on Mount Victoria for six months, then in a double unit at the Miramar Transit Camp for a year. As Douglas was beginning

[1] This section is based on Godfrey Gray's memoir of his brother's early life delivered at the memorial service held at Lady Margaret Hall on 5 May 2018, and his biographical account held in the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. See Godfrey Gray, *A Capital Childhood: Growing up in Post-War Wellington* (1998); ATL MS-Group–0796; MS-Papers–6488–2.

[2] Gray, *A Capital Childhood*, p. 5.

[3] Gray, *A Capital Childhood*, p. 5.

his studies at Victoria University College, the family moved to the Hutt Valley, 119 Molesworth Street, a state house in Taita.[4] This meant a daily train journey into Wellington. During the university holidays, Doug worked at Brownlee's Timber Yard in Lower Hutt, stacking timber to earn his university fees. His extra-curricular interests during this time included Bible Classes at the Taita Union Church, and later he became a lay reader in the Church of England.

In 1951, Douglas achieved a BA degree and, along with fellow student Bryce Harland, a Senior Arts Scholarship.[5] The following year, he was awarded an MA degree with First Class Honours in English, and this was followed by a Post Graduate Travelling Scholarship to Oxford University. Until he departed for Oxford in 1954, he held the position of Junior Lecturer in English, under the guidance of Professor Ian Gordon. Douglas left Auckland on the *SS Ceramic*.[6] When his parents waved him off at Wellington Railway station, his Dad said to his Mam, 'Ah, well, two years will soon pass, and he'll be back with us', little realising that he would never see his elder son again.[7] At Oxford, Doug found lodgings in London Place, and took up his studies at Merton College where, specialising in Old and Middle English, he graduated BA in 1956, and MA in 1960.[8] He was appointed College Lecturer at Pembroke and Lincoln Colleges, a position he held from 1956 to 1961. According to the medievalist John C. Hirsh, Douglas consulted G.V. Smithers, who was a Professorial Fellow of Merton at that time, and on his recommendation decided not to pursue a research degree but to follow his own programme of reading across a vast range of medieval literature. In this way he consolidated his MA (from Victoria University) and BA (Oxford) and substantial teaching experience at Victoria University College.

During his first year at Oxford in 1955 Doug attended a reception given by the New Zealand High Commissioner for the then New Zealand Prime Minister, Sidney Holland, and at Goldsmiths' Hall a reception for overseas students given by the Dominions Fellowship Trust, which was attended by the Queen. His holidays that year were spent hitch-hiking round the Continent and staying in youth hostels, first crossing to Dieppe, continuing to Chartres, and then travelling through Belgium, France, and Germany. He offered encouragement to his younger brother Godfrey in the form of postcards written in French, and a trip diary in which he drew word-pictures of some of his roadside acquaintances. He ventured into Vienna, which was still under Four-Power Occupation,

[4] Gray, *A Capital Childhood*, p. 21.
[5] A New Zealand diplomat and academic, New Zealand's first Ambassador to China, and a Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York, and High Commissioner to London.
[6] Gray, *A Capital Childhood*, pp. 30–1.
[7] Gray, *A Capital Childhood*, p. 31.
[8] The Oxford MA is a courtesy title awarded to holders of an Oxford bachelor's degree 21 terms after matriculation, not a research degree.

and required an Occupying Forces Travel Permit. The trip helped him improve his already impressive grasp of French and German. To the dismay of his parents in New Zealand, he decided to stay on in England.

In 1959 Oxford Douglas married Judith Clare Campbell.[9] Born in Armidale, New South Wales, in May 1936, Judy had studied at Canterbury University College, New Zealand, and Somerville College, Oxford. The best man was Gray's former flat-mate, Duncan Stewart, later master of Lady Margaret Hall, to where Douglas was appointed as Professorial Fellow in 1980. They spent their honeymoon in the mountains of Andorra, followed by a seaside break at Barcelona, and returning via Toulouse, with Douglas sporting a Basque beret. In 1961 their only child, Nick, was born. About four years later, they bought a house in Tackley, north of Kidlington. Judy continued with her music tuition. Summer holidays, a family occasion, took them to France, especially when they discovered a place called Gray near Dijon, with a road sign to photograph! In 1974 Douglas returned to New Zealand on a visiting scholarship to Victoria University of Wellington (VUW), accompanied by Judy and Nick. He was able to see his mother again. Further visits to New Zealand were made in 1980, 1985, 1995, and 1998. Nick went on to study Balinese culture and music, and taught in that field at SOAS.

Douglas was a tireless teacher on WEA and extra-mural courses, and a senior A-level examiner for many years for the Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board. He was also a highly respected Chairman of the English Faculty Board on several occasions, widely trusted for his plain dealing. In 1997 he retired, and as Professor Emeritus continued to pursue his various writing projects at Tackley. He visited New Zealand briefly at the end of January 1998 to attend a conference on medieval literature at Wellington under the auspices of the British Council. The following year in 1999 he was the De Carle Lecturer at Otago University. This month-long visit to New Zealand provided an opportunity to spend some time with his brother Godfrey and wife Marlene, then living in Dunedin. In 1995 he was again in New Zealand, this time to receive an honorary Doctor of Literature degree from his alma mater, Victoria University of Wellington. The citation for this degree on 3 May 1995 recalls how medieval writers liked to draw on nature for symbolic figures, and how 'in his Inaugural Lecture before the University of Oxford in 1981 Professor Douglas Gray wittily and modestly suggested that if he were to be identified in this way it would probably have to be as a Lesser Spotted Kiwi!'[10] He could, however, much more aptly be placed in a very distinctive Oxford species, that of the Frequently Seen Kiwi — for New Zealand, the country of his upbringing, has supplied Oxford with some of its most powerful and distinguished medievalists over the last seventy-five years.

[9] Elder daughter of Percy and Helma Campbell.

[10] Victoria University of Wellington, Citation of Douglas Gray for the degree of Doctor of Literature, Honoris Causa, 3 May 1995.

Although he would obviously consider Middle English (or Older Scots) leisure reading, his favourite non-medieval author was P.G. Wodehouse. Around 2004, he went to hospital after suffering a stroke. Visitors found him enjoying Jeeves and Wooster, or Mulliner, or Cuthbert ... because the doctors had forbidden him to do any work.[11] After Douglas died, Judy was settled in a home, but she did not long survive him.

Research overview

Douglas Gray was the master cartographer of later medieval English literature.[12] The astonishing range of his erudition and cultural reach was always lightly displayed but weightily deployed in critical discussions of real power, perception, and humane (indeed, humanist) insight. He started his publishing career with short expositions published in *Notes and Queries* between 1960 and 1968 on anonymous minor verses of the late Middle Ages and inscriptions found in Hexham and Warkworth. This interest in explicating the simple forms and the quotidian nature of late medieval writing would be sustained throughout his career. So it might come as a surprise to see that Gray's first full publication was an edition of Book One of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1969), a work of lengthy convoluted allegory and dense political reference that disconcerts all but the most intrepid first readers with its ornate intricacies. That said, it is entirely characteristic of Gray's published oeuvre that his first major publication is concerned to make the difficult comprehensible through humble, unfussy, but deeply learned annotation.

His next major publication was *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric* (1972), a study which repeatedly shows his social anthropologist's eye and ongoing interest in the docks and daisies of songs and stories. This grew out of his teaching at Victoria University of Wellington, when as a Junior Lecturer, Douglas had compiled a typescript anthology of lyrics, with side-glosses. At Oxford he was part of a 'nexus' of distinguished medievalists working on lyrics in the 1960s. Douglas was highly respected by his compatriot, Peter Dronke, four years his younger, who had heard his lectures at Victoria University: impressive, they left their mark. Dronke was Lecturer in Medieval Latin at Cambridge from 1961 to 1979, when he became Reader. He published his *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric* in 1965–66, and *The Medieval Lyric* in 1968. When his wife, Ursula Dronke, left her post at Somerville to join him in

[11] Lucinda Rumsey, who says she still misses neighbours Doug and Judy, kindly supplied this date.
[12] This account of Gray's work is edited from the eulogy delivered by Vincent Gillespie at the memorial service of Douglas Gray, with contributions from John C. Hirsh, Helen Barr, Jane Bliss, Robert Easting, Greg Waite, and Janet M. Wilson.

Cambridge, her successor in 1961 was Rosemary Woolf, author of the magisterial Oxford University Press study, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (1968). John Hirsh recalls that Peter, Rosemary, and Douglas would meet for drinks and discussions at the Eastgate Hotel. It was there that the triad of scholars of the medieval lyric was effectively formed. Douglas's research into the lyric which had started in the 1950s, flourished with his 1972 monograph, a study of its forms and traditions, and was followed by his edition, *A Selection of Religious Lyrics* (1975).

Douglas called *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric* 'an introduction for readers in making their way into the huge mass of medieval religious lyric poetry'.[13] It contains a clear and orderly synthesis of earlier research into the tradition; the poems are arranged and discussed according to two comprehensive themes: the Scheme of Redemption, and the Life of this World. It is a comprehensive, lucid, and stimulating account of the lyric. Both Woolf and Gray demonstrated impressive erudition, and a sure-footed command of intellectual traditions and theological teachings explored in the surviving lyrics. But Douglas is arguably the better close reader and he brings a clearer sense of the strata of cultural engagement with religious graphic art in which the lyrics participated. Whether discussing verses in wall paintings or memorial brasses, or discussing popular tags and rhymes, he moves elegantly and with an assured light touch. He listened attentively and perceptively to the voice of each lyric, and interpreted with acute care, long experienced as he was as an editor responsive to student and scholarly readers' needs, from the time of his first Victoria University anthology – cyclostyled copies of which continued to circulate there for decades, complete with a rich tilth of added marginalia and scholia, some of them Gray's own.

In his review of *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric,* T.P. Dunning points out that Gray is too modest in claiming his book is an introduction for new readers to help them to read the poems with 'increased pleasure, understanding, and discrimination'; he points out this 'indispensable' study would just as equally benefit those who 'have long been engaged in academic study of this poetry'.[14] The book's outcomes are achieved by

> Mr. Gray's careful planning of his work, by the comprehensiveness of his survey, and not least by his extensive learning which […] is lightly carried in the best Oxford tradition and is mainly discernible in the lengthy notes put at the back of the book which establish more firmly the various matters he is dealing with and provide

[13] Douglas Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. ix.

[14] T.P. Dunning, Review of *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric* by Douglas Gray; *The Art of the Middle English Lyric* by Edmund Reiss, *Review of English Studies* n.s., 24:96 (November 1973), 467–70 at 468, citing Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric*, p. ix.

> valuable pointers to the ways in which several aspects of his many-faceted subject may usefully be further pursued.[15]

A.V.C. Schmidt, in his review, notes that Gray regards the lyric tradition as inclusive and devotional rather than narrowly meditative; that his non-chronological, thematic approach allows him 'to treat the English Middle Ages as a spiritual whole [with] certain distinctive concerns and patterns of thought'; and that his emphasis throughout is 'on the way in which a tradition may be *used* by a creative intelligence'.[16] Schmidt praises the study as a model that sets a 'high standard in the literary criticism of the lyric'.[17]

Some of Douglas's typescript anthologies of lyrics that circulated at Victoria University of Wellington, fed into his much reprinted 1975 anthology, *A Selection of Religious Lyrics*. This edition is still a book to turn to, not least because of the version it gives (no 43) of the most wonderful, mysterious, and powerful of all the Middle English religious lyrics, 'In the vaile of restles mynd'.[18] The striking and plangently skilful interweaving of images and motifs from diverse sources and analogues are illuminated in Gray's richly concise annotation to this most beautiful of lyrics:[19] references are included to types of the traditional 'chanson d'aventure'; the Good Friday liturgical reproaches; Julian of Norwich's figuration of Christ as mother; The Song of Songs; the Sermons of St Bernard; Henryson's *The Bludy Serk*; the devotional image of Christ sitting in distress; and the figure of the truelove flower from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

That Scottish poet Robert Henryson turns up in the anthology's notes to 'In the vaile of restles mynd' will cause no surprise to scholars familiar with the breadth of Douglas's scholarly interests. At the time of publication, however, Henryson and his contemporaries were still under-studied, and for the most part, marshalled under the limiting moniker of 'Scottish Chaucerians'. Douglas's *Robert Henryson*, for the Medieval and Renaissance Authors series (Leiden: Brill, 1979), of which he was one of the General Editors, told a very different story. It was at the forefront in invigorating a new turn and impetus in the study of Late Medieval Scottish writing. Gray's deep learning in classical and continental writing, together with his expertise across medieval and early modern studies, made him an ideal reader of the works of Henryson and his contemporaries. His was the first study to draw on Denton Fox's new edition of Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid* (1968), and, as Florence Ridley observed in her review of Gray's monograph in *Speculum*,

[15] Dunning, Review of *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric*, 468.
[16] Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric*, p. ix.
[17] A.V.C. Schmidt, Review of *A Selection of Religious Lyrics*, edited by Douglas Gray, and *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric* by Douglas Gray, *Essays in Criticism*, 26:3 (1976), 250–7 at 254, 255, 257.
[18] This poem is also discussed in *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric*, pp. 143–5 (notes on p. 275).
[19] *A Selection of Religious Lyrics*, pp. 125–7.

he 'presents insights that are consistently original, perceptive, and faithful to Henryson's text'.[20] Even more significant is that Gray's study of Henryson was the first to analyse the Scottish poet's entire corpus. Building on the work of earlier scholars such as John McQueen, A.C. Spearing and I.W.A. Jamieson, he demonstrated convincingly the complexity and diversity of Henryson's vision. In the *Morall Fables*, he showed that the poet's world view was far from harmonious, and the bleakness of some scenarios was replayed in different keys in *Orpheus and Eurydice*. Gray's study of *The Testament* teased out the intricacies of Henryson's recasting of Chaucer's Criseyde, whilst also rescuing the Scottish poem from the long (and often limiting shadow) of Chaucerianism through demonstrating its indebtedness to Senecan thought. Reading against the background of an age when '"completeness and harmony" were still ideals, but no longer a straightforward inheritance',[21] Gray showed that Henryson's poetic vision was suited to his time; one that was anything but simple, but 'which holds – sometimes with difficulty – opposites in tension'.[22]

Medieval Scots writing featured prominently in Douglas's anthology of *Late Medieval Verse and Prose* (1988). The opening of his Preface is worth quoting in full.

> When I was completing this book, my eye was caught by a newspaper headline, 'Those Anthology Blues'. Such a title is likely to stir the many and curious anxieties to which an anthologist is prone, and I read on. It was a review written by someone claiming to be a 'founder member of the Society for the Prevention of Anthologists', and it stated flatly: 'we know what's wrong with the whole damned breed: they're as incestuous as used-car salesmen, shifting fifteenth-hand material from one tired lot to the next, and leaving no one but themselves the richer'. While this particular charge does not disturb me, since my lot contains some brand-new material and my older models are of very good quality, the general *cri de coeur* moves me to a brief apologia, or at least a statement of intent.[23]

There are few writers who can start with such witty humility, and few writers, also, who can proceed to produce an anthology of such rich invention, learning and diversity. Well-known medieval names such as Hoccleve, Lydgate, Skelton, Caxton and Malory rub shoulders with the less well-known 15th-century writers Stephen Hawes, Alexander Barclay and Lord Berners. Prose tracts on Philosophy and Natural Science (which included treatises on angling and remedies for blisters) keep company with

[20] F. H. Ridley, Review of *Robert Henryson; The Poems of Robert Henryson; Robert Henryson*, by R. L. Kindrick, R. Henryson, D. Fox, & D. Gray, *Speculum*, 57:3 (1982), 626–31. https://doi.org/10.2307/2848715

[21] Douglas Gray, *Robert Henryson* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), p. 30. The phrase 'completeness and harmony' comes from Edwin Muir.

[22] Gray, *Robert Henryson*, p. 271.

[23] Douglas Gray, *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval English Verse and Prose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. iii.

Ballads, Verse Romances, and an entire chapter on 'Nifles, Trifles and Merry Jests'. Lyrics sit alongside Letters, and the writings of Thomas More alongside the anonymous morality play, *Mankind*. The Scots writers, Robert Henryson, James I of Scotland, William Dunbar, and Gavin Douglas, have whole chapters devoted to their work, and the chapter entitled 'A Scottish Miscellany' includes extracts from Orkney poet Richard Holland's *The Buke of the Howlat*, Hary's *The Wallace*, and an anonymous *Tale of the Five Beasts*.

Safe in his hands, readers are piloted through the swirling currents of an unruly literature produced by a choppy and turbulent age. As the 'Funes the Memorious' of medieval literary criticism,[24] Gray brings a Borgesian mixture of playfulness and high seriousness to his discussions of the period and its writers north and south of the border, blending his voracious reading into powerful, illuminating, and entertaining critical syntheses. The inclusion of a wealth of vibrant Scots literature in the context of such a cornucopia of late medieval writing allows further fresh examination of the significance of these poets without recursion to the Father figure of Chaucer; here is a newly revived showcasing of the achievements of these remarkable 15th-century Scots poets, without major critical interventions or intermediaries.

It is no overstatement to say that the *Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose* transformed the study of the 15th century, making available tasters of texts that students and scholars alike had rarely explored. The editors of *The Long Fifteenth Century*, Gray's *Festschrift*, Helen Cooper and Sally Mapstone, confirm 'it was a landmark in the study of the literature of the end of the Middle Ages'.[25] Like a Bristol merchant venturer of the period, Douglas sent back samples of materials, sweet and spicy, weird and wonderful, funny and fabulous. The range of reading and erudition that went into that book is easy to underestimate. Just the number of obscure early printed texts that he read and extracted would itself be a major achievement for most scholars. But he traversed and explored 150 highly fertile and productive years with colossal assurance and critical modesty, providing a veritable Baedeker to the period, introducing texts that many scholars had not thought worth a detour, never mind worth a special journey.

In a continuation of his determination to revalue later medieval Scottish writing in the following two decades, Gray devotes Chapter 20 of his *Later Medieval English Literature* (2008) to the poets William Dunbar and Gavin Douglas. Douglas undertakes to release Dunbar from the previous rather narrow view of his achievement:

[24] A reference to the short story fantasy by Jorge Luis Borges about a man who falls off his horse, injures his head, and is then able to remember everything.

[25] 'Introduction' to Helen Cooper & Sally Mapstone (eds), *The Long Fifteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 1–14 at p. 1.

> Critics have sometimes tried to simplify Dunbar's style into 'two voices' ('aureate' and 'eldritch', for instance), but the variety forbids easy categorization into opposites. Such variety is a mark of the craftsman poet. Dunbar's superb stylistic skill is applied to the requirements of traditional types of verse, and his exactly calculated effects are infused with a characteristic energy and a curious intensity of vision which can make poetry out of the strangest, or the most common sights and episodes.[26]

He proceeds to substantiate these claims through deft and dazzling close reading of a huge range of Dunbar's writing and the contexts in which it was written.

Gray's discussion of Gavin Douglas's oeuvre owes much to his own, often overlooked flair as a philologist. His analytical language skills enable him to demonstrate convincingly that Gavin Douglas was an extremely talented writer who used an extraordinarily varied and copious vocabulary (what he called 'fouth' [abundance]) to explore imaginative ideas. Learned words such as 'pungitive', 'umbrate', or 'vivificative' mingle with humble Scots words and proverbial comparisons to extend the range of the poetic vernacular. Gray draws attention to Gavin Douglas's mastery of an array of different styles and tones, and of complex rhyme schemes with acute attention to acoustic effect, arguing that this paved the way for his magnificent linguistic bravura in his translation of the *Aeneid*. Just one example of Gray's close reading of Douglas's poetic masterpiece must suffice for illustration of his empathetic care for language and verse: when

> a long Virgilian simile compares the Trojan advance to the approach of a tempest from the sea which strikes terror into the hearts of the countrymen, Douglas is so carried away by it that he makes the countrymen burst into direct speech:
>
> > Quhilk, with sair hartis quakand, 'allake, allaik'
> > Says, 'Lo, yon bub [squall] sall stryke doun growand treys,
> > Doun bet our cornys, and by the ruyt upheis,
> > And far onbreid ourturn all doys upstand:
> > Hark! heir the swouch cumis bayand to the land' –
> > On sicklye wys . . .[27]

Gray's work on rehabilitating the art and power of later medieval Scots writing owes much to his brilliance as a literary philologist, as evidenced, for example, in his glossed texts of *Selected Poems of Robert Henryson and William Dunbar* (1998).

After his retirement from the J.R.R. Tolkien Chair of English Literature and Language in 1997, Douglas continued to produce invaluable anthologies of texts and 'tours d'horizon' of the literary scene. His 2003 *Oxford Companion to Chaucer*, of over 500 pages, offered an invaluable handbook for students and scholars alike. In 2010 he won the Beatrice White Prize of the English Association (awarded for outstanding scholarly

[26] Douglas Gray, *Later Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 535.
[27] Ibid., p. 559. The lines quoted are Gavin Douglas, *The Aeneid* 22: 22–27.

work in the field of English Literature before 1590), for his magisterial survey and synthesis of *Later Medieval English Literature*,[28] of over 700 pages. Recognising the turn in medieval criticism towards fuller recognition of the three literary languages of medieval England (Latin, Anglo-Norman, and English), in 2011 he published another substantial volume, *From the Norman Conquest to the Black Death: An Anthology of Writings from England*, to support access to non-anglophone materials.

In 2012, *The Phoenix and the Parrot: Skelton and the Language of Satire* was published in Dunedin; this is an expanded account of the De Carle lectures, given in 1999 at the University of Otago (with a great tradition in medieval studies), in New Zealand's southernmost city of Dunedin. The result is an exhilarating, copious, linguistically rollicking and deeply sympathetic tour through the career of this unusual and innovative Tudor poet who Douglas believed has received less than his due from critical tradition. This book captures many key attributes of Gray's scholarship. His extensive engagement in European literature, in all its various vernaculars as well as Latin, allowed Douglas to move laterally across literatures and disciplines, making sensitive and perceptive comparisons and contrasts, and illuminating the way English authors participated in and helped to shape the European cultural moment. Skelton had the misfortune to be the last poet of medieval England. He died in the late 1520s, just when the new courtier poets Wyatt and Surrey were about to signal a distinctively Italianate direction in English literature. But one strength of Gray's book is to show that Skelton was deeply *au fait* with many aspects of the New Learning (and deeply critical of others). Coming from a generation exposed to and imbued with the scholarly resources of Christian Humanism (he was apparently a friend and correspondent of Erasmus, who called him 'the light and glory of British letters'), Skelton seems to have felt that his light was obscured due to the constraints of having to defer to the powerful figures surrounding him. Tutor to young Prince Henry, in line to the throne after Prince Arthur, he lost his privileged place at court after Arthur's death in 1502 and Henry's promotion, and lobbied for a return to court after Henry's accession in 1509.

But much of Skelton's output is given over to waves of satire, both Juvenalian and Menippean, railing against the evils of the age. He situated himself as a voice crying in the wilderness of Wolsey's England (though there are signs in the wide range of targets of his satire that he may have been something of a pen for hire) before achieving some sort of strategic rapprochement with the Cardinal in the 1520s, when he produces pro-regime propaganda against the Scots and attacks the incipient ranks of Lutheran and Lollard heretics. Yet, in keeping with his satirical calling ('If I'm telling the truth why

[28] OUP, 2008.

don't you believe me'),[29] he also seems to have had a highly developed sense of his calling as an inspired priestly poet and prophet, a *poeta theologus* in the line of humanist vates from Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio onwards.

Gray elegantly weaves together the ragged strands of Skelton's life and writing career, avoiding over-tidy generalisations and simplistic resolutions of his often paradoxical writings. Grounding his reading of the texts in the wider European and classical tradition of satire and invective, he gently leads the reader towards the dazzling lexical display that Skelton deploys in his poetry, and his virtuosic and experimental command of literary form, metre, and voice. More than any other account, this book shows not just the way Skelton inhabits the same late-medieval European thought world as Villon or Rabelais, but also how aspects of drama, interlude, visual arts, street language, ballads and broadsheets, proverbs and commonplaces, woodcuts and engravings, neo-classical rhetoric and humanist copiousness all blend and clash together. Douglas captures and analyses the vibrancy and the sheer verbal flair of Skelton's verse, exploring his use of the mono-rhymed Skeltonic form, for example, against a background of medieval and contemporary versions of similar writing in most European languages. Passages from Skelton are illuminatingly but unshowily compared with strikingly pertinent parallel passages in French, German, Italian, and Spanish contemporaries. Douglas captures the European cultural Zeitgeist in a series of well-composed snapshots. Because he listens to the voices with such attentiveness and amused tolerance, his Skelton emerges as a writer for whom the intoxicating linguistic exploration and experimentation are held in check by a sense of the moral seriousness of his art. This is an exhilaratingly learned book, showing a lifetime's reading in the culture and the art of the period, as well as knowledge of social anthropology and linguistics. There is possibly no better pairing of critic and poet than Douglas Gray reading Skelton.

The Phoenix and the Parrot: Skelton and the Language of Satire foreshadows Gray's later work on medieval popular literature, including Ballads. Of course, popular 'literature' was never written down, and is known only by way of snippets that appear in other writings. For example, a medieval women's dance song is found, castigated, in a volume of Latin sermons. In addition to all this, Douglas brought Older Scottish writing into the main beam of critical attention, not just through his own sympathetic and perceptive writing, but also through the many students he supervised, who have themselves gone on to create several generations of scholars who now constitute a flourishing community of Older Scotticists.

[29] Skelton, citing John 8:46 in the concluding line (in the Vulgate Latin) to his envoi appended to 'Agaynst the Scottes' (line 39); see *The Complete English Poems of John Skelton*, ed. John Scattergood, rev. edn (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 106.

Douglas was the living embodiment of the truth that medievalists reading forward into the 16th century bring a weight of literary and critical understanding to those texts that few early modernists can easily achieve. From his 1969 edition of Book 1 of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, he never lost that ability to highlight and celebrate the connective tissues that joined the late medieval and the Tudor literary worlds. The long 15th century has never seemed shorter or sprightlier than in Gray's magisterial *Later Medieval English Literature* work. It is entirely typical that the contributors to *The Long Fifteenth Century* struggled in their various essays for the *Festschrift* to match the seemingly effortless range of his own volume. Playing a patient and cultivated Virgil to the readers' Dante, he explores the highs and lows of the period, characteristically venturing into popular forms and genres as important parts of the taxonomy of cultural activity in the period. Subsequently, in this exceptionally productive period of his scholarly life, Gray made a foray into oral culture with a ground-breaking essay on 'The Robin Hood Poems' in 1984,[30] expanding this with coverage of ballads and medieval plays in his last monograph, *Simple Forms: Essays on Medieval English Popular Literature*,[31] in which he gave sustained attention to these forms of folk narrative and *Fachliteratur* (that is, trade or technical literature). The first of his two posthumous books, *Make We Merry More and Less: An Anthology of Medieval English Popular Literature*[32] was designed as a companion volume to *Simple Forms*.

His publications examine a great range of writings, from the popular to the most exalted, from the serious to the comic, and this matches his ability to write with quiet authority across the full chronological range of medieval and early modern literature. Douglas was a global literature scholar before the term had been invented. For the remainder of his publishing life he returned to the study of literary forms earlier than the end of the 16th century, though he sustained throughout an interest in eliding the so-called 'divide' between the medieval and the 'renaissance' (as it was then called, rather than the contemporary term 'early modern').

Throughout his Oxford career and further in retirement, Douglas Gray remained conscious of belonging to a pedagogic tradition of antipodean philological medievalists at Oxford. This galaxy of brilliant scholars was sustained over four generations, from the 1920s to the 1990s, each supporting the next, as he said, 'with helping hands along the way'.[33] He shared the values of his outstanding compatriot peers, and representing

[30] Published in *Poetica*, 18 (1984), 1–39, and reprinted in Helen Phillips (ed.), *Robin Hood: Medieval and Post-Medieval* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005). See Helen Phillips, 'Douglas Gray (1930–2017): A Remembrance', *The Bulletin of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies*, 2 (2018), 35–8.
[31] OUP, 2015.
[32] Edited by Jane Bliss (Open Book Publishers, 2019).
[33] James McNeish, *Dance of the Peacocks: New Zealanders in Exile in the Time of Hitler Mao TseTung.* Auckland; Random House, 2003), p. 357.

the culmination of this magnificent era as its scribal recorder in obituaries and *Festschriften*, he celebrated their achievements. Such recognition of his scholarly community, which can be seen as a global academy that extended from the antipodean universities to the scholarly hub in Oxford, underlies Gray's wide range of appreciative, reflective writing, from essays on particular topics, obituaries, and completion of unfinished works, to editing and contributing to Festschrifts.[34] After the sudden death of J.A.W. Bennett in 1981, he completed Bennett's unfinished *Middle English Literature 1100–1500*, a volume of the *Oxford History of English Literature* (1986); he wrote obituaries both for Bennett, saluting him as 'a man of great *mana*, of spiritual power and authority', and for the Otago University Rhodes Scholar, Norman Davis, who succeeded J.R.R. Tolkien as Merton Professor in 1959, and who died in 1989, acknowledging Davis as an outstanding glossator because of his ability to sense 'the precise contextual nuance of a word'.[35] He co-edited with Eric Stanley *Five Hundred Years of Words and Sounds* (1983), the *Festschrift* for the Australian Eric Dobson, Professor of English Language at Oxford and author of the two volume *English Pronunciation 1500–1700*.[36] In turn, with *Oxford English Dictionary* lexicographer, Robert Burchfield, and Peter Dronke, who held a personal chair in Medieval Latin Literature at Cambridge, Gray contributed to the *Festschrift* to J.B. Trapp (1994), librarian at the Warburg Library from 1953 to 1976, in a grouping that reflects their undergraduate friendships formed at Victoria University of Wellington. Douglas was also influential in securing for Oxford in 1986 the arrival from Wellington of the world's pre-eminent bibliographer, D.F. McKenzie, to a Readership in Textual Criticism; McKenzie launched the multi-volume Cambridge History of the Book in Britain project in 1989, the year he was appointed Professor in Bibliography and Textual Criticism.

These medieval scholars – Trapp, Dronke, Gray, Burchfield, Bennett, and Davis – participated in collaborative ventures that reflected their interrelations as an expatriate circle. They were all deeply loyal to their New Zealand origins and homeland influences, as their *Festschrift* memoirs attest; all acknowledged the early training they received from their mentors: the movement's 'godfather',[37] the distinguished philologist, Kenneth Sisam, who worked at Oxford University Press, first as Assistant Secretary in 1925 and then as Secretary to the Delegates from 1942 to 1948; and the outstanding medieval

[34] Janet M. Wilson, 'New Zealand medieval studies: An academy across the globe', in Anna Czarnouw & Janet M. Wilson (eds), *New Zealand Medievalism* (London: Routledge, 2024), pp. 23–46.
[35] Douglas Gray, 'A Tribute to J.A.W. Bennett (1911–1981)', *Medium Aevum*, 50:2 (1981), 205–14; 'Norman Davis: 1913–1989', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 80 (1993), 261–73. Gray and Davis collaborated on several occasions: for example, Davis provided a 16-page 'Notes on Grammar and Spelling in the Fifteenth Century' for Gray's anthology, *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose*.
[36] Eric Stanley & Douglas Gray (eds), *Five Hundred Years of Words and Sounds: A Festschrift for E.J. Dobson* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983).
[37] McNeish, *Dance of the Peacocks*, p. 260.

scholar P.S. ('Pip') Ardern, teaching at the universities of Auckland and Wellington. Both encouraged a love of learning and of scholarship as a humane activity.[38]

Douglas and this group of his New Zealand and Australian contemporaries were a golden generation in medieval studies, and Douglas was every bit their equal, and wrote more accessibly and fluently than many of them. His British Academy memoir of Norman Davis, in addition to offering a perceptive analysis of Norman's scholarly contribution, affectionately retells his exploits in the Second World War, and reads like a John Buchan thriller, though more stylishly written. That generation of New Zealand medievalists were all characterised by a high intellectual seriousness, profound learning, advanced technical linguistic and philological skills, and a profound sense of wanting to see literature in the broad context of art, music, architecture, and the history of ideas. But Douglas, perhaps more than any of them, communicated the sheer joy and pleasure in encountering the play of creative minds interacting with tradition and convention, and driven by imaginative innovation and exploration.

It is therefore not surprising to find that this close-knit network influenced Douglas's interests in writing on language and lexicography more generally: he was one of four contributors to *A Chaucer Glossary* (1979) under the editorship of Norman Davis. Furthermore, among his pithy articles about the development of the English language, he turned to the papers of the explorer, Captain Cook, to examine Indigenous loan words that were discovered on his Pacific voyages in 'Captain Cook and the English Vocabulary', published in his coedited *Festschrift* for Eric Dobson.[39] In his 'Note on Sixteenth-Century Purism' in *Words for Robert Burchfield's Sixty Fifth Birthday* (1988), edited by Eric Stanley and Terry Hoad, he opened up a whole new avenue of inquiry into the predilection of Thomas Cheke and others for vocabulary that was Germanic in origin rather than borrowed from other Continental languages. Gray delineated with minute care how Protestant writers tried to bypass the influence of papal Rome through going behind recent inventions or borrowings from Latin or French by returning to the rock solid Anglo-Saxon origins of their native tongue. Vincent Gillespie recalls as a final-year undergraduate in 1975, studying the old medieval and renaissance Romance paper with Douglas in his room up in the eaves at Pembroke, and being sent off to read the Tudor romances of John Bourchier, Lord Berners. Sitting in the Upper Reading Room of the Bodleian Library and ploughing through *Huon of Bordeaux* and *Arthur of Little Britain*, it gradually dawned on him that the Bodley copies were uncut and had never been read before. How did Douglas know them so well? He considered the idea that he either owned them or, alternatively, had he deployed his photographic memory for texts read at

[38] See, for example, Gray's acknowledgement in his Preface to *Later Medieval English Literature*, p. vii: 'I should like to pay special tribute to those who taught me: Ian Gordon, P.S. Ardern (who first excited my enthusiasm for the Middle Ages), Joe Trapp, Geoffrey Smithers, and Jack Bennett'.

[39] Douglas Gray. 'Captain Cook and the English Vocabulary', in *Five Hundred Years of Words and Sounds*, pp. 49–62.

some other library? Later, when Gray supervised his doctorate, his gentle touches throughout the process in his book-filled and paper-strewn room in 5 Fyfield Road were enough to keep Gillespie on course. He adds that it was a very light touch: sometimes the only way you could tell if he had read a draft chapter was the mosaic of muddy cat prints across the pages. (Like many medievalists, Douglas was a devoted cat person and wrote a wonderful essay on medieval and mystical cats for Stanley S. Hussey's *Festschrift*, *Langland, The Mystics and the Medieval Religious Tradition.*)[40]

Gillespie finds a telling comparison of Douglas, both in person and on the page, with Gray's beloved Chaucer, on whom he wrote so well and sensitively (his essays on 'pitee' and 'gentillesse' are still classics, and his edition of 'The Miller's Prologue and Tale' is a gem in the standard *Riverside Chaucer*). For years, he had a suspicion that were he to meet Chaucer at some celestial dinner party, he would look and talk just like Douglas. It is hard not to see something of Douglas in the Host's words to Chaucer in the prologue to Thopas:

> What man artow? quod he;
> Thou lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare,
> For evere upon the ground I se thee stare [....]
> He in the waast is shape as wel as I;
> This were a popet in an arm t' enbrace
> For any womman, smal and fair of face.
> He semeth elvyssh by his contenaunce,
> For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce.[41]

This captures well the wry humour and modest self assurance of both Chaucer and Douglas. Both had taken to heart the teaching of Albertanus of Brescia, retold in *The Tale of Melibee*. 'De arte tacendi et dicendi', the art of speaking and of keeping quiet, characterised Gray's highly effective style both in faculty politics and in his critical practice. In his scholarly writing he was always keen to get out of the way, keep quiet, and to let readers listen to the texts he was exploring. But not, of course, without first having given them the critical keys they needed to unlock those same texts and to see them in a new light. His style is deceptively approachable, his prose is beautifully refined and elegantly modulated. But there is none of the belle-lettristic scholar about his critical engagement, his multilingual finesse and interest in the more humane letters (a feature of his generation of New Zealanders who came to the UK to do second BAs after an excel-

[40] Helen Phillips (ed.), *Langland, the mystics and the medieval English religious tradition: essays in honour of S. S. Hussey* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990).

[41] Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, VII, 695–7, 700–4, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. L.D. Benson & F.N. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 212–13.

lent traditional grounding at home). His deep and secure philological training, and understanding of the noise the words make and what they actually mean (deployed so tellingly in his work on the *Chaucer Glossary* undertaken with other medieval colleagues in the English Faculty), mean that his criticism was never 'wafty' or vague. For Douglas, medieval culture lay before him like a richly variegated carpet or tapestry, and few could move from the local details to the big picture with more style and substance.

Always led by curiosity and by a deep intellectual compassion and empathy with his texts and authors, his work is never showy or self-regarding, never looking for strained innovation or strident originality. He had a rare (increasingly rare) kind of intellectual and personal humility, allied to a quiet self-assurance of a scholar in command of his tools and comfortable in his intellectual element. When Gillespie thinks of the deep, sustained, and profoundly civilised range of reading that flows into every sentence of his writing, and the modesty with which he deployed his learning, he often finds himself thinking of G.K. Chesterton's words about Chaucer: 'He is prouder of having read the books than of having written the poems'.[42] In turn, today's scholars have every cause to be proud and grateful that Douglas wrote as well and as much as he did. His impact on the present shape of medieval studies, and on what Gillespie likes to call the 'gray' area between medieval and early modern in particular (playing on C.S. Lewis's epithet of 'leaden'), was decisive. Oxford English medieval studies, with its interest in all the literatures written in what is now called the Anglo-Celtic archipelago, could not be what it is without his quietly effective example as a teacher and a scholar.[43] In his later medieval anthology, the *Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose*, Douglas printed an extract from Thomas More's Life of Pico della Mirandola. More's praise of Pico seems an apt epitaph for Douglas Gray's marvellous, personally modest, intellectually magnificent, and much missed contribution to the scholarly world:

> To the bryngyng foorth of so wondreful effectes in so small time I considre fyve causes to have come togedir: first, an incredible wit; secondly, a mervelouse fast memory; thredly, grete substaunce, by the which to the bying of his bokes, as wel Latin as Greke and othir tongis, he was especially holpen —.vii.m. ducatis he had laide out in the gadering togither of volumes of all maner of litterature. The fourth cause was his besy and infatigable study; the fyft was the contempt or dispising of al erthly thingis.[44]

Despite the many honours he garnered, such as his Fellowship of the British Academy and his Honorary DLitt from Wellington, Douglas was unmarked by personal vanity (signalled to the world by a succession of progressively ever more ragged jumpers and

[42] G.K. Chesterton, *Chaucer* (London: Faber, 1932), p. 33.

[43] Anglo-Celtic archipelago is one of the terms used to replace The British Isles, given that the Republic of Ireland is politically independent of the British government.

[44] Gray, *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval English Verse and Prose*, p. 409.

increasingly disreputable trousers). A hole in one of his jumpers became a hole in the wall between Pyramus and Thisbe! This was in a 'medieval' play gleefully written and put on for him by his students. On the script that they handed to him Douglas wrote this witty comment: 'Can it be the work of Rowley, the 15th century Bristol monk? If so, I would guess that it comes from the end of his life, since the forms are more consistent and correct than those of his early work.' This not only states cryptically Douglas's appreciation of the forgery (because Rowley was the invented author 'rediscovered' and published by Thomas Chatterton), it also praises the students for their 'consistent and correct' forms, reflecting the way that Chatterton became more 'consistent and correct' as he gained more experience in his forgery. Such learned humour illustrates how he maintained a deeply humane and balanced perspective on life, finding the vanity of earthly ambitions compatible with an equitable and energetic enjoyment of the pursuit of excellence. Douglas lived the life of the mind with unusual intensity but with a proper sense of fun, and a joyful appreciation of the fruits and pleasures of wine and wit, of life and love, of friends and family.

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Note on the authors: Vincent Gillespie was Emeritus J.R.R. Tolkien Professor of English, University of Oxford; he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2013; he died in March 2025, just a few days before this memoir was published. Helen Barr is Professor of English Literature at the University of Oxford. Jane Bliss is an independent scholar based in Oxford who has published on a variety of medieval subjects. Janet M. Wilson is Professor Emeritus of English and Postcolonial Studies, University of Northampton.

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