



MARY LASCELLES

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Mary Madge Lascelles

1900–1995

MARY LASCELLES was Tutor and Fellow in English at Somerville College, Oxford, for twenty-nine years, and latterly University Lecturer and then Reader in English Literature at Oxford University. As a literary scholar and critic her particular contributions were to the study of Jane Austen, Shakespeare, Dr Johnson, and Walter Scott. She was also a poet and sensitive witness of the changes in a lifetime which spanned almost the whole of the twentieth century.

‘I was born on the slopes of an extinct volcano in the Caribbean.’¹ That is the first sentence of the *Memoir* she wrote late in her life. Mary Lascelles was born on 7 February 1900, and the volcano in question was on the island of Grenada where her father, William Horace Lascelles, had an estate on which he grew cocoa, limes, and sugar. He was a younger son—the eighth—of the fourth Earl of Harewood. Her mother, born Madeline Barton, was the daughter of a Church of England clergyman who had served as chaplain to the English community in Freiburg. The Revd Gerard Barton came of Cumberland Quaker stock and before his ordination had farmed in Norfolk. Mary was the eldest of the family; twins, Daniel and Pamela, were born two years later. The children did not flourish in Grenada, a fact which Mary attributed in part to diet—orange juice, a product of the island, was then considered unsuitable for children. The family left Grenada when she was three but she loved the recollection

¹ Mary Lascelles, *A Memoir* (privately printed for the author by Smith Settle, Otley, West Yorkshire: 1989), p. 1.

of it. She would tell the story of her christening, when a hen was found to have laid an egg in the font. The memory of the Caribbean Eden was sustained for some years by consignments of molasses, much relished in an English childhood.

In England the family had various homes, first in Monmouth and then in Suffolk and Norfolk. The family grew to five: the twins were followed by a sister Susan and a brother John. They were close-knit. As Mary wrote in old age 'For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, we have been a family.'² Among her childhood recollections were the delights of the open air in the English countryside and her parents' reading aloud. Her acquaintance with Jane Austen began when she listened to her mother 'reading *Pride and Prejudice* to two friends on the lawn. They laughed, and I laughed with them, as little girls will—though, as I was only seven, I do not suppose I understood a word.'³ Her father read poetry, largely Macaulay and Kipling. In such a household a child saw no need to learn to read. 'Efforts were made to teach me to read, but I stoutly resisted.'⁴ She was eight years old when, staying with relations in Ireland, she combated loneliness by learning to read.

Her early education was from a series of governesses 'in the Brontë tradition'.⁵ Most of them were content to leave her alone with a book, of which there were plenty in the house. Mary remembered only one rule: 'no Walter Scott before lunch.'⁶ At the age of fifteen she was sent to boarding school at Sherborne in Dorset. She forgave the school its philistinism, and the humiliations of the hockey-field, for the sake of the teacher who recommended that she prepare for Oxford. She went up to Lady Margaret Hall in 1919 to read English. The end of the war gave more than personal optimism to the beginning of three delightful years.

Her tutor was Janet Spens with whom a friendship developed. She recalled also with particular gratitude the lectures of Walter Raleigh and small classes he ran for the women's colleges. Although LMH had been founded in 1878, the first of the women's colleges in Oxford, women were still far from being accepted fully in the University and in Oxford society when Mary went up. Women were not permitted to take Oxford University

² *Memoir*, p. vii.

³ *Memoir*, pp. 6–7.

⁴ *Memoir*, p. 6.

⁵ *Memoir*, p. 14.

⁶ *Memoir*, p. 19.

degrees until 1920. The social awkwardness experienced by a woman undergraduate was less easily remedied:

Some of the unreconciled opponents of the admission of women would not allow their daughters to associate with us, even where there was a former friendship. In houses where hospitality was offered, Oxford ladies—such a term would not then include members of women's colleges—would assume their husbands' severity of demeanour towards us.⁷

A meeting of significance was with Katharine Chapman (Metcalf) whose work on Jane Austen—she had edited *Pride and Prejudice* in 1912—inspired the work of her husband R. W. Chapman. Modestly, Mary attributed her first-class degree to the fact that she was a good examinee, 'a low order of being in all respects but one: it implies a sort of resilience.'⁸

In 1922 she embarked on a B.Litt., on a medieval topic. Janet Spens had encouraged her natural taste for poetry and romantic narrative, especially for narratives with a legendary strain, and she chose as the subject of her thesis a study of the English versions of the fabulous story of Alexander's adventures on his voyage to the lost earthly paradise. Her supervisor was George Gordon, although the conventions of the day, and the fact that his health had been undermined in the trenches, made the supervision only nominal. Mary came to regret that she had embarked on research before David Nichol Smith's introduction in 1926 of a course in research methods for B.Litt. students, including bibliography and palaeography, and she referred to her own procedures as 'Robinson Crusoe methods'.⁹ Despite the laborious means her study of the romances of Alexander taught her the disciplines of manuscript and source study. She had access to an unpublished manuscript of a little-known Scottish version of the Alexander story, Sir Gilbert Haye's *Buik of King Alexander the Conqueror*, which had recently been acquired by the British Museum. This required work in London, which was assisted by first a research studentship at Westfield College and later by a Gilchrist Studentship. Her thesis, which was finished in 1926, revealed a wide acquaintance in Britain with the Alexander romances, particularly associated in the Middle Ages with France. It was published under the title 'Alexander and the Earthly Paradise in Mediaeval English Writings' in three instalments in *Medium Ævum* in 1936.¹⁰ Mary retained a belief in

⁷ *Memoir*, p. 27.

⁸ *Memoir*, p. 20.

⁹ *Memoir*, p. 33.

¹⁰ *Medium Ævum*, 5 (1936), 31–47, 79–104, 173–88.

the B.Litt. as an introduction to literary scholarship, and in later life would propose it to graduate students in preference to the D.Phil. which she used to say 'had been foisted on Oxford by foreign universities'. The B.Litt. was the oldest postgraduate qualification in English, and its particular merit in her view, besides its research-methods course, was the circumscription of length and time in which it was to be completed.

It was now time to look for paid employment, for which she felt totally unqualified. Her first posts were testing. She taught briefly at St Leonard's School in St Andrews, where she regarded herself as a total failure, and then for two years at Royal Holloway College. At Royal Holloway the teaching was entirely by lecture, and she was required to give thirteen lectures a week. Deciding to get at least one of these courses of lectures to a satisfactory state she made it the course on Jane Austen. LMH meanwhile did not lose sight of its struggling graduate—on leaving Royal Holloway she was invited to teach at LMH for two terms while Janet Spens was on sabbatical leave. This, she reckoned, assisted her appointment in 1931 as Tutor in English in Somerville, following Helen Darbishire's elevation to Principal. Mary became a Fellow of Somerville in 1932 and remained Tutor in English until 1960 when she became a University Lecturer in English Literature.

In her early years at Somerville Mary's task was to teach literature from the Middle Ages to 1830. In covering that range she had the help of Kathleen Constable (later Professor Kathleen Tillotson) who was already teaching part-time at the college and became a friend. Tutorial teaching was her favourite method of teaching—she liked the fact that tutorial discussion had no boundaries, and she relished the kind of student who pressed the tutor so that she needed 'the speed and cunning of a hunted animal'.¹¹ Few of her former students will recognise themselves in such a remark; most thought *they* were the hunted animal. Many, however, will echo the comment of one former student that her tutor's formidable aspect 'did me an ENORMOUS amount of good'. She inspired her pupils with a love of literature, and drew out of them talents they did not know they had. Long after they had gone down she offered them her support and genuine, though austere, affection. Among the Fellows she was regarded as particularly accident-prone. At a meeting of the Somerville Council in 1939 she submitted a request for sabbatical leave in the Michaelmas Term of that year, to enable her to travel on the continent. 'College legend has it that one fellow passed to another a note which read

¹¹ *Memoir*, p. 51.

“Now war is certain”.¹² From 1947 to 1960 she was also Vice-Principal. Since the Principal, Dame Janet Vaughan, was a distinguished haematologist with many duties outside the college, the tasks that fell to Mary Lascelles as Vice-Principal were varied and unpredictable, in addition to the fact that *ex officio* she was ‘President of the Senior Common Room, Senior Tutor and charged with the conduct of chapel services, and the care of the garden.’¹³

During the 1930s she served her apprenticeship as a critic by writing reviews for *The Times Literary Supplement*—reviews were then anonymous and she kept no record of her contributions. She also started to write on Jane Austen, the subject of her first book. An article on ‘Miss Austen and Some Books’ appeared in the *London Mercury* in 1934¹⁴ and ‘Some Characteristics of Jane Austen’s Style’ in Helen Darbishire’s collection of *Essays and Studies* in 1937.¹⁵ Mary acknowledged two respects in which she was fortunate in writing on Jane Austen when she did. R. W. Chapman’s edition of *The Novels of Jane Austen* had appeared in 1923,¹⁶ providing a sound textual base for criticism, and his editions of *Jane Austen’s Letters* (1932) and of her juvenilia and unpublished works ensured that almost all that Jane Austen wrote was for the first time accessible. The second circumstance assisting her work was Mary’s feeling that her upbringing had given her an understanding of Jane Austen’s world: ‘It was my particular gain that the climate of a country parish, then little changed over the past century, was not strange to me.’¹⁷

Jane Austen and Her Art was published in 1939. It starts from the recognition that Jane Austen was, although popular, little understood. The accepted commonplace that Jane Austen always wrote about the society she knew meant that the *art* involved in the novels was scarcely appreciated. There are two main themes to Mary Lascelles’ book: Jane Austen’s engagement with earlier fiction, and a consideration of her novels in the light of current theories about narrative art. *Jane Austen and Her Art* starts with a biographical account of Jane Austen in forty pages, which remains an excellent short life of the author. Particularly striking to the modern reader is Mary’s distinguishing of the phases of Jane Austen’s life, noting the crisis in her life when the family home of her

¹² Pauline Adams, *Somerville for Women: An Oxford College 1879–1993* (Oxford, 1996), p. 194.

¹³ *Memoir*, p. 64.

¹⁴ *London Mercury*, 29 (1933–4), 527–39.

¹⁵ *Essays and Studies by members of the English Association*, 22 (Oxford, 1937), 61–85.

¹⁶ *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1923).

¹⁷ *Memoir*, p. 53.

childhood became the women's home of widow and spinster daughters, and the fact that her creativity seems to have responded to a secure home in the country, however modest. The publication of Jane Austen's letters had surprised readers by some instances of ill-natured remarks which were seized upon triumphantly by commentators. Mary's retort has drawn the sting from such criticisms: 'The censor who has never suffered the shame of recollecting equivalent words of his own is much to be envied, whether for the goodness of his disposition or the badness of his memory.'¹⁸

Jane Austen and her Art explores the importance of Jane Austen's reading in the development of her own novel-writing. It is not a study of influence, although many instances of it are mentioned, but an introduction to Jane Austen's narrative procedure. Mary Lascelles presents as the dominant theme in Jane Austen's work the usurping of reality by an illusory view of the world. The commonest sort of illusory world is that presented by the eighteenth-century novel. As Mary points out, many commentators on the novel, then and later, pointed out its dangers, in that it invited inexperienced readers to accept a flattering view of the world. So common was this particular criticism that a tradition of burlesque mockery had grown up within the novel itself. That is the tradition in which Jane Austen embarked as a writer of fiction in her earliest satirical sketches. The satire is still obviously present in the first two of her novels to be completed, *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility*. Mary draws attention, however, to the source of illusion in the popular novel even in Jane Austen's novels which do not make that interpretation explicit. Where would Emma have got the idea of Harriet Smith's being a gentleman's daughter, or of Jane Fairfax's being involved in some discreditable relationship with Mr Dixon, except through contemporary fiction? For Mary Lascelles Jane Austen's use of contemporary fiction was more than a source of comedy. Jane Austen expressed her vision of society through the juxtaposition of the world as it is experienced and the world conjured by the imagination, and Mary suggests that she enlisted fiction in order to do so because of the popularity of novel-reading in her day, and because novels presented an area of shared experience which was open to both men and women. Jane Austen is able to make versions of this story comic in the way that severer moralists could not: she was not one of those who scolded readers who succumbed to the delusive delights of fiction, requiring them to take the stern medicine of

¹⁸ Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and her Art* (Oxford, 1939), p. vi.

reality. Jane Austen's novels are delightful because she thought the promises and contrivances of fiction were less delightful than reality, and so although her heroines may experience some brief pain in parting from their illusions they are actually making themselves more and not less happy by doing so. Mary writes of Jane Austen's 'vision of reality and of the unrealities that humankind prefers', and adds 'It is a vision so constantly held and consistently presented that, if she had been born a man then, or a woman in this more indulgent age, it might almost have been called Thought'.¹⁹

The book was an immediate success. It was not only reviewed appreciatively in *The Times Literary Supplement* on 17 June 1939, but the leader-writer took her observation that Jane Austen's characters are 'modelled, as it were, in very low relief' as the starting point for a meditation on that quality in the work of other artists and writers. Retrospectively Mary Lascelles found it significant that *Jane Austen and Her Art* appeared in June 1939. 'Looking back on that summer, I see it as a time when we were still holding fast to cherished traditional things.'²⁰ The book is poised between two worlds. From our vantage point it is the beginning of modern criticism of Jane Austen. It is still in print.

During the war Mary was one of those who kept the teaching in Oxford alive, teaching in Somerville and lecturing to naval cadets in the men's colleges. She did some war work during the long vacation, acting as secretary to the local Home Guard at her parents' home in Norfolk. 'My work consisted chiefly in typing entreaties to the sentries on the railway line not to shoot the plate-layers, and in filing forms.'²¹ No doubt her own contribution seemed slight, as the war years were spent in anxiety over her brothers, Dan, in the Foreign Office and John, who served in the Norfolk Regiment and then with the Lincolns in Burma. Dan was First Secretary in the British Embassy in Oslo when the Germans invaded Norway, and oversaw the evacuation of King Haakon on HMS Glasgow on 29 April 1940.

The visit to the continent that Mary had proposed to make in the Michaelmas Term of 1939 was to Italy. Her reason for wanting to go there, and to learn Italian, was that she was planning to write on Shakespeare and particularly those plays which draw on Italian sources. She abandoned the attempt to travel in 1939, on her brother Dan's advice.

¹⁹ *Jane Austen and her Art*, p. 83.

²⁰ *Memoir*, p. 54.

²¹ *Memoir*, p. 59.

The outcome of her study of Shakespeare was a book on *Shakespeare's 'Measure for Measure'* published in 1953. The play 'baffled and repelled me, but I was bent on coming to terms with it'.²² What repelled was the theme of 'the monstrous ransom'—that the heroine should be offered the chance of saving her brother's life by sleeping with the ruler who had condemned him to death—and what baffled was, among many smaller problems, the fact that the play was a comedy. Mary's book starts forbiddingly with an account of earlier versions, narrative and dramatic, of the tale of the monstrous ransom and Shakespeare's possible knowledge of them. It takes flight, however, when she turns to *Measure for Measure* itself. She patiently elucidates what the problems in the play are, frequently giving imaginative renderings of how scenes could be staged and speeches spoken. Throughout the argument she keeps in mind the possible influence of earlier treatments of the theme and problems in the text itself; but what grips the reader is the gradually unfolding interpretation of the play—this is not a book to dip into but one to give oneself up to. What distinguishes her reading is her acute recognition of different sorts of sinful and dishonourable behaviour, and the many shifts that the plot of *Measure for Measure* places on its characters. Her conclusion justifies her starting with earlier versions of the plot story: in this play, she concludes, Shakespeare drew on 'the conventions of an art inferior to his own'²³ and his characters had outgrown, though not relinquished them.

Besides her life in college and her scholarly life there was also life at home. After the death of their parents her sisters established a home at Cley, near the Norfolk coast, where Mary was always welcome. Her brother Dan was a diplomat and was reputed to know more languages—twenty-four—than anyone else in the Foreign Office. (He achieved the legendary feat, on being posted as Ambassador in Ethiopia in 1949, of presenting his credentials at the court of Addis Ababa in Amharic.) They were a talented family: in particular Dan and Susan were painters; Pamela was a gardener and made a garden in a disused quarry at Cley. Mary shared these talents, and added another: from an early age she wrote poetry.

Mary Lascelles was a natural writer, to whom writing was a pleasure and a calling. She had no patience with editors (usually from overseas) who wanted to alter her punctuation. As she expostulated after one of these encounters,

²² *Memoir*, p. 61.

²³ Mary Lascelles, *Shakespeare's 'Measure for Measure'* (1953), p. 121.

Now, I hold that punctuation is the literary good manners of the professional writer: the means by which he ensures that the reader's understanding of his intended pauses and emphasis shall be as easy as though he were listening to a good speaker. And I am a professional writer, of fifty years' standing!²⁴

Those teaching in modern universities, who are required to undertake research, forget how recent such an obligation is. Mary recalled the conditions of an earlier age: 'In the profession into which I gradually made my way, writing of an appropriate kind was permissible, so long as it ministered to my professional usefulness.'²⁵ It was not then universally agreed that *research* was possible except in the sciences, on which Mary's view was, 'I would not insist on the inclusion of literary exploration and enquiry, if a better term could be found.'²⁶ One of the activities of a literary scholar least unworthy of being called research must surely be editing. Mary expressed a view of the dignity of editing which was impressed on more than one generation of graduate students in Oxford, 'Editing is, in my estimation, a member's subscription to the world of letters. The work has to be done; to do it perfunctorily will mean dispatching criticism on a faulty compass bearing.'²⁷

Mary Lascelles' editorial work started under the inspiration of R. W. Chapman. She was responsible for later revisions to his edition of Jane Austen,²⁸ and she edited the novels for the Everyman series, correcting the text 'in accordance with the readings established by R. W. Chapman'.²⁹ Her major editorial work, however, was on Dr Johnson. Mary loved Johnson for his wisdom and pragmatism, and for all those redoubtable and trenchant qualities of mind and expression to which neither Jane Austen nor she were tempted to aspire. She had already published articles on Johnson and in 1951 had been President of the Johnson Society of Lichfield. She inherited from R. W. Chapman the task of editing Johnson's *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775) for the Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson.

The study of the text of Johnson's *Journey* was started by Chapman during weeks of inactivity as a temporary gunner in Macedonia in the summer of 1918, and when in the 1950s the Yale editors distributed their texts it was natural to offer the *Journey* to him. He was in poor health,

²⁴ In a letter to the writer, 20 April 1976.

²⁵ *Memoir*, p. 69.

²⁶ *Memoir*, p. 33.

²⁷ *Memoir*, p. 83.

²⁸ David Gilson, *A Bibliography of Jane Austen* (Oxford, 1982), p. 300.

²⁹ 5 vols. (London, New York, 1962–4).

however, and died in 1960, and the edition was offered to Mary Lascelles. She took it on in the knowledge that the edition that readers cherished was Chapman's volume containing both Johnson's and Boswell's account of their shared journey to Scotland in 1773, first published in 1924.³⁰ Despite the fact that the common reader links them, it is unavoidable that the great editorial enterprises devoted to Johnson and Boswell should consign them separately each to its author. Johnson had discouraged the publication of James Boswell's *Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1785) in his lifetime, perhaps anticipating how readers would be deflected from his own grave study of a country visited by Boswell's irrepressible interest in the visitor himself. It was no difficulty for Mary, who had no great respect for Boswell, to make different comparisons, not with Johnson's fellow-traveller but with the works of previous travellers whom Johnson had read, in particular Martin Martin and Thomas Pennant. Martin Martin was important because Johnson had read his *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (1703, 1716) as a boy and it inspired his visit to the Western Islands. When Johnson got there he found that, not only had the 'system of antiquated life' which Martin described almost passed away, but that many questions arose which Martin could presumably have answered if he had thought of doing so. Johnson's comment was, 'he probably had not knowledge of the world sufficient to qualify him for judging what would deserve or gain the attention of mankind. The mode of life which was familiar to himself, he did not suppose unknown to others.'³¹ This observation fuelled Johnson's search for facts during his tour, and must influence an editor. As an editor Mary Lascelles brought her sensitive ear to the remaining difficulties in Johnson's text. In her Introduction she places the *Journey* in the context of both Johnson's life and of eighteenth-century Scottish political, economic, and social history. Her editorial commentary is always respectful of the texture of the narrative as it moves from observation to reflection, from the abrupt to the expansive, and adds scrupulously only what will elucidate Johnson's text.

The years of research on Johnson's *Journey* were lightened by holidays in the Highlands, in the course of which Mary followed most of Johnson's route. She stayed on Raasay, and her visit to Armadale in Skye was rendered more interesting from the fact that, through her paternal grand-

³⁰ Johnson's 'Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland' and Boswell's 'Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.', ed. R. W. Chapman (1924) and frequently reprinted.

³¹ Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, ed. Mary Lascelles, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, vol. 9 (New Haven and London, 1971), p. 65.

mother, she was a descendant of Johnson's host, Sir Alexander Macdonald. The great tradition of the editing of Johnson's *Journey* was handed on to David Fleeman, the friend whose services ranged from supplying Highland genealogies to helping to gather the apples from the topmost branches of Mary's apple tree.

The last of the group of major writers who earned Mary's life-long interest was Walter Scott. She had loved his poems as a young girl and it was the preoccupation of later life to trace his genius in story-telling. She was never an uncritical admirer: she acknowledged that his inspiration could at times be fitful, and his relations with his publishers did not entirely pass muster with her sense of honourable behaviour. And yet, the longer she lived into an age that undervalued him the more staunchly she asserted Scott's power to combine poetic and narrative inspiration. In 1960 she was invited by John Butt to give the Sir Walter Scott lectures in Edinburgh University. The titles she chose were 'Scott and Shakespeare' and 'Scott and the Sense of Time'.

In the former she points to an important similarity between Scott and Shakespeare in that their writings express understanding and forbearance of both sides of the controversy which had divided their society, in Shakespeare's case that between Catholic and Protestant and in Scott's Jacobite and Hanoverian. In the second lecture she investigates the way in which Scott's fictions measure the passage of time by both the personal memory of the individual and the history of a society—with consequences almost always tragic. At the end she quoted the lines from *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* with which she ended her lecture course on Scott in Oxford:

...
 Unlike the tide of human time,
 Which, though it change in ceaseless flow,
 Retains each grief, retains each crime
 Its earliest course was doom'd to know;
 And, darker as it downward bears,
 Is stain'd with past and present tears.³²

While Mary was in Edinburgh an incident took place which has had repercussions on the study of Scott. In the National Library of Scotland she was shown the manuscript of *Redgauntlet*, and at her request it was opened at a page of 'Wandering Willie's Tale'. The opening showed an instance of Scott's characteristic use of a verso for additions to what he

³² Walter Scott, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (Edinburgh, 1805), Canto 4, II, ll. 1–6.

had written on the opposite page. The revision she saw on that visit remained in her mind and was the source of her essay on 'Scott and the Art of Revision',³³ which stands at the beginning of modern textual study of Scott.

Mary Lascelles had an abiding curiosity into the workings of the imagination, and the way the verbal artist captures its perceptions in words. Her criticism often concerned itself with tracing the use the creative imagination makes of its sources, oral and written. In explaining this sort of literary exploration she offered a typically homely image: 'I have been like a farm-yard cat watching and moving stealthily in a stable loft, alert for anything which may stir behind those bales of hay. Whatever movement comes to my notice, I must ascertain the cause.'³⁴ As to the great work of the imagination itself she wrote, 'Johnson asked of any literary performance which is to endure only 'an original principle of growth'. I should be hard put to it, as usual, to find my own words for his aphorism, but I think I can recognise the thing, if ever I have the good fortune to meet it.'³⁵

In the 1960s Mary's scholarship began to be recognised more widely. In 1960 she was appointed a University Lecturer and in 1962 a Fellow of the British Academy. In 1966 she became a Reader in the University and a Professorial Fellow of Somerville. The recognition of her stature by Oxford University, although gratifying, carried with it some immediate inconveniences. In 1960 she was relieved of the posts of Tutorial Fellow and Vice-Principal of Somerville, and as a consequence found that she had to move out of College, after twenty-nine years. It is not easy for the present generation to recognise what that meant for women scholars who had had no experience of house-keeping. For those pioneers in opening the life of the mind to women inability to cook was a token of the rigorous path they had chosen. But Mary came from a family rich in talents and resourcefulness. She bought a small terraced house in Stratfield Road, behind the shops in Summertown in north Oxford, and furnished it in a way that combined the scholar's study with the prettiness of her sisters' house in Cley. Between tall bookcases hung her brother's water-colours of Afghanistan (Sir Daniel had been Ambassador in Kabul in 1953–7), and one of HMS Glasgow; on the mantelpiece and desk were favourite pieces of lustreware and posies of buds and twigs breaking into

³³ 'Scott and the Art of Revision' in *Imagined Worlds: Essays on some English Novels and Novelists in Honour of John Butt*, ed. Maynard Mack and Ian Gregor (1968), pp. 139–56.

³⁴ *Memoir*, p. 33–4.

³⁵ *Memoir*, p. 100.

leaf. In that room, sitting over a recalcitrant stove, graduate students would come for supervision and Jane Austen, Johnson, and Scott scholars from all over the world would experience her hospitality. Mary was never one to retreat from realities. With the insight of one who had come late to it, she summed up domesticity as 'a fight against the two enemies of mankind, hunger and dirt.'

When no longer a College tutor Mary became more involved in graduate teaching. Her talents as a supervisor are legendary, lying particularly in suggesting what students might do with their material. She did not direct the outcome, although she could be cool about authors she disapproved of, but saw her job as the drawing out of the potential in any idea that the student came with. She paid her graduates the immense compliment of supposing that they were starting out on a life of writing and scholarship comparable with hers, and offered advice which was the result of hard-won experience. The beneficiaries have not forgotten such injunctions as 'learn to use small amounts of time' and 'use your work as a shield against unhappiness'.

As the years passed she had her own share of unhappiness. She had the grief of losing both her brothers. Within herself her greatest sorrow was that her eyesight started to fail seriously in her fifties. As she remarked, 'From my mid-fifties, reading has been a fight.'³⁶ Her expedition as Visiting Professor to Australia, arranged to follow her retirement in 1967, had to be cut short because of a sudden serious deterioration in her sight. Her host on that occasion was her former pupil J. P. Hardy, Professor at the University of New England at Armidale, to whom she always remained grateful for contriving that she should have happy and memorable experiences of Australia despite her ominous circumstances. From then on scholarly work was difficult. There were particular difficulties in completing the close work involved in her edition of Johnson's *Journey*, which appeared in 1971.

The following year she published a volume of essays entitled *Notions and Facts*.³⁷ It contains most of her essays on Shakespeare,³⁸ Johnson (including two essays on *Rasselas* and her study of 'Johnson and Juvenal'), and Scott (including the Edinburgh Scott lectures). The first essay, entitled 'The Rider on the Winged Horse' is a study of the Renaissance association of the poet and Pegasus, the winged horse of classical

³⁶ *Memoir*, p. 71.

³⁷ Mary Lascelles, *Notions and Facts: Collected Criticism and Research* (Oxford, 1972).

³⁸ An essay on 'King Lear and Doomsday', *Shakespeare Survey*, 26 (1973), 69–79, was written too late for inclusion.

mythology, and harks back in method to her early study of the Alexander romances.³⁹ A personal debt was acknowledged in concluding the collection with her British Academy memoir of R. W. Chapman. The title of the volume, *Notions and Facts*, is an allusion to a quotation by Jane Austen of a distinction made by Dr Johnson.⁴⁰ The distinction between ‘facts’, discoverable by the disciplines of enquiry, and ‘notions’, the ideas perceived by imaginative sympathy, here coming down through two of her favourite authors, had particular significance for Mary Lascelles and it can be detected throughout her scholarship.

With dignified stoicism she reconciled herself to curtailing other ambitions for books, particularly on Shakespeare and Johnson; but she determined on one last book, the subject chosen because it could be written with most dependence on early reading and least on work in a library. It is a study of narrative art set in the past, with particular reference to Scott, Stevenson, and Kipling, under the title *The Story-teller Retrieves the Past*.⁴¹ Mary had a life-long interest in story-telling, and regretted that it was under-rated in contemporary criticism. She recalled from her teaching days the student who would claim to be interested in *character*—‘something of which she had neither the experience nor the insight to form even an impression. Yet she was near enough to her childhood to remember the charm of a *story*.’⁴² Among the instances of narrative art analysed in the book is Scott’s use of his source story in *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*, which has been an inspiration to later criticism. In her last years Mary was grateful to the friends who came and read to her, but recorded sadly, ‘with diminished sight, my famine is perpetual’.⁴³ She went on living and working in Stratfield Road until near blindness and infirmity meant that she could no longer live alone. Her last piece of writing was an essay on Mrs Ewing, an early favourite, for the centenary of her death in 1985.⁴⁴ Loss of independence was what she dreaded, but she

³⁹ Originally published in *Elizabethan and Jacobean Studies Presented to Frank Percy Wilson*, ed. Herbert David and Helen Gardner (Oxford, 1959), pp. 173–98.

⁴⁰ ‘But like my dear Dr Johnson I believe [sic] I have dealt more in Notions than Facts’, letter from Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 8–9 Feb. 1807 (*Jane Austen’s Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford, 1995), p. 121) alluding to a letter from Johnson to Boswell, 4 July 1774, concerning the printing of his *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* in which he writes, ‘I suspect some mistakes; but as I deal, perhaps, more in notions than facts, the matter is not great’ (*The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1992), II, p. 145).

⁴¹ Mary Lascelles, *The Story-teller Retrieves the Past* (Oxford, 1980).

⁴² In a letter to the writer, 31 Dec. 1979.

⁴³ *Memoir*, p. 69.

⁴⁴ ‘Juliana Horatia Ewing 1841–1885: An Appreciation’, privately printed in 1985.

moved in 1990 to Norfolk to be with her remaining sister, Susan, whom in the end she outlived.

Mary Lascelles published two volumes of poetry privately: *The Adversaries and Other Poems* in 1971, and *Further Poems* in 1982. The 'Adversaries' in the title poem of the first collection are scholarship and poetry, the former opening with 'You to turn poet! That's a bitter jest'.⁴⁵ Poetry was, however, Mary's first love and she had been writing all her life.

One thing endears my verse to me: I can seldom if ever be sure where it comes from. As an incalculable bounty, it complies with the child's answer to the question: 'what is the meaning of the word Anon?' 'It means that even the author does not know who wrote it.'⁴⁶

Her deepest reflections on life are explored in her poems, expansions of the apparently casual expressions of general wisdom which are pervasive in her scholarly writing. She was acutely aware of having lived through two world wars, and of the sense of both loss and preservation which longevity gave. She always respected those who had fought, and literary study which had been undertaken in conditions of war. Sharing with Dr Johnson a sense of awe at the idea of 'the last', she lamented the end of her own family (of the five none had children), of an aristocratic inheritance and the culture that went with it. These were small reflections of a greater loss, the loss of faith and meaning in the modern world. This pessimism is expressed in the poem 'The End of the Road', where the intimation that 'Here the road ends' provokes a meditation on a world destroying itself:

Must we, to whom a peopled world was lent,
Kinless encounter each succeeding year?
'Having devoured his fellow-creatures' part,
Man, predator and parasite, consumes
Even his own heart'.⁴⁷

A reason for writing her *Memoir* when she was in her eighties was 'to record, from an inconspicuous vantage point and in terms of personal experience, changes in a world which has capsized—indeed, rolled over and over—in the century now drawing to its close'.⁴⁸ About changes in Oxford she used the word 'heart-breaking'.⁴⁹ In dark moments she felt

⁴⁵ Mary Lascelles, *The Adversaries and other poems* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 9.

⁴⁶ *Memoir*, p. 101.

⁴⁷ *The Adversaries and other poems*, p. 38.

⁴⁸ *Memoir*, p. vii.

⁴⁹ *Memoir*, p. 97.

that she could not communicate with later generations. She was haunted by the memory of a 'dead village' she had seen on a holiday in Skye. Her fear was that the great traditions of literature and culture would be like that abandoned village, in which empty stone walls still stood, 'their garden enclosures still fenced with fuchsia'.⁵⁰ In her poems about nature—trees, birds, the seasons—the fleeting English summer is an image of life threatened by prevailing clouds. Although she responded to sorrow with stoicism she shared Dr Johnson's view of the ultimate inadequacy of that doctrine. She had a reticent piety, sharing the 'village Anglicanism' often attributed to Jane Austen. She always preferred instinct to theory and she had no taste for theology: 'with heart and senses sustained by the language of the Authorised Version and the Book of Common Prayer, the mind must frame its own theology out of such examples as human intercourse may afford. I would rather have it that way.'⁵¹

Mary was a generous and discriminating benefactor of Oxford University. She always took a close interest in the English Faculty Library, and was responsible for building up its collections of Jane Austen and Scott. She wanted even undergraduates to be able to handle works of literature as they originally appeared in print. On leaving Oxford she gave her library and her house in Stratfield Road to Somerville College, and in her will left a generous bequest to the Friends of the Bodleian Library which has been used to establish the Mary Lascelles Fund for Special Purchases. Oxford has paid its own tribute by remembering her as one of those dons who figure in anecdotes (some of doubtful authenticity) whose point is the unattainable standards of the don and the abject posture of the narrator. Mary's usual invitation was to tea, at exactly half past four. Generations of students have an intense memory of the gardens and shop windows of Summertown as they waited for the precise moment to knock. To Esther Rantzen, the well-known television presenter, is attributed the story of arriving a few minutes late and being greeted with, 'Oh, you've come at last. I shall go and reheat the scones.'

Mary was a strikingly good-looking woman, slender and elegant, and usually dressed in blue. As she grew older her hair turned a silvery white. Although she had a wide circle of friends, including many former students, she remained an awe-inspiring figure. One reason may have been her shyness; another perhaps her conscious independence of mind, revealed by her observation that 'The true art of coming to terms with

⁵⁰ *Memoir*, p. 75.

⁵¹ *Memoir*, pp. 64, 20.

mankind's herd instinct consists in going your own way without self-justification; but it takes time to learn.⁵² She observed a distinction in human nature which she described as that between a cat and a dog. She once suggested to the present writer, a graduate student recently arrived from Scotland, that 'a Lowlander is like a dog, and a Highlander like a cat.' She was indubitably a cat herself; but she loved human nature's dogs, of whom Dr Johnson was the most noble. A celebration of that unlikely fellowship is found in her poem 'Dog and Man', which ends 'Nature forgive us all!'⁵³

Those who knew Mary Lascelles remember a person consistent in high, though sometimes intractable, ideals. She did not compromise but she was not stuffy, and could surprise with humour. Observing fastidious order in her own life she warmed unexpectedly to a lack of order elsewhere, like the hen's egg in the font. Meditating on her life confronts us with all that the modern world suppresses in the way of idealism. Against the odds she kept faith with her vision of literature and scholarship. Her indomitable quality is best expressed by an image from one of her poems. The poem is 'Old Woman saying her Prayers' and its final lines are these:

. . . an old, frayed rope between my hands.
So it be taut, no matter how rough,
Faltering hands are firm enough.
It quivers and burns—let go who will,
Hand over hand, I am hauling still.⁵⁴

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⁵² *Memoir*, p. 19.

⁵³ Mary Lascelles, *Further Poems* (Gloucester, 1982), p. [12].

⁵⁴ *The Adversaries and other poems*, p. 49.

