

PLATE XXVII



Photograph by Walter Bird, 1962

JOHN EVERETT BUTT

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1906-1965

JOHN BUTT was born at Hoole in Cheshire on 12 April 1906, and educated at Shrewsbury School and at Merton College, Oxford. He went up to Oxford in 1924 intending to follow his father into the medical profession, but before long he transferred to the School of English Language and Literature. As an undergraduate at Merton he had the good fortune to become a pupil of David Nichol Smith. How far the Merton tutor consciously shaped the pupil in his own image, or how far the pupil consciously or unconsciously absorbed the influence of the leading eighteenth-century scholar of his day, it would be impossible now to determine; but in so far as Nichol Smith founded a school of eighteenth-century scholarship Butt became one of its most notable products, and perhaps the most eminent example of its virtues. All this, however, lay in the future. Butt matured gradually (he was never in a hurry, physically or intellectually), and he took a second in Schools in 1927.

It was just about this time that the B.Litt. was being re-organized by Nichol Smith and George Gordon. With its new courses in Textual Criticism, Bibliography and Palaeography, and the History of English Scholarship, it became available for Butt, who was one of the first to obtain the degree under the new dispensation. Nichol Smith had an amiable way of listening to suggestions for subjects from his pupils, and then quietly but firmly directing their wandering desires to some minor eighteenth-century poet. At all events, Butt was to write his thesis on Thomas Tickell, thereby greatly increasing his own knowledge of eighteenth-century poetry and of the literary and social background of the period, but also making some interesting additions to the canon of Tickell's writings. His first appearance in print came in 1928 with 'Notes for a Bibliography of Thomas Tickell' in the *Bodleian Quarterly Record*. Another interest of those early years was expressed in his more substantial 'Bibliography of Izaak Walton's "Lives"', which was published two years later in the *Oxford Bibliographical Society Proceedings and Papers*. His interest in Walton was lifelong, and might at one time have led to a full-length book. He did, however, publish an interesting essay on 'Izaak Walton's Methods in Biography'

(1934), and almost twenty years later, when invited to give the Ewing Lectures at U.C.L.A., he chose to speak on English biography, and Walton (along with Johnson and Boswell) was one of the three authors discussed.

He began his career as a university teacher in 1929 at Leeds, where he held a temporary post as an assistant-lecturer. He returned to Oxford in 1930, and was for some time the all-but-honorary Sub-Librarian of the English Schools Library. Later in the same year he became Lecturer in English at Bedford College, London (with Lascelles Abercrombie and, later, F. P. Wilson as head of the department), and there he was to remain, with a long break in the war years, until 1946. He was always a good lecturer, and as his knowledge grew and his ideas matured, he became an excellent one. Like his Merton tutor, he had no patience with the more pretentious and esoteric developments of modern literary criticism, but kept to the high-road of the demonstrable; and if his knowledge ran far beyond that of his student audiences, his contact with them remained unbroken, and the deep pleasure that he took in Pope or Johnson or Wordsworth or Dickens was unaffectedly communicated to them. One of his great assets was a fine resonant voice; and a lecture by him was not only well informed and well organized, but was enlivened by passages of verse or prose beautifully timed and delivered. The voice that was heard at Butt's lectures can be heard again in his prose, which, like so much else about him, became fuller and more assured as he grew older, and took on something of the poise and finality of his favourite century.

The war years brought out new qualities in him that had only been waiting for a chance to find expression. In 1941 he became a Temporary Administrative Assistant in the Ministry of Home Security, and in 1943 he was transferred to the Home Office, where he was a temporary Principal. Here he proved so successful that at the end of the war some pressure was brought to bear upon him to remain in the Civil Service. Butt, who was a splendid administrator—systematic, thorough, equable, and friendly—was tempted to stay on in an environment that he had found so congenial. He had, too, the extraordinary notion that he wasn't really a good teacher. For some time it was touch and go, and either decision would have been the right one; but in the end he decided to return to academic work. He went back to Bedford College in 1945, but only for a short period. The following year he was appointed to the Chair of

English at Newcastle, at the age of forty. In 1947 he succeeded the present writer as Editor of *The Review of English Studies*, just when the flood of post-war contributions was beginning to break its banks. I can well remember his mild exasperation at having to work off a number of dull articles I had accepted (when scholarly work was almost at a standstill), before he could publish those he had accepted himself. He proved himself to be a wise and indefatigable editor for seven years, until pressure of other work forced him to resign.

One of the two main scholarly enterprises of his life was now well under way. In 1932, at the age of twenty-six, he had been invited to become General Editor of the projected Twickenham edition of Pope. He planned the edition carefully, chose his editors judiciously, and gave them clear and unambiguous instructions. His own volume, *Imitations of Horace* (1939), an admirable model, was the first to appear; and in spite of war-time difficulties a second volume was published in 1940, and a third in 1943. The edition was completed in seven volumes, as originally planned, in 1961; but in the mean time the publishers had been persuaded to include the translations from Homer, and those (in four further volumes) will shortly appear. Owing to the death of Norman Ault, Butt became a good deal more than the general editor of Vol. VI (*Minor Poems*), and had in fact to carry out a detailed revision of Ault's manuscript and make himself ultimately responsible for determining the canon of the minor poems. Long before his death he must have had the satisfaction of knowing that the quickened interest in Pope's poetry in recent years was in large measure due to the edition to which he had given so much time and thought, and to which he had himself contributed so much. In 1963 he brought out a one-volume edition of the Twickenham text of Pope, together with select annotations: a volume running to 850 pages, and yet in the circumstances a notable work of compression. His interests, however, were far from being confined to Pope or to eighteenth-century poetry. A translation of *Candide*, for example, made in 1947 for the Penguin series, proved to be very successful, and was followed, in 1964, by translations of *Zadig* and *L'Ingénu*.

The years at Newcastle were happy ones. In 1941 he had married a former student of Bedford College, Enid Margaret Hope, and with their young family of a son and two daughters they were now living in a handsome eighteenth-century house at Corbridge, which they had tastefully modernized, much in

the manner of Pope imitating Horace. It was to this house, during a railway strike, that Mr. (now Professor) Peter Butter drove one summer day from Edinburgh, carrying with him a bundle of scripts for the external examiner. When Butt, who was expecting him, opened the door himself and said: 'I'm Butt', his visitor made the inevitable reply, 'I'm Butter.' It was during the Newcastle years, too, that he made his first visit to the United States, where he taught in 1952 at the University of California, Los Angeles. He was a visiting professor at Yale in 1962, and he also lectured from time to time in various European countries.

In 1954 he delivered the Warton lecture at the Academy on 'Pope's Poetical Manuscripts'. After giving a general account of the surviving manuscripts, he proceeded to pay more detailed attention to a draft of the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* in the Pierpoint Morgan Library, New York, and then showed that another manuscript fragment in the Huntington Library is not, as was then generally supposed, a second autograph manuscript of the poem, but a continuation of the Morgan draft. The various lectures delivered each year at Burlington Gardens are normally received in a decorous and even formidable silence; but anyone who was present at Butt's Warton lecture will recall that although this particular argument held the audience spellbound, the climax of it produced a sudden release of feeling.

If we have any remaining doubt [the lecturer said] whether two sheets now separated by 3,000 miles were once contiguous, there on the last Morgan sheet is a tell-tale blot from a correction Pope had hurriedly added to the Huntington fragment.

At that point there came a sudden burst of applause that was a tribute at once to a beautifully conducted argument, and to the dramatic timing of the lecturer.

Over the years Butt had written a number of interesting papers on eighteenth-century literature; he had contributed a useful volume, *The Augustan Age* (1950), to Hutchinson's University Library, and a *Fielding* to the British Council's 'Writers and their Work' series. The steady and thoughtful quality of his criticism is well seen in the paper on 'Johnson's Practice in the Poetical Imitation', a lecture to the Johnson Society of London which was later published in a volume of studies compiled for the 250th anniversary of Johnson's birth (1959). Yet sound as his critical work on Pope, Johnson, and other eighteenth-century

writers undoubtedly was, it was not, by the very highest standards, outstanding. One still thought of him primarily as an editor who was capable of turning from the establishment and annotation of Pope's text to judicious and well-informed criticism of his poetry, or as a literary historian whose judgements of literature were well weighed and always sane, but not especially original. When, in the 1940s, however, he became interested in what was to prove the second main field of his scholarly activity, the novels of Dickens, he seemed as a literary critic to take on a new dimension. True, his approach was still that of the editor, and in 1958 he was to become joint-editor with Kathleen Tillotson of the Clarendon Press Dickens. But the problems involved in editing Dickens raised critical questions of the greatest interest, and these questions were of a kind peculiarly suited to Butt's critical gifts. With Pope, none of the surviving manuscripts except that of the *Essay on Criticism* was intended for the press, and their readings were therefore, as Butt himself put it, 'provisional only, liable to rejection, and frequently in fact rejected'. With Dickens the situation was quite different, and a good deal more complex. It was the habit of Dickens to send to the printer the corrected first drafts of each instalment of a novel; and the manuscripts of all but the first three novels have survived complete, and of the first three, considerable portions are extant. These manuscripts frequently contain passages that had to be excised because Dickens had overrun the space available for his monthly or weekly part, and sometimes contain passages which he had been compelled to add to make up the necessary length. All this material (together with corrected proofs, revisions made by Dickens for later editions, and much else) makes the establishment of the text a delicate and complicated task, and one calling for a judgement that takes everything into account but is not overwhelmed by detail. Since the new edition of the novels was from the first a joint undertaking, it required also two minds able to work together on a plane of complete understanding and shared interests; and this was indeed an editorial partnership from which the highest quality of work could confidently be expected. In such circumstances it is difficult to separate the work of the two general editors; but it is fair to say that it was Butt's interest in the Dickens manuscripts and his perception of their significance in establishing a critical text that made clear the need for a new and authoritative edition. In Pope studies he was one of the best in a long line; in Dickens studies

he was a pioneer. He did not live to see the publication of the first volume (*Oliver Twist*, edited by Kathleen Tillotson), but he had managed to read most of the proofs. He himself was editing *David Copperfield*, but his progress was impeded by the serious illness which developed in 1963, and which (although there were several periods of intermission) was ultimately the cause of his death.

The editorial work on Dickens was accompanied by, and indeed preceded by, a critical investigation of the conditions under which Dickens wrote, the effect of serial publication on his writing, the extent to which the contemporary world entered into his fiction and suggested its themes, and other related topics. It was in his inquiries into the effect of the instalment system of publication on the novels that he made his most original and important contribution to modern literary criticism. The first public sign of this new interest was an article in the *Durham University Journal* (1948), 'Dickens at Work' (the title was to be used again for the volume of studies which he published jointly with Mrs. Tillotson in 1957), and further papers on Dickens's mode of composition appeared in the next few years in various learned journals. These, very substantially revised, were collected in the volume just mentioned, and additional studies were to appear on *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*, on 'Editing a Nineteenth-century Novelist', and on 'Dickens's Manuscripts'. Those various critical papers showed Butt at the most mature stage of his scholarship. He always liked to work with facts rather than conjectures, and here he had not only facts in plenty, but a complex mass of evidence which had to be brought together, carefully scrutinized, and intelligently interpreted. The result was a new and illuminating commentary on Dickens, and the opening of a fresh approach to the study of nineteenth-century fiction that must always be associated with his name and that of his collaborator.

In 1959 Butt's high standing in the field of English studies was recognized by his appointment to the Regius Chair of Rhetoric and English Literature at the University of Edinburgh. He gave his inaugural lecture (very appropriately both in place and time) on James Boswell, and quickly plunged into a busy life of teaching and administration. To one of his subsidiary duties, the annual award of the James Tait Black Memorial Prizes, he gave his customary close attention; and his influence was soon to be felt, not only in his own department, where considerable developments took place and to

which a growing number of post-graduate students were attracted, but on the higher levels of academic administration. But here, as always, his priorities were right, and he gave his best to his students.

If numbers rose embarrassingly, [one of his colleagues, Professor Denys Hay, has remarked] he had, in a way, only himself to blame. When a professor sings ballads to the First Ordinary Class of English Literature in the Pollock Hall he is taking his subject seriously, but he is also likely to make it seem significant to those hesitating before the claims of other disciplines.

The singing to which Professor Hay refers was not just the result of a momentary whim, but a long-standing interest of Butt's. He had a fine bass voice, and had sung in the Wigmore Hall with the Oriana Madrigalists, and on other occasions with the Fleet Street Choir and at Bedford College.

On one other major task he was working right up to the time of his death. As the hours ran out he was striving with unbroken fortitude to complete his volume for the Oxford History of English Literature, *The Mid-Eighteenth Century*. Shortly before his death I had a letter from him (dictated to his wife) in which he told me of the progress he had made, and what still remained to be done.

I am not writing, because Gibbon in particular requires to be read; but I have reached the position of being able to say that seven of my ten chapters are quite complete, and that substantial sections have been written for the other three.

In this same letter he told me that he was hoping to resume 'a strait-jacket designed by the orthopaedic chaps to hold up my head and shoulders'. A little later his wife wrote to say that he was cheerful and active, but very much immobilized and in some pain:

O.H.E.L. proceeds, Gibbon is read and being written on—some pretty garbled bits get taken down by anybody that is available, and he can't always bear in mind that we don't do shorthand. Nearly every day there is a student or colleague or predecessor on the job . . .

Only one week later I had the news of his death. His gentle endurance of increasing pain and disability in those last months had been heroic, a shining triumph of the spirit over a body that did him 'grievous wrong'.

The mind inevitably goes back to the tall slim figure of his youth and early manhood. Although he was never much of an athlete he always looked robust, and he was a great walker, at

Corbridge, at Edinburgh, and in the Lake District, where he was a Trustee of Dove Cottage. He can hardly have known a day's illness until the first symptoms of bone disease became evident in 1963. Genial, anecdotal, and with just enough severity to give his anecdotes a flavour, he was the best of company, and he made and kept friends wherever he went. He was immersed in his work; yet, unlike that Duke of Newcastle who was said to have lost half an hour in the morning which he kept running after for the rest of the day trying to overtake, he seemed always to have time for everything and everybody. His friends and fellow scholars, all of whom held him in the greatest affection, were well aware of what he had done; they were even more conscious of what he was. In the Berkshire village where I now live, when they want to praise a man, they have a way of saying, 'He's always the same.' To meet John Butt after an interval of time was to experience that satisfaction to the full: the warm, friendly personality, the sense of fun, the delightful conversation, the moral and intellectual integrity—nothing had changed, he was always the same. In a troubled, acrimonious, and often petty world he radiated not only good sense, but generosity and positive goodness. To be in his company was to be with a man who had for so long been going right that it would have required some abnormal concatenation of circumstances to make him go wrong. His scholarship, too, was the natural by-product of his habitual right thinking, and of the application of a serene and unbiased mind to the facts before him. If he had still much to give, he had also accomplished much:

Thus far was right, the rest belongs to Heav'n.

JAMES SUTHERLAND

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