

A. A. B. FAIRLIE

The Mistress and Fellows, Girton College, Cambridge

## Alison Anna Bowie Fairlie 1917–1993

ALISON ANNA BOWIE FAIRLIE was born in Shetland on 23 May 1917, the eldest daughter of Robert Paul Fairlie, Minister of the Church of Scotland, and Florence A. A. Wilson. At the time, Robert Fairlie was minister in Lerwick and a chaplain to the Fleet in Scapa Flow. Although Alison Fairlie left Shetland before the age of two, and therefore had no childhood memories of it, she remained fascinated by the place throughout her adult life, returning in 1950 and again in the late 1980s, and buying every book on Shetland she came across. In 1919, the family moved to Ardrossan, on the Ayrshire coast. The manse faced the beach, and had a large garden which seems to have been a special delight to the small girl. She deeply resented moving to Dumfries, where her parents' first house offered no such pleasures. Alison always maintained an intense feeling for her homeland. Scotland was the place where she spent most of every August, on holiday with the family, up to 1947. Their visits created in her a special fondness for the West Highlands, to which she would return at every opportunity. During the 1930s and 1940s, Robert Fairlie's summer holidays involved exchanging his parish with another, preferably rural, minister. Alison would be recruited to play the organ or the harmonium at morning and evening services. Although in adult life she herself was not a believer, her memory was alive throughout her later years with the Authorised Version, the metrical psalter and the Church of Scotland hymnal.

Alison Fairlie was educated at Ardrossan Academy, Dumfries Academy, and then, between the ages of twelve and seventeen, as a

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boarder at Penrhos College. A glimpse of her intellectual formation may be had from the long and characteristically generous Acknowledgements section that she placed at the head of her collected essays in 1981: 'Debts to still earlier influences are many: to grandparents and parents who delighted in reading and discussion, in experiments in writing, and in contrasts between countries and their languages; to the Scottish school system which in the 1920s taught children from age eight to enjoy reading and writing inventive if simple tales in French; to Penrhos College, Colwyn Bay, not only for scholarships but especially for the enjoyment of a wide range of teaching where examination pressures never protruded; to the redoubtable Isabelle H. Clarke both for seeing Oxford as a goal and for suggesting not set-text selection but the widest personal reading across the centuries of French literature.' As an undergraduate at St. Hugh's College she came into contact with the extraordinary group of scholars who were at that time laving the foundations for Oxford's outstanding contribution to the development of French studies as a modern university discipline. She remembered with particular pleasure the lectures or tutorials given by Gustave Rudler, Will Moore, Enid Starkie, E. A. Francis, Cécile Hugon, Rhoda Sutherland, L. A. Bisson and H. J. Hunt. After taking her First in the Final Honours School of Medieval and Modern Languages in 1938, Alison Fairlie began work on her D.Phil. thesis. Her research, which was in due course to be centred on Leconte de Lisle's Poèmes barbares, was supervised by Rudler, and its fruits were published by Cambridge University Press as Leconte de Lisle's Poems on the Barbarian Races (1947). At Oxford she joined the Communist Party, at the same time as her exact contemporary Denis Healey and countless others of their generation. Her membership is likely to have lapsed at the end of her undergraduate career, although in a letter from London, early in the war, she writes, referring to the graduate students with whom she was sharing digs: 'I get the D. W. [Daily Worker at midday and have instituted the excellent habit of all the family reading it'. She joined the Communist Party not because she had deeply studied Marxist doctrine, nor even because she had been persuaded by its principal tenets, but as a way of expressing her indignation and disgust at the rise of Fascism in Europe: Mosley, Franco, Mussolini and Hitler had to be repudiated root and branch, and resisted from day to day. Throughout later life, Alison's political views were steadily of a sceptical left-wing kind.

Alison Fairlie had begun work as a research student in Paris shortly

after graduating in 1938, but on the outbreak of war she returned to Britain and undertook voluntary work in billeting and rationing offices. Early in 1940 she was advised by the Central Employment Bureau for Universities to complete her research. In accordance with this advice, she returned to Paris with the Zaharoff Research Scholarship which she had been awarded in the summer of 1939, and continued research until the fall of France in June 1940. For Alison, these were months of intensive and exhilarating scholarly enquiry, during which she accumulated the unruly mass of material on nineteenth-century intellectual history that was eventually to be published, in a pruned and methodised form, in her first book. What emerges en filigrane from her own modestly worded accounts of this period is the single-mindedness of her devotion to scholarship — part of her fully expected the Bibliothèque Nationale to remain open in defiance of the German armies as they advanced upon Paris — and the good-humoured courage with which she faced physical danger. Having returned to Britain by way of Bordeaux, she wrote a remarkable chronicle of her journey in the form of a long letter to her sister Joyce. She already had many adventures behind her when she arrived at the Bordeaux docks in the hope of finding a passage home. In the following extract the twenty-three-yearold Alison describes the transfer of herself and her fellow research students to an ocean-going vessel, and the voyage that eventually followed:

Eventually she [a harbour craft] took 100 on board, naturally the consular party. As they were transferring a German bomber suddenly appeared, circling very low over us, but an auxiliary cruiser chased it off. They were a very nasty few minutes, as in broad daylight and so near us, both ships could have been sent to the bottom. While this was occurring, can you guess what was the first article to be transferred from one boat to the other? — a bag of golf-clubs! (Again needless to say the consular party — thinking of all our things in Paris we felt golf-clubs were a little superfluous. But you should have seen the rows and rows of beautiful cars simply abandoned all along the Gironde by the people who left on these boats.)

So we went on sailing and sailing, no one willing to take us on board. The captain had told us he had to be in the harbour by nightfall, and we thought if we went back there was little chance of getting off again. I forgot to say that the night before Bordeaux had been pretty badly bombed — naturally, since the Government had come there. At last, at eight o'clock, we came alongside the Dutch cargo steamer Stad Haarlem, and they said they would take us. Pretty well straight away, while they were still trying to fix gangways amidships, Frank had heaved our cases over from the top deck. When I saw my case of precious notes go, I grabbed Dorothy and said 'We're

going too', so we all four clambered across like pirates from one boat to the other, without any gangway or anything.

The Stad Haarlem was a cargo steamer. Her cargo was grain, but from the general aspect you'd certainly have said coal, and very dirty coal at that. The crew were really marvellous, and officers and men gave up their cabins, but of course those were only for children or old folks. The rest of us slept in the hold, on boards. Sleeping on boards may be possible if the boards are all the same height, but these were every conceivable shape and height, and so loose that one end sprang up if anyone stepped on the other. Also there wasn't nearly enough space for all of us. A little draughty too — Frank's hat came in useful for stopping up a hole in the ceiling.

However the first night we were so thankful to be there that we were all cheery. The cook made us some very good soup and after a bit everyone arranged themselves as well as possible. Not being as bruised that night as later I got to sleep after a bit (in a most uncomfortable position due to the shape of the board) but about 1.30 a.m. I was wakened by large numbers of people stepping on me at once and someone saying 'Il y a des navires de guerre qui vont bombarder.' Sure enough a bombardment began. We had just one light in the hold, and no switch to turn it off, of course no door to shut, just a space open to the sky. Eventually they got the bulb out of the light, and we watched the bombardment — they were said to be dropping magnetic mines on parachutes, and tracer bullets were flying up the sky. A few women got a bit hysterical — I was mainly annoyed at being wakened and so was Frank. Dorothy and George didn't sleep all night anyhow, they were so cold. Actually two ships were sunk two nights later on the same spot, so we had a narrow escape (I forgot to say that we spent that first night lying off the harbour, and started in the early morning).

At about five Frank, who hadn't been able to stay on the boards any longer, woke me with a plate of semolina. As we had no spoons the only thing to do was drink or lick it up from the plate. We had a good breakfast from our own provisions and then proceeded to go to sleep in the sun to make up for the night. Soon poor old Dorothy was violently sea-sick, and she stayed below in the hold all day. Actually it was a most glorious sail — hot sun (all our noses blistered) and glittering sea, with schools of dolphins following us and leaping in the most graceful way I've ever seen. The real drawback was the dirt. We soon discovered that all there was to wash in was cold salt water. If you want to experiment, rub yourself in coal dust and then try to get if off with salt water — it simply ingrains every speck of dirt till it's an ineradicable part of your skin. Besides this there were only two basins between 300, and the door of one washroom had the handle broken so that you couldn't shut it.

So we looked a thoroughly piratical sight before long. I had George's largest handky tied round my hair, and soon I had one round my leg as well, for I fell off an iron ladder as the boat gave a particularly big lurch, and caught my leg between two rungs so that it was pretty lucky I didn't break it. We had a very funny scene as I lay in a heap at the foot of the ladder

with Frank rubbing iodex on my leg, a soldier holding my head and George trying to pour water and eventually rum down my throat.

Alison wrote two further accounts of her escape: one address in French delivered to her old school, Penrhos, and another in English given from her father's pulpit in Dumfries. Those who knew Alison only in her later years will immediately recognise her characteristic tone and outlook in this brief summary of her experiences during the fall of France: 'When I say to people that I "quite enjoyed" our escape, they look at me suspiciously as if it were wrong to enjoy something rather terrible of this kind. We had many escapes which could only be called providential, and often were so tired that we could hardly continue. We saw other people in much more terrible positions than ourselves, but all the way one thing made an immense difference; we were all five determined to laugh, and I am persuaded that it was largely this which kept us going.'

The years 1940–2 saw Alison back in Oxford, finishing her D.Phil. dissertation. From September 1942 for two years she served as a Temporary Administrative Officer with the Foreign Office, spending most of her time at Bletchley Park. Alison remained on terms of firm friendship with a number of her Foreign Office colleagues, and it was one of the most valued of these, Leonard Forster, later to be Schröder Professor of German at Cambridge, who read the following portrait of Alison at Bletchley to the memorial meeting of her friends held in Girton on 6 November 1993:

Alison Fairlie joined us at Bletchley Park in 1942. It is now no secret what went on there, thanks not least to the recent book Codebreakers by Hinsley and Stripp. This book contains an account by Vivienne Alford of Naval Section VI, to which Alison was assigned. It existed, as Vivienne Alford wrote, 'for the purpose of solving obscurities in the text of decrypted and otherwise translated naval messages . . . Most frequently it would be a reference to a component of some new weapon, such as a heat-seeking torpedo, limpet mine, or direction-finding device'. These matters were pursued under the inspiration of a remarkable polymath, Geoffrey Tandy of the Museum of Natural History, South Kensington, and Commander RNVR. Alison came to us with her head filled with Leconte de Lisle's poems about the barbarian races, about which she had just completed her Oxford D.Phil. thesis. She herself was not the most practical of people, and her acquaintance with technological matters went no further than the ability to drive a car and work a record-player. And yet she soon became outstandingly successful at the new work.

The questions the section existed to solve were questions of fact; we had a good library of reference works, trade or service or captured, to help us

answer them. By the end of the war we were using practically the same reference books as the enemy. The problems presented themselves of course mainly in German and Italian, but also in Japanese and in due course we became responsible for other languages too, especially Spanish. We also kept indexes. Profound linguistic or technical knowledge was not always required; the real technical experts were elsewhere. What was needed was acquaintance with the techniques of research and skill in applying them. This is what Alison had; she was on the top of her form after a successful period of intensive research work. The method which succeeded with Leconte de Lisle was equally applicable to U-boat engines: Leconte de Lisle was a learned poet who went out of his way to deal with unfamiliar subject-matter and his poems teem with references which need to be explained; it had been Alison's job to identify them and explain them and she had developed the technique for doing so. It was not difficult to transfer it to different material in a different language. Sometimes Leconte de Lisle came up trumps. When we began to be interested in Spanish Alison was the one of us who knew that an alferez was a junior officer in the Spanish navy; Leconte de Lisle had used the word and Alison had long ago tracked it down and identified it. And so in other fields too. Alison in later years would never willingly confess to a knowledge of German, but what she brought with her from school and subsidiary university work, combined with her undoubted flair for the job, was sufficient in the event.

Her attitude to Bletchley Park as a whole was one of cool detachment unlike Carmen Blacker's open dislike or my own rather naive devotion. She saw it as just another large bureaucratic organisation with the peculiarities such organisations have. This was the impression she conveyed to her family, and she could be very amusing about it. So much so indeed that her young brother Robin, then nine years old, wrote a piece about the place where his sister worked. In a crazy sort of way it conveyed the atmosphere of the office rather well, especially a certain sense of hectic disorder which appeals to young people of that age. The central figure was a startlingly life-like character called Professor Piffle whom we all felt we knew . . . After the war was over, we were all asked to write accounts for posterity of what we had done. Alison added Robin's piece to her account as an appendix, to illustrate the impression we apparently made on the outside world. And she may well have been right; perhaps the world outside really did see us as just another relatively innocuous piece of inflated Government bureaucracy; the Germans at any rate had no interest in us. Had they known what went on there they could easily have bombed us to pieces; the aircraft that destroyed Coventry went right over our heads and we heard them coming and going. And so Professor Piffle still leads a shadowy existence somewhere among the files of the Public Record Office.

One of the contributors to the book by Hinsley and Stripp, Derek Taunt of Jesus College, Cambridge, writing as a mathematician, said: 'Characteristics which were in great demand at BP were a creative imagination, a well-developed critical faculty, and a habit of meticulousness', to which one might

add: the ability and readiness to work until you dropped. Alison, as we all know, possesed these characteristics in a high degree.

Alison Fairlie's academic career began in the autumn of 1944, when she was appointed Lecturer in French at Girton College, Cambridge. She fondly remembered the welcome she received from K. T. Butler, then Mistress of the College, and Henriette Bibas, Director of Studies in Modern Languages. She learned from both of them how research and undergraduate teaching could, in her own phrase, 'vitally and essentially combine'. She was elected Fellow and Director of Studies in Modern Languages in 1946, and University Lecturer two years later. The arrival of Odette de Mourgues as a Research Fellow of Girton in 1948 marked the beginning of a long professional collaboration, and a lifelong friendship. In 1967 Alison became University Reader, and in 1972 the first holder of a personal Professorship in the Cambridge French Department. Although she repeatedly refused invitations to chairs at other universities, new and old, her outlook was in no way parochial. In 1968 and 1969, she was elected President of the Society for French Studies; in 1969, a member of the Council of the Association Internationale des Etudes Françaises, becoming one of its Vice-Presidents in 1983; and, in 1972, a member of the Editorial Board of French Studies. Her election to an Honorary Fellowship of St. Hugh's in 1972 gave her particular pleasure. She served on committees of the Modern Humanities Research Association, and lectured by invitation at many universities in Britain, the United States, and Australia. She was much in demand as external examiner for graduate and undergraduate courses, and sat on juries for higher doctorates in Brussels and Paris. She was elected to a Fellowship of the British Academy in 1984, and became one of the founding Honorary Senior Research Fellows of the Institute of Romance Studies in 1989.

Very soon after her arrival in Cambridge her name became a byword in the University and outside for her abilities as a College teacher. Until 1972, Girton was one of only three Cambridge colleges to admit women, and it was besieged by applications from some of the brightest girls in the country. Alison had a flair for selecting from among these, and every year Girton Modern Linguists walked off with a hugely disproportionate number of Firsts in both Part I and Part II of the Tripos. Many of her former pupils now hold university posts. Words of Power (University of Glasgow, 1987), the Festschrift prepared for Alison by her Girton pupils, contains essays by Gillian Jondorf,

Alison Finch, Dorothy Gabe Coleman, Gwyneth Castor, Judith Davies, Christine Crow, Joan Driscoll, Lorna Close, Alison Sinclair, Mervyn Coke-Enguídanos and Valerie Minogue. Alison had an extraordinary and not entirely comfortable tutorial style. She considered that the function of the tutorial hour was for students to bring and explore their own ideas: so they were expected to do the talking, with only occasional incisive comments from her. If they had not done enough work, or if their ideas dried up, she would ask a probing question and then simply wait and wait for the answer, the ash on her cigarette growing ever longer and sometimes finally dropping off on her clothes. The silence would grow until it became unbearable, and would at last be broken either by an admission of ignorance from the student or a pointed remark from her to the effect that such and such 'needed further thought' (a favourite phrase). Many Girtonians found this technique terrifying, but at the same time realised its value in placing the onus on them, and saw that her refusal to 'soft-soap' was part of an impressive fair-mindedness. Once — so the story went — a Girton Modern Linguist was found sobbing in a college bathroom. 'Miss Fairlie thinks I'm no good!' 'How do you know?' 'She's been nice to me for the last three weeks!'

Alison's most remarkable achievement as a university teacher is one that is nowadays easily forgotten or taken for granted: in the years immediately after the Second World War she played a central part in relaunching Modern Languages as a serious intellectual discipline in British universities. Until then, the subject had been something of a poor relation to History and Classics, and had often had little ambition for itself apart from the efficient inculcation of basic linguistic skills. Literature was surveyed historically for the benefit of undergraduates, and its landmarks were pointed out in admiring and respectful terms, but detailed critical analysis of literary works was extremely rare. Alison Fairlie brought to the study of French an extraordinary responsiveness to the grain and texture of literary language, and in her own critical writing skilfully exposed layers of implied meaning in works that others had been content to characterise simply as 'masterpieces' or as 'typical of their time'. Alison's whole approach took her back to the intricate inner workings of the literary text, and it did so many years before the notions of text and textuality came to enjoy their astonishing period of celebrity in the Paris of the 1960s. Her intellectual partnership with Lloyd Austin, who was Drapers Professor of French between 1967 and 1980, made Cambridge into a true powerhouse for the study of modern French literature.

Her critical manner was often one of questioning and speculation, but the questions she asked and the hypotheses she ventured invariably took their cue from the words on the author's page and, far from clothing the literary text in interpretative fantasies, sought to bring the reader back with clearer sight and a renewed power of enjoyment to its central riches. She wrote with precision about ambiguity in literature, and especially about those ambiguities that have an informing role in the works of art chosen for discussion. During a period when criticism of French literature had its own querelle des anciens et des modernes and suffered from severe factional narrowness and ill-temper. Alison was one of the few who remained generously plural in their interests and approach. While attending closely to the formal and expressive properties of the individual literary work, she was scrupulously aware that many things lying beyond that work — manuscripts, variant readings or 'sources', the author's personal relationships or his letters — could prompt the literary scholar to valuable new kinds of critical perception. Perhaps most important of all, the language she herself used was, in its attunement to the subjects discussed, its economy and its discreet inventiveness, a lesson to all those critics who seek, by their luxuriant verbal displays, to outwit and outwrite their writers.

Although Alison was exceptionally widely read, and from time to time lectured with relish on earlier periods of French literature, almost all her published work was devoted to the nineteenth century. To four authors in particular she returned continually throughout her Cambridge career: Constant, Baudelaire, Nerval and Flaubert. In all four she found an inexhaustibly fascinating combination of passion and intellectual lucidity, and a textual complexity that seemed always to invite further study and reflection.

In some ways, the close study of Leconte de Lisle was an improbable training ground for a scholar who was to develop ruling interests such as these. For although the poet in mid-career was still driven by strong sexual and political passions, he had the ambition of becoming the exemplary literary artist of his age and this involved him in an extensive programme of scholarly and semi-scholarly reading. He sought to write about past civilisations within their own terms, and to espouse the world-view of non-European peoples. In order to achieve these goals he read widely in the best available accounts of ancient

myth and religion, and in a huge variety of historical and anthropological works. Alison takes her reader back from the serried verbal textures of Leconte de Lisle's poems to the bibliographical labyrinth in which they had been conceived. And in exploring his erudition she became dauntingly erudite in her turn. What is more impressive, however, than her willingness to document exhaustively the poet's reading is her insistence upon historicising his historical project: 'he had begun to write poems at a period when the passion for erudition was at its height, but specialisation and scholarship in their infancy' (387). The historians of Leconte de Lisle's day, upon whose work he drew so trustingly, were often exceptionally unreliable. Their skewed and imprecise vision of the past was then subject to a variety of further distortions, conscious and unconscious, as the poetic imagination played upon it and turned it into verse. Alison proved to be extraordinarily adept at detecting and teasing out the disparate source materials that lay behind Leconte de Lisle's orotund periods. Her readings of the Poèmes barbares are a series of elaborate radiographic portraits, and the book as a whole offers a working model of the acquisitive and integrative literary imagination at work.

It is this quality of Alison's book that in fact prepared her extremely well for her later researches. Although she was never again to devote such intensive scrutiny to any single body of textual sources, and was always to write in brief formats about her chosen authors, her later work was born of the same fascination with literary texts as complex semantic fields. Constant, Baudelaire, Flaubert, and even Nerval, who was extremely erudite in his own fashion, did not call for the same sort of detective work as Leconte de Lisle had. But in Alison's view all four of her 'new' writers did demand to be discussed in terms of the co-present and interactive ideas, images and verbal motifs that their works contained. Her skill in anatomising such canonical texts as Adolphe, Les Fleurs du Mal or Madame Bovary, and her ability to preserve, at the same time, an overall sense of their drama, have made her essays and monographs into standard works wherever these authors are studied seriously. Alison would have been quite happy to write 'needs further thought' in the margins of her own critical writings, and would not have been dismayed by a recent reviewer's suggestion that the favourite Alison Fairlie category of 'suggestiveness' was by now in need of deconstruction. 'Suggestive', when used of a prose sentence or a verse line, was Alison's personal way of promising to do more analytic work in due course.

The monographs on Les Fleurs du Mal (Arnold, 1960) and Madame Bovary (Arnold, 1962) are Alison's finest sustained pieces of critical exploration and argument. As detailed maps of two supremely complex literary works — for the use of students, scholars and general readers they have still not been superseded. But if I had to single out one study which represented the critical intelligence of Alison Fairlie working at its fullest stretch, it would be her 'An Approach to Nerval', first published in Studies in Modern French Literature presented to P. Mansell Jones (Manchester University Press, 1961) and republished in Imagination and Language. Collected Essays on Constant, Baudelaire, Nerval and Flaubert (Cambridge University Press, 1981). One of the things that is so remarkable about this article is its author's clear but understated sense of personal mission in writing about Nerval at this time. Here was a poet who was still ignored or treated with suspicion by numerous scholars of nineteenth-century French verse; he was 'obscure', and perversely attached to alchemy, occultism and the tarot pack. Many of those who had written about Nerval had armed themselves with arcane techniques of decipherment in preparation for their task. Obscure verse had called forth obfuscating criticism. Alison insisted on approaching Nerval by reading him. Rather than fret over the difficulties of Les Chimères, one could begin one's journey to a full understanding and enjoyment of Nerval's writing by attending first of all to those elements which were clear and well-defined:

Even if El Desdichado is the best known [of Les Chimères], it is perhaps worth looking at it as if one had never seen it before, and discovering how it can simply in itself convey a meaning and a value which detailed research does thoroughly enrich but does not alter. Its first effect is deliberately one of dreamlike, unconnected and unelucidated images. But one thing is utterly clear: the syntax. By contrast with Mallarmé, certain simple verbal phrases give a time-sequence and a general sense which works its way out regardless of detailed allusions. 'Je suis le ténébreux' (present sorrow); 'Toi qui m'as consolé' (past comfort); 'Rends-moi' (desire for renewal); 'Suis-je Amour ou Phébus?' (hesitation over the nature of self); 'mon front est rouge encor du baiser' (persistence of past joy); finally the climax of repeated victories in 'J'ai deux fois vainqueur... Modulant sur la lyre...'. Loss, hesitation, fugitive and strange beauty, renewed consolation and final victory through a song gradually emerge before any detailed elucidation.

In writing like this, Alison was a sane explainer, a pioneer indeed in the application of penetrating good sense to the solution of interpretative problems, but her special brilliance as a critic lay in her ability to look

beyond the local detail of a text as well, and to recreate its larger imaginative impact.

Alison's 'retirement' was an extraordinarily energetic one, during which she was a member of the editorial team responsible for the new Euvres complètes of Benjamin Constant and always available to help and encourage an innumerable company of friends, colleagues and fellow scholars from around the world. Robin Fairlie, the nine-year-old author to whom reference has already been made, has recently provided this cameo portrait of his eldest sister: 'My strongest memory of her is curled up at the family home in a huge arm-chair, feet curled under her, smoking, knitting (at furious speed), reading a text and annotating the margins, and listening to Bach on the radio.' This appetite for experience persisted even after she had been diagnosed as having inoperable lung cancer. Equally persistent, however, was the wish to share her experience with others, and it was this that made her into a compelling literary critic, an inspiring teacher and an irreplaceable friend.

MALCOLM BOWIE Fellow of the Academy

Note. I should like to give warm thanks to all those who have helped me in the preparation of this memoir, and especially to Robin Fairlie, Joyce Fairlie, Leonard Forster, Lloyd and Jeannot Austin, Alison Finch, Christine Crow, and Gillian Jondorf.