



HERBERT JOHN DAVIS

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1893-1967

HERBERT JOHN DAVIS was born 24 May 1893 in the Northamptonshire village of Long Buckby. He was the youngest child, and the only one to survive infancy, of Carter Davis and Martha Ann Sheldon. He lost his father when he was still a child and was brought up by his mother, a staunch Anglican as befitted a member of the family that had produced Gilbert Sheldon. From his birth Herbert Davis seemed destined for the Church, and as a boy he sang solos in the village church and in churches in Northampton. To the end of his life he delighted to sing in his strong and true bass voice. He had many relatives in the area, farming people, centre of England folk for generations, with whom he would spend happy weeks in his holidays. Traces of the country boy remained with him to the end. He was as proud of the splendid vegetables and soft fruit he grew in his lovely garden at Iffley as of any of his works. Although when he returned from the First World War he was unable to find his vocation in the Church, became a radical in politics, was intellectually and aesthetically adventurous, and developed into a true 'citizen of the world', a 'natural piety' bound his days together. One of his greatest strengths as a literary scholar lay in his deep, instinctive understanding of the traditional roots of English life and his sympathy for old ways.

As a little boy he learnt his rudiments at the village 'dame school', but as soon as he was old enough to cycle the necessary eight miles he went to Northampton Grammar School. From there he entered St. John's College, Oxford, with an exhibition in Classics, in 1911. In spite of the disapproval of his moral tutor, he managed to persuade the college to allow him to change from Classics to the comparatively new, and rather despised, Honour School of English. The founding fathers of English as an academic study turned to it from Classics and History. Herbert Davis was of the second generation. Like his closest friends and colleagues, David Nichol Smith, his senior, and F. P. Wilson, his contemporary, his scholarship grew out of his work as an undergraduate. He was tutored by George Gordon, and attended classes and lectures with Walter Raleigh and his young assistant, David Nichol Smith, and, though he owned quite out

of his depth, responded to the exact and profound philological scholarship of A. S. Napier's classes on *Pearl*. He gained from his teachers a sense of the richness of the subject, of the immense amount of material waiting to be worked on, the challenge it presented, and the standards at which the work should be done. Few concessions were made in those days to students' ignorance. If a lecture was above the heads of the audience, there were plenty of books available for them to inform themselves from and vacations to read them in. He went home for his first long vacation 'with a box of books for company', thinking that a holiday would be a luxury; but a 'wise old friend' thought otherwise and gave him money to go abroad in both his long vacations. It was possible then on very little money and without a passport to roam freely around Europe. Herbert Davis was all his life a traveller who domesticated himself wherever he was, and it was characteristic that after he had taken his Schools in 1914 he planned to go to a German University and continue his studies. By July he had settled himself very happily in Heidelberg. He just managed to get over the frontier in time a fortnight or so later.

He had come up to Oxford intending to read for Holy Orders. His plans for study in Germany having been thwarted, he went for two years to Wells Theological College before joining the Royal Garrison Artillery in July 1916. He was promoted from the ranks to Lieutenant and earned a mention in dispatches. After the Armistice he served in the Army of Occupation in the Rhineland where he met Gertrud Lucas, his first wife, whom he married in 1922. On demobilization he was offered a post at Leeds University by his old tutor, George Gordon, who had gone there as Professor. He found Leeds a grim city after Oxford, and the lives of his students and colleagues lacking in the pleasures and amenities that college life provides. But there were compensations. The civic universities at this period were still small enough to be genuine communities in which it was easier to feel a sense of the essential unity of knowledge than in the large universities of today or in a collegiate university. Their teachers, many of whom were scholars of great distinction, were inspired by a true sense of mission to the great industrial cities whose citizens had created and fostered their universities. Herbert Davis, in some unpublished reminiscences from which I have been quoting, wrote of the pleasure he had in getting to know the Professor of Botany and Mathematics as well as of Classics and English, and of finding himself a member of an

academic institution not sequestered from the harsher aspects of life in a nation that owed its prosperity to industry. Assistant Lecturers were ill paid, and like many others in his position he supplemented his salary by evening teaching for the W.E.A., then in its heyday. 'I don't know that I ever did anything where I was made to feel it mattered so much', he wrote in later life. Keenly aware of his own good fortune, he kept to the end of his life a passion for social and political justice, and for equality of intellectual opportunity.

In 1922 he left Leeds for Canada to be associate professor—later professor—at Toronto. He remained there for fifteen years except for a short interval at Cologne. His early years at Toronto were overshadowed by the ill health of his wife, the result of privations endured in post-war Germany, and by her death in tragic circumstances in 1928. Two years later he married Gladys Wookey, at the time a lecturer in the English department, and found in her a wife who shared his intellectual interests and the warmth and generosity of his nature. In his years at Toronto he laid the foundations on which his achievements as a scholar were based and gradually established his characteristic way of life. One of his old colleagues has written that he 'found an outlet there for his rich nature among a variety of people such as he never found again', and added: 'As I see him, he flowered in Toronto and bore fruit later.' Others have told of his complete identification with Canadian life, and of the importance of his contribution to a new and rapidly developing country. His strength as a scholar dealing with the eighteenth century lay in his deep interest in other aspects of literary study, his enthusiasm, for instance, for contemporary literature, particularly for D. H. Lawrence, his knowledge of bibliography, his familiarity with German literature. He carried his specialized knowledge within a large frame of learning and taste, which included an informed experience of music and the fine arts. His generosity to younger scholars, his willingness to hand over to them important projects, and to accept from them, as one of the most distinguished has said, 'advice and sharp criticism', was a part of the same open-mindedness and open-heartedness that made his life in Toronto so full and rewarding to him and to all who knew him there.

It was characteristic that he looked for a house out in the country and found one with a half-wild, tree-filled ravine in front and clear ground at the back where he made a semi-formal garden. He had brought some furniture with him; other

pieces he had made locally to his own designs. All the pieces were 'functional', a word he favoured before it came into general use. The living-room was dominated by the black Grotrian-Steinweg grand piano that he had brought from Europe. He was a good pianist as well as possessing a fine singing voice. He rapidly surrounded himself with a group of hitherto unacquainted but able amateurs—singers, violinists, cellists, and flutists, with whom he explored chamber-music from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. He had a rich collection of music, and from it he also introduced his students to the pleasures of singing madrigals and motets. An evening without music was unthinkable to him. He was the first owner in Toronto of a newly perfected record-player on which he delighted to play music of all periods. But he was happiest in performing and in encouraging others to perform, whether informally after dinner or at seriously rehearsed concerts.

The dining-room provided delights of a different kind. The hospitality of Herbert Davis's home rapidly became legendary wherever he was. It has been reported to me, and I can well believe it, that in Toronto he was 'uncannily familiar with the best place, market, or tiny shop, for finding fish, flesh, fowl, vegetable, or fruit, and that in his home the universally accepted Canadian "baker's bread" was never seen'. He was widely acquainted with the relative merits of cheeses and wines, and it was a delight to see him nursing a good bottle. His sense of the value of the individual significance of things made him appreciate for what it was either the bouquet of a fine wine or the sharp taste of a wild berry.

The study or library had windows giving on to both the ravine and the garden. Its contents reflected the natural luxuriance of the one and the artistic orderliness of the other. While certain systematically ranged shelves and a glance at a carefully classified pile of books on the floor awaiting review revealed the eighteenth-century scholar, other shelves and other heaps of books showed no professionalism but an eclectic choice of books old and new. And in conversation he would leap from a detailed argument over Swift's *Genteel Conversation* to similarly well-informed and penetrating comments on *The Plumed Serpent*. Beyond the ravine that his study overlooked were the great valleys and lakes of northern Ontario. A friend of his Toronto days has recalled accompanying him on 'many a testing canoe-trip' and how he would turn 'the sombre ritual of Canadian camp-life into a delicious comedy of manners', adding as a

final comment on his Toronto years: 'Nothing in Canada escaped him; nothing bored him there, except the stupidity that seemed to fly at his approach; nothing angered him, except the injustices he so often quietly worked to set right.'

It was at Toronto that he began to concentrate on Swift. His first publication on the subject, 'Swift's View of Poetry' (*Toronto Studies in English*, 1931), was probably the first and, in the view of more than one authority, is still the most useful modern appreciation of Swift's verse. It laid down a principle he was to observe throughout the next three decades, as he became the most influential student of Swift in the world. It may be stated in words he used later: 'I have always tried to concern myself with what Swift wrote.' Obvious as this may seem, it represented a long overdue reaction to the scholars and critics of the nineteenth century, who were often content to rely on inferior and inaccurate, and even spurious, texts, and to interpret Swift's works in the light of unacceptable preconceptions about his life, character, and times. In 1935 he followed this with an edition of *The Drapier's Letters*. Based on a wide study of original documents, including manuscripts and rare pamphlets, it was a contribution to history and economics as well as to literary scholarship. Its importance and influence can hardly be overestimated, for it led other scholars to concern themselves with the formidable bibliographical problems and the authenticity of Swift's canon. It was natural that when Sir Basil Blackwell thought of reprinting the prose works of one of his favourite authors in their entirety, and turned for advice about an editor of Swift to Sir Harold Williams, he was told that Herbert Davis was the man to undertake it. He needed little persuasion to accept the task, having been assured that the publisher would 'welcome a combination of first-rate scholarship with elegant typography'. He began what was to be his major work in 1937 and completed the thirteen volumes of text in 1962. The fourteenth volume of corrigenda, supplementary material, and indexes appeared in the year after his death, the work of Professor Ehrenpreis who had assisted him in editing an earlier volume.

In spite of his happiness at Toronto he was 'lured' from there, as he confessed, by the attractions of the great libraries and centres of advanced study in the United States, and in 1938 he accepted an invitation to Cornell. But he found to his disappointment that after only a year he was forced to become Chairman of a large department, more occupied with administration than scholarship. He was approached at this time by the University of

Birmingham in search of a professor, but with two young children he felt it was hardly the moment to cross the Atlantic. His move in 1940 to become President of Smith College might seem an odd one for someone disappointed at being distracted from scholarship by administrative duties, but he felt that in a world at war 'it seemed indecent to be looking for scholarly leisure and quiet', and that, as head of a distinguished educational institution, he would at least be doing something to shape whatever world emerged out of the war. A letter from the students at Smith warmly urging him to accept tipped the balance. With an academic wife and two daughters, Herbert Davis believed passionately in the higher education of women and felt honoured to be asked to preside over a famous women's college. He found time among the multifarious duties of a President to act also as a Professor, both lecturing and holding seminars. He was particularly concerned with building up the collection of the Library, to which he made generous gifts from his personal collection: he was, as the Librarian said, 'a Librarian's President'. He was also a 'Faculty President', as an inscription in a presentation copy in his library showed: 'To Herbert Davis who once said that he had tried as President of Smith to make it possible for the Faculty to get on with their work this volume is offered as proof of his success.' He was also a 'students' President', the Davis home being as always 'open house'. He was happy to be able to use his position to help more than one political exile to find a way back to academic life and security. Among others may be mentioned Albert Einstein, whom he brought to the department of Music, and José López-Rey, whom he found teaching in the Spanish department, encouraged to go on with his work on Goya and transferred to the department of Fine Arts. And when the threat of invasion became imminent in England, the Davises organized the reception of the children of their academic colleagues on the beautiful Smith campus, and took four of them into their own family for the duration of the war.

He left Smith College in 1949 to come to Oxford to fill the newly established Readership in Textual Criticism. He carried on and expanded the work, so notably begun by Strickland Gibson, of initiating ignorant beginners in literary research in the use of the fundamental tool of bibliography. His great individual contribution was the establishment of classes in the use of a hand-press. These gave not only practical insight into bibliographical problems, but what graduate students so much need, the chance to get to know each other and their teachers.

Many an Oxford graduate student will say that his happiest evenings were spent at Herbert Davis's printing-classes and after; for the delightful and often very entertaining productions of the class bore a significant imprint: 'Imprinted at Oxford at the New Bodleian Library, over against the King's Arms.' He allowed himself to be distracted from Swift by the fascination of this new field of study, which resulted in his co-editorship, with Harry Carter, of Moxon's *Mechanick Exercises on the Whole Art of Printing* (1683-4) in 1958.

The Bibliography Room in the New Bodleian was his headquarters, and he was to be found there in term and vacation at almost all hours of the day. Neither his own old college nor any other Oxford college elected him to a fellowship. A lesser man, or a man with less sense of humour and tolerance, might well have felt resentment; but he accepted with gratitude dining-rights offered him by Worcester, through the good offices of that noted bibliophile Colonel Wilkinson, and, without grudge or complaint, made of the Bibliography Room a natural port of call for persons of all kinds from all over the world. Distinguished scholars would begin and end their visits to Oxford, however brief, with a visit there; colleagues with problems or in need of counsel or comfort, former pupils looking in with news of their careers or families, young men and women needing help of all kinds, members of the Library staff consulting him—all were equally welcome. He was happily at home in the Bodleian canteen where he joined the staff most days at tea. As one of them has written, 'fresh from wrestling with practical problems of bibliography and printing, he inevitably drew round him an interested group who delighted in his company as they learnt from his experience', adding 'he broke down many barriers because in his innocence he never saw them'. The same was true of the parties he delighted to give in the lovely house and garden he settled in at Iffley, where eminent scholars rubbed shoulders with young research students and their wives, and members of the Faculty not ordinarily conspicuous for seeing eye to eye found themselves enjoying a common sense of welcome and well-being.

After his retirement in 1960 to an Emeritus Professorship (he had been given a titular Professorship in 1956), he continued to supervise and examine research students, to conduct the printing classes, and to assist, with practical advice drawn from his wide experience of libraries all over the world, in the planning of the new and splendid building for the English Faculty Library at

Oxford, which he enriched with a valuable Swift collection. He also travelled widely and enthusiastically, renewing old contacts and making new. As the edition of Swift neared completion he took on other tasks, notably one-volume editions of Pope for the Oxford Standard Authors series in 1966 and of the Poems of Swift, based on Sir Harold Williams's classic edition, for the same series in 1967. In both the text was re-examined with his usual independence. He also took on the editorship of a new series: the Oxford English Novels. The range of his acquaintance throughout the learned world and his sanity of judgement can be seen from the editors he was able to call upon. His quality as a general editor can be guessed at from the excellence and the restraint of the annotation in this series. He turned also to an old love, Restoration Comedy, in which he had the help of his wife whose main academic interest had lain here, and displayed his versatility by producing an edition of Congreve's plays in one volume, in which, in obedience to the instructions of the general editor, he based the text on the quartos or acting editions; while for the Clarendon Press he undertook a full-scale edition of Congreve with the text based on the third edition of the *Collected Works* (1719–20), the last edition that Congreve revised. He was at work on this when he died. Although in his last years he seemed physically frail, his zest for life and intellectual energy were undimmed. In hospital in his last illness he was at work on a speech for the Swift celebrations in Dublin, completed and read for him by his friend James Sutherland. He died on 28 March 1967.

Herbert Davis's main achievement as a scholar was the edition of Swift's Prose Works. Only those aware of the extensive corruptions of the earlier editions will realize the magnitude of his achievement. Swift himself was much concerned over the faulty printing of many of his works and the numerous false attributions in his own lifetime. In his introduction to the first volume Herbert Davis announced that his primary intention was to provide scholarly texts of the received canon and to identify and eliminate the many false attributions. The successive introductions as they appeared constitute a history of the composition and publication of the individual works; but they also, collectively, present a large body of material, biographical, social, political, and religious, which provides a context for the understanding of Swift the man, his writings, and his age. The study of the canon and of the text has been described by one of his younger colleagues in the edition as 'far-ranging, indepen-

dent and imaginative'. A number of works missed in earlier collections of Swift's works were discovered and included; works such as *A Letter to a Young Poet* and the sermon on *The Difficulty of Knowing One's Self*, widely and mistakenly assumed to be Swift's, were shown to be uncanonical; the discovery of important manuscripts and editions allowed for the construction of valuable new texts of works like *Some Free Thoughts*.

As an editor he accepted what was, when he began work on the edition, the orthodox principle: that an editor should base his edition on the last text known to have been corrected by the author. It has been regretted that he did not adopt what has become the modern orthodoxy, the principle enunciated by Greg in his famous article on 'The Rationale of the Copy-Text' (1950): that the base should be the first edition, corrected by authoritative changes in subsequent editions. Greatly as he admired Greg, Herbert Davis never fully accepted this theory, or rather he questioned, and many will say he was right to do so, its universal applicability. He thought of editing as an art, and was not convinced that a theory arrived at from intensive study of Elizabethan dramatic texts was necessarily valid for the editor of an eighteenth-century writer who published his own works. When he edited his one-volume Pope in 1966, aware that his choice of some copy-texts differed from the choice of the Twickenham edition, he wrote in his preface that it was his 'modest hope' that his edition would demonstrate 'that there are more ways than one of editing texts printed in the eighteenth century'. I think also that the modern conception of an 'ideal text' conflicted with his aesthetic sense of an edition as an individual object, and with his historic sense.

It can be, and has indeed been, objected that the collations in his edition, although they represent immense labour and provide fascinating evidence of Swift's methods of composition, are not sufficiently meticulous or inclusive to satisfy modern editorial standards. He was not convinced of the value of inclusiveness. He feared, as many of us do, that an excessive tithing of mint, anise, and cummin may lead to a neglect of weightier matters, or to their burial under dust-heaps of trivialities. It seems unlikely that anyone today would undertake single-handed so daunting a task as editing in their entirety the prose works of Swift. A team would be gathered together, the work parcelled out among research assistants and graduate students, and some would be set to collate in full, others to annotate, others to study linguistic matters. Whether such

methods—though possibly producing results more satisfying to the pure textual scholar, or the pure social historian, or the pure philologist—will produce editions more satisfying as a whole than editions which are the product of a single mind, alert to the manifold aspects of an editor's task of presentation and elucidation, is still uncertain. Some modern co-operative enterprises suggest that if there are gains in the division of labour there are also losses. Anyone using Herbert Davis's edition of Swift has not only the benefit of a dependable text, and of wide, unobtrusive, and relevant information to help him see the work in its personal, social, and political context, but also the pleasure of contact with an imaginative, judicious, and humane student of Swift's works, who by years of devoted study had come to a profound understanding of his author's mind and art. His knowledge overflowed the edition into other studies of Swift and his age, the most notable being the Alexander Lectures at Toronto on *Stella an Eighteenth-Century Gentlewoman*, delivered in 1942, and three lectures on *Swift's Satire*, given at Smith College in 1946. These, along with other essays, such as 'The Augustan Art of Conversation' and 'The Augustan Conception of History', were collected in 1964.

In writing this memoir I have been much helped by friends and colleagues who knew Herbert Davis before he came back to Oxford to become the beloved friend and counsellor I knew, and of those more qualified than I am to assess his work on Swift. Their letters, often very long, and their conversation have movingly confirmed my impression of the uniqueness of his personality and of the warmth of the love he inspired. To the end of his life he radiated a sense of enjoyment and proved in a paradoxical sense the truth of the old adage: 'The good die young.' Though strict in his standards, he never spoke or wrote to wound, and never sank into mere controversy. Free of vanity, he was free of envy and malice. He loved to help and he loved to praise. His beautiful, resonant speaking-voice, which made him so effective a lecturer and gave to his reading and his quotations an unforgettable ring, gave a particular authority to his favourite word of dispraise, 'absurd', and to the more often employed word of praise, 'superb'. Nobody was more generous in commendation or more sympathetic to those in distress or perplexity. It is possible that he had 'that sort of Slouch in his Walk' which Swift complained of in Arbuthnot. But if Swift had known his twentieth-century editor, he would perhaps have said of him what he said of Arbuthnot, that he was 'as fit a man either to

dy or Live as ever I knew', and joined him with Arbuthnot in saying 'if the World had but a dozen like' them he would burn his Travels.

HELEN GARDNER

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