



WILLIAM LINDSAY RENWICK

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1889-1970

WILLIAM LINDSAY RENWICK was born in Glasgow on 6 January 1889, the youngest of the five children of William Kirkwood Renwick and Jane Lindsay. He grew up in Glasgow, where his father was a merchant, and always maintained strong links with it, but he felt also an affinity with the Border country, where his paternal grandfather was a shepherd near Garvald. His mother's family were bonnet-lairds near Balmore, in south Stirlingshire. He was educated at Woodside School, and in October 1907 matriculated at Glasgow University. There he soon began to make his mark in the lively undergraduate society of his day, which included a notable proportion of men later to achieve public distinction. He was active in Union discussions and debates, in literary societies such as the Mermaid Club, and in the O.T.C. He wrote verse and prose for the *Glasgow University Magazine*, of which he was sub-editor in 1909-10, the year of Walter Elliot's editorship; some of his contributions appear in two anthologies of Glasgow University verse.

In 1911 he gained First Class Honours in English, and was awarded the Clark Scholarship, for four years' tenure, in 1912. There was a somewhat picaresque walking-tour in the Pyrenees with John Boyd, Walter Elliot, and George Buchanan Smith, and over a year spent in soberer travel and study in France and Italy, mainly at Toulouse and the Sorbonne. During this time he resolved that his future work was to be on Spenser, that he would use his knowledge of the French and Italian languages and their literature to study his poetry in relation to European traditions, and that he would begin to edit the work of Spenser with the kind of exact textual care then usually reserved for Shakespeare. But for the war he would have embarked on this on his return from abroad: instead, on 27 September 1914, he volunteered for active service, and was commissioned to the Tenth Battalion of the Cameronians, the Scottish Rifles. His administrative ability led to his rapid promotion, which left him completely unspoiled; a university contemporary of his remembers arriving as a private in a different brigade at Chiseldon Camp in June 1915, and being sought out and invited to his quarters by William Renwick, who was already a junior captain

and second in command of a company: a bridging of a gulf very real at that time.

A month later he went out to France with the battalion, which took part in the Battle of Loos that September. With four other junior officers, he was left in the reserve lines when the attack was made. The history of the battalion records:

Of the 940 or so who had gone over the parapet on the Saturday morning [one officer] and about 135 other ranks paraded on Monday. Fifteen officers and 260 other ranks were killed or died of wounds shortly after.

William Renwick found himself in charge of two companies; a young man of twenty-six feeling, as the grim winter wore on, 'like a ghost, an old ghost, sceptical and disillusioned'. His service in France ended six months later, when he was sent back to Britain for hospital treatment, after which he was on instructional duties; the cicatrice of the experience remained with him. Years later, editing Spenser's *Complaints*, he commented on the disharmony between Spenser's natural bent and interests and his Irish frontier experiences, which were 'crude disturbances, hopelessly out of key. Many a young scholar felt thus between 1914 and 1918.' The observation is true both in general—one thinks of R. W. Chapman writing the essays that form *The Portrait of a Scholar* 'in camps and dug-outs and troop-trains'—and in particular; no man valued more than William Renwick the fruits of peace, but he offered himself for the duty of war.

The Second World War also took its toll of him, not in his work as commander of the local Home Guard, which he rather enjoyed, but in the eight months' tour of Chinese universities which he made as Visiting Professor at the request of the British Council in 1943-4. Under pressure of the Japanese advances, many universities had been evacuated westwards into undeveloped mountain regions, difficult of access at any time and almost insuperably so in conditions of war. Academic staff, almost cut off from outside cultural contacts, exiled from their own regions, and living in conditions of hardship on salaries made totally inadequate by inflation and profiteering, stood in great need of the encouragement and contact that it was the purpose of the visit to bring. Between November 1943 and July 1944 Renwick visited universities, institutes, laboratories, law courts, medical colleges, and schools. Lecturing in English departments and meeting their staff and students, and visiting schools of art, were the assignments and opportunities he

enjoyed; he also gave public lectures and talks on many aspects of British life and culture, addressed high-school children perforce in throngs of over three thousand, and at his own wish, when the rains allowed access over flooded fields, visited schools of botany and agriculture. His reports and recommendations covered Chinese universities in general, their conditions and needs and libraries, the teaching of English, schools of art, and the state of the Fine Arts. There can be no doubt of the high value of his visits, to many individuals, groups, and institutions, and that he was excellently equipped for the task; but equally there is no doubt that, despite his equable temperament and calm acceptance of the delays and difficulties of war-time travel in an invaded country, the tour impaired his health, then and for years to follow. Overland journeys had to be made by any means of transport procurable: crowded buses or trains if any, otherwise lorry convoy, post-van, or charcoal-fuelled truck. Overnight stops were sometimes in indescribably dirty inns, food often poor. Universities were housed in bombed or dilapidated buildings, or consisted of mud huts with glassless windows; it was difficult to keep warm, and clothing became dank in the damp climate. One could guess little of this from his account in the *Durham University Journal* (1945), 'Footprints of a Wild Swan', which is characteristically laconic and modest, and blurs gently the outlines of experiences that were sharp with discomfort and at moments danger; it describes, and his sketch-book records, the pleasanter episodes and impressions. There were enriching encounters, and delight in observing new flowers and birds and shapes of landscape; but it was an exacting and courageous piece of national and international service.

Meanwhile, between the wars, life went happily. In 1917 he married Margaret Lang, who had been a contemporary at Glasgow; and after the war entered Merton College, taking his B.Litt. in 1920. A short spell of lecturing at Glasgow was followed by Renwick's appointment in 1921 as Joseph Cowen Professor of English Language and Literature at Armstrong College, Newcastle, then in the University of Durham. There he remained for twenty-four years, living for ten of them in Newcastle and then at Stocksfield in the Tyne valley. During this time his work on Spenser was brought to fruition. *Edmund Spenser: An Essay on Renaissance Poetry* was published in 1925; it was reprinted in 1933, 1949, and 1961, and issued in a paperback series in 1964. Nearly fifty years after its appearance, it is still indispensable for its demonstration of Spenser's relation to

European poetic practices, aims, and experiments, especially his affinities with Ronsard and the ideas of the Pléiade. Its perspicacious observations on metre, rhythm, and accent offer a more assimilable initiation into these matters than many more elaborate expositions, enabling the reader to grasp the basic principles of English prosody and to recognize and respond to them in practice. Similarly the few pages on decorum transmit the sense of a living concept: others have written more on it and communicated less. The sub-title of the book is characteristic: an essay, a piece of work, were terms he preferred to more pretentious descriptions of literary scholarship, and his method is to select not to exhaust; he sketches significant outlines with discernment and clarity.

The book on Spenser was followed by editions of his works. A small book of selections had already appeared in the Clarendon Series in 1923; then the Scholartis Press published his edition of the minor poems, *Complaints*, 1928, *Daphnida and Other Poems*, 1929, *The Shepherd's Calendar*, 1930. For sheer pleasure and ease in reading this edition is hard to surpass, inviting in format, with the poems on uncluttered pages, and a wide-ranging commentary and elucidatory notes at the end. The last volume in this series was *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, 1934, Spenser's account of the evils troubling that long-troubled land, with drastic proposals for a solution; this was reissued in 1970 by the Clarendon Press, with spelling modernized and some other changes. The commentary sets Spenser's report in context, the notes provide references to sources, comparable matter from contemporary documents, and explanatory comment. The editor, like Irenius in the dialogue, keeps his eye on the object and avoids polemic. If the Scholartis Press edition is pleasant, the complete edition from the Shakespeare Head Press is sumptuous. It was limited to 375 copies and 11 on vellum, with wood engravings in colour, those for *The Shepherd's Calendar* being based on the cuts in the original designs. There is no apparatus here, simply the texts, edited from the first editions and presented, one feels, for reading on high days and holidays. Rarely is such scrupulous scholarship combined with book-production so aesthetically delightful.

By the time this work on Spenser was completed, Renwick had been honoured by two universities. He was awarded the degree of D.Litt. by his own university of Glasgow in 1926, and an honorary Doctorate in letters in 1934 by Bordeaux, where he had lectured under the auspices of the Société Anglo-Britannique.

His next publication was an edition of the play *John of Bordeaux or The Second Part of Friar Bacon*, from the Alnwick Castle Manuscript, for the Malone Society in 1936, followed three years later by *The Beginnings of English Literature to Skelton 1509*, in collaboration with Harold Orton. This first volume of the Cresset Press Introductions to English Literature has proved itself a hardy perennial. 'The dead is the superseded', Renwick observed in the substantial introduction preceding the descriptive bibliographies; the book, which in 1966 went into its third edition, is clearly alive. The introduction is in effect an acclimatization course for the modern reader of early literature, imparting not isolated dates and facts but an understanding of the actualities of life in earlier ages, and its comments on specific literary works are pithy and appetite-whetting.

The war years followed, with difficulties in keeping a department going with members of staff away on war service, and with his own absence for a session for the tour in China. After the war it was a different and larger department he had to build up, on his appointment to Edinburgh in 1945 as Regius Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature. He at once set about organizing its escape from cramped and dreary premises to a place more conducive to that atmosphere of shared learning, enthusiasm, and fellowship which had made his Honours school at Newcastle a notably exciting and happy one. He had to spend too much energy on this cause for too long; he was nearing retirement when his practical aim was achieved and tutorial rooms, library, and a common-room shared by students and staff, were all housed together. Perhaps he was never so happy in Edinburgh University as in Newcastle: lecturing to the huge Ordinary class was physically taxing, and to a professor who liked to know all his students personally, frustrating; faculties and departments were isolated by situation, habit, and lack of common social facilities, and he missed the easy mingling with medicals, artists, botanists, that was a natural part of academic life in Newcastle. There, he had always fostered co-operation between departments, and he continued to do so in Edinburgh. He saw the scope of a School of Scottish Studies for linking several disciplines, and was associated with it from its inception. He encouraged dramatic productions and was concerned with the provision of a university theatre. Besides developing the usual courses in English, he promoted new ones, two of which were of special value to overseas students. Realizing that many foreign undergraduates were insufficiently grounded in the language to

benefit fully from the normal courses, he initiated the provision of special language and literature teaching in English for Foreign Students. At the graduate level, there were overseas applicants well-fitted to pursue some further study, but lacking time or ability to attain a doctorate, and he devised a one-year Diploma in English Studies to meet their case. Both of these innovations became courses of good standing, and widely-known. Two honours came to him during this period: in 1946 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy, and in 1953 he was awarded the honorary degree of LL.D. by Glasgow.

On his retirement in 1959, as a gift expressing the esteem and affection of many pupils, colleagues, and friends, his portrait was painted by Robert Lyon, R.B.A., R.P.: he later gave it to the university, where it now hangs. His first years of retirement were given to the completion of his volume for the Oxford History of English Literature, *English Literature 1789-1815*, which was published in 1963. 'Literature is life articulate', he had said more than forty years earlier, in his inaugural lecture at Armstrong College; he saw the fabric of literature to be woven from all the concerns of life, and the range of literary history as including politics, public events, men's ideas of society, and their attitudes to their surroundings. The result is a book in which facts, events, writings and ideas, reviewed by one who possessed in high degree 'the imaginative comprehension of the human past', to use words of his own, are seen in significant relation. Behind it lies not only a mass of reading, sifted with discrimination, but a lifetime of zestful appreciation of literature and reflection upon it. The careful exploration of Wordsworth's development as man and poet, the sensitive consideration of Coleridge's temperament and genius, and the illuminating conspectus of Scottish writing, are of particular value in a survey that is rewarding throughout.

Smaller literary tasks continued to be fulfilled: a study of a holograph verse epistle of Burns, contributed to *Of Books and Humankind*, essays and poems presented by Bonamy Dobrée in 1964; an introduction to an anthology of stories and verse by a predecessor in the Regius Chair, William Edmondstone Aytoun, 1964, and a foreword to a posthumous collection of essays and addresses by his successor in it, John Butt, 1969. Between these came his edition, with an introduction, of John Moore's novel *Mordaunt*, in 1965; and lastly he provided an introduction for an Everyman reprint of John Brown's *Rab and his Friends*, the advance copies arriving a few weeks before his death in 1970.

On his eightieth birthday, in 1969, Professor and Mrs. Renwick were present at the opening of an exhibition in his honour at the National Library of Scotland. Five years earlier, to the day, he had given to the library a collection of about thirty early books, including one incunable and several first editions, and these were on display. Most are sixteenth-century editions, nearly half of Italian authors, including Bembo, Alamanni, Ariosto, and Tasso, and several of French. These books, reflecting his abiding interest in the relation of English to European literature, form a valuable supplement to the collection of over 750 items given by David Nichol Smith, which includes many French, Italian, and English works in their original languages and in translations, so showing cultural interactions between England, France, and Italy from the sixteenth century onwards.

The exhibition included Renwick's own publications, ranging from his editions of Spenser, through essays and lectures on Akenside, Kipling, and others, to original verse and short stories. He delighted in craftsmanship of all kinds; his feeling for the crafts of painting and music-making informs two of his most attractive stories, 'Pastiche: 1784', which appeared in *Saltire Review* (Autumn 1955), and 'Cavatina', contributed to *Essays presented to C. M. Girdlestone* (1960). For some years his Christmas and Hogmanay stories brought Christmas greetings to their friends from himself and Mrs. Renwick, from both their Stocksfield and their Edinburgh homes. He enjoyed turning his skill to a particular challenge, as when Dr. W. G. Whittaker was invited to take his choir to Germany to perform his own setting of Psalm CXXXIX and, needing a Latin version, enlisted Renwick's help in adapting the Vulgate to ensure that the sopranos had suitable vowels on which to sing out their high *fortissimos*; or when introducing honorary graduands in his capacity as Public Orator of Durham University in speeches of appropriate gravity laced with neat wit. Both in speech and in writing he handled words well, with precision and feeling and sureness of touch. He distilled his matter and expressed it with graceful economy, so that all his writing gives pleasure to read.

The day after his eightieth birthday, Renwick successfully resigned as President of the Scottish Text Society, having attempted to do so the previous year but been persuaded to stay in office. He had been a member before coming to Edinburgh; shortly after his arrival, he was elected to the Council,

later becoming Vice-President, and, from 1962, President. His interest in bibliography led to another long-standing connection continuing into retirement: he served on the committee and editorial board of the Edinburgh Bibliographical Society for many years, being President from 1956–9, and read papers on the bibliography of Edmund Spenser and on Wordsworth's presentation of his poems. He was also a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, participating in its activities. The decade of retirement was well-filled with such occupations and the preparation of work for publication, and with the continued enjoyment of recreations. Renwick had a keen and instructed interest in botany and was a practical gardener; drawing and painting, as well as visiting art exhibitions and galleries, were lifelong pleasures; and he and Mrs. Renwick let few summers pass without a visit to France. Above all, the years of retirement were serene in the companionship of the supremely happy marriage Professor and Mrs. Renwick shared for more than fifty years; they celebrated their golden wedding in 1967 in both Glasgow and Edinburgh with relations and friends.

Many qualities combined to make Renwick an unforgettable teacher. His scholarship was imparted with infectious zest; his lectures on Shakespeare brought to life a practising dramatist responding to his actors' abilities and the theatre's conditions. But it was in teaching small groups and tutoring individuals that he excelled: his insight, sensitivity, and respect for the minds of others enabled him to stimulate them to develop in the ways most natural and fruitful for them, never trying to shape them into the mould of his own. A student consulting him about a dissertation might go away after an hour or so of apparently rambling discussion feeling that nothing very tangible had emerged, only to realize, as idea after idea presented itself as he worked on in ensuing weeks, that the seeds had been sown in that gently discursive session. There must be numerous people whose minds he has prodded into independent growth. A fair number of them hold academic posts in universities throughout Britain and abroad, a fit cause of satisfaction for a university teacher; but Renwick would be equally pleased to know that his teaching brought heightened delight in literature to a Fine Art student whose course included English for only one year, or enlarged the imaginative world of a student taking a pass or Ordinary degree. And he would be glad to know that whatever his Honours students did in after life, they would not dare to make less than a careful and honest job of it.

The same courtesy that enabled him to draw out his students was shown to his colleagues. Twenty years ago, and less, an assistant in a Scottish university was a low and expendable form of academic life, and treated as such by many professors, but never by Renwick, to whom senior and junior members of staff alike were simply his colleagues. To those who knew him only slightly, he may have appeared a rather austere figure, rising in Senatus or Faculty meetings to give forthright utterance: friends came to know the warmth and humanity, the sharp sense of the comic, and the sheer gentle kindness that lay behind his natural reserve. Of his private generosity it is not appropriate to speak, except to say that where he saw or sensed a need, he took tactful action to meet it. It is not surprising that he possessed such qualities; Spenser's end in writing *The Faerie Queene* was 'to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline', and few can have understood the import of that aim better than Renwick. Edmund Spenser would have approved of William Renwick.

WINIFRED MAYNARD

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