

Norman Davis 1913–1989

THE DEATH ON DECEMBER 2, 1989, of Professor Norman Davis, MBE, FBA, D. Litt., deprived the Academy of one of its most distinguished members, the world of medieval English scholarship of one of its most influential figures, and his friends of a witty and convivial companion.

Norman Davis was born in Dunedin, New Zealand, on May 16, 1913, the only child of James John and Jean Davis (née Black). The family, like many in this part of New Zealand, had deep Scottish roots. Three of the grandparents came from Scotland. James Davis's father (from a Gloucestershire family) had come to New Zealand from Tasmania at the age of seventeen; he worked on the big stations as a boundary rider, and was renowned for his stories of the 'early days'. Eventually he purchased a farm, 'Bellevue', in Central Otago (still owned, a hundred years later, by a Davis cousin). His wife was a Highlander, Margaret Cameron. Jean Black's parents were both Lowland Scots. Norman Davis's parents were both brought up in Central Otago, in the Maniatoto (a region now perhaps more widely known outside New Zealand because of the novelist Janet Frame). However, when he was aged about twenty, James Davis moved to Dunedin to work with Reddells Men's Tailoring, a business which he was later able to buy. Both parents are remembered as lively and witty people: it is likely that Norman Davis inherited some of his dry and quizzical sense of humour from them.

His childhood was a happy and secure one. The family was firmly Presbyterian—and also teetotal. Although in later life he became an agnostic, and was also prone to make jokes about 'wowers' (an Australasian term for those fanatically opposed to strong drink), the family atmosphere seems to have been far from oppressive, and certainly did not make him into an early rebel. He was fond of both his parents, and was deeply influenced by them.

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Holidays were often spent at a beach house in Karitane, north of Dunedin, and on the farm in Central Otago, where he helped with the mustering and the work in the wool shed, and enjoyed the company of his cousins. He once spent a period of three months on the farm when the Dunedin schools were closed because of the polio epidemic in the 1920s. His experience of New Zealand farming remained with him. Later in life he would occasionally give a graphic account of the shearing or slaughter of sheep; he was also fond of using the phrase 'I am only a simple farming lad, of course, but . . .' to introduce and emphasize a decidedly unsimple remark. His cousins recall these early days with affection—swimming, rowing on the Waikouaiti River, or playing tennis at the farm. Although his eyesight had been affected by a severe early attack of measles, he made up for this in games by his quick wittedness. He and his two cousins caught minnows from the creek in a tin bath, and set up their own business (for the production of mud pies, etc) called 'We, Us and Co.' (Norman Davis was We, his cousins Violet and Dorothy Us and Co.). Later, reading and 'tramping' were his preferred pastimes. He was a keen tramper, and spent much time walking in the mountainous region now called 'Fiordland'—in the Hollyford Valley and around Milford, capturing the spectacular scenery with his camera. This part of New Zealand, while it has been to a certain extent developed for tourism, still has some extremely remote and virtually inaccessible areas. In those days, when there were hardly any roads or tracks, there were even more: he used to recall the thrill of coming over a ridge and seeing a valley which he felt sure had never been seen by a human being before.

The resourcefulness and self-reliance developed in these early years were to prove of particular value to him in a later period of his life. His academic inclinations were also developing. Besides his love of reading, he gave early evidence of a penetrating mind, and an insatiable intellectual curiosity. He entered Otago Boys' High School, a school of high academic reputation, where he developed a taste for languages and for debating, and ended as dux and the winner of a university scholarship. In 1930 he went to Otago University, the oldest of the New Zealand universities, and one which was proud of its Scottish tradition of academic excellence. In those days the B.A., on which he first embarked, was a three-year unclassified degree, involving more than one subject; it was possible to follow it with a further one-year M.A. course, which was classified. He studied English Language under a remarkable duo—Professor Herbert Ramsay, originally a St Andrews classicist, a deeply committed scholar with a distrust of humbug, and, most remarkably for a university in a town of distinctly Presbyterian leanings, a deeply committed atheist; and MacGregor Cameron. The writer Dan Davin, a near-contemporary of Norman Davis at Otago, later to become Academic Publisher to the

Oxford Press, remembered him as a natural scholar, one who 'seemed secure in himself, strong in that natural good sense that . . . never left him'. He had, says Davin, 'a natural sense of what scholarship really is': 'the rest of us . . . looked at what we were doing as a means to an end and not as an end in itself . . . We had little notion of the passionate dedication to learning which burnt in Ramsay's mind like one of those peat fires that never go out, and recognized in Norman's mind at least a spark of that same fire.' He was a hard worker as well as a brilliant student, who found his relaxation in tramping and climbing rather than in more goliardic student activities. His career at Otago culminated in a First and the award of a Rhodes Scholarship (with characteristic modesty he had not contemplated applying for this until it was strongly suggested to him by Mrs Ramsay).

In 1934 he came to Oxford. This was a major turning point in his life. Oxford was to become his true intellectual and emotional centre, and his later visits to New Zealand were rare and relatively brief. However, New Zealand, and Dunedin and Central Otago in particular, were never forgotten, and he kept in close contact with his relatives and early friends. He was too sceptical and too level-headed a person to become a professional expatriate. Just as he enjoyed revisiting his native land, so he enjoyed expatiating on its characteristic defects and virtues—such as the anti-intellectualism he remembered vividly, or its development, in a later, more enlightened period, of excellent wine. After a whisky or two he might quote, with ringing voice and mischievous eye, the lines of the nineteenth-century Otago writer Thomas Bracken: 'Go trav'ler, unto others boast / Of Venice and of Rome, / Of Sainly Mark's majestic pile / And Peter's lofty dome, / Of Naples and her trellised bowers / Of Rhineland far away: / These may be grand, but give to me / Dunedin from the Bay.'

Oxford was an important centre for English philological studies. Among his teachers were H. C. Wyld, J. R. R. Tolkien, then Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Pembroke, C. T. Onions the lexicographer, and Kenneth Sisam (himself a New Zealand expatriate of an earlier vintage). Tolkien in particular proved to be a sympathetic and inspiring mentor, and later a lifelong friend. It was producing a series of talented philologists: its recent graduates in English Language included G. V. Smithers (1933) and Angus McIntosh (1934). Davis's own college, Merton, was in those days a nest of English philologists from the Antipodes—his stay overlapped with that of Jack Bennett from Auckland and Eric Dobson from Sydney. The three of them shared friendly academic rivalry and, later, fame (Bennett became a professor at Cambridge, Dobson at Oxford). Norman Davis took a First in English in 1936, and followed it with a Diploma in Comparative Philology.

He learnt much else at Oxford besides historical philology. When Dan Davin met him again there in 1936, he found that 'he had become an enthusiastic rowing man, he had an unexpected and unrivalled command of the bawdy verses familiar to sporting and sparkish undergraduates, and he had acquired an extensive and profound knowledge of the subtly varying qualities of vintage clarets and burgundies.' He had been able to receive an education in the finer points of wine while staying with his uncle (of the New Zealand Dairy Board) and aunt who were then living near London. It was during this period that he came to know and to appreciate good food. He not only enjoyed a good dinner, he remembered it, and would recall it in loving detail years later.

In 1937 he was appointed to a Lecturership in English at Augustaitis University in Kaunas, Lithuania. He celebrated this by a European grand tour in the Antipodean manner, visiting Germany, Italy, Switzerland and France before taking up his post in September. Always an excellent linguist, he added another language to his store. He shared the affection which all Indo-European comparative philologists have for the Lithuanian language, and was particularly delighted to find his surname being declined on the pattern of the Lithuanian noun. He had to eke out his meagre salary by giving private lessons in English. (One of his more interesting pupils was the secretary general to the Foreign Ministry, Urbšis, who became the last Lithuanian Foreign Minister before the Soviet annexation, and survived fourteen years of Russian imprisonment, eleven of them spent in solitary confinement.) The political situation in Lithuania was looking increasingly uncertain, and Davis approached the British Council about a job. In July 1938 he heard that he had been successful in gaining a British Council Lecturership in the University of Sofia. Here, in typical manner, he added good Bulgarian—and what he called a basic 'common Slavonic' for use in other parts of the Balkans—to his skills.

The shadow of war was now very threatening. He marked the end of peace with a memorable motoring tour of France with Eric Dobson and two friends, in which cathedrals and restaurants ('we had some excellent meals') were equally prominent. With the advent of war he resigned from the British Council, taking the post of Assistant Press Attaché to the British Legation in Sofia. He had in fact also by now been recruited by the Department which later became the British Special Operations Executive 'for the conducting of clandestine warfare against the Axis powers'. Those of us who knew him only in his later years find it extremely difficult to imagine the Merton Professor of English Language and Literature involved in the dark world of sabotage, but his resourcefulness, quick wittedness and linguistic talent made him a very successful practitioner. When later, after many years of discreet silence, he could be prevailed upon to talk about

this period, he would always stress his youth, the fact that there was 'a war on', and that 'it was a long time ago.'

Sofia made a suitably *louche* Balkan setting for the beginning of his adventures. In 1957 the memoirs of the British ambassador, Sir George Rendel, gave a brief and cautious account (with the participants cloaked, as was still necessary, under the pseudonyms Stevens and Ivanoff) of Norman Davis's most spectacular exploit. The background to this event, which took place in 1941, a year which was to prove a turning point in the war as well as an *annus mirabilis* for the young Norman Davis, went well beyond the diplomatic life of Sofia. With the fall of France, and the entry of Italy into the war the Allies were faced with the threat of a German move south through Bulgaria towards Greece. In Bulgaria German influence was growing, and pressure on King Boris increased. Eventually, German troops began to infiltrate disguised as 'tourists' or 'technicians'. Davis remembered calling on a surprised British ambassador with the news that reliable sources had reported German staff cars and transports inside the Bulgarian frontier: this was the first intimation Rendel had had of his Assistant Press Attaché's secret life. It was soon impossible to deny the increasing German presence. In February the *New York Times* reported German general staff officers wearing civilian clothes staying in a leading hotel in Sofia—and watching a student demonstration against the German occupation of Bulgaria.

The only consistently anti-German group in Bulgaria was the Agrarian Party led by Dr. G.M. Dimitrov (because of the German-Soviet pact the Bulgarian Communist Party was urging resistance by 'non-cooperation, but not by force'). Dimitrov fiercely opposed any pact with the Germans. Davis had made his acquaintance and kept in secret contact with him. When eventually the Bulgarian Government formally allowed the entry of German troops, Dimitrov's life was at risk. He was quickly arrested, but managed to escape, and turned to Norman Davis. They met on the evening of February 22nd, and agreed that Dimitrov had to leave the country. A plan was devised, to which Ambassador Rendel agreed, with the warning that he would have to disclaim all knowledge of it if it ever came to light. The British Legation was making preparations for leaving, and the files were to be taken out of the country by truck under diplomatic immunity. And so, in Norman Davis's own words:

I got a large packing-case, a large peasant quilt, some oranges for Dimitrov to eat . . . We picked him up in the middle of the town in the middle of the night (25 Feb 1941), put him in the packing-case inside the truck, put the quilt round him, and round the packing-case we stacked the legation files. At the last moment Dimitrov said he wanted a gun. We gave him a gun. And off we went . . .

(though not without causing considerable anxiety to others, since the building was watched: 'if', said Rendel later, 'you wish to smuggle someone in a packing-case out of a country by night and there are police about, use screws and not nails.') It was an extremely dangerous and tense journey, since the notional 'immunity' would certainly not have stretched to the contents of the case. With some irony they were in fact occasionally escorted by motorized police. The truck's driver had been kept in total ignorance of the real purpose; remembering the journey, Dimitrov remarked 'I could overhear the conversation between the driver and the English professor, who was distracting his attention so that he would not notice if I should cough behind his back . . .' Then there was a hitch at the frontier crossing—Rendel's instructions for clearance without inspection had not been received by the frontier guards, and there a delay of several hours while permission was sought. During the long wait Norman Davis spoke loudly so that the secret passenger would know what was going on—but, he said, 'I have never been so anxious in all my life'. Permission eventually came, and after thirty hours Dimitrov was at last released in the British Legation in Istanbul. Both he and Norman Davis, disguised as King's Messengers, then went by rail through hostile territory to Belgrade, where he could establish contact with colleagues and allies.

Later that year Dimitrov was charged in absentia in Bulgaria with plotting to overthrow the government, and acts of sabotage involving English agents, including Davis. After a long and well-publicised trial, he was sentenced in absentia on December 25, 1941 to be hanged, along with ten others, one of whom was Norman Davis, described as 'that architect of British subversion'. When the news of this sentence eventually reached New Zealand, a friend of his father came to commiserate with him about the report that young Norman had been sentenced to death in absentia; 'by the way,' said the friend, 'where is absentia?' But before this much else was to happen.

Belgrade now became the setting for more stirring events. After the signing of the Three-Power Pact in Vienna on 25th March, there was an officers' coup which ousted Prince Paul (an Anglophile Quisling-malgré-lui) and installed the young King Peter in his place. This took place on the night of 26/7 March. 'I was duty officer in the SOE annexe to the legation that night,' Norman recalled, 'with a camp bed, and incendiary device with which I was meant to destroy secret files, some sandwiches and a bottle of beer. I heard a racket outside and looked out. I saw a tank and a whole lot of soldiers with rifles . . . so I prudently went back to bed. This was the coup d'état taking place in the city'. This made a German invasion inevitable, and ten days later the Luftwaffe attacked Belgrade.

The British Legation had been warned to prepare for a sudden

evacuation. Davis had to collect petrol, a car, tinned food ('and this damned machine gun which we put in the back') in readiness. On the night of 5th April he, Hugh Seton-Watson (also working for SOE, and also later a Fellow of the Academy), and other friends had 'an extraordinarily good dinner'—'the main course was smoked Ochrid trout which was very beautiful'—and more to drink 'than we should have had if we had known what was going to happen.' He recalled driving back in the middle of the night in a state 'of which I would not now approve'. In the early hours of the morning of the 6th he was roused by a naval attaché with the news that German planes had crossed the frontier. He woke Hugh Seton-Watson with some difficulty ('I said, 'Get up, the war's on', and nothing but a grunt emerged'), and they and their colleagues set off ('Hugh went off to his rendez-vous and I said, "Well, heigh ho, see you later"'). The plan was that they should all meet at Avala, a few miles outside Belgrade, and sort themselves out into convoys. Davis's task was to drive Dimitrov and a lieutenant of his, Kostov, who 'had been given British passports and were supposed to be French Canadians'. After reaching Avala, he made further trips back into the bombed city to rescue men and equipment. They then set off in convoys for Kragujevac and Sarajevo, which they reached on the 10th after a difficult and dangerous drive. The roads were full of refugees and groups of soldiers, and at night they had to drive without lights on very rough roads ('I couldn't see where I was going and I owed a good deal to Basil Davidson for looking out and saying "If I were you I'd go a bit to the right, we're nearly going over the edge"'). At Mladenovac they were stopped and told to jettison all their belongings to take on more refugees. He recalled a particularly tricky situation at Višegrad :

I had a couple of chaps in my car the Germans mustn't get hold of, and we slept in the local square because we couldn't find a room. The place was absolutely crowded and again, a very hair-raising event in my young life was that I was at the wheel, and the two Bulgarians were in the back, and . . . we were of course supposed to be British. In the middle of the night a policeman came round checking the cars . . . so I said, 'You know, this is a diplomatic car; we are British diplomats.'

But one of his passengers began to talk in Serbo-Croat —

and the car was supposed to be full of British diplomats . . . and I had to cover. Well, the policeman was a simple-minded rustic and he didn't pick it up, but oh dear, oh dear. So there it was . . .

The situation in the country was now chaotic. Sarajevo was severely bombed, and on the 13th the party set off for the coast. Davis was told to drive directly to Kotor on the Adriatic coast with a colleague, Tim Watts (one of those who had enjoyed the smoked Ochrid trout back in Belgrade),

who had been seriously wounded by a bomb splinter and was likely to need medical attention on the way (his permanent passenger Dr Dimitrov was a physician). He picked him up. 'I remember driving through the broken glass and wire and things in Sarajevo' he said modestly. A journalist who was there gave a more dramatic account of the event :

though the bombardment was now heavy and continuous, Norman Davis calmly parked his car there and carried Watts out. Watts was not yet out of danger, and there was a chance of his losing his sight. Norman Davis therefore drove through the bombardment as slowly as a funeral, whistling rude airs to himself, while the rest of us scudded through the town at some speed.

On the 14th he reached Kotor, and rejoined the rest of the Legation party. There were other adventures :

I was driving Hugh [Seton-Watson] . . . in the dark with no lights along the short distance from Kotor to where we were to be billeted. I hit a bridge in the dark and burst a tyre. Hugh and I sat on the rocks by the sea shore waiting to be picked up, and I said, 'It occurs to me that there's a bottle of White Horse in that bag and we'd better just bring it down with us'. So we did, and we sat there sipping whisky until we were duly picked up. I remember this little vignette, Hugh and I sitting there, sipping whisky on the rocks in the Boka Kotorska, a most improbable scene.

The party waited at Kotor for the flying-boats they had been told were coming from Athens to pick them up. It had by now grown considerably; it included 'consular people from Split and places up the coast, and odds and ends, mining engineers, British Council people', and two or three airmen who had been shot down. On the 16th one flying-boat turned up, and those who were thought to be in danger were loaded on to it : 'that included my two Bulgarians and Tim Watts, and people who were held to be compromised, very largely Yugoslavs'. The remaining eighty or so were left behind, hoping to be picked up by a destroyer or a submarine. However, on the 18th, they were captured by the invading Italians.

The diplomats were taken by bus and military trucks to Scutari, and eventually to Durazzo, where they were lodged in the Hotel Durrës, 'quite a good hotel'. They were to be flown to Italy, and on April 30th the first group were taken to Tirana for a plane, but one was not available, and they had to go back to Durazzo and wait until the following day. On the evening of their return to Durazzo he experienced one of the worst moments in his wartime career. On April 30th the Albanian Italian language newspaper *Tomori* carried an item headed 'Intrighi Serbi scoperti a Sofia' which reported the opening of Dimitrov's trial in absentia, linked him with the former British Legation, and identified 'un certo Norman Davis' as the 'principale organizzatore del terrorismo' who had distributed explosives

with his own hands. 'Apparently they didn't realize it was me', said the principal organizer of terrorism. Most alarmingly of all, it was brought to his attention in the vestibule of the hotel as they came in by one of the party who had remained there waving it and saying 'Oh what fun!':

The foyer was full of detectives. The Italians had my passport—it would have been quite easy for them to have taken me back to Sofia so I was a little nervous at this point. Nobody noticed the connection, and just to show how extraordinarily foolish and vain one is I had a copy of the newspaper and I brought it with me and have it to this day.

The following day the nineteen diplomats were flown across to Foggia in small Caproni bombers. Into the first were put those who were in any way compromised, including Hugh Seton-Watson and Norman Davis ('and I was considerably compromised by that time').

Some sighs of relief were heaved when they reached 'as it were . . . the mainland of Europe, the first time for a long time'. Foggia had a big Luftwaffe base, and they were not allowed out of their hotel, but they were given lunch in a private room:

in order to get to this room we had to walk through the dining room which was entirely full of German Airforce officers, in uniform, and there were 19 of us, not in uniform, and we were led through the 100 or so German officers. In our private room we had an excellent lunch, just a good Italian midday meal. At intervals along the table were bottles of excellent Brolio, and beer . . .

And when they tried to pay, the proprietor said, 'Gentlemen, you are my guests. I will not take any payment'—'we thought that was very good.' They were taken by train to Chianciano, where they maintained this standard of good living (contriving to drink the hotel's cellar dry). Eventually they were taken by train through Vichy France to Spain, and then by a convoy from Gibraltar to the Clyde, arriving in London on 13th July 1941. After only twelve days' leave, Davis was flown out to Cairo, and went on to Istanbul, where he operated under a new identity—'James Cameron'—and with a new appearance. Photographs of him in disguise now have a faintly comical air, but since the disguise apparently deceived Ronald Syme, it must have been effective. He also served for some time in GHQ, Cairo. He ended the war with the rank of major, and was awarded an MBE (Military). In 1944, resuming his true identity, he married Magdalene (Lena) Jamieson Bone, whom he had known since his time in Sofia. The marriage was to prove a very long and happy one. Lena shared his shrewd and detached view of the world, as well as his interest in good food and drink. They were devoted and inseparable companions.

The extraordinary events of the war years inevitably demand a

prominent place in any obituary of Norman Davis, and a biographer of Romantic inclinations might find his return to academic life something of a comedown. He, however, in his typically down to earth way, regarded his wartime SOE period as a necessary (and often entertaining) temporary interlude. He was glad to be able to return to what he had really wanted to do all along, and he was delighted that he could now do it in Britain. He taught in London for a short period as lecturer in medieval English at Queen Mary College (1946), and then back at Oxford, as a lecturer at Oriol and Brasenose Colleges (1947). In 1948 he became University Lecturer in Medieval English. Then, in 1949 a far-sighted and enlightened decision made him Professor of English Language in the University of Glasgow, a post which he held for ten years.

This was a very happy period. He enjoyed a warm and effective relationship with Peter Alexander, the Professor of English Literature, and he built up his own Language Department and reshaped the syllabus. He liked Glasgow, and, naturally, had no difficulty in adapting to the pattern of a Scottish university. He was a good lecturer, and a superb administrator. There was much time to make up, and evidence of his scholarly distinction now began to appear in published form. First came reviews—and these continued in a steady stream throughout the rest of his career. He was an excellent reviewer, judicious and authoritative, severe if he thought it necessary, but only then. Then came a series of articles and notes, beginning in 1949 with a piece on the text of Margaret Paston's letters, and continuing with offerings on topics as diverse as the Middle English Bestiary and 'Hippopotamus' in Old English. There were many on the Paston Letters, a subject he made increasingly his own: in particular, 1955 saw the publication of a major British Academy lecture (the Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture, 1954) on 'The Language of the Pastons'. Longer works also began to appear: in 1953 the revision of Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Primer* (in fact a totally new work which proved a reliable and indispensable guide to generations of students) and in 1958 a Selection of the Paston Letters in the Clarendon Medieval and Tudor Series. He was by now a leading authority on the language and texts of the Middle English period, and especially of the fifteenth century. In 1959 he succeeded Tolkien as the Merton Professor of English Language and Literature at Oxford.

His return to Oxford began the happiest phase of his career. He was an Oxford man through and through, and as one of the most loyal of old Mertonians, he was delighted to be able to occupy a Professorial Fellowship at that college. The long tenure of the Merton chair (from which he retired in 1980) was an unqualified success. He was able to devote himself totally to his work for the Faculty and to an increasing number of devoted graduate

students. In these years the skills he had developed in earlier years came to fruition. He became increasingly influential in medieval philological and textual studies. Already in his Glasgow days he had become joint editor (with Peter Alexander) of *The Review of English Studies* (a position he held from 1954 until 1963) and Honorary Director of the Early English Text Society (1957–1983). He later became a Delegate of the Oxford University Press and a general editor of the Oxford History of English Literature. To these enterprises he devoted his wide learning and considerable energy. He excelled in a kind of ‘collaborative’ scholarship, maintaining an unrelenting gentle moral pressure on his authors or collaborators, and painstakingly commenting on everything they produced. Selflessly, he would put much of himself into the work of others. The only tangible memorials to this remarkable achievement are to be found in the prefaces of many books (and, as he would jokingly point out, in the EETS and RES instructions to authors and contributors, where the date of his birth was enshrined as a model).

This period saw an impressive flow of scholarly work. Among many important articles may be mentioned ‘Styles in English Prose of the Late Middle and early Modern Period’ (1961), which raised grave doubts about R. W. Chambers’s views on the ‘continuity’ of English prose, and ‘The *Litèra Troilli* and English Letters’, in which he used his knowledge of epistolary formulae to illuminate a passage in Chaucer. Others appeared on topics ranging from ‘The Epistolary Uses of William Worcester’ to ‘Sheep-farming terms in Medieval Norfolk’ or ‘William Tyndale’s English of Controversy’. The Glossary which he provided for *Early Middle English Verse and Prose* (ed. J. A. W. Bennett and G. V. Smithers, 1966) demonstrated another area in which he excelled. As a glossator, he had a remarkable sense of the precise contextual nuance of a word. This quality was seen again in the glossary of his revised edition of the Tolkien and Gordon edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1967)—again, what was modestly called a ‘revision’ was a completely new work. Another practical and useful project of this kind was brought to completion in 1979 in the collaborative *Chaucer Glossary*. The idea was entirely his; he organized and oversaw the work with his customary skill and meticulous accuracy. In 1970 there appeared his EETS edition of *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, and in 1971 the first volume of his *magnum opus*, the edition of *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*. Volume II of this was published in 1976. It was a great sadness to us all that Volume III, with further notes and the glossary, did not appear, but the two volumes that did represent a magisterial and definitive achievement. After his retirement he produced distinguished pieces on late medieval English, and on Chaucer’s language (in the Riverside edition). He also took part in a number of recorded

readings from Chaucer with Nevill Coghill, John Burrow and Lena. These arose from a highly successful series of readings for undergraduates in Oxford, in which John Burrow was a dashing Troilus, and Norman Davis read Pandarus with considerable zest.

Over the years honours of various kinds came to him. He was elected to the Academy in 1969. In 1977 he became a Corresponding Fellow of the Medieval Academy of America, and in 1984 he returned to Dunedin to receive an honorary D. Litt. from the University of Otago. He had apparently settled into a happy retirement in Oxford when he was plunged into deep sadness by the death of Lena in 1983. It took him a long time to recover from this, though he was helped by his visit to his New Zealand relatives. Eventually, his inner strength reasserted itself, and he regained much of his former cheerfulness, helped by the constant kindness of his college, Merton, the attentions of his group of friends in Oxford and elsewhere, and the renewal of his old friendship with Mary Seton-Watson, the widow of Hugh, his former SOE colleague.

His death following three months in hospital after what had been thought to be a simple hip replacement operation greatly saddened his friends. Always firm in the face of death, his steadfast refusal to have any memorial service would no doubt have pleased his old academic mentor, Professor Ramsay.

Norman Davis was a fine scholar, with a genuine modesty that is not always found in academics. His friends remember the quizzical look and the sceptical turn of phrase, and, above all the wit and geniality of his companionship. As a host he demonstrated the wide and humane range of his interests. There would be entertaining dinner-table disquisitions on etymologies, sometimes punctuated by visits to the *OED*, and superb imitations of the speech patterns of Glaswegians, New Zealanders, and others. For him life and scholarship were not separate compartments. His vitality and his imagination contributed in no small measure to that quality which was so characteristic of him: 'a natural sense of what scholarship is'.

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Note. I am indebted to Mrs V. Mathewson and Miss D. Davis, and to Mrs Mary Seton-Watson for extensive information about Norman Davis's earlier career, and to the following published sources: an interview with Norman Davis in *The NZ Listener* May 9 1981; Dan Davin, 'Norman Davis: the Growth of a Scholar' in *Middle English Studies presented to Norman Davis in Honour of his Seventieth Birthday* edd. Douglas Gray and E. G. Stanley, Oxford, 1983; Charles A. Moser *Dimetrov of Bulgaria* 1979; Sir George Rendel, *The Sword and the Olive* London, 1957; David Walker, *Death at My Heels*, London, 1942.