



ROBIN NISBET

Robin George Murdoch Nisbet

1925–2013

ROBIN NISBET (known professionally as R. G. M. Nisbet), who was born in Glasgow on 21 May 1925, was one of the most distinguished and influential Latin scholars of his time. He studied at the University of Glasgow before going to Balliol College, Oxford, in 1947, for a second BA. On graduation in 1951, he moved at once as a Junior Research Fellow to Corpus Christi College (CCC), Oxford, where he became a Tutorial Fellow in 1952, and then moved across to the Corpus Christi Chair of Latin in 1970. He retired in 1992 and was (unusually) elected to an Honorary Fellowship at Corpus; other distinctions included an Honorary Fellowship at Balliol (1989), a Fellowship of the British Academy (1967) and its Kenyon Medal (1997).

Nisbet himself composed an autobiographical memoir, a paper delivered to the Oxford Philological Society at Corpus on 20 May 2005, the day before his eightieth birthday, entitled ‘A Retrospect’ (cited hereafter as *AR*). Its terse and witty texture, elegantly written with significant and often ironic asides on various issues, gives a good impression of its author’s style of public discourse.¹ Its account of his family background is worth quotation:

I had the good fortune to be born into a classical family, where in 1936 the death of Housman was mentioned at the breakfast-table, the first time I heard the name. My father, Robert Nisbet,² was a lecturer in Glasgow University in the

¹The full text of the unpublished paper can be found in the Nisbet papers, Archives, Corpus Christi College, Oxford. All footnotes to Nisbet’s text are mine.

²R. G. Nisbet (1872–1955); for his career (MA, Glasgow 1898; Exhibitioner and MA, Christ Church, Oxford, some time in London and Germany, lecturer at Glasgow from 1903) see J. Henderson, ‘*Oxford Reds*’: *Classic Commentaries on Latin Classics* (London, 2006), pp. 114–15, and the brief anonymous obituary in *The Glasgow Herald*, 10 March 1955, p. 9, which stresses his modesty and interest in teaching and his membership of the University’s Senate.

Department of Humanity, as Latin was still called in the Scottish universities; his commentary on Cicero's *De Domo*, published in 1939, is sometimes attributed to me in the bibliographies, though I was only fourteen at the time.³ His own father had been a village schoolmaster in Lanarkshire, and the respect for education in rural Scotland should not be underestimated. If you go back a couple of centuries, John Nisbet of Hardhill was a militant Covenanter, for which he was hanged in 1685; this is the world depicted in Scott's *Old Mortality*, where he shows his Shakespearian gift for understanding people he didn't agree with. If you go back to the sixteenth century, Murdoch Nisbet, from whom I derive my third initial, was a Lollard who translated the New Testament into Lowland Scots, and hid from his persecutors in a secret vault under his house. You may wonder whether this learned man translated the New Testament from the Greek Vulgate, so I must confess that he translated it from English.

My mother, Agnes Husband, had read Latin and French with great distinction at Glasgow University;⁴ as the teaching of Greek declines in schools, Oxford ought to remember that Latin can combine well with a Romance language. My mother was not learned in Latin syntax the way my father was, but she had an instinctive feeling for literature and an eye for what was interesting. There was said to have been a notable ancestor in her mother's family, who may have been responsible for larger ambitions if not a genetic inheritance. In the late eighteenth century George Broun, Lord Coalston, was a prominent judge in Edinburgh, whose daughter Christian married Lord Dalhousie, and is described in Scott's *Journal* as an intelligent, amiable and lively woman. I am supposed to be descended from another daughter, Euphemia Broun, who ran away with the factotum of a neighbouring landowner, and as a consequence was cut off with a silver spoon. I cannot vouch for the truth of the tale, but my sister⁵ still has Euphemia's spoon. (*AR*, p. 1)

Nisbet had a highly successful career both at school (the independent day-school Glasgow Academy), where he records an awakening interest in Cicero and his prose-rhythm, and first learning about Catullus on wartime fire-watch (*AR*, p. 2); both were authors who would feature in his future work. At Glasgow University he came first in Humanity [Latin] and Greek (Honours) and Modern History (ordinary) in finals (1947), and won the most prestigious classical awards.⁶ In mid-course he spent two years of war service working as a clerk in a Glasgow machine-tool factory (1943–5), having been rejected for the army on account of his poor eyesight. At Glasgow, apart from his father, who retired in 1942, his main influence

³R. G. Nisbet, *Cicero: De Domo* (Oxford, 1939); the confusion easily arose from Nisbet *filis*' similar initials and similar commentary on a Cicero speech for the same publisher twenty years later (see below, n. 18).

⁴First Class Joint Honours, 1917.

⁵Robin's twin sister Nanette, his only sibling, who became a consultant geriatrician and now lives in retirement at Pittenween in Fife.

⁶The Jeffrey Medal, the Ramsay Memorial Medal and the Cowan Medal.

was C. J. Fordyce, whom he regarded in later life as an excellent technical Latinist but as a formidable and forbidding character.⁷ In 1947 he won the prestigious Snell Exhibition to Balliol College, Oxford, the previous holders of which include Adam Smith (1740) as well as Fordyce himself (1920) and W. S. Watt (1933), soon to be Nisbet's Balliol tutor.⁸ This he regarded as the key point in his life (*AR*, p. 2). At Balliol, in the *de facto* absence of graduate degrees at that time,⁹ he read for a second undergraduate degree in Classics.

This placed him in a golden cohort. The 1947 generation of classical undergraduates at Balliol was especially distinguished, and included the philosophers John Lucas, a future neighbour at Merton and always a good friend, and the future Sir Bernard Williams, a colleague at Corpus in the 1990s,¹⁰ as well as Dick (Baron) Taverne QC, later a Labour cabinet minister. In a higher year and just finishing his classical degree there was Donald Russell, who became Nisbet's closest friend and Oxford colleague, to whom he was introduced by his Latin tutor W. S. Watt, who had been a student of Nisbet's father at Glasgow.¹¹ At Balliol Bill Watt, with whom he kept up and whose obituary he later wrote,¹² was a key influence on Nisbet, stimulating his interest in textual criticism; he was also taught Greek by the future Sir Kenneth Dover, later to be his President at Corpus (1975–86),¹³ philosophy (which he found over-theoretical) by R. M. Hare, who also became a Corpus colleague as White's Professor of Moral Philosophy (1966–83), and ancient history, which he much liked as a subject, by the legendary Russell Meiggs.¹⁴ All four of his tutors became

⁷ Personal conversations with the author. The gentler Roland (R. G.) Austin (1901–74), who had been his father's close colleague in Glasgow 1923–37 and later became Professor of Latin in Cardiff (1937–55) and Liverpool (1955–68), was also a family friend and an influence (personal conversations); he too produced an influential Oxford commentary on a speech of Cicero (*Cicero: Pro Caelio*, Oxford, 1933; new edns. 1952, 1960) which may have been a model for the *In Pisonem*.

⁸ For a full list see <<http://archives.balliol.ox.ac.uk/History/snell.asp>> [accessed 23 Dec. 2013].

⁹ See his own account in R. G. M. Nisbet and D. A. Russell, 'The study of classical literature at Oxford, 1936–1988', in C. A. Stray (ed.), *Oxford Classics: Teaching and Learning 1800–2000* (London, 2007), pp. 219–38.

¹⁰ As White's Professor of Moral Philosophy (1990–6); for his career see S. Blackburn, 'Bernard Arthur Owen Williams, 1929–2003', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 150, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows*, VI (2008), 335–48.

¹¹ Confirmed by Donald Russell (personal information).

¹² R. G. M. Nisbet, 'William Smith Watt, 1902–1989', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 124, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows*, III (2004), 355–72.

¹³ Dover comments on this generation of Balliol undergraduates in his autobiography *Marginal Comment* (London, 1994), p. 68, that 'there was not much I could explain to them which they did not already understand'.

¹⁴ For their careers see Kenneth Dover, 'Russell Meiggs, 1902–1989', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 80 (1991), 361–70; A. W. Price, 'Richard Mervyn Hare, 1919–2002', *Proceedings of the*

Fellows of the British Academy. He attended E. R. Dodds's class on translation, in which students offered their own versions of Greek poetry (*AR*, p. 2), and of course Eduard Fraenkel's seminars on literary texts, which left a lasting impression: he was in no doubt of the value of the German-style seminar, which Fraenkel was the first to introduce in Oxford, but deprecated the great man's perceived need for dominance: '... he came with his mind firmly made up on every problem, and didn't encourage the suggestion of alternatives. It was even more dangerous to produce a crumb of information that he himself didn't possess' (*AR*, p. 3).¹⁵ Nisbet duly got Firsts in both parts of the classics course (Mods and Greats) and won all the major classical prizes.¹⁶

He was elected a Junior Research Fellow at Corpus in 1951, apparently owing to the influence of Fraenkel, who in the manner of the time simply informed him that the offer was available without any prior application or interview; he was later dined at Corpus and duly elected (*AR*, p. 3). Fraenkel wanted him to work on the fragmentary early Roman historians (*AR*, p. 3), but Nisbet, characteristically independent, chose to follow his father in working on Cicero and after a term of looking for a subject¹⁷ spent most of the 1950s on his commentary on Cicero's *In Pisonem*, a masterpiece of Roman invective oratory against a political enemy, which was published in 1961.¹⁸ Though Fraenkel helped him in various ways with the project, and they would meet weekly for scholarly talk, Nisbet learnt after an early experience that it was best not to show him work in progress, since he would suggest that it needed laying aside for a couple of years (*AR*, pp. 3–4).¹⁹ On the *In Pisonem* Nisbet made significant contributions to both text and interpretation, making effective use of Campana's

British Academy, 124, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows*, III (2004), 117–37; D. A. Russell and F. S. Halliwell, 'Kenneth James Dover, 1920–2010', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, XI (2012), 153–75.

¹⁵ For a more detailed and nuanced account of Fraenkel's seminars cf. Stephanie West, 'Eduard Fraenkel recalled', in Stray, *Oxford Classics*, pp. 203–18.

¹⁶ Chancellor's Latin Prose Prize 1948, Craven Scholarship 1948, Hertford Prize 1949, Dean Ireland's Scholarship 1949.

¹⁷ His fixing on the topic is noted in a letter of his to President Hardie of Corpus of 30 Dec. 1951 (Nisbet papers, Archives, Corpus Christi College, Oxford; in those days one could be elected to a research fellowship without a clear plan of research), and the preface to the book is dated September 1960.

¹⁸ R. G. M. Nisbet, *Cicero: In Pisonem* (Oxford, 1961). It was extensively and positively reviewed; for a free-wheeling modern account see Henderson, 'Oxford Reds', pp. 128–51.

¹⁹ Fraenkel had made the same suggestion to C. J. Fordyce about a sample of a potential commentary on Seneca's *Controversiae* in the 1930s (Fraenkel papers, Archives, Corpus Christi College, Oxford); the commentary never emerged.

recent rediscovery of Poggio's copy of the speech, the important readings of which had before then to be reconstructed from later evidence; his penchant for textual emendation shows only a little here, perhaps thinking of Fraenkel's future critical scrutiny, with just two tentative suggestions in the *apparatus criticus*,²⁰ along with suggestions by his tutor Bill Watt and friend Gordon Williams.²¹ This commentary's introduction contains what is still the best miniature guide to the principles of Ciceronian metrical prose-rhythm,²² which was always a topic of key interest to him, and which he there and elsewhere stressed as a useful criterion for deciding between textual variants.²³

Alongside these technical achievements, the commentary is keen to stress that this is a work of literature, something similarly evident in an essay of 1965 which drew attention to Cicero's supreme artistry in his speeches while making some characteristically robust and lapidary observations about his sincerity and ethics:

Cicero was the greatest prose stylist who has ever lived, with the single exception of Plato. He had supreme intellectual gifts, especially for a public man . . . yet most of his speeches fail to satisfy. Though both eloquent and serious, he was seldom both at once. He championed unworthy causes for short-term results in front of audiences that he despised. He turned on spurious emotion so often that it is difficult to know when he is being sincere. He used his outstanding talents to frustrate rather than to promote action. Except at the beginning and end of his career, the moral authority of a Demosthenes or a Lincoln or a Churchill eluded him.²⁴

In the first half of the 1960s he also published similarly lively and important essays on Horace's *Odes* and Persius's *Satires* which showed that classical texts deserved close stylistic and thematic scrutiny as well as traditional textual criticism and biographical or historical analysis;²⁵ this

²⁰ Both plausible (a rearrangement of the word-order at 32, and *confero* for *conferam* at 38).

²¹ Suggestions by Williams at 17 (adding a word), 43 (deleting three words) and 47 (adding a word), and Watt at fr.ix (*subdolo* for *subito*), 47 (adding a word), and 94 (rewriting a crux).

²² I still copy pp. xvii–xviii for my students half a century on.

²³ See *In Pisonem*, pp. xix–xx, and R. G. M. Nisbet, 'Cola and clausulae in Cicero's speeches', in E. M. Craik (ed.), *Owls to Athens: Essays on Classical Subjects Presented to Sir Kenneth Dover* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 349–49; R. G. M. Nisbet, 'Cola and Clausulae in Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 1.1', in A. Kahane and A. Laird (eds.), *A Companion to the Prologue of Apuleius' Metamorphoses* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 16–26.

²⁴ R. G. M. Nisbet, 'The speeches', in T. A. Dorey (ed.), *Cicero* (London, 1965), pp. 47–79 at 77–8.

²⁵ R. G. M. Nisbet, '*Romanae fidei lyrae*: the odes of Horace', in J. P. Sullivan (ed.), *Critical Essays in Roman Literature: Elegy and Lyric* (London, 1962), pp. 181–21; R. G. M. Nisbet, 'Persius', in J. P. Sullivan, *Critical Essays in Roman Literature: Satire* (London, 1963), pp. 39–71.

position was not always widely held at the time.²⁶ Though he later felt that the Horace paper was ‘one-sided and over-rhetorical’ (*AR*, p. 5) and (as with the Cicero paper) did not choose to reprint it thirty years later in his collected papers (see below), it too combined high praise and literary appreciation with blunt and well-crafted comment on the poet’s perceived shortcomings:

The Odes could only have been written by a poet of unusual energy and intelligence. Horace created a style which was both original and inimitable. He covered a far wider range than most lyric poets. He transferred the metres and the themes of Greek poetry to an alien setting, and somehow gave them a genuinely Roman quality. Yet his limitations must be acknowledged. His high standards of technical perfection brought a loss of spontaneity: only those who write fast can express all the shades and subtleties of thought. He lacked style and grace of the Catullan sort (his social origins may be relevant here); he had no appreciation of certain sorts of beauty; he was unusually self-conscious, for a poet, about expressing emotion. When he turned to public subjects he could not speak as an autonomous agent; and freedom to conform is not enough for anyone who is any good ... The Odes are most successful when they reveal something of the poet’s own humanity and scepticism.²⁷

With his willingness both to conduct detailed stylistic readings and make forthright aesthetic judgements, he played a key part in the emergence of literary criticism in Latin studies in the UK in the 1960s, alongside such figures as E. J. (Ted) Kenney, W. J. N. (Niall) Rudd, J. P. Sullivan,²⁸ P. G. (Peter) Walsh²⁹ and David West,³⁰ all friends or associates of his. The significance of his work in this period was already recognised by election to the British Academy in 1967.

Horace was no casual choice for his essay of 1962, for that was the year in which Nisbet conceived (in a moment of inspiration on the sands of St Andrews: *AR*, p. 5) the idea of a commentary on the whole of

²⁶For the dearth of literary criticism in classical studies in the 1950s and early 1960s see Niall Rudd, ‘Introduction’, in Niall Rudd (ed.), *Essays on Classical Literature Selected from Arion* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. vii–xvii.

²⁷Nisbet, ‘*Romanae fidicen lyrae*’, p. 217. ‘Humanity and scepticism’ suggests key qualities of Nisbet himself.

²⁸For John Sullivan, who was an Oxford colleague from 1954 to 1961 but then left for the USA, see Gareth Schmeling, ‘Sullivan, John Patrick (1930–1993)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/53361>> [accessed 23 Dec. 2013].

²⁹For an obituary of Peter Walsh see <http://www.royalsoced.org.uk/cms/files/fellows/obits_alpha/walsh_pg.pdf> [accessed 23 Dec. 2013].

³⁰For an obituary of David West see <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/10130699/Professor-David-West.html>> [accessed 23 Dec. 2013].

Horace's *Odes*.³¹ The original commentary team was to have consisted of four Oxford colleagues (himself, Margaret Hubbard of St Anne's College, A. F. 'Freddie' Wells of University College, and Gordon Williams of Balliol College), all what were then known as 'Mods dons', heavily occupied undergraduate teachers giving instruction in Latin and Greek languages and literature, at that time limited to the first part ('Mods', Honour Moderations) of the Oxford 'Greats' (*Literae Humaniores* = Classics) course (see further below). Hubbard and Williams were contemporaries and friends of Nisbet, and both are already thanked by him in the preface to the *In Pisonem*; Wells (b.1911) was somewhat older and had worked on the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* in the 1930s. The team was rapidly reduced to two: Wells suffered from severe ill-health in the early 1960s, effectively retired in 1963 and died in 1966,³² while Williams moved to the Chair of Humanity at St Andrews in 1963 and took no further part in the Oxford project. In the preface to the first volume of commentary, Wells is briefly but warmly memorialised as an earlier 'partner in our enterprise' (p. vi), but Williams is not mentioned, presumably because he had in the end contributed little, and seems to have incorporated his work on Horace into the many Horatian analyses of his *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry*, in the preface of which Nisbet's help is acknowledged (p. viii), and into the small-scale edition of *Odes* 3 which he published in 1969.³³

All the original four-person team were connected with Fraenkel, whose *Horace*, itself replete with many close analyses of the *Odes*, had come out in 1957, when its author was a few years into retirement from the Corpus Chair of Latin but still very much an active scholar and teacher; by that time Nisbet had been his colleague at Corpus for six years, Williams his Oxford colleague for three,³⁴ while Wells (like Nisbet) was warmly acknowledged in the preface of *Horace* for helping shape the

³¹This section draws on the research in S. J. Harrison, 'Two-author commentaries on Horace: three case studies', in C. A. Stray and C. S. Kraus (eds.), *Classical Commentary: Explorations in a Scholarly Genre* (forthcoming), and is informed by several conversations with Robin Nisbet in 2012.

³²For obituaries see that by Nisbet himself in *The Oxford Magazine* (1966), p. 10, and an unsigned piece in the *University College Record*, 5.1 (1966), 6–11.

³³G. W. Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* (Oxford, 1968), and G. W. Williams, *Horace: Odes Book III* (Oxford, 1969). For Williams's later career, ending as Thacher Professor of Latin at Yale, see the obituary and memorial addresses at <http://www.yale.edu/classics/news_williams.html> [accessed 23 Dec. 2013].

³⁴Their friendship since 1954 is highlighted by Williams in the preface to *Tradition and Originality*, p. viii. Williams's letters to Fraenkel from the 1960s are available in the Fraenkel papers in the Archives, Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and show clearly that Fraenkel supported Williams for the Corpus Chair in 1969.

volume's English, and Fraenkel had been a keen supporter of Hubbard's appointment at St Anne's in 1957.³⁵ The eventual two-person team of Nisbet and Hubbard clearly had something of an ambivalent relationship with Fraenkel, whom (as seen above) Nisbet at least regarded as too domineering over younger colleagues, and the last paragraph of the preface to Book 1 is a masterpiece of tact worth citing in full:

One debt remains to be acknowledged. Like many of our generation we owe to Eduard Fraenkel our whole approach to ancient literature, and in particular to Horace. He has always taken a sympathetic interest in our work, and lent us his books freely: if we have shown him nothing of what we have written, it is because we wish to remain as independent as we can. He will often find us guilty of plagiarism, sometimes of recalcitrance. We must trust to his magnanimity to forgive us for both.

The commentary indeed takes much from Fraenkel's work (its historicist concerns, its focus on literary patterning and models, and on literary history) but also differs from it in some key respects (an interest in candid literary evaluation and, in the later reception of the poems, a more nuanced approach to the poet's use of the first person, and a grittier and less idealistic approach to the poetry's political context). Its most distinctive feature, its assembling of extensive parallels from Greek and Latin literature, in some ways drew on Fraenkel's work (always aware of the Greek substrate to Horace's poetry), but went much further.³⁶ The preface to Book I confronts this issue directly:

We have cited a large number of parallel passages, many of which we believe to be new. It is easy to misunderstand this procedure: classical scholars must seem a strange breed of pedants who refuse to admit that life is short unless they can find ten parallels to prove it. In fact we are trying to show how a very literary poet takes over themes conventional in various genres and adapts them to his new idiom. We also believe that many problems, both large and small, can be illuminated by the collection of evidence, and that without such evidence the most ingenious theorising is often misdirected. We hope that our stores may be found serviceable by commentators on other works of ancient literature.

The last sentence here is prophetic: there is virtually no commentary written on Latin poetry since 1970 that does not use the material of the first volume of Nisbet and Hubbard, and the detailed exegesis of the book's poems after that date inevitably starts from its parallels and judge-

³⁵ See M. G. Leigh, 'Margaret Hubbard', *The Ship* (2011–12), pp. 76–7 (available at <http://www.st-annes.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Publications/TheShip_2012.pdf.pdf> [accessed 23 Dec. 2013]).

³⁶ For an interesting review discussion of this feature of the commentary by a former partner in the enterprise see G. W. Williams, *Horace* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 2–3.

ments, though it has been criticised by some for its underestimation of some aspects of Horatian poetics, e.g. imagery and literary structure.³⁷ The fact that the material is often austere presented in compressed form, simply citing the parallel without further elucidating its function, has paradoxically added to the longevity of the commentary, leaving the reader to apply his or her interpretation to the suggested resemblance or connection.

One further element from the preface deserves notice. Nisbet and Hubbard deny that they are doing literary criticism: 'We do not rule out the possibility of serious literary criticism on a Latin poet, but we had neither the confidence nor the time to take on the job ourselves' (p. v). Though this is meant to draw a contrast between their work and that of more overtly literary critics of the time such as Kenneth Quinn,³⁸ it seems both to be in contradiction with their statement on the same page that 'we have occasionally suggested that some odes may be better than others' and to underestimate the value for literary-critical purposes of the interpretations which the commentary provides, though it is true to say that it does not provide the structural analyses and linear readings of the *Odes* to be found (for example) in Quinn's later commentary of 1980.³⁹ Here Nisbet and Hubbard are surely over-influenced by Housman's celebrated but over-austere view that scholarship and literary criticism are separate gifts rarely combined in the same person.⁴⁰

Both volumes of Nisbet and Hubbard were fully joint enterprises, with both partners reading and commenting on the whole set of drafts. One partner would begin the work on a particular poem by producing a first draft for comment, discussion and redrafting: according to Nisbet, he wrote the first draft on slightly more poems in Book 1 than Hubbard and on a considerable majority of poems in Book 2. Nisbet himself felt that the collaboration worked more effectively for the first volume, when the enterprise was fresh for both partners, and neither had other major distractions: after 1970 Nisbet had the considerable administrative burden carried by the Corpus Chair of Latin at Oxford (see below), while Hubbard

³⁷ Their famous statement that 'his metaphors are sparse and trite' (I: xxii) has been justly criticised (see e.g. Quinn's review, see below, n. 38): for a richer view see e.g. D. West, *Reading Horace* (Edinburgh, 1967).

³⁸ For example, K. Quinn, *Latin Explorations* (London, 1963). For Quinn's initial mixed reaction to Nisbet and Hubbard see K. Quinn, 'The new Nisbet-Hubbard Horace', *Arion*, 9 (1970), 264-73.

³⁹ K. Quinn, *Horace: the Odes* (London, 1980).

⁴⁰ A. E. Housman, *The Name and Nature of Poetry* (Cambridge, 1939), p. 1.

was already engaged on the work which would lead to her important book on Propertius.⁴¹

As with many collaborative enterprises, it is hard for readers to ascribe particular parts of Nisbet and Hubbard to one or the other, even if there is some record of original allocations of poems between them for initial drafts.⁴² This was neatly encapsulated by L. P. Wilkinson's improvised verses on Book 1:⁴³

This is a book of Hubbard and Nisbet:
Some of it's her bit and some of it's his bit.
I leave it to you to decide who did what,
But all of it's sense and none of it's not.

Occasional guesses were usually wrong: some supposed that the commentary on the Archytas ode (1.28) with its copious philosophical material was principally Hubbard, others that 1.12 with its especially rich set of literary models was Nisbet, but both were incorrect according to Nisbet himself. The parallels from English poetry (an interestingly innovative feature of the commentary) came from both authors, though Nisbet regarded Hubbard as more expert there. Nisbet at least could change his mind over time: the commentary's somewhat austere denial that the wintry Mount Soracte in *Odes* 1.9 symbolised old age was withdrawn in one of his later articles.⁴⁴ A generation on, these two commentaries remain remarkable achievements and must be consulted by all serious readers of Horace's *Odes*.

Alongside this considerable research activity, Nisbet was a dedicated classical tutor at Corpus in the period 1952–70. Then, as now, classics was a key subject at Corpus. In 1952 the college had only eleven fellows, three of whom were classicists: Fraenkel and the ancient historian Frank Lepper in addition to Robin himself. On Fraenkel's retirement in 1953 Sir Roger Mynors,⁴⁵ with whom Nisbet had a warm relationship and whose commentary on Virgil's *Georgics* he saw through to publication after his

⁴¹ M. Hubbard, *Propertius* (London, 1974).

⁴² Nisbet's reading text of the *Odes* (Wickham's *editio maior*, now in the possession of Richard Tarrant) contains a list of the initial planned division of first drafts for Book 1 under the original four-person team, each containing roughly the same number of lines (Nisbet: 2, 9, 11, 18, 20, 22, 25, 28, 32, 37; Hubbard: 4, 7, 16, 17, 21, 31, 34, 35, 38; Wells: 1, 3, 5, 8, 14, 15, 23, 24, 26; Williams: 6, 10, 12, 13, 19, 27, 29, 30, 33, 36) and for Book 2 (Hubbard: 1–3, 5, 8–9, 13, 15, 18–19; Nisbet: 4, 6–7, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16–17, 20). These were clearly not maintained in practice for Book 1, given that two of the team had dropped out by 1963, and may not have been for Book 2 (see above).

⁴³ Known to me from a postcard, perhaps in Wilkinson's own hand (Nisbet papers, Archives, Corpus Christi College, Oxford).

⁴⁴ R. G. M. Nisbet, *Collected Papers on Latin Literature* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 414–15.

⁴⁵ For his career see M. Winterbottom, 'Roger Aubrey Baskerville Mynors, 1903–1989', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 81 (1991), 371–401.

death,⁴⁶ came back from Cambridge to the Corpus Chair, which meant at Corpus evenings in the 1950s and 1960s one could find oneself with Fraenkel, Mynors and Nisbet together, an impressive concentration of Latinists. A further collection of classical colleagues appeared over the next two decades: (Sir) Hugh Lloyd-Jones in 1954 (moving to the Regius Chair of Greek in 1960), the philosopher J. O. Urmson in 1959, the Hellenist Gerald Toomer in 1960 (moving to Brown in 1965), the philosopher Christopher Taylor in 1963, the Hellenist Ewen Bowie in 1965, the Roman historian John Matthews in 1969 (moving to Queen's in 1976, later to Yale) and John Bramble as Nisbet's own successor as Latin tutor in 1970.

In these years he was jointly responsible for Corpus's emergence as an undergraduate classical powerhouse, and the college's performances in Mods and Greats improved greatly. He taught a large number of distinguished schoolteachers and academics as undergraduates: amongst the academics one could mention Gerald Toomer, Nigel Wilson, Peter Brown and Oliver Taplin, all of whom became Oxford tutorial fellows, and other distinguished scholars such as John Briscoe, William Harris, John Moles, Andrew Wallace-Hadrill and Harry Hine in classics, not to mention Jonathan Dancy in philosophy. He also taught others of high achievement in other fields, for example Sir Martin Wolf, the leading financial journalist, William (Baron) Waldegrave, Corpus's first cabinet minister since the 1930s, and many outstanding civil servants and lawyers.

Both before and after his election to the Corpus Chair (see below), Nisbet played a central role in the administration of classics at Oxford, chairing the Classics Faculty Board and Sub-Faculty of Languages and Literature and acting as Director of Graduate Studies: he would often aver that there were two types of academics on committees, those who 'greased the wheels', and those who 'gummed them up' (he regarded himself as a wheel-greaser). In particular (along with Donald Russell and others) in the 1960s he was a leader in the most important reform of his academic generation, establishing the study of classical literature at Oxford as an equal part of Greats with Philosophy and Ancient History from 1970, a crucial step for the Sub-Faculty of Languages and Literature and for the study of classical literature generally.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ R. A. B. Mynors, *Virgil: Georgics* (Oxford, 1990).

⁴⁷ For these reforms see further Nisbet and Russell, 'The study of classical literature at Oxford, 1936–1988', pp. 219–38.

In 1969, with the first volume of the Horace commentary in press and some of its contents known to the electors, Nisbet was elected to the Corpus Chair of Latin Language and Literature. His referees were an interesting selection: his former Corpus colleague Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Regius Professor of Greek, and the Hellenist Rudolf Kassel of Köln, who had visited Oxford and declined the Regius Chair of Greek in 1960, with Roger Mynors (the then holder of the Corpus Chair) as the only Latinist. Fraenkel, supporting Gordon Williams, was not available for Nisbet, though he wrote to congratulate him afterwards.⁴⁸ Mynors's reference does not survive, but the other two are preserved:⁴⁹ both mention having read parts of the forthcoming commentary, and both provide perceptive views of their subject. Lloyd-Jones, acutely analysing a character very different from his own more mercurial nature,⁵⁰ stated that 'his quiet, unruffled personality makes him able to get on terms with almost anyone, yet he has strong opinions, and is ready to defend them. He is highly congenial to his colleagues, easy of access and ready to discuss scholarly topics at all times.' Kassel's reference naturally stressed the excellence of the Greek parallels in the draft commentary, but its most effective aspect was a lengthy quotation from an anonymous former undergraduate student of Nisbet's:

I think I can say without any hesitation that he is the best teacher I have had, and that he has opened my eyes to a great deal in classical literature which I am sure I would otherwise have failed to notice. He is also extremely conscientious, and takes an interest in the people he comes across . . . his teaching technique is well suited to research supervision, as it consists rather in asking awkward questions about work which a man has done than in filling a pupil with knowledge. He always encouraged us to have ideas of our own, even though his own ideas were so persuasive that we didn't much want to disagree with them.

Anyone taught by Nisbet at any level will recognise the accuracy of this account.

The year of Nisbet's election to the Corpus chair also marked a key change in his personal life. In his first years at Corpus he had lived the then life of a bachelor don and dedicated tutor in college, but in 1969 he married Anne Wood, with whom he had worked closely as College Secretary in his progress through the various college offices; he was Senior Tutor (1967–70) and twice Vice-President (1960–2, 1972–3), and Corpus

⁴⁸The letter (dated 12.5.69) is in the Nisbet papers, Archives, Corpus Christi College, Oxford.

⁴⁹In the files of the Presidential office at Corpus Christi College, Oxford.

⁵⁰See N. G. Wilson, 'Peter Hugh Jefferd Lloyd-Jones, 1922–2009', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 172, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows*, X (2011), 215–29.

and its affairs and interests were always close to his heart. The pair moved to Cumnor, close to Oxford, where they enjoyed a long and happy marriage, a garden and cats, and for some years they also had a summer retreat at Barton-on-Sea in Hampshire.

As Corpus Professor (and indeed before) he had a stream of distinguished graduate students who have gone on to occupy major positions in universities all over the world, and to do sterling work in schools and colleges. Amongst scholars, these included Richard Tarrant and Kathleen Coleman at Harvard, Denis Feeney at Princeton, Jonathan Powell at Royal Holloway, Michael Dewar in Toronto, the late Adrian Hollis and Don Fowler in Oxford, John Henderson at Cambridge and Charles Martindale at Bristol. There was also a stream of bright young colleagues in the P. S. Allen Junior Research Fellowship—his former students John Briscoe, Richard Tarrant and Harry Hine, and also Philip Hardie and Arnd Kerkhecker, all of whom enjoyed his support and help and went on to distinguished careers.

As a graduate supervisor he was a conscientious, rapid and acute reader of his students' work, often well into their professional careers, which he supported generously. His graduate seminars were fundamentally formative for his students, taking a Latin text, whether well-known or not, and subjecting it to the widest range of scrutiny, textual, literary and cultural; his stance, consciously differing from Fraenkel's need for domination, was essentially that of a midwife, to encourage, point students towards key bibliography and ideas, and very occasionally correct. For many, these seminars exemplified true and tolerant scholarship in action.

He did not travel overseas, academically or otherwise; in later years, he used to say to younger colleagues that they did his travelling for him. Wherever they went, his name achieved instant recognition, and if it was anywhere in the Anglophone academic world, they would inevitably find a colleague who owed something to Nisbet's help or teaching. And though he did not himself bring overseas scholars to Oxford, he was always kind and welcoming when they appeared, and keen to know what was going on elsewhere in the classical world. He did occasionally make it as far as Liverpool and Leeds, where he much enjoyed the colloquia organised by Francis Cairns and the chance to talk to old friends such as David West and Tony Woodman, and to London, where he served as Vice-President of the Roman Society and on the editorial committee of its journal.

Having spent most of the 1960s and 1970s on Horace, from the mid-1970s he began to produce a wide range of essays on Latin authors. Perhaps most famous amongst these were his co-authorship of the first

edition of the Gallus papyrus from Egypt in 1979, resurrecting the missing link in Latin literature, Cornelius Gallus, the poet who stood at the head of the rich tradition of Latin elegy later developed by Tibullus, Propertius and Ovid. His brilliant paper of 1978 on the text and interpretation of Catullus both opened up and cleared up a number of issues in one of the most central and often-read Latin poets, and his splendid account of Virgil's Fourth Eclogue showed that the long-known similarities between Virgil's poem and the prophecies of Isaiah were likely to have been due to the Hellenised Jewish culture of Alexandria; he also produced important work on the style of the *Eclogues*, on the historical background of Horace's *Epodes*, on Seneca's tragedies, on Statius, and on Juvenal, as well as several pieces on scholarly methodology. In the end there were more than twenty essays over fewer than twenty years, later published in his *Collected Papers on Latin Literature* (1995), a volume which all intending professional Latinists should read.⁵¹

In 1992 he retired, and was feted by a splendid international collection of scholars at a conference on Horace at Corpus, later published as a Festschrift entitled *Homage to Horace*.⁵² Characteristically careful and methodical, he moved his extensive classical library to Cumnor by the simple expedient of taking two shopping bags of books home each day on the bus for nine months. He was a man of some austerity: he did not drink, drive or type, and computers and the internet came too late for him, despite attempts by colleagues at his conversion. As often happens, having been a reformer in his early career he became more conservative later on, and did not always approve of the emergence of literary theory

⁵¹ Nisbet, *Collected Papers*. I add here for completeness' sake the articles and chapters published after 1995 by Nisbet and therefore not included in the full bibliography (pp. 435–8) in that volume. Apart from the 2001 piece on prose-rhythm in Apuleius (see above, n. 23), the 2004 obituary of W. S. Watt (see above, n. 12), and the 2007 historical piece with Donald Russell on classics in Oxford (see above, n. 9), these were: R. G. M. Nisbet, 'The word-order of Horace's Odes', in J. N. Adams and R. G. Mayer (eds.), *Aspects of the Language of Latin Poetry* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 135–54; R. G. M. Nisbet, 'Epilegomena on the text of Juvenal', *Acta Antiqua Hungarica*, 39 (1999), 225–30; R. G. M. Nisbet, 'Sera vindemia: marginal notes on the text of Horace and Juvenal', in J. F. Miller, C. Damon and K. S. Myers, *Vertis in usum: Studies in Honor of Edward Courtney* (Munich, 2002), pp. 56–66; R. G. M. Nisbet, 'A wine-jar for Messalla: Carmina 3.21', in T. Woodman and D. Feeney (eds.), *Traditions and Contexts in the Poetry of Horace* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 80–92; R. G. M. Nisbet, 'Horace: life and chronology', in S. J. Harrison (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Horace* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 7–21; and R. G. M. Nisbet, 'Housman's Juvenal' [a revision of his 1989 article of the same title], in D. Butterfield and C. A. Stray (eds.), *A. E. Housman: Classical Scholar* (London, 2010), pp. 45–63. Some further conjectures on Juvenal await publication in the Italian journal *Segno e testo*.

⁵² S. J. Harrison (ed.), *Homage to Horace: a Bimillenary Celebration* (Oxford, 1995).

in Latin studies, driven in the 1990s in this country by two of his most brilliant graduate students, John Henderson in Cambridge and the late Don Fowler in Oxford. Likewise with the new area of classical reception in recent years: he could see that Milton and Tennyson drew interestingly on their classical knowledge, and respected and praised the work of Charles Martindale (another former graduate student) on translation, but was sceptical about reception studies (now a key part of classics) as a field of endeavour.

Horace was not forgotten in retirement. After the publication of Book 2 in 1978, Hubbard had turned to other work, but Nisbet had continued drafting a commentary on Book 3, following the original intention of the project to cover the whole of the four books of *Odes*. By the mid-1980s Nisbet was clear that he would not go on to *Odes* 4 (which he found less inspiring than the early books), and others took on that book, on which we have now two major commentaries.⁵³ When he retired, friends and colleagues urged Nisbet to complete *Odes* 3, but he was initially unsure whether he would be able to do so.

Help came from an old friend.⁵⁴ In the mid-1990s, Niall Rudd, who had retired from his chair of Latin in Bristol in 1989 and was already the author of a widely used smaller-scale commentary on Horace *Epistles* 2 and the *Ars Poetica*,⁵⁵ approached E. J. Kenney as the main Latin editor of the 'Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics' series ('green and yellow' format), asking whether the series wanted a commentary on Horace *Odes* 4. Kenney replied that the series had already commissioned such a volume (from Richard Thomas), but would Rudd be interested in *Odes* 3 instead? At this point Rudd recalled that Nisbet was working on a larger-scale project on that same book and contacted him to see if he was interested in a collaboration. Nisbet replied that he had a good deal of handwritten material and would welcome collaboration to finish the project; Rudd (a user of computers) then agreed to type up that material, and add occasional elements of his own where he felt it was appropriate. The two partners agreed that whatever emerged would be a third volume for Oxford, in a longer and more detailed format, rather than for the leaner Cambridge series.

⁵³ P. Fedeli and I. Ciccarelli, *Q. Horatii Flacci: Carmina Liber IV* (Florence, 2008), R. F. Thomas, *Horace: Odes Book IV and Carmen Saeculare* (Cambridge, 2011).

⁵⁴ In what follows I am most grateful to Niall Rudd for help and discussion as well as to the late Robin Nisbet for several conversations. Quotations are from a letter from Niall Rudd to the author, dated 14.5.2013.

⁵⁵ N. Rudd, *Horace: Epistles II and Ars Poetica* (Cambridge, 1989).

Rudd had already begun work on his admirable Loeb edition of Horace's *Odes* and *Epodes* (published in 2004),⁵⁶ so he had thought through most of the major interpretational problems of the third book, and he sent Nisbet an outline of the main issues in each poem and of his own views, while Nisbet sent Rudd his draft commentaries on the same poems. Rudd's own words take up the story: 'as the packets of material arrived, it became clear that our approaches were very much the same, though I was happy to stand aside when he plunged into the more thorny thickets of *Wissenschaft*. It also became clear that in a few cases, where he thought I was wrong but not insane, he was willing that I should have my say.' Nisbet estimated that 20 per cent of the final draft came from Rudd, whom he viewed as more conservative than himself and more liable to be content with the traditional text and interpretation; the differences between the two partners are (unusually) enshrined in the commentary, where their divergent views are regularly reported under their initials. Discussions took place at regular Sunday meetings at Nisbet's home in Cumnor, where they would spend most of the day on the commentary. The commentary was duly completed and published in May 2004, almost exactly on Nisbet's seventy-ninth birthday.

In retirement Nisbet had been regularly and willingly enlisted in his wife Anne's active charitable life in Cumnor, for example delivering 'meals on wheels'. Her death in 2004 a few weeks after the publication of *Odes* 3 was a sad blow, and Nisbet's serious ill-health which followed a few years later eventually confined him to his home, leaving him unable to visit his beloved Corpus as he had done weekly since retirement; he found some consolation in listening to Classic FM and in even more extensive reading in modern history. He was sustained in Cumnor by a team of excellent carers and by the devotion of his friends Esme and Tony Wyatt. He kept in touch with other friends and colleagues largely by telephone, always keen to know and discuss the latest news, whether political or academic. He died on 14 May 2013, a week before his 88th birthday.

Nisbet's career as a scholar was influenced by three major figures in particular, as well as by his father and undergraduate teachers. His life-long profound interest in history led him to Syme, whose emphasis on the explanatory power of prosopography he followed, not least in his interest in the relevance of the *Odes* of Horace to the careers of their addressees, whose realistic and ironic approach to politics he found highly congenial,

⁵⁶N. Rudd, *Horace: Odes and Epodes* (Cambridge, MA, 2004).

and whose lapidary style he greatly admired and sometimes imitated.⁵⁷ His interactions with Fraenkel from his undergraduate days were a crucial part of his development as a scholar:⁵⁸ Fraenkel's range of learning was a source of wonder to him, and his refusal to compartmentalise classical studies into Latin and Greek and his application of a vast spectrum of texts and information to the study of poetry was a key influence on Nisbet's commentary technique. Bill Watt's encouragement of Nisbet's interest in textual criticism led him to Housman, whose capacity to identify problems in a Latin text and solve them via the application of clear reason and encyclopedic knowledge was a constant inspiration and the subject of his last paper;⁵⁹ textual criticism of both prose and poetry was a keynote of Nisbet's career from first to last.

Though Housman and Fraenkel were scholarly models, Nisbet could see and avoid their darker sides. As already noted, while he was personally much influenced by and grateful to Fraenkel, he was clear (as already suggested) that the great man's capacity to discourage the research of others was his Achilles' heel: 'in spite of his immense contribution to Oxford classics, research did not prosper under him; to quote the fable in Horace, the tracks led into his den but none came out' (*AR*, p. 4).⁶⁰ Nisbet was the opposite: his capacity to encourage research at every level was one of his key contributions to the subject, as the numerous successful theses and books of his many pupils and protégés make more than clear. In the case of Housman, he found the latter's needless aggression unprofitable and unworthy: 'to professional rivals he was persistently offensive . . . and the effect on rising scholars was inhibiting'.⁶¹ Again, in published work, he himself pursued the converse course, for example in a review of Shackleton Bailey's text of Horace: 'A review concentrates on points of doubt or disagreement, but it cannot do justice to the many occasions where Professor Shackleton Bailey has made one reader reconsider. It is a privilege and delight to debate with him about these interesting problems.'⁶² In private, he could be mischievously amusing about other scholars: in response to the publication of a (in his view) learned but misguided volume on a

⁵⁷ See the Syme-style summaries of the careers of Cicero and Horace (see above, nn. 24 and 27).

⁵⁸ A letter survives from Fraenkel to the undergraduate Nisbet, dated 2.1.1949, congratulating him on the award of the Craven Scholarship and inviting him to his Plautus seminar (Nisbet papers, Archives, Corpus Christi College, Oxford).

⁵⁹ See above, n. 51.

⁶⁰ The reference is to *Epistles* 1.1.73–5 (the clever fox refuses to enter the lion's den).

⁶¹ Nisbet, 'Housman's Juvenal', p. 61.

⁶² Nisbet, *Collected Papers*, p. 201.

classical author X, he once quipped in his inimitable Scots accent: ‘You’ll learn a lot from it, but not about X’ (but note how even here there is some praise). In general, kindness and thoughtfulness was a key feature of his life as well as of his scholarship, as his friends, colleagues and students can bear manifold witness.

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Note. In preparing this memoir I have had generous assistance from Professors Donald Russell and Niall Rudd, from Julian Reid, the Archivist of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, from the Presidential office at Corpus, and from Dr Robin Darwall-Smith at University College, Oxford (himself a former Nisbet graduate student). Most useful of all was the extensive material prepared with typical method and forethought by Robin Nisbet himself for his future memoirist, which is now in the Archives of Corpus Christi College. I take this opportunity to salute him, my teacher, colleague and friend for over thirty years, and to hope that this small tribute is some return for his support and example over all that time. *Ave atque vale.*

CORRIGENDUM

Correction to

‘Robin George Murdoch Nisbet, 1925–2013’, by S.J. Harrison
Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy, XIII (2014), 365–382

On page 376, line 6, delete the words: ‘and declined the Regius Chair of Greek in 1960’.