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DAVID NICHOL SMITH

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1875-1962

DAVID NICHOL SMITH was born at Edinburgh on 16 September 1875, and was educated at George Watson's School and Edinburgh University. In the course of a long life he saw the firm establishment and development of English studies as an academic discipline, and himself played an important part in that development. When he became a student, the Regius Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature, David Masson, was engaged in remodelling the English School with the assistance of Nichol Smith's elder brother, Gregory Smith, who was then a lecturer in the department. As early as this Nichol Smith began to make academic history; for he was the first to graduate (with a First Class) from the new Honours School of English at Edinburgh.

While he was still at Edinburgh George Saintsbury arrived as Masson's successor (*Enfin Malherbe vint*), and exactly fifty years later, when giving the centenary oration to the members of the Saintsbury Club, Nichol Smith was to recall how he attended his inaugural lecture, and how much he was impressed with 'the precise and rapid utterance' of the new professor, whose only academic experience up to that time had been as an undergraduate at Oxford, but who was now 'to write the books which he wanted to write, and to become a very great professor'. One of the books Saintsbury was then writing was his *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, and the new graduate was entrusted with the task (which 'turned out to be a heavier piece of work than either of us had expected') of revising the dates in the index to that volume. As Nichol Smith put it to the members of the Saintsbury Club, who had just been savouring an 1846 Madeira with the turtle soup and a 1924 Château Latour with the roast pheasant and who were now rounding off the dinner with a 1912 Cockburn, 'It was then that I began to gather evidence which in time led me to the conclusion that the only dates in which Saintsbury could be trusted to be minutely accurate were the dates of vintages.' Different as the two men were in so many ways, Nichol Smith's admiration for Saintsbury was entirely genuine, and it was for the man as well as for his works. It is proper to say here that his interest in men was as great as his interest in books. He was fully capable of admiring men, such as

Saintsbury and Raleigh, whose qualities were very different from his own, and he could be generous in his praise. But he had admittedly some blind spots, and his adverse judgements could be devastating. What he looked for in men was manliness and magnanimity, the sanity that comes from ample knowledge and a well-balanced temperament, and, among literary men, the ability to appreciate good writing and to communicate their enjoyment of it. All those qualities he found in Saintsbury; and Saintsbury, if he sometimes got his dates wrong, and was less than adequate as an editor, had the great virtue of stimulating the reader's interest and increasing his enjoyment of individual authors. He found the same qualities in Hazlitt, another of his favourite critics. It is significant that one of his earliest works was a selection from Hazlitt's essays on poetry, followed two years later (1903) by an article on Hazlitt for *Chambers's Cyclopaedia of English Literature*. We are not therefore surprised to find him saying of Saintsbury that 'of all the greater English critics Hazlitt was, I think, the one to whom he was most akin'.

Having seen to Saintsbury's index, Nichol Smith left Edinburgh to spend a year at the Sorbonne. It was there that he began to acquire his remarkable knowledge of the English and French critics of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He must also have acquired by this time what was to become a life-long habit of book-buying, for in the next few years he built up a notable collection of French criticism which he ultimately gave to the National Library of Scotland. Bliss was it to be alive in the dawn of the twentieth century when, with a few francs or a few shillings in his pocket, the young scholar could pick up rare books on the *quais* by the Seine or in the book-shops of Edinburgh and Oxford. I do not think he ever lost his early interest in the eighteenth-century critics, but in later life he was less inclined to accept everything they said. 'They often said queer things,' he once wrote to me, 'and even the poets themselves were generally happier in their poems than in what they said about them. The critics have not helped me much in my appreciation of eighteenth-century poetry, no more than Wordsworth's prose prefaces have helped my appreciation of his poems. There is a horrid gap between the work and its maker's theories about his art.'

Later, Nichol Smith was to buy more and more widely, although the bulk of his library always consisted of books and pamphlets of the neo-classical period. To his Oxford friends the long, rather dim-lit study at 20 Merton Street may not have

had any especial significance; they met him in many other environments. But to the visitor from the outside world, who rarely saw him anywhere else, it was almost impossible to associate him with any other setting. There he sat, a tall robust man in his easy chair, a pipe in his hand, discoursing on men and books—'choice word and measured phrase', not usually 'above the reach of ordinary men' and certainly not 'a stately speech', but, none the less,

Such as grave Livers do in Scotland use.

It was always a curious sight to watch him break off a conversation and go to one of his book-shelves to fetch down a volume. Nearly everywhere they lay two-deep, sometimes apparently three-deep, on the shelves, and yet he never hesitated about where to thrust in his hand. This valuable collection, slowly built up over sixty years, has been acquired by the National Library of Australia at Canberra.

The year at the Sorbonne accounts for Nichol Smith's first two books: a selection of Brunetière's essays which he translated, and which appeared in 1898 with a preface specially written by Brunetière, and an edition of Boileau's *L'Art Poétique*, which was kept in print for many years. They were followed two years later by an edition of Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*. The Boileau is the first volume in which he displayed his ability as an annotator. Although he was one of the last men to boast of his achievements, he was known to say that if there was one thing he *could* do it was to write a note. He had an austere sense of relevance which he imparted to several generations of his post-graduate students, and both by his example and his instruction he has had a widespread influence on the editing of English texts in the twentieth century. What he felt about annotation may be seen from some comments in his *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*, when he is dealing with Shakespeare's early editors. Theobald, he tells us, 'wrote bad notes, long, flabby, and dealing in wearisome iteration with the shortcomings of Pope'; and Warburton's notes 'do not help us to an understanding of Shakespeare so much as to an understanding of Warburton himself'. To Nichol Smith both those men showed that failure of character to which he was always sensitive, and he also thought, with Dr. Johnson, that Theobald was a dull dog, far too fond of praising by inference his own critical acumen. In contrast, he gives Johnson the highest praise. Johnson may have been deficient in historical knowledge, but 'in the kind of notes

which alone could be written if all the libraries in the world were burned, and we had nothing to guide us but our common sense and what we know of our fellow creatures and of the workings of the head and of the heart, Johnson is supreme'. In his own editing Nichol Smith took infinite pains to inform himself adequately, and his notes were always necessary, succinct, unobtrusive, admirably to the point, and lucidly expressed. Criticism with him 'the Muse's handmaid proved', and was never in any danger of becoming an autotelic activity. He belonged, too, to a generation which did not consider it necessary—and perhaps not even desirable—to show how poems worked, but to indicate, when necessary, what they meant. As an editor he seems almost to have sprung like Minerva from the head of Jove. The Boileau of 1898 is a quite astonishing edition for a young man of twenty-three to produce, differing hardly at all from the work of his mature years, and not only showing a surprising erudition, but revealing everywhere in its commentary that disciplined sense of relevance that was to mark all his editorial annotation.

From editing critical texts he went on to Shakespeare, and prepared, with the same exact care, school texts of *King Henry the Eighth* (1899) and *King Lear* (1902). All these early works were, as Johnson once put it, 'jobs for the booksellers'; the lean years from 1895 to 1902 were Nichol Smith's Grub-Street period. Yet everything he published was scrupulously performed; he 'nothing common did or mean'. In those more primitive times, when an Arts department was commonly run by a professor and one assistant, it was not easy for a young man to find employment in a university, and Nichol Smith had to wait seven years for his first academic post. In 1902, however, he met Raleigh, who appointed him as his assistant at Glasgow, and from now on his progress was rapid. After two years with Raleigh he applied for, and obtained, the Chair of English at Armstrong (now King's) College, Newcastle. The appointment was made in the last days of September 1904, and the young professor, with a fixed stipend of £300 and one-third of the class fees ('a minimum income from both sources of £400 being guaranteed') had to get to work at once.

While he was still in Glasgow he had published (1903) a collection of *Eighteenth-Century Essays on Shakespeare*, his first major work in the rehabilitation of the eighteenth century. 'The purpose of this work', he explained, 'is to give an account of Shakespeare's reputation during the eighteenth century, and

to suggest that there are grounds for reconsidering the common opinion that the century did not give him his due.' As the years passed Nichol Smith was to produce more and more grounds for reconsidering the nineteenth-century view of the age of Pope and Johnson, and the critical reevaluation of eighteenth-century literature in our own time is due in large measure to the patient and scholarly way in which he assembled and deployed the evidence. As an advocate he never pressed the case for his client too impetuously or too insistently, and he never sought to aggrandize his favourite authors by blackening those of other periods. He had, in fact, favourite authors in most periods. But his undoubted learning, together with his fairness, his moderation, and his inescapable good sense, won him a hearing for the eighteenth century, and in course of time a growing number of followers. Long before his death he had seen the re-establishment of Dryden and Pope, and a general revival of interest in eighteenth-century literature that could hardly have seemed likely in the first decade of the present century. In view of some of the wilder aberrations of contemporary criticism he may even have begun to wonder if he had not done his work too well.

What with teaching, examining, and administrative duties, the years at Newcastle left him with little time to write. But in 1908 Raleigh, who had gone to the new chair of English Literature at Oxford four years earlier, brought his old Glasgow assistant to join him as Goldsmith's Reader, and the two men were to work together in a close and friendly association until Raleigh's death in 1922. In the *Life of Raleigh* which he contributed to the *Dictionary of National Biography* Nichol Smith rightly observed that although the school of English Literature had been established in 1894, 'its steady development began with Raleigh's appointment'. It is only right to add that much of that development was due to the Goldsmith's Reader. If Raleigh's brilliance as a lecturer and his undogmatic and stimulating mind gave the new school much of its distinction, his 'indifference to system' might have retarded its growth, if the calm and orderly mind of Nichol Smith had not been available with suggestion and criticism. Perhaps his greatest single contribution was made in the organization of the B.Litt. course, which he carried out along with Raleigh's successor, George Gordon, and completed in 1926. Up to that time the B.Litt. student had a supervisor whom he saw at regular, or more probably irregular, intervals; but under the new regulations he was given instruction in bibliography and palaeography, and he also attended

a course of lectures delivered by Nichol Smith on the History of English Scholarship. It is much to be regretted that he never fashioned those lectures into a book.

Early in 1909 the new Reader gave an inaugural lecture on 'The Functions of Criticism'. The title was significant: Matthew Arnold had discussed the function, but Nichol Smith preferred to consider its functions. He proceeded to a judicious survey of contemporary modes of criticism, finding some good and some bad in all of them. Here and there he half-disclosed his own preferences—for biographical criticism which shows us the man behind the work, and for the sort of criticism which reveals, in Johnson's words, 'the beauty of thought as formed on the workings of the human heart'—but he maintained that each critic was free to approach literature in his own manner, and so was each age. Yet at the end he laid his cards on the table. 'When we are asked what is the common function of all criticism we can only make the simple reply that it is to aid appreciation.' The larger Oxford audience which was now hearing the Goldsmith's Reader for the first time must have left the lecture hall with the feeling that if this new man, who clearly weighed every word he uttered, was not a Raleigh, he was certainly no pedant, but a liberal-minded scholar for whom the study of literature was a delight as well as a discipline. When in the following year he edited a selection of *Jeffrey's Literary Criticism*, he summed up Jeffrey's achievement in some words that might almost be applied to his own:

There are no great passages in Jeffrey, and there is not one single great essay. When he wins his way to appreciation, he wins it step by step. His work is remarkably uniform in quality, and it is cumulative in effect.

If we weigh the cumulative effect of Nichol Smith's work over fifty years, we do more justice to his achievement and to its widespread effect than if we tried to base his reputation on individual books or lectures.

The early years at Oxford saw him at work on a major project which in the event he was forced to abandon. When in 1960 *King Lear* was added to the New Cambridge Shakespeare, it carried a dedication to Nichol Smith. Through the kindness of Professor Dover Wilson I am able to quote some sentences from the letter he received on that occasion, written shortly after Nichol Smith's eightieth birthday, and recalling the facts to which the dedication pointed.

The Warwick edition came out 58 years ago It belongs to my Edinburgh days when I was waiting for something to turn up—which came at the end of 1902 when I joined Raleigh in Glasgow. I don't like looking at it now, but I remember that my chief guides were Johnson and Aldis Wright, not a poor couple. When Raleigh had moved to Oxford and I was in Newcastle he got me chosen by the Clarendon Press for their edition of Shakespeare, which was to conform as far as reasonable to the first Folio. It was to be a simple job—so Raleigh in his enthusiasm seemed to think—I had only to remove obvious errors and be in effect a competent printer's reader. Then Raleigh contrived to bring me to Oxford and the way was understood to be clear for speedy publication. How it was I forget, but I spent most time on *King Lear*—it was the chief occupation of my spare time for several years. What happened was that I taught myself the problems of Shakespearian editing (I got little or no help) and gradually learned that I had better abandon them and own myself beaten. I suspect that Raleigh thought me pedantic. He sometimes showed an uncanny gift of solving a difficulty at sight, but some of the problems that bothered me I could not get him to understand.

This is almost all forgotten now, but you seem to me to have put on record that I once was a wrestler with these textual problems, and in doing so you have pleased me greatly.

Although he was forced to own himself beaten, he never lost his interest in the Elizabethan period. For many years he continued to review books dealing with various aspects of Elizabethan and Jacobean life and literature, he contributed the chapter on 'Authors and Patrons' to *Shakespeare's England* (1916), and in the same year brought out his 'World's Classics' volume of *Shakespeare Criticism*, a much-used selection. Later in life he was to edit two plays for the Malone Society. When, in 1945, he was presented with a volume of *Essays on the Eighteenth Century*, in honour of his seventieth birthday, he wrote to me to say how much the book had pleased him. But there was one surprising reaction:

I see myself henceforward even more cursedly confined to one century. The reviewers already deny me any desire to cast eyes promiscuously on the others. I must get busy with the Malone Society and now that *Arden of Feversham* is finished pass on to *Mother Bombie*. It may all be of no use in extricating me from the bonds which you have taken an almost malicious pleasure in winding round me. . . . But I warn you that I have enjoyed my seventieth birthday so much that I mean to try to live to the age of eighty.

Yet, whether he liked to think so or not, he identified himself more and more with the eighteenth century as the years

passed. In 1913 he contributed a chapter on Johnson and Boswell to the Cambridge History of English Literature. In the following year he edited a volume for the Roxburghe Club, *The Letters of Thomas Burnet to George Duckett 1712-1722*, a book for which he had always a special fondness, and which threw some interesting light on the world of letters in the early years of the century. In 1918 he moved back into the previous century for one of his best compilations, *Characters from the Histories and Memoirs of the Seventeenth Century*, a volume in a Clarendon Press Series of which he was the general editor, but which was never given a name. Here again it was 'the biographical part of literature' that appealed to him, and the key figure in this volume was Clarendon. For another series which he planned and edited, the 'Clarendon English Series of English Literature', he prepared one of the first volumes, *Wordsworth, Poetry and Prose*, 1921, and followed it with similar volumes on Dryden (1925) and Byron (1940). Meanwhile he had revised and completed an edition of *A Tale of a Tub* (1920) which was being prepared by A. C. Guthkelch at the time of his death, and in 1926 he published his *Oxford Book of Eighteenth-Century Verse*, another successful foray into the still largely unappreciated resources of the eighteenth century. Three thoughtful and judicious lectures on *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century* appeared in 1928, and in 1929 his Warton Lecture, for which he chose, characteristically, Warton's *History of English Poetry*. A lecture on *Jonathan Swift* (1930) was followed by another to the Royal Society of Literature, *Jonathan Swift. Some Observations*, in 1935, and in the same year he published his important edition of the recently discovered *Letters of Jonathan Swift to Charles Ford*, the largest single contribution to our knowledge of Swift for many years, covering as it did the period in which Swift was at work on *Gulliver's Travels*. On the death of Sir Charles Firth in 1936, Nichol Smith took over the material for an edition of *Gulliver's Travels* which Firth had been preparing; but although he worked on the edition spasmodically for many years, and made a serious attempt to finish it towards the end of his life, he was never able to complete it. During the last year of his life almost the only books one saw on his desk were those that he was using for the *Gulliver*, but his own *Travels* were now too near the end, and only the first Voyage was ready for the printer.

Yet if he failed in this task he continued to explore and write upon eighteenth-century literature in all its aspects: Johnson's *Irene*, a chapter on the newspaper for *Johnson's England*,

a lecture on Robert Burns delivered at the Sorbonne (1938), and one on Edmond Malone at the University of London in 1939. His three Alexander Lectures to the University of Toronto were published in 1937, with the title of *Some Observations on Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, and here he was perhaps at his best on the two Scottish poets who formed the subject of his third lecture, Thomson and Burns. When, in 1950, he gave the Scott Lecture in his old university, he chose to speak on 'The Poetry of Sir Walter Scott'. Only two other major works need be mentioned here: his fine edition (with Edward L. McAdam) *The Poems of Samuel Johnson* (1941) and his Clark Lectures on *John Dryden* (1948)—not, perhaps, one of his best books, but for a man of 73 a sustained and lively performance. What Dryden could say of himself in his old age Nichol Smith was entitled to say of his Clark Lectures: 'What judgment I had increases rather than diminishes, and thoughts, such as they are, come crowding in . . . upon me.'

In 1921 he had become a Fellow of Merton College, and from 1928-46 he was Merton Professor of English Literature. He had married in 1915 Mary, daughter of the Rev. Canon Harford, and had one son and three daughters. His son Christopher, an officer in the Royal Air Force, was killed at Tobruk in 1942, and his death was a heavy blow to his parents. Nichol Smith became a Fellow of the Academy in 1932, and later in life was made an honorary graduate of Durham, Princeton, Adelaide, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Cambridge, and Lyons. In later life, too, he travelled a good deal. In 1936-7 he worked at the Huntington Library, and in 1946-7 he was at Smith College and at the University of Chicago. Wherever he went in the United States his old postgraduate students would spring up like the armed men from the dragon's teeth. He kept the names of all his B.Litt. and D.Phil. students in a black exercise book, and followed their subsequent careers with the greatest interest. Many of them (and many of his Oxford colleagues) will always remember with gratitude the advice and help he gave them in later years, and the unselfish care with which he revised their work in manuscript or in proof. Many more authors and editors will not even realize how much they owe to him, but the archives of the Clarendon Press could disclose with what scrupulous attention he read and corrected the manuscripts submitted to him over a long period of years.

On his retirement Nichol Smith visited Cairo and lectured at the university there; and from 1950 to 1951 he made an

extended visit to the University of Adelaide, and was also a Nuffield Lecturer in New Zealand. He continued to lecture occasionally until he had passed his eightieth birthday. In 1952 he spoke at Bristol on the historical development of English as a university subject, but his final appearance as a lecturer was at Newcastle in 1958, when he talked on 'Armstrong College Fifty Years Ago', astonishing many of the older members of the audience by the tenaciousness of his memory.

As a lecturer Nichol Smith was always lucid, and—one need hardly add—perfectly prepared. The judiciousness which was such a marked feature of all his utterances was not a mannerism, but the inevitable result of wide knowledge and prolonged reflection. As a teacher he was at his best not with the undergraduate but with the research man, and he was best of all when his pupil was producing results and had given him something to criticize—to amplify, to modify, to correct. As a scholar he will be long remembered for his editorial work, and those who have come under his discipline will be very ready to acknowledge the debt they owe to his sagacity, his severe standards of scholarship, and his unhesitatingly expressed contempt for the shoddy, the facile, the merely clever, or any form of self-display. If his critical utterances were rarely exciting, they almost always illuminated his author or his subject. He was not so much a literary critic as a scholar who provided the essential materials for literary criticism. His own criticism was either a by-product of his scholarship or a corrective to some uninformed or partial view which stood between the reader and his appreciation of an author.

Nichol Smith was essentially conservative in his outlook, and though naturally he had many friends among the Whig dogs, there was never any doubt where his sympathies lay. He read *The Morning Post* till the day of its demise, and the sudden cessation of that venerable and well-written newspaper was like a family bereavement in the Nichol Smith household. Although he was always at his best in the age of Pope and Johnson, his interests were, as we have seen, very far from being confined to one period. But 'when they talked of their Raphaels, Correggios, and stuff'—when, that is, the conversation shifted to the poets of the present day, he was apt to withdraw into an ominous silence. It is recorded of him that once, when asked by a Harvard undergraduate what he thought of Mr. W. H. Auden, he answered with devastating truthfulness: 'I do not think of him at all.' It is only right to add, however, that in 1945 he was

supervising a student, now a professor of English Literature, who was working on Yeats. Writing to me at the time, he told me about it, and he clearly felt this was something of an occasion.

He is writing a D.Litt. dissertation on Yeats under my supervision—yes, mine—mine of all people, and we get on very happily together. My education is progressing. I am very receptive, at times gratefully, at others a little cynically,—and he is just a little cynical himself, which is all to the good.

Specialization was inevitably thrust upon Nichol Smith, as it is on most of us; if he could have chosen freely he would no doubt have ranged more widely.

His very excellence as an editor, again, may have had a good deal to do with his failure to give us any major work of criticism. The writing of notes becomes a habit, and leads in the end to a series of small and self-sufficient tasks rather than to a large and continuous argument. But if we are tempted to regret the concentration of so much of his time on the minutiae of editing, we may remember some words that he once quoted from his favourite Hazlitt:

If a man leaves behind him any work which is a model in its kind, we have no right to ask whether he could do anything else.

JAMES SUTHERLAND