



SIR MAURICE BOWRA, C.H.

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1898-1971

SIR MAURICE BOWRA has described the early part of his career in an autobiography which, though some complain that it lacks the salt of malice, is much better reading than most reminiscences of scholars (*Memories, 1898-1939*, London, 1966). He is also to be the subject of a memorial volume of appreciations and reminiscences by various friends; this will include the full and admirable obituary notice published in *The Times* of 5 April 1971, the address delivered by Sir Isaiah Berlin at a memorial service held in the University Church at Oxford on 17 July 1971, and the appreciation by Mr. Cyril Connolly printed in the *Sunday Times* for 29 August of that year. All these writings will be quoted in the following pages.

Cecil Maurice Bowra was born on 8 April 1898 at Kiukiang, in China, where his father, Cecil Arthur Verner Bowra, of a Kentish family, was working as an official in the Chinese Customs Service. His father was an intelligent and cultivated person, conservative in his opinions and somewhat austere in character, who combined loyalty to his own country with devotion to the interests of his Chinese employers. During his childhood Maurice Bowra was somewhat in awe of his father, but later they could talk without reserve. Maurice was clearly more like his father's father, Edward Charles Bowra, also a Chinese scholar and a member of the Customs Service, a dashing and imaginative person who unfortunately died young. Cecil Bowra was brought up by his mother, daughter of an East India Company official, Samuel Woodward, by a natural daughter of the Lord Cornwallis who was Viceroy. This is why Maurice Bowra was able to reply to an inquiry whether his family had any connection with the United States by saying, 'Not since my great-great-grandfather surrendered at Yorktown'. In childhood Maurice Bowra saw less of his father than of his mother, born Ethel Lovibond, the daughter of a brewer living in Fulham, who though a collateral descendant of John Locke preferred to claim descent from the last man in England hanged for forgery: She was a gay and amusing person with a special gift for understanding others, even if their background was very different from her own.

Soon after Maurice Bowra's birth his father was transferred to Newchwang, in Manchuria, and he spent happy early years there before being brought to England in 1905. Living with his paternal grandmother and her second husband, the Revd. George Mackie, at Putney, he first had lessons from a governess—Ethel M. Dell's sister—and then went to an old-fashioned but good boarding school kept by two ladies. Here, with lessons from Cecil Botting, a master at St. Paul's who collaborated with his High Master in the well-known Greek textbook known as 'Hillard and Botting', he began his classical education.

After an exciting visit to his parents, now at Mukden in Manchuria, in 1909–10, Bowra at the age of twelve entered Cheltenham College. The place and its headmaster, the Revd. Reginald Waterfield, were not free from the absurdities of the Victorian school, as Bowra was well able to appreciate. But it provided a sound training in Greek and Latin; G. F. Exton, a dry Cambridge scholar, gave a good grammatical grounding, and Leonard Butler, later a Fellow of St. John's College, Oxford, gave Bowra a taste for writing Greek verse which he carried into later life. But Bowra found the school work boring, and used his last two years in the sixth form not to concentrate on classics, but to read widely. He learned French well enough to understand Verlaine and Baudelaire, tackled the Divine Comedy in a bilingual edition, and began to learn German. In 1916 he won the top scholarship to New College, Oxford.

Soon after this he returned to China by the Trans-Siberian Railway to spend the interval before joining the army in a visit to his parents. This journey, made at the most impressionable age, was of great importance in his life. He was deeply impressed by the marvels of Peking, where his father was now living as Chief Secretary of the Customs Service with an establishment of thirty servants and a cook who bore the title of 'Great Eating Professor'. On the way back he had the great good fortune to stay for some time in Petrograd. He made friends who were able to inform him about the interesting state of Russia at that time, and quickly acquired a working knowledge of the language. He was deeply fascinated by a brilliant and delightful Russian girl, who, he later wrote, 'had much fancy and humour, and unlike some Russians did not bother to talk about her soul or even mine'. This girl afterwards disappeared during the Revolution, and may have starved to death. To the end of his life Bowra wrote and spoke of her as he did of no other person, and it is clear that she filled a special place in his affection.

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Bowra kept the Michaelmas Term of 1916 in a depleted Oxford; but early in 1917 he joined the Royal Field Artillery. He trained at an officer cadet school in Bloomsbury, and was much irritated by the 'spit and polish' on which his instructors insisted; but he made good friends, and managed to complete the course successfully. In September he was commissioned, and went to France in time to take part in the later stages of the Third Battle of Ypres. Later he was present at the successful action at Cambrai, and saw much heavy fighting during Ludendorff's offensive of March, 1918 and the decisive counter-offensive of the month of August.

'Whatever you hear about the war', Bowra later said to Cyril Connolly, 'remember it was inconceivably bloody—nobody who wasn't there can ever imagine what it was like.' But he carried out his duties with success, and seems to have developed at this time the ability to get on terms with very different people that he showed later. While in the trenches he read widely. He read a good deal of modern literature—during one leave he bought together Hardy's *Moments of Vision*, Yeats's *The Wild Swans at Coole*, and Eliot's *Prufrock*; but he read also Greek and Latin books, which now that he had left Cheltenham he took up with keen interest.

In April 1919, Bowra came into residence at New College, and from then until his death Oxford was his home. The cultural break occasioned by the First World War did not take effect immediately; it was not until the thirties, after the slump, that the wet blanket of collectivist thinking came down to stifle English intellectual life. The Oxford of the twenties contained many people who were not only intelligent but also gay and amusing, and in this society Bowra's quick wit and dominating personality made him conspicuous. Bowra's undergraduate friends in his own college included, to name only those who later became famous, Cyril Radcliffe, Roy Harrod, and Henry Price, and J. B. S. Haldane was a young don there; in other colleges he met Robert Boothby, L. P. Hartley, and Lord David Cecil; he frequented the *salons*, if that is the right word, of F. F. Urquhart and R. H. Dundas, and in Cambridge got to know G. H. W. Rylands.

At this time and for long afterwards Bowra presented a formidable as well as an engaging figure. 'I was not nearly so sure of myself as I should have liked', he later wrote, 'and this made me present a brassy face to the world and pretend to be more hard-boiled than I was.' Like most people with the wit to

think of them, he found it hard to resist the temptation to utter devastating remarks; and the temptation was strengthened by the extreme sensitivity which never left him. One can understand the rumour that the character of Markie Linkwater in his friend Elizabeth Bowen's novel *To the North* owed something to the impression made by the young Bowra.

New College at that time cannot be said to have offered the best classical tuition to be had in Oxford. The Mods. tutor was the flaccid and unappealing H. L. Henderson, and the Greats historian, P. E. Matheson, was then well past a not very impressive best. One philosophy tutor was A. H. Smith, a cultivated and sympathetic person who did all he could to help Bowra and was to remain his friend for life; but Smith was scarcely the man to give him the intellectual training which he needed. The other tutor in philosophy was H. W. B. Joseph, who devoted great force of will and not inconsiderable ability to the rigorous enforcement of his own brand of dogmatic idealism upon his pupils. It is hard to imagine a tutor less congenial to Bowra than this chilly scholastic, who in Sir Isaiah Berlin's opinion 'undermined his faith in his own intellectual capacity'.

Fortunately not all the tuition Bowra received was from the fellows of his own college. Gilbert Murray had been Regius Professor of Greek since 1908, but still contrived to give some personal instruction to undergraduates, and this together with his lectures was far more important to Bowra than anything his other tutors could provide. Bowra wrote with special appreciation of Murray's famous classes in the translation into Greek of English verse and prose. Bowra was at all times a strong believer in the educational value of this now unfairly disparaged and neglected exercise, particularly in the hands of a scholar like Murray or J. D. Denniston. Bowra did not win any of the university scholarships and prizes given primarily for composition and in those days highly valued; but he obtained First Classes both in Mods. and Greats.

In 1922 Bowra, with the support of Murray and his old friend A. S. Owen of Keble, was elected to a tutorial fellowship at Wadham College, at that time, despite the beauty of its buildings and the eminence of some of its old members, a small, poor and not notably distinguished institution. In later years his tuition was sometimes a little hasty; but it was always exciting, and in his early years it was superb. Wadham did not provide Bowra with the most promising material, but he had among his pupils a future Secretary of the Cabinet in Norman Brook,

a future historian of the Delphic Oracle in H. W. Parke, and a future Poet Laureate in Cecil Day Lewis. He also took an effective part in college business, being prominent among those who placed the finances of Wadham on a new footing by persuading the governing body to sell part of the Warden's garden to allow the building of Rhodes House. In 1930 he was elected to serve as Proctor, thus gaining the best possible introduction to the business of the university.

Bowra's social life as a young don was even more varied and exciting than it had been while he was an undergraduate. He more than anyone helped to launch into civilized life the brilliant generation that came up after the immediate postwar years, and aesthetes like Brian Howard and Harold Acton, scholars like Kenneth Clark, Isaiah Berlin, Roger Mynors, and John Sparrow, and men of letters like John Betjeman, Cyril Connolly, 'Henry Green', and Evelyn Waugh all owed much to his friendship and his influence. At that time several houses in the neighbourhood of Oxford were centres of intellectual activity, and Bowra was at home in all of them; he visited the Murrays on Boar's Hill, the Morrells at Garsington, and the Asquiths at Sutton Courtenay, and made contact with other distinguished frequenters of these establishments.

Bowra spent part of his vacations in continental travel, and like other English intellectuals during the twenties and early thirties he found Weimar Germany a fascinating study. A visit on the way back from Yugoslavia with Hugh Gaitskell in 1927 was followed by a longer stay in 1932, when his friend Adrian Bishop was living in Berlin. He became intimate with several distinguished Germans, notably with the historian Ernst Kantorowicz, with the Curator of the University of Frankfurt, Kurt Riezler, and his wife, and with Baroness Lucy von Wangenheim. All these had some connection with the circle about Stefan George, of whom Bowra later wrote in *The Creative Experiment*; the classical scholar closest to this group was Karl Reinhardt, whom Bowra much admired. His visits to Germany enabled Bowra to form an early first-hand impression of the National Socialists, for whom, unlike many English people at that time, he conceived and expressed an instant disgust.

Even while his social life and college employments were at their height, Bowra was never idle. The habit of reading in bed, which he maintained throughout his life, ensured that he continued to extend his knowledge; and what he read he usually remembered. An article on 'Homeric Words in Arcadian

Inscriptions' (*Classical Quarterly* 20, 1926, 168 f., followed up in 'Homeric Words in Cyprus', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 54, 1934, 54 f.) was a pioneer work; later the decipherment of Linear B was to lend special interest to these investigations of the two Greek dialects that conserved most Mycenaean features. In 1928 he published, in collaboration with his Wadham colleague H. T. Wade-Gery, a translation of Pindar's Pythian Odes into free verse, which was beautifully printed by the Nonesuch Press. This was one of the first renderings of Greek verse—certainly one of the first by academic persons—to throw off the worn-out trappings of sub-Tennysonian traditionalist verse. It had a deserved success, and later formed the basis of the translation of all Pindar's epinician odes which Bowra published in the Penguin Classics series in 1969. More good translations by Bowra have appeared in *The Oxford Book of Greek Verse in Translation* (1938).

In 1930 Bowra published *Tradition and Design in the Iliad*, a well-written and well-reasoned book which ranks high among his writings. He was not the only scholar at that time to maintain that 'there was a single poet called Homer, who gave the *Iliad* its final shape and artistic unity, but who worked in a traditional style on traditional matter'. But Bowra's book is wholly free from the nationalism and sentimentality that disfigured other unitarian studies in the English language. It gets to grips with the central problems of composition, but is not afraid to describe and discuss the *Iliad* as we have it as a poem with a plot and with its own kind of unity, and he never loses himself in mists of archaeological and linguistic detail. Bowra was acquainted with the work of Murko, though not yet with that of Milman Parry, whose *L'Épithète traditionnelle* had appeared two years before, and at one point considered whether the *Iliad* might not be an oral poem. He concludes that Homer is likelier than not to have used writing, but to have used it for his own use, not for the poem to be read, but for it to be recited; we shall see presently how interesting it is, in the light of current opinion, to find this in a book published as long ago as 1930. The work has a freshness and liveliness that make it after more than forty years still well worth reading.

During the thirties Bowra was mainly occupied with early Greek lyric poetry. Papyrus publications had substantially increased the small amount of material available, and elucidation was badly needed. With Wade-Gery as his colleague in Wadham Bowra kept in close touch with the latest developments in early

Greek history, archaeology, and art, and set out to use this to illuminate the poetry.

Bowra was not suited to be a textual critic. He lacked the accuracy and caution expected of an editor, and he had been denied the gift of textual divination. The presentation of the early lyric poems in *The Oxford Book of Greek Verse* (1930), for which he was responsible, leaves much to be desired; and his Oxford text of Pindar (1935), though its apparatus criticus contains some useful matter, has not enough positive merits to compensate for its numerous inaccuracies. In 1936 he brought out *Greek Lyric Poetry*, a large interpretative book which devotes a chapter to each major figure; in 1938 it was followed by *Early Greek Elegists*, a slighter volume which contained Martin Lectures delivered at Oberlin College in Ohio. In later years Bowra was critical of the former book, which in 1961 he subjected to a radical revision.

I was too often carried away by my imagination [he wrote] and did not pay a sufficiently critical attention to views which I put forward because they fascinated me. Nor was I careful enough with some small details. I knew that they mattered and I enjoyed discoursing about them, but with them too enthusiasm was not enough. In trying to find solutions for all problems I went further than the fragmentary evidence allowed, and too many of my hypotheses were fragmentary and unsubstantiated.

That characteristically severe self-criticism is just; but the book's failings are not only on the side of technical scholarship. The writing slides far too easily into cliché; people who knew Bowra only from his conversation must have been staggered to find him capable of writing 'Alcman well understood the Spartan girls who sang in his choirs and entered completely into their happy dainty longings' or 'Over their ripening desires Sappho presided'. Correspondingly, the critical approach adopted to the authors is disappointingly conventional. Yet with all its faults the book has attractive qualities, showing as it does its author's wide knowledge and real love of literature. To a beginner in scholarship at that time it seemed to offer a fascinating glimpse of the picture of early Greek civilization then being drawn, under the influence of Beazley, by men like Payne and Blakeway, and to help the reader to enjoy the precious fragments whose number the papyri had excitingly increased.

In 1936 the Regius Chair of Greek at Oxford was to be vacated by the retirement of Gilbert Murray, to whom Baldwin as Prime Minister was known to have assigned the task of

choosing his successor. The most proficient Greek scholar teaching in Oxford at that time was beyond question J. D. Denniston, whose famous book *The Greek Particles* had appeared in 1934. But Murray thought particles a dull subject, and thought that Denniston lacked what he used to call 'originality'. Bowra tells us in his *Memories* that he himself was convinced that Denniston ought to be appointed, but that once he became aware that Murray was unlikely to recommend Denniston, he began to consider himself a candidate. When the choice fell upon E. R. Dodds, at that time Professor of Greek at Birmingham, Bowra was bitterly disappointed, and it cannot be said that he did much to make life easier for the new professor, with whom he was later on friendly terms, but only after many years had passed. But it was not long before Bowra became aware that Cyril Bailey's consoling remark that the apparent disaster might prove to be a blessing in disguise had been fully justified.

During the winter of 1936-7 Bowra was absent from Oxford as Visiting Professor at Harvard, where he stayed in Lowell House. He made a powerful impression on both colleagues and audiences, and as usual made good friends. Among the older people, he saw much of John Livingston Lowes, of Felix Frankfurter, and of William James, the son of William and nephew of Henry; among the younger, he made friends with Harry Levin, F. O. Matthiessen, and Ted Spencer. Among the classical scholars he had friendly contacts with Carl Jackson and with E. K. Rand; but the most significant of his friendships was with John Finley, who was later to be his colleague as Eastman Professor at Oxford. Before the end of his visit, Bowra was offered a permanent post at Harvard, and had to think hard before declining. He was surely right. Though he was anything but insular, Bowra was too English to have settled down anywhere outside England, perhaps too Oxonian to have settled down outside Oxford.

In 1938 the Warden of Wadham retired from office, and though only forty years of age Bowra was put forward for the succession by Wade-Gery together with Professor F. A. Lindemann, later Lord Cherwell. Considering the difference in their political opinions, it may seem strange to find Lindemann as one of Bowra's strongest advocates; but over the then all-important question of Chamberlain's policy of appeasing Hitler they were in close agreement.

Not surprisingly, the news of Bowra's election came as a shock to that section of opinion which he would have described as *bien*

pensant. He was, as *The Times* obituary notice of him says, 'a free thinker, an epicure and an uninhibited advocate of pleasure'; worse still, many of his epigrams about respected persons and institutions had got about. Soon after his election at Wadham, some of his friends outside that college entertained him at a party held to celebrate his triumph; they ended by celebrating black mass in a college chapel—not his own—and were ejected by the verger. It was predicted that Bowra would be the greatest possible failure as the head of a college. In the event, he was generally acknowledged to have proved the greatest possible success.

Fortunately for Wadham College, though less fortunately for the common good, Bowra was never offered a government post during the war. If he had been, the result might have been remarkable. The powers that enabled Bowra to master the contents of innumerable books in a short time served him well in gaining a rapid grasp of business. His gift for understanding the working of other people's minds helped him to find the arguments that would convince them, and he was able to get through the agenda quickly without giving his colleagues the feeling that they had been hurried into acquiescence. His remarkable gift for discerning ability in others led to some wise choices in fellowship elections, and he maintained the friendliest relations with his colleagues, guiding and encouraging the younger ones without ever seeming to patronize them. Every undergraduate in the college got a vivid impression of the Warden's personality, and knew that he placed nothing before the education and welfare of the junior members of the university.

Bowra's *Sophoclean Tragedy* appeared in 1944; it had been written a good deal earlier, but its publication was delayed because of the war. Its distinguishing note is the contention that in Sophocles' work the justice of the gods is upheld. Although some psychological arguments that do not convince are used, and at times the nature of divine justice seems to be conceived in too uncomplicated a fashion, this makes the book a valuable contribution to the understanding of the poet.

As early as 1934, Bowra had written for his own amusement a study of Yeats. He had become friends with Yeats, who for some time lived in Oxford; he showed Yeats an early draft, and Yeats's comments on it are to be found in *Memories* (p. 240). Other essays about modern poets followed, and these finally appeared in the volume *The Heritage of Symbolism* (1943); besides Yeats, there are chapters on Valéry, Rilke, George, and Blok. This

publication and that of *From Virgil to Milton* (1945), a valuable study of the secondary epic, made possible Bowra's election to the Oxford Chair of Poetry, a post held for five-year periods which he occupied from 1946 to 1951; the renewed interest in this chair and its occupants dates from the period of his tenure. By way of an inaugural lecture, he gave under the title of 'The Background of Modern Poetry' a lucid and intelligent account of the aims and presuppositions of the modern movement. In 1949 he published *The Creative Experiment*, a kind of sequel to *The Heritage of Symbolism*, in which he discussed Cavafy, Apollinaire, Mayakovsky, Pasternak's early poetry, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Lorca's *Romancero Gitano*, and Rafael Alberti's *Sobre los Angeles*. *The Romantic Imagination* (1950) contains lectures given when he was Charles Eliot Norton Professor at Harvard in 1948-9, staying at Eliot House under the auspices of his old friend John Finley. Many of the essays on modern and medieval poetry which he composed subsequently are reprinted in the volume *In General and Particular* (1964). Special mention may be made of *The Simplicity of Racine*, where his familiarity with certain of the poet's sources gave him an advantage over other Racinian critics, and of his Taylorian Lecture of 1961 on 'Poetry and the First World War', a subject on which he was particularly well qualified to speak. In 1965 he gave the Wiles Lectures at the Queen's University, Belfast, which appeared the following year under the title *Poetry and Politics, 1900-1960*; the book contains interesting remarks about poets whom he knew, like Edith Sitwell, Quasimodo, Seferis, and Neruda.

'If we do not know what an author has tried to do', Bowra once wrote, 'we cannot justly decide whether he has succeeded in doing it.' Much of his critical work was designed to answer just this question. He concentrates on an attempt to explain the author's artistic purpose and the method he has used in order to achieve it; he would have agreed with Carlyle that to read any author properly one must as far as possible enter into his mind and see with his eyes. The catholicity of his taste and the warmth of his enthusiasm for literature enabled Bowra to do this effectively in the case of many different writers; and at a time when some of the most influential literary critics were restricted in their interests and narrow in their sympathies, these qualities made his writings especially valuable. The merits of his critical writings are balanced by marked deficiencies. That very enthusiasm for authors which was one of his chief assets was a disadvantage in so far as it caused his approach to authors to be

descriptive rather than critical. Too often his descriptions have a kind of cosiness, as though all were for the best in the best of possible worlds; and this effect is strengthened by the flatness of much of the writing. It is instructive to compare his work with that of another critic of comparably wide sympathies, Edmund Wilson. One cannot imagine a scholar like Bowra being as misguided as Wilson was over the *Philoctetes* of Sophocles or the Dead Sea Scrolls; yet by comparison Bowra's critical writings lack a cutting edge. Bowra is most successful with those modern poets who stand closest to the romantic tradition, particularly his friend Yeats; he is less at home with Eliot, as his careful but uninspired summary of *The Waste Land* shows. But even this essay is a far more valuable guide to someone not yet acquainted with the poet or his methods than many more penetrating critical studies would supply; and this is true of most of Bowra's criticism.

Bowra should by right have succeeded to the Vice-Chancellorship of Oxford in 1948, when an unforeseen accident removed the then incumbent; but he was then at Harvard, and so was enabled to serve out his term as Professor of Poetry and then be Vice-Chancellor from 1951 to 1954. His tenure of the post was the most memorable of modern times. The qualities that made him such a successful head of his own college stood him in good stead in this office also. He was an effective chairman of committees, able to master great masses of material with impressive speed and altogether free from the inability to decide which is such an infuriating characteristic of academic persons. His swiftness in repartee silenced antagonists; and his brilliant conversation, combined with a good nature remarkable in one so witty and always more in evidence as he grew older, made him countless friends. After he had ceased to be Vice-Chancellor Bowra was re-elected to the Hebdomadal Council by a number of votes far in excess of any previously recorded, and continued to serve on this body, on the General Board, the University Chest, and as a Delegate of the Clarendon Press, and did valuable service to all these bodies. He was much concerned to see that important posts, and also honorary degrees, should go to the best candidates, and his great power to recognize ability in others helped him to do the university specially valuable service in this respect. The prominence on university committees of a person of so much scholarly distinction and of such a cosmopolitan outlook did much to redeem Oxford from the reproach of parochialism, which in earlier times might justly have been levelled at it.

The Academy also profited from Bowra's great administrative ability. He had become a Fellow in 1938 and was President from 1958 to 1962. In two matters in particular, that of the Treasury Grant and of the setting up of a British Institute in Teheran, he did the Academy great service;¹ but his work for the Academy will be chronicled elsewhere (see p. 393).

This public activity never diminished the flow of Bowra's writings, and his best written work, with the exception of his early book about the *Iliad*, belongs to the last part of his career. The later works dealing with modern poetry have already been described. *Heroic Poetry* (1952) shows an astonishing knowledge of primary epic literature in many languages, and presents its results in most attractive fashion; hardly any other scholar could have written this book. The same is true of *Primitive Song* (1962), which offers translations from the verse of those communities which may be thought to give a notion of the primitive way of life. Bowra's large contribution to the study of epic poetry was rounded off by a posthumously published book entitled *Homer*, written for the series 'Classical Life and Letters', and giving a clear and extremely up-to-date account of the Homeric poems. Here Bowra works out ideas already touched on in his Andrew Lang Lecture of 1955, 'Homer and his Fore-runners'. While fully taking into account the work of Milman Parry, Bowra showed how its acceptance was perfectly consistent with a unitarianism, placing Homer at the end of a long poetic tradition, of the kind advocated in *Tradition and Design in the Iliad* forty-two years earlier.

Bowra meant his *Pindar* (1964) to be his main achievement in scholarship. Not everyone will think it was. Two years before its publication, Elroy L. Bundy had challenged the assumption that Pindar's odes of victory were full of personal and historical allusions, and had insisted that the main clue to their interpretation lay in the truth that the poet's primary purpose was to praise the victor he was celebrating. Bowra's book never questions the assumption of Wilamowitz that a study of Pindar can take the form of a biography. Unlike Wilamowitz, he did not give his book a biographical form, but to reject the analysis of individual poems in favour of chapters each devoted to some general topic was a still greater error. The mass of generalizations becomes tedious, and the style tends more than usually towards cliché. The *Pindar* is indeed a useful book. Bowra was familiar with the whole relevant literature; he took far more

¹ See Sir Mortimer Wheeler's *The British Academy, 1949-68*.

trouble over detail than he had in *Greek Lyric Poetry* in 1936; and his obvious affection for his subject lends the work a special attraction. But it breaks no new ground, and can hardly be compared with Bowra's work on Homer.

Some of Bowra's early articles were collected in the volume *Problems in Greek Poetry* (1954); articles of the later period are reprinted in *In Greek Margins* (1970). These articles, particularly the later ones, contain some of Bowra's best classical work. He would take an individual work, usually a poem, often one that had suffered neglect because of its isolation, and would explain its significance and relate it to its historical context.

Bowra was the successor of his teacher, Gilbert Murray, as the leading provider of works designed to explain Greek literature to the English-speaking general reader; and *The Times* obituary well says that if Murray's style was the more delicate instrument, Bowra was more direct and realistic. As early as 1935 he contributed to the Home University Library a small but useful book called *Ancient Greek Literature*. In 1957 he brought out *The Greek Experience*, a well-written and carefully considered book which is generally considered the best work of its kind now available in English. *Landmarks in Greek Literature* (1966) is another valuable survey; and *Periclean Athens* (1971) is not only full of information but reveals a gift for historical narrative that makes the reader wish Bowra had essayed it earlier.

Bowra would normally have vacated the Wardenship of Wadham in 1968, when he reached the age of seventy. But the Fellows honoured him by using their power to extend his tenure for two years; and when in 1970 that period expired, they granted him the unusual privilege of continuing to occupy rooms in college. Here he died suddenly, as he would have wished, on 4 July 1971. In spite of increasing deafness, he had retained all his powers to the last.

Bowra's achievement as a scholar and critic is, by any standards, considerable; his career as a university administrator is the most distinguished of modern England. Yet his most remarkable success lies in his influence on those who encountered him in Oxford. This influence was powerful throughout his career, but most of all in the early part of it; later it was more widely diffused but less highly concentrated.

An important element in this influence was the brilliance of his talk. *The Times* obituary notice speaks of 'the scintillating, shimmering and sometimes thunderous wit of his conversation'. 'His wit was verbal and cumulative', writes Sir Isaiah Berlin, 'the

words came in short, sharp bursts of precisely aimed, concentrated fire, as image, pun, metaphor, parody, seemed spontaneously to generate one another in a succession of marvellously imagined patterns, sometimes rising to high, wildly comical fantasy.'

But Bowra was far more than an amusing talker; he was, in Sir Isaiah's words, 'a major liberating influence'. In Bowra's early years in Oxford the constricting stuffiness of Victorian convention still lay heavily on much of English social life. Much of intellectual life was correspondingly inhibited; till well into the thirties most senior academics and schoolmasters reacted with sheer horror to any movement in literature and the arts that seemed to break away from the Victorian tradition. Against this tradition Bowra was an open rebel. He was ready, and had been since his early years to lend an ear to innovations in art and literature. He had a kind of religion, like that of the early Greeks, but he did not believe in Christianity, and would have agreed with Keynes in finding it odd of so many earnest Victorian atheists to go on proving it to be false and wishing it were true. He enjoyed pleasure, and thought that on the whole what people liked tended to be good for them.

In politics, his sympathies, like those of many generous-minded members of his generation, were with the left rather than the right; but not all modern left-wingers could safely claim him as a kindred spirit. During the General Strike of 1926 his sympathies were with the strikers; he was a close friend of Hugh Gaitskell; and after the Papadopoulos government came to power in Greece, he gave up the Hellenic Cruises that had been one of his favourite recreations. During the thirties he campaigned actively against the policy of appeasing National Socialist Germany. Dislike of appeasement was by no means confined to left-wingers; but Bowra loathed everything that was associated with the predominance of men like Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain. Yet he was never a doctrinaire socialist; anyone in doubt on the matter should study the references in his *Memories* to the late Lord Lindsay of Birker, Master of Balliol. His left-wing sympathies arose from his desire for liberty, which in his youth was threatened chiefly by right-wing and conventionally religious authoritarians. He did not care for cant; and in his later years, when most cant was coming from the left, he did not allow ideological sympathies to blind him to its nature. One of his strongest terms of disapproval was 'cagey'; he detested the stuffy, cautious conventionality that is epitomized by his friend Anthony Powell's famous character, Kenneth Widmer-

pool. Bowra did what he could to block the advance of Oxford's Widmerpools, of whatever political colouring.

Unlike most people who talk a great deal, Bowra was uncannily observant of others and alive to their reactions. No one was more generous in giving encouragement to others, and in England, where reserve and the cult of good form so often damp enthusiasm, this quality was particularly precious. The number of people who acknowledge a debt to Bowra for having strengthened their self-confidence at a critical period is very great; the people in question are of very different kinds, and many exceptionally gifted. When Bowra had reached a position in which he could use his gift of discerning talent by promoting able people, he spared no pains to do so. During his last months he was in hospital suffering from a painful complaint when he was informed that a gifted young scholar, whose promise he had long before discerned, had been appointed to a high position. Bowra was so excited that he almost leaped out of bed in his delight.

Those who knew only Bowra's writings may find it hard to understand, but no person who knew him at all well can fail to be surprised that nothing that he ever wrote gives the faintest inkling of the impression which he made in conversation. He wrote indeed better than most scholars, and especially in the later part of his career he knew how to order his material with great skill. But even where he avoids cliché, what he wrote seems flat and pedestrian beside the brilliance of what he said. To this deficiency of style corresponds a deficiency of content. His work in technical scholarship is solid, sound, judicious, but it is never brilliant; his criticism is sane, lucid, sympathetic, but it lacks flair.

How can we explain this puzzling limitation? We have seen that he himself wrote of his lack of self-confidence in early life; and something of this uncertainty always remained with him. One sign of it was his extreme sensitivity to adverse criticism; at a hint of disloyalty he could become furious even with old friends. Sir Isaiah Berlin thinks that his self-confidence was undermined by the destructive criticism of Joseph; but the roots of his diffidence must lie further back. At school he had disliked the hard grammatical grind of the old-fashioned classical education; he came to love the ancient authors during the war, when he read them for pleasure, just as he read Anatole France, Verlaine, or Baudelaire. He read rapidly, and his quickly-moving brain tended to bypass difficulties; he seldom stopped to break his head over a knotty problem. At Oxford he became well aware of his deficiencies; he was aware of the difference

between his scholarship and that of men like Housman or Lobel, and though he knew that he was capable of some achievements which they never attempted, the knowledge worried him. But by an act of will he gave himself the resolution necessary to carry through each plan; he tapped speedily away on his typewriter, seldom pausing for reflection, for too much reflection might weaken his determination. As in technical scholarship he made mistakes until he learned not to expose his weakest side, so in criticism he failed to come to grips with the chief critical problems; that very sympathy with the authors whom he studied that was one of his best qualities had also its reverse side. Cyril Connolly has said that he was a poet *manqué*. Certainly his talk was more like a creative writer's than like a scholar's, and if he had essayed creative writing perhaps he would have shed some of his inhibitions. Scholarship gave him a discipline he needed; and yet it may have promoted what Sir Isaiah calls 'a peculiar lack of faith in his original and splendid gifts'. His least inhibited writing was his occasional verse, and it is sad that little of this is likely to be published while those who can recognize its allusions are alive.

But his achievements are so considerable that the regret felt by his friends that he did not accomplish more is a striking tribute to the power of his personality. He was the most celebrated Oxford character since Jowett, whom he surpassed in scholarship and in warmth of character. His services to his college and his university were unique; so was his effect upon colleagues and undergraduates of all kinds, obscure as well as famous. But when all this has been said, it gives no notion of what it was like to talk with him, and still less of the affection and admiration felt for him, at least during his later years, by all who knew him.

Bowra was knighted in 1951, and in 1971 was made a Companion of Honour; he was a Commander of the Légion d'Honneur, a Knight-Commander of the Greek Order of the Phoenix, and a holder of the German Order *Pour le Mérite*. He was a corresponding member of the American and Irish Academies, and held honorary doctorates from Paris, St. Andrews, Harvard, Aix-en-Provence, Columbia, and Hull, and from Trinity College, Dublin. At Oxford he became Doctor of Letters in 1937 and Honorary Doctor of Civil Law in 1970, and was Honorary Fellow of New College and of Wadham College.

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