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JULIAN BROWN

NEIL RIPLEY KER, 1908-1982 *

To remember Neil Ker is to remember a man of strong character who reserved his strength for a few activities for which he cared deeply; and to remember a man who was signally responsive to the courses of his friends' lives: not 'friends and colleagues', because friendship was apparently the only mode in which Neil was able or willing to enter into relations with other persons. Some of us knew him for long years; but many who met him once, or knew him only through a letter, would still count him as their friend. And because Neil made us all his friends, we can presume to say to Jean; to Robert, Christina, Helen and Janet; and to his six much-loved grandchildren, that we think we can understand some of the sorrow, and some of the joy, from which their thoughts of such a husband, such a father, and such a grandfather must be compounded this afternoon.

Neil Ker was an only child, educated until the age of ten at his mother's knee: she kept a lesson or two ahead of him in their Latin book. As a boy at Eton, he compiled, indexed and published his first catalogue: gravestones in a country churchyard. Catalogues, and indeed gravestones, fascinated him ever afterwards. When he came up to Magdalen in 1927, his decision to read P.P.E. was influenced by his family's hope for a career in the Foreign Office; but C. S. Lewis fortunately discovered Neil's bent, and in 1931 he took a BA in English Language and Literature. He went on to a B. Litt., on palaeographical aspects of Ælfric's homilies, which took him well over the threshold of his great career as a scholar. In 1929 he had been president of the Oxford University Mountaineering Club; and

* Si pubblica qui come omaggio alla memoria del grande paleografo scomparso il 23 agosto 1982 il discorso commemorativo pronunciato da Julian Brown nella cappella del Magdalen College di Oxford il 13 novembre 1982.

his introduction to mountains, as to philology, came to him as a child from his mother, who took him walking with her in the two mountainous countries in which his parents had homes: Scotland and Switzerland.

Neil's University career was uncomplicated: Lecturer in Palaeography 1936-46; Reader, in succession to E. A. Lowe, 1946-68; Emeritus Reader thereafter. Magdalen was his only college: Commoner, 1927-31; Fellow, 1945-68; Librarian, in succession to C. T. Onions, 1956-68; Honorary Fellow from 1975. His devotion to Magdalen, and his quiet sometimes sleuth-like interest in all its affairs, were as apparent as ever during his frequent visits to the College after he left Oxford for Scotland in 1968. You will not be surprised to hear that he kept out of the general run of College politics, though he was always well-informed; or that his responsibilities as Librarian were sedulously discharged. In particular, visiting researchers were warmly welcomed and generously advised; the typing of the old Library Catalogue, begun in 1938, was completed before he retired; his list of Bishop Jewel's books was published in 1977; the medieval books in the library were described; some 300 post-medieval literary manuscripts were catalogued. The College gained much, both from what Neil was and from what he did best.

All his teaching was done for the University; and over 32 years his classes introduced to Latin palaeography a considerable proportion of the world's best graduate students in English and History. The palaeographer who could meet with equal ease the basic, urgent needs of beginners in both English and History would be a portent; and the rows which regularly break out in this country when a palaeographical post is to be filled are only what the rival factions deserve for behaving as if one stone were enough to kill two birds of different species. Neil's most faithful constituents were the philologists, without a doubt; but many historians of the kind who use books as well as documents have known how to profit from his teaching. The University which has the unrivalled good fortune to include the Bodleian Library among its intellectual assets has a duty to promote the palaeographical and bibliographical studies which its great collections of manuscripts and rare books are uniquely fitted to support. Oxford has long been the capital of manuscript studies in Britain, and never with more authority than in the generation when Neil Ker and his friends Richard Hunt, Roger Mynors, Otto Paecht, and for

all too few years Bob Delaissé, were creating a climate of scholarship which has enriched many branches of medieval and renaissance studies throughout the whole of the English-speaking world. Neil's interests and gifts were an essential element in the effectiveness of this constellation of talents, whose influence has extended far beyond the range of their own pupils. And of Neil's handful of research students two — Malcolm Parkes here and Andrew Watson in London — are already distinguished as teachers and writers in palaeography, in the wide sense of the word in which he himself understood it. The esteem and affection which Neil and Richard both inspired in their many friends on the Continent was sometimes tinged with a near-superstitious awe of their informality, which has surely done wonders for the humanity of Oxford's image in the republic of letters. Many sad but grateful citizens of that republic from other countries would have been here with us today, if only the journeys had been feasible. Is there a better political cause in which Neil's Oxford friends could serve his memory than the defence, against the perils of the times, not only of palaeographical and bibliographical teaching in this University, but of the antiquarian sides of the Bodleian Library.

To move on to Neil's writings, there is no doubt that the essence of his reputation, like the reputation of the first English palaeographer, Humfrey Wanley, depends on his work as a cataloguer of manuscripts. The collection of papers which Malcolm Parkes and Andrew Watson edited in Neil's honour for his seventieth birthday, in 1978, begins with a masterly and affectionate review of his *oeuvre*, by Christopher Cheney, which nobody could rival. Suffice it to say now that Neil's three great catalogues are surrounded by a penumbra of books, papers and introductions to facsimiles which enlarge on points which arose naturally out of one or other of them; and it is in this penumbra that the mask of restraint which the wise cataloguer holds up between the reader and his own learning and enthusiasm is least in evidence. Round *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain* (1942 and 1964; extensive addenda and corrigenda left almost ready for the press at Neil's death) cluster the writings on cathedral libraries, on English manuscripts in the twelfth century, on books in sixteenth-century Oxford, on some of the first English collectors of manuscripts. The *Catalogue of Manuscripts containing Anglo-Saxon* (1957; supplement published in 1976), the keenest single weapon yet placed in

the hand of Old English scholarship, generated half a dozen crucial discussions of particular manuscripts and itself contains, in deceptively modest form, unshakeable foundations for a Late Saxon palaeography on which Neil himself chose not to build, since he evidently wished to move on to his last and most ambitious enterprise. Instead of a catalogue of manuscripts in Middle English, for which a group of papers and introductions shows him to have been splendidly qualified, he undertook to describe all the medieval manuscripts in this country which are preserved in libraries too small to afford the services of an expert cataloguer. The first two volumes of *Medieval Manuscripts in British Libraries* were published in 1969 and 1977; the third is in proof; and the fourth was nearing completion when Neil died. His choice of Andrew Watson as his literary executor is our guarantee that publication will be completed in due course. We in Britain are fortunate that such an elegant and thoughtful model of how to describe medieval books of all kinds should have been published in our own language: there are other good models, some in English and some not, but none is better. That *MMBL* is making a vast contribution to medieval studies in general goes without saying; but it is also a major source of new palaeographical and codicological fact in particular. For the sake of this undertaking, Neil thought it worth while to retire from all his Oxford positions in 1968 and to spend a week or ten days every month, between then and the day of his death, travelling north, south, east and west to every corner of Britain, often more than once, and always at his own expense. To most of us, this looks like altruism of a high order; but he would have told us that he did it because he enjoyed it; and we may use the book all the more gratefully because it was a labour of love. Let me quote a valedictory sentence on Neil from a letter of Bernhard Bischoff's, himself no stranger to great palaeographical enterprises: « There is nobody left in our field who could set himself such great tasks and realize them with such tenacious consistency. I admire his greatness the most when set beside his unpretentious simplicity ».

Neil's straightforwardness, and his modesty, were exemplary. As a critic of work in progress he was deeply conscientious and allowed nothing inadequate to pass, however small; but the most he would say to a third party about poor work, once it had been published, was 'not very good'. It is pleasant to know that on one occa-

sion he allowed himself to come out with this: 'He should have asked me. I do *know* about things like that'. As his well-kept files of correspondence show, many hundreds of people did ask him; and his regular Sunday output of replies often amounted to as many as twenty invaluable letters, typed on a machine whose personality was as distinctive as its master's. Further, he quietly made it his business to know what research was afoot and to communicate new discoveries of his own to anyone who needed to know of them. To the question that a great scholar's work always raises in ordinary minds — 'How did he manage to do it all?' — the answer seems to be that he had an excellent memory, on which he relied heavily; that this power of concentration was exceptional; and that he could use even short periods of time for serious work. *Nulla dies sine linea*: but no late nights; no particularly early rising; and — except perhaps when he was composing a paper, not a catalogue entry — nothing but acceptance for any child or grandchild who came to his study.

A ball of cut glass made to hang in a window is heavier, more solid than it looks. Neil's lean, athletic frame, whose natural elegance could never be obscured by his usual concern for ease in dress at the expense of mere smartness, housed a strength — it was a spiritual strength, though his personal commitment to religion was apparently of the slightest — that was expressed not only in the quality of his academic life but in his response to the moral challenge of the Second World War. As a conscientious objector to military service he served all his fellow citizens as a theatre porter at the Radcliffe Infirmary, and those who shared his conviction as one of a group of advisers on how to present the objector's case at a tribunal. A ball of cut glass catches light from all directions, and so reflects it that its exact form is difficult to apprehend. Neil's hushed but vivid sensitivity to the personalities, and to the problems, of his many friends means that to see him as a many-faceted piece of some flawless material, delicately poised to catch and send out again whatever of the light of life came his way, is perhaps the most exact view of him that any one of his friends can hope to capture.

When Neil and Jean exchanged their hospitable house at Kirtlington, in 1968, for a winter flat in the New Town of Edinburgh and a summer cottage in Perthshire, called Slievemore, hospitality made the move with them; and for more than a dozen years they generously shared with as many of their friends as possible the hap-

piness of their life in the Highlands. What Neil had sagaciously and most contentedly retired from was only the groove of Academe, not the pursuit of manuscripts; and he was hard at work, as only he could be, until the end. That the end should have come as a fall among the mountains he loved to walk on gives grounds for consolation as well as grounds for shock and for sorrow: full of years, but never an old man, he encountered death in the landscape of his predilection.