PROFESSOR T. A. BIRRELL

Professor Thomas Anthony Birrell, who has been such a notable contributor to the work of the Catholic Record Society, was born on 25 July 1924, of a family which came from Fife in Scotland. His father was a Presbyterian while his mother was an Irish Catholic who at one time taught in the U.S.A. and in Mexico. Tom spent his early years in Herne Hill and other parts of south London. His father was engaged in various business enterprises, but after the slump of the late 1920s hit him badly, the family moved to Weston-super-Mare, where they lived on the northern edge of the town looking out towards Woodspring Priory.

Tom attended a prep school before entering Downside School in September 1937. He left in December 1941 and having won a scholarship went up to Downing College, Cambridge. Having taken the first part of the English Tripos in 1943 he joined the Army and was posted to the Royal Armoured Corps. After six months at Sandhurst he was commissioned in September 1944, and following the failure of the Allied airborne landing at Arnhem served with an armoured car reconnaissance unit in the Netherlands until the break-through into Germany in early 1945. After VE Day (June 1945) he was posted to India where he served as an education officer and a transport officer at Calcutta, Delhi and elsewhere.

He was released in 1946 to return to Cambridge where he took part 2 of the Historical Tripos in 1947. He then taught for a time at the Cambridge Technical College (now the Anglia Ruskin University) before moving to Ealing where he taught at St. Benedict's School. There was a Dutch community in Ealing and Tom heard from them of a vacancy in the Department of English at Nijmegen Catholic University. He applied for this but the appointment went to an Irishman, who however had such a strong brogue that his students could not understand him. So the services of the Irishman were dispensed with and Tom was appointed to the post in 1949. This was the beginning of a career which lasted until the mid-1980s, with Tom becoming Professor and Head of the Department of English and American Literature, and serving for the appropriate period as Rector of the University.

He was for many years a great friend of Antony Allison of the British Museum Library and David Rogers of the Bodleian, who were responsible for revivifying the CRS after the 1939–45 War. Tom's early interest in recusant history is illustrated by the fact that the inaugural lecture which he gave at Nijmegen in 1950 was entitled *Catholic Allegiance and the Popish Plot. A Study of Some Catholic Writers of the Restoration Period* (Nijmegen, 1950). He went on to produce a two-volume edition of a work by John Warner, S.J. *The History of English Persecution of Catholics and the Presbyterian Plot (1678–85)* in 1953 (CRS, vols. 47

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034193200012590 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and 48). A major article entitled 'English Catholics Without a Bishop, 1655–72' appeared as vol. 4, no. 4 of *Recusant History* in 1958.

It was in April 1958 that the first Conference on Post-Reformation Catholic History was held at St. Anne's College, Oxford. (The responsibility for organizing these conferences was subsequently taken on by the CRS, and the fifty-second conference was held in Liverpool in July 2009.) Tom volunteered to circulate information to help those studying the subject and he produced a series of nine *Newsletters for Students of Recusant History* between 1958 and 1971. These gave details of work in progress, publications, migrations and accessions of archives, and the names and interests of workers in the field. They did much to encourage research, and when rising costs and pressure of work forced Tom to give up the series, some of the contents were printed each year in a newsletter section of *Recusant History*. Until the annual Conference on Recusant History was forced to move from Oxford in 2005 Tom was a familiar and valued participant, sometimes as a lecturer and frequently as a contributor to the discussion sessions.

In 1984 his colleagues at Nijmegen produced a Festschrift dedicated to him to mark his sixtieth birthday and his forthcoming retirement. Edited by G. A. M. Janssens and F. G. Aarts it is entitled *Studies in Seventeenth Century English Literature, History and Bibliography*. The range of its contributors bears testimony to the affection and esteem in which he is held. The checklist in this volume of his writings for the period from 1943 to 1983 amounts to 82 books and articles plus 63 book reviews. In addition, for many years from 1980 he edited the journal *English Studies* which was first published in Amsterdam in 1919.

On his retirement in 1985 he moved to London to a flat in Southampton Row close to the British Museum, in the library of which he had long been a familiar figure. He had for years been working on the Old Royal Library which had been presented to the newly-founded British Museum by George II in 1757. The books of this library were originally kept together in the British Museum, but at the end of the eighteenth century a reorganization of the Museum library on a subject basis led to the Old Royal Library books being scattered throughout the collections. Fortunately a catalogue of the Old Royal Library had been compiled in the 1760s and this provided the key to recreating the collection. However some Old Royal Library books had been disposed of in the duplicate sales which the British Museum held between 1768 and 1832, and often the Museum library holds two or more copies of an item referred to in the catalogue of the Old Royal Library. It is therefore necessary to examine all the relevant copies to decide by checking the library ownership stamps and the various shelfmarks recorded which (if any) is the Old Royal Library copy. This was a task to which Tom devoted much time over several years. As there are about 17,000 items recorded in the Old Royal Library catalogue, and in many cases the Museum library contains

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034193200012590 Published online by Cambridge University Press

more than one copy of an item, the number of books to be looked at ran into many thousands. During his vacations from Nijmegen Tom was occupied for many long days in the North Library (the rare books Reading Room of the British Museum) checking barrow-loads of books brought up to him from the stacks often at the rate of thirty or forty items per day.

The first fruits of these labours was a catalogue of the library of John Morris (*c.* 1580–1658) which was acquired for the Old Royal library in the 1660s. This was published in 1976 as *The Library of John Morris. The Reconstruction of a Seventeenth Century Collection.* Then in 1986 Tom delivered the Panizzi Lectures at the British Library under the title *English Monarchs and their Books: from Henry VII to Charles II.* In these lectures he discussed the connections between particular monarchs and their libraries. In the preface to the published version which appeared in 1987 Oliver Everett, then Librarian at Windsor Castle, described the lectures as 'excellently researched and brilliantly delivered'—anyone who has heard Tom lecture knows what a master of the art he is. Since the Panizzi Lectures the full catalogue of the Old Royal Library on which Tom has worked for so long has been eagerly awaited, and it is good news that the work is now moving towards completion.

After five years in London Tom moved to Oxford in 1990, but before that the CRS had seized the opportunity of his being back in England to recruit him to its Council. He was elected in 1987 and remained on the Council until 1996 when he became a Trustee following the death of Antony Allison. He held this position until he decided to resign in 2006 because travelling to London was becoming a problem for him. His common sense was of great help in ensuring that the finances of the CRS were kept in proper order. In 2005 he had been appointed a Vice-President so his advice is still available to the Council by letter or telephone.

He has long been interested in the way in which collections of books are built up, arranged and used. One product of his work on the Old Royal library was what has been described as a classic article on the fate of Casaubon's collection ('The Reconstruction of the Library of Isaac Casaubon' in *Hellinga Festschrift* edited by A. R. A. Croiset van Uchelen (Amsterdam, 1980). His contributions to the Publishing Pathways series, edited by Robin Myers, Michael Harris and Giles Mandelbrote, include 'Anthony Wood, John Bagford and Thomas Hearne as Bibliographers' (in *Pioneers in Bibliography*, 1988), 'Reading as a Pastime. The Place of Light Literature in Some Gentlemen's Libraries in the 17th Century' (in *Property of a Gentleman*, 1991), 'The Circle of John Gage (1786–1842), Director of the Society of Antiquaries, and the Bibliography of Medievalism' (in *Antiquaries, Book Collectors and the Circles of Learning*, 1996) and 'Books and Buyers in 17th Century English Auction Sales' (in *Under the Hammer*, 2001). His most recent

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publication is a major study entitled 'The British Museum Duplicate Sales, 1768–1832' (in *Libraries within the Library*, edited by Giles Mandelbrote and Barry Taylor (British Library, 2009).

His years at Oxford have seen the production of other articles and reviews and he remains a very well known figure in scholarly circles. At a recent conference on bibliographical matters in the British Library his name was frequently mentioned as a major contributor to the field. At his riverside home in Oxford he is visited by friends from this country and from the Netherlands who enjoy his knowledge and wit. Few people have such a wealth of good stories.

P. R. Harris

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034193200012590 Published online by Cambridge University Press