

IN MEMORIAM:

Geoffrey Little
1931–2010

The following eulogy was delivered at the funeral service held for friends and colleagues at T. J. Andrews Funeral Services on Enmore Road at 2.30pm on Thursday 12 August 2010.

I have been asked to say a few words about Geoffrey Little as a friend and colleague in the Department of English at the University of Sydney, so for my purposes Geoffrey – Geoffrey Latham Little or G.L.L. as he signed himself in that fine, close, barely legible script of his – was born in 1960, the day that he arrived in one of the lecture rooms in the main quad at the University of Sydney, fresh from his ocean passage, in the days when it was legal to travel by boat to Australia. Enter a strikingly handsome young Englishman with a shock of thick black hair carrying (my colleague Margaret Harris assures me) two hold-all bags full of books, from which, like Jack Horner, he proceeded to pull out one plum after another and to offer what was effectively an annotated bibliography of the treasures he had brought with him from the old world. Margaret reminded me that in those days Fisher's holdings were severely limited in certain areas and I'd like to think of those two bags as carpet bags, containing as they did the very latest in scholarly commodities. Over the next thirty-three years, until he retired from the university in 1993, these and the other books in Geoffrey's library would be subjected to that fine autograph script and torn paper tagging characteristic of him, until they would finally settle in the purpose-built library he helped to erect outside the house up the Hawkesbury River that he loved so well, and that would become his Lake District.

With a first degree from the University of Keele and an MA

from Melbourne, Geoffrey had ended his doctoral candidature at the University of Oxford by refusing to make the emendations required of him by a university that found his approach to literature inappropriately 'philosophical', and subsequently left to take up the lectureship at Sydney. During his many years as a teacher and a scholar in the department, Geoffrey's main focus was on the literature of the Romantic period. Within the Romantic period, Geoffrey specialised in the poetry (as one did in those days), and from amongst the Romantic poets Geoffrey specialised in William Wordsworth. Geoffrey was not the only one in that large department who taught Romantic poetry – I well remember being introduced to Wordsworth's 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey' by Gerry Wilkes and it was Ron Dunlop who lectured to first year on Blake (whom Geoffrey, it has to be said, couldn't stand) – but within ten years of his arrival in the department Geoffrey carried responsibility for further study of the Romantics at senior level and all the fourth year Honours classes in Romantic literature.

Like all of us, Geoffrey made occasional appearances in courses outside the area of his expertise, with a particular fondness for British writing during and after World War II – Anthony Powell, William Golding, C. P. Snow, Kingsley Amis – but Geoffrey was truly a Wordsworthian as that term was then understood, and indeed had been understood pretty much since the 1830s. Throughout his career, Geoffrey maintained connections with Dove Cottage and the Wordsworth Trust, corresponding with the likes of Jonathan Wordsworth and Robert Woof, its president and director respectively. Geoffrey's major project – his version of Wordsworth's unfinished Recluse and Coleridge's fragmentary *Logosophia*, as it were – was an edition of the poet's wife Mary Wordsworth's diaries.

Like so many scholars trained in the 1950s and 60s, Geoffrey was an inveterate publisher of scholarly notes, contributing numerous corrections and incidental critical reflections to the *Review of English Studies*, edited out of Oxford for many years by Geoffrey's friend and teacher, Reggie Alton, the man who introduced the postgraduates in English literature to the delights of bibliography and paleography. It is fitting, however, that Geoffrey's most distinguished publication

should have been a thoroughly researched and carefully prepared edition of *Memoirs of Wordsworth* written by the poet's friend and younger contemporary, the lawyer and later judge of the Supreme Court of NSW, Barron Field. Fitting, I think in a number of ways: fitting because Field's memoirs of the poet was an act of homage by a fellow Wordsworthian, but fitting, too, because this fellow Wordsworthian had himself translated to Australia – though, unlike Geoffrey, not permanently. (Barron Field is the author of the poem 'Kangaroo' that you'll often see as the first offering in anthologies of Australian poetry, and he went on to become the Chief Justice of Gibraltar.) What the choice of Barron Field reflects, in other words (apart from the availability of the MS), is Geoffrey's commitment to his adopted country. Australian students remember Geoffrey as very English – he certainly seemed that way to me when I first sat in his classes. But it is to his credit that Geoffrey embraced this country and its cultural history – its architectural history especially – with a gusto that had no trace of cultural snobbery of the kind that was not at all uncommon amongst educated Australians themselves during the 1960s and 1970s. The Hawkesbury was Geoffrey's Lake District, not a pale imitation or a consolation prize.

Geoffrey will be remembered as a fiercely – and at times, it has to be said, an annoyingly – determined supporter of ideas, issues, and students that mattered to him. The proverbial terrier who bit in the more deeply the more you tugged the T-shirt. Geoffrey's old friend and colleague, John Burrows, remembers Geoffrey's 'heroic feat of stonewalling when he alone fought Sam Goldberg from morn to dewy eve (from 2.30 in the afternoon to 10 at night) over the wording of a single exam question on Dickens. The other twenty or so of us dozed the while and the philosophic and semantic niceties were intense. The problem was that the question had to acknowledge the magnificence of Dickens, without gainsaying the fatal flaws, or vice-versa, or somewhere between these extremes'. (Charles Dickens, of course, held an equivocal place in F. R. Leavis's 'great tradition' and Sam Goldberg was a committed Leavisite.)

Certainly I have personal recollections of finding it impossible to get Geoffrey to shift his critical position in some of the small classes

of his that I took as an undergraduate – and it has been the same since he retired, when he would drop in to my office to find out what I was working on, or just to argue about something of mine that he'd read. In all that time, however, I was never dismissed or made to feel humiliated by the experience. Geoffrey's stubborn determination was personal to himself – a determination, not to dominate an opposition, but to hold on to a cherished notion.

And as Catherine Runcie reminded me in an email the other day, Geoffrey genuinely 'cared about and was so patient with his students'. Margaret Harris remembers one of the first things Geoffrey did as a young member of the department was to set up a literary society with the students. Geoffrey's students might recall the discomfort of his smoked-filled room, or the embarrassment of sinking into second hand furniture so accommodating you could never get out of it – which was always a problem when you were trying to strain forward to hear what this soft-voiced man was saying – but Geoffrey did care, and when he cared he was fiercely supportive at a time when it was unfashionable to take too much interest in your students.

I will always remember that support with gratitude and affection and always remember the arguments, however protracted, with sincere pleasure. Who could forget attending one of Geoffrey's colloquia up the Hawkesbury – or perhaps more accurately one of his symposia? Geoffrey was always generous in not allowing my not drinking to inhibit his, and he would take me up to the pre-fabricated library he built to house his generous collection of eighteenth-century and Romantic texts (some of them, no doubt, from those two hold-alls he brought with him so many years ago) to show me, with schoolboy glee, a smutty passage in Mary Wordsworth's diaries. Then, of course, there was the trip back, often late at night, in which the engine he had always recently bought from a neighbour conked out – it always conked out – with Geoffrey poised over the engine, covered in petrol, with the eternal cigarette dangling from his mouth!

All this I will remember with gratitude and affection. Geoffrey Little: hail and farewell.

Will Christie