

Review Article

"This is our master . . ."

I will not cease from mental fight
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand. . . .

—Blake

The untimely death of Arthur Woodhouse, soon after the publication of this volume in his honour, has by its unexpected and abrasive quality sharpened our appreciation of the man and of this tribute to him. It is hard to think of any worker in the vineyard of the humanities in Canada to whom a more profound tribute of gratitude is due. He was at the same time centrifugal and centripetal, always ready to move out and take up a new challenge, yet doing so in complete consistency with a few central principles. And the kind of cheerful, unremitting fervour which he gave to every task became legendary in his lifetime. He could not "cease from mental fight", and he had the clearest convictions about building Jerusalem. And one cannot think of his death as having brought this to a halt. From one end of our country to the other his colleagues, friends, students, and disciples struggle to bring clarity and purpose into Canadian intellectual life.

As a teacher he had the power to arouse and sustain a serious concern with ideas. Not always with ideas which he regarded as important; sometimes with divergent concepts; on one occasion, at least, with the idea that the history of ideas does not exist. While he did not encourage dissent for its own sake or suffer vain speculation gladly, he believed like Milton in an intellectual city where, in the classic sense of the term, there is continuous, purposeful "disputing". It was possible to pass the door of his long seminar room and to hear issuing from the gaping threshold, at the level of the old floor, some enormous and immemorial question uttered in a voice vibrating with instant concern,—*"And can we say that Pelagianism is conducive to pride?"* If he spoke of Hooker or Milton or Johnson, one could come away feeling that one had been talking directly to them; this without theatricality, the simple result of his intensity and absorption.

In the field of academic organization, his chief concern was the Graduate School, on its Humanities side. Here, especially in the 1930's and during the dislocations of the war period, he laboured mightily to establish sound courses and intelligible procedures; to co-ordinate the efforts of all the Toronto colleges; to attract the right students, give them the right training, and afterwards find for them the right posts of responsibility: and much of this at a time when the prior demands of war made all planning chimerical.

The graduate school was his first and last love; on the day before he died he participated in oral examinations with all his pristine concern. He expected of his students about what Milton had expected of his, simply that they fit themselves to be "dear to God and famous to all ages".

His own research was a labyrinth of patient and diverse penetrations, interconnected and oriented toward a centre. His Christian faith, like Hooker's, took profound cognizance of law. His studies in Spenser and Milton branched into vast excursions encompassing Nature and Grace; Church and State; and the Glorious Liberty of the Sons of God. His concern with the fundamentals of English Romanticism, though it received less emphasis in his publication, was scarcely less intensive. There were annual rumours that his seminar investigating Romanticism might with luck settle with Blake by Christmas. At the centre of the labyrinth lay his conviction that God is light and, though our ceaseless effort to attain to truth cannot be instantly gratified, the posture of continuous, eager, cumulative search is no bad way to spend a lifetime. And yet it was truth in action that he gave himself to: the demands of honour and graduate students; the needs of his department; the necessities of his aged mother,—these took precedence over his own private work.

I have written elsewhere of his symbiosis with the *University of Toronto Quarterly*. With Brett and E. K. Brown he was one of its founders and in the next thirty years variously played every needed role except that of printer. Some of his most influential pieces appeared, over the years, between its covers. From the beginning, when his letters to the publisher could nicely proportion Chesterfield with Johnson, to the end, when he was a symbolic guardian of standards, his interest never flagged or failed.

He helped, in the bad days of 1943, to bring the Humanities Research Council into being and was consistently thereafter, officially or unofficially, its strong counsellor and supporter. Rockefeller and Carnegie were induced by exhaustive and stoutly argued briefs to finance explorations of Canadian needs and some systems of scholarships until the formation of the Canada Council. Six months before his passing, he received a medal at the Council's twentieth anniversary dinner, to commemorate his services. It bore the sign of the Council, which might have been his own,—a firmly rooted, vigorous, climbing stem of ivy "never sere".

The *Essays in his honour** are on the whole worthy of their task. They include a Woodhouse bibliography by M. H. M. MacKinnon; a personal and critical appreciation by Douglas Bush; Milton studies by Arthur Barker, Geoffrey Bullough, Merritt Hughes, and Hugh MacCallum; essays on Spenser by William Blissett and Rosemond Tuve; pieces on Jonson, Walton, and Browne by Hugh Maclean, R. C. Bald, and Norman Endicott;

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on the Augustans by Herbert Davis and F. E. L. Priestley; on Wordsworth and Mill by J. R. MacGillivray and John Robson; and studies in nineteenth-century thought by Lawrence Shook, Northrop Frye, and Malcolm Ross. There is infinitely more pith and substance in these than can be extracted in any brief review: a winter's intermittent reading with profits slowly accumulating for further investment. A good book to own; beautifully produced; a good book to keep and read.

The texture of this tapestry, however, is uneven. The contributors vary enormously in their attitude towards the reader. Sometimes he is in the presence of a fellow humanist. Sometimes he is on the outskirts of a conclave of mandarins. Sometimes he confronts a plateful of yeasted dumplings, served up by an invisible hand, or a length of crochet-work that must have been done in a bad light. Or the ghost of Henry James appears, murmuring we know not what about Milton. Or a smooth voice leads us into the *cul-de-sac* of total incomprehension. It is a pity that Woodhouse's own vigorous clarity could not have been exemplary to all who were writing in his honour.

For many, of course, it is. They challenge our assumptions:—"the university seems to me to come closer than any other human institution to defining the community of human authority" (we may pause on "human" and "defining"). They give us a fresh sight of some known figures: Swift "bargaining with governors and members of the House of Lords on behalf of his friends or in the interests of Ireland, or facing his accusers and defying those who tried to use their authority to break his proud spirit"; Ruskin "providentially" encountering Hooker, like Jacob and the angel. There is evidence that many of those doing homage to Arthur Woodhouse have sat at the same table, eaten the same fare, learned the same craft.

This large community of interest explains why most of the book is devoted to a discussion of ideas (not the simple identification of sources), why for the most part these ideas are closely related to traditional Christian or Platonic values (rather than to sharply contemporary, existentialist or international issues), why the tone of all the best contributions is urbanely and honestly persuasive (as though what is being argued matters).

In Canada we have not traditionally been very adept at gestures of homage. The perfect phrase cut perfectly into stone; the uplifted glasses at a moment at once gay and intensely significant; the tribute so exactly matched to the deed itself that they remain inseparable: on the whole we are not good at these things. But we are learning. Criticism itself is an effort in the right direction. In honouring those who seek to honour Arthur Woodhouse we are in no danger of a mutual admiration society. For they join with him in honouring the great names,—his who was held a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas, his whose soul was like a star and dwelt apart, his who received the attribution (fit also for Milton) "There was a man sent from God whose name was John". In these pages the ladder of Plato (or Jacob) is continually let down; there is no limit to the height to which the reader may begin to climb.

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