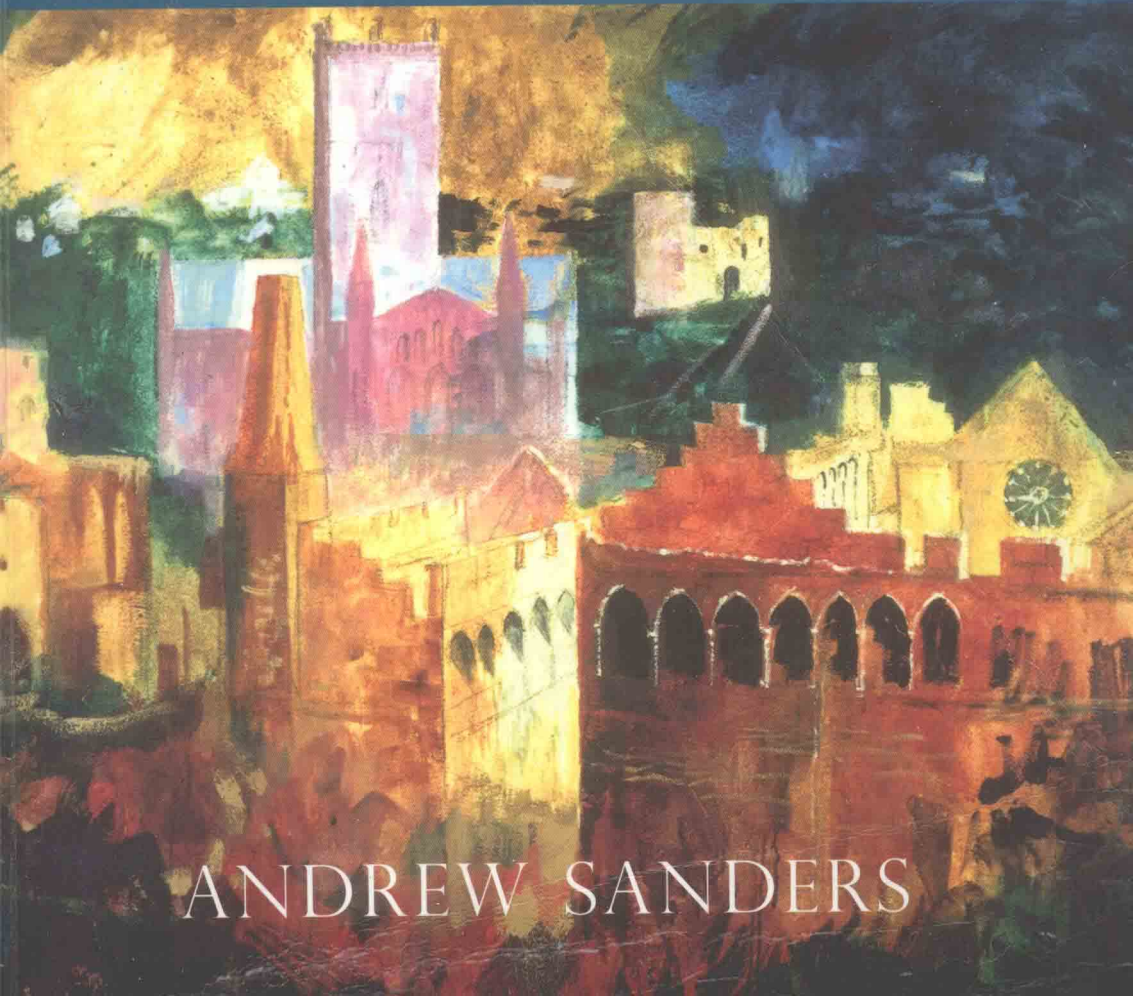


THE SHORT
OXFORD HISTORY
OF
ENGLISH
LITERATURE

SECOND EDITION



ANDREW SANDERS

THE SHORT OXFORD
HISTORY OF
ENGLISH
LITERATURE

Andrew Sanders

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2, 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford
and furthers the University's aim of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Athens Auckland Bangkok Bogotá Buenos Aires Calcutta
Cape Town Chennai Dar es Salaam Delhi Florence Hong Kong Istanbul
Karachi Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai
Nairobi Paris São Paulo Singapore Taipei Tokyo Toronto Warsaw

and associated companies in Berlin Ibadan

Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University

Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

© Andrew Sanders 1994, 1996, 1999

First published 1994

Revised edition 1996

Second edition 2000

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press.
Within the UK, exceptions are allowed in respect of any fair dealing for the
purpose of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted
under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, or in the case of
reprographic reproduction in accordance with the terms of the licences
issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning
reproduction outside these terms and in other countries should be
sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press,
at the address above

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way
of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated
without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover
other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition
including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Sanders, Andrew.

The short Oxford history of English literature/Andrew Sanders.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. English literature—History and criticism. I. Title.

PR83.S26 1996

820.9—dc20 93-32330

ISBN 0-19-818697-5 (Pbk)

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong

Printed in Great Britain

on acid-free paper by

Biddles Ltd., Guildford, Surrey

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I AM most grateful to the following friends and colleagues who made close, helpful, encouraging, and often indispensable comments on various aspects in this *History*: Isobel Armstrong, Sandra Clark, Robert Inglesfield, Peter Mudford, Graham Parry, Jan Jedrzejewski (formerly of the University of Lodz, now of the University of Ulster), Chantal Cornut-Gentile D'Arcy (of the University of Zaragoza), Mihaela Irimia (of the University of Bucharest), and Anita Weston-Bilardello (of the University of Perugia). I am also, if less directly, grateful to the many anonymous readers of sections of the manuscript whose detailed comments were generally most helpful. Above all, I would like to thank my patient wife, Edwina Porter, for bearing the strains of composition and for offering immediate critical comment on pages thrust in front of her. Shirley Levy provided what I needed when I was most out of my depth: carefully considered direction and notes for the chapter on medieval literature. I am also grateful to my colleagues in the English department at Birkbeck College for two terms of 'light teaching' over a four-year period which enabled me to complete certain parts of the text without significant interruption (except for examination scripts!). My final thanks are due to Kim Scott Walwyn who flattered me into writing this book, to Andrew Lockett who coaxed and encouraged it into its present existence, to Jason Freeman who oversaw its progress through the press and to Michael Rogers who so patiently and scrupulously helped to proof-read it.

Andrew Sanders

Sophie Goldsworthy's invitation to revise this book for the Oxford University Press has given me the opportunity to add sections to it concerning authors and topics which I had, for various reasons (mostly ignorance), omitted from the first edition. I have also had the welcome opportunity to substantially revise the closing chapter. I am most grateful to the many people who have generously praised my earlier efforts and to those who prompted me to rethink or who helped shape my ideas. My particular gratitude is due to Ian Doyle, Michael O'Neill, Will Wootton, Alison Shell, Arnold Hunt, and James Birkett. My thanks too, to the same James Birkett for his help in revising the Guide to Further Reading.

London—Durham
February—March 1999

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

IN the case of quotations I have endeavoured to cite the best scholarly texts available. In most instances this has meant that the spellings have not been brought into line with modern usage, though where I have quoted from the plays and certain poems of Shakespeare and his contemporaries I have followed the common editorial practice of accepting a modernized spelling. I apologize if these anomalies offend certain readers. I hope that the quotations in the text give some sense of the development of the English language and English usage over the centuries.

CONTENTS

A Note on the Text	ix
Introduction: Poets' Corners: The Development of a Canon of English Literature	1
1. Old English Literature	16
2. Medieval Literature 1066–1510	28
3. Renaissance and Reformation: Literature 1510–1620	84
4. Revolution and Restoration: Literature 1620–1690	187
5. Eighteenth-Century Literature 1690–1780	274
6. The Literature of the Romantic Period 1780–1830	334
7. High Victorian Literature 1830–1880	399
8. Late Victorian and Edwardian Literature 1880–1920	458
9. Modernism and its Alternatives: Literature 1920–1945	506
10. Post-War and Post-Modern Literature	579
Chronology	653
Guide to Further Reading	675
Index	717

INTRODUCTION

Poets' Corners: The Development of a Canon of English Literature

Soon after his death in October 1400 the body of Geoffrey Chaucer was placed in a modest tomb in the eastern aisle of the north transept of Westminster Abbey, the coronation church of the English kings. He was so honoured not because he was the author of *The Canterbury Tales*, but because he had formerly held the post of Clerk of the King's Works and because he had been living in the precincts of the Abbey at the time of his death. He was, moreover, distantly connected to the royal family through his wife Philippa. When John Gower died some eight years later he was interred in the Priory Church of St Mary Overie in Southwark (now Southwark Cathedral). Gower, who had retired to the Priory in his old age, received a far more elaborate tomb, one which proclaimed him to be *Anglorum Poeta celeberrimus* ('the most famous poet of the English nation') and one which showed him in effigy somewhat uncomfortably resting his head on his three great works, the *Vox Clamantis*, the *Speculum Meditantis*, and the *Confessio Amantis*.

The respective fortunes of the burial sites of these two 'dead, white, male poets' is to a significant degree indicative of how a distinct canon of English literature has emerged over the centuries. Although St Mary Overie's, renamed St Saviour's in the sixteenth century, later housed the tombs of the playwrights John Fletcher (d. 1625) and Philip Massinger (d. 1640) and of Bishop Lancelot Andrewes (who died at the nearby Winchester House in 1626), it never proved as prestigious a church as the distinctly aristocratic Westminster Abbey. Nor did the body of Gower prove to be as powerful an object of poetic veneration as that of Chaucer. In 1556 Nicholas Brigham, a government official with antiquarian tastes, erected a new, but conservatively Gothic, monument over Chaucer's bones. His act of national piety was a tribute to Chaucer's acknowledged status as, to use Edmund Spenser's term, the 'pure well head of Poesie'. It was within feet of Chaucer's grave that Spenser himself was buried in 1599, his mural monument, erected some twenty years later, pronouncing him to be 'the Prince of Poets in his Tyme'. Thus specially consecrated to the Muses, this corner of a royal church later contained the ashes of Michael Drayton,

who 'exchanged his Laurell for a Crowne of Glorye' in 1631, of 'rare' Ben Jonson who died in 1637, and of Abraham Cowley who died in 1667. Its prestige was firmly established with the burial of John Dryden in 1700 and by the subsequent construction of an elegant funerary monument which seems to guard the entrance to the aisle.

Writing in *The Spectator* in 1711, Joseph Addison referred to this already celebrated part of the Abbey as 'the poetical Quarter'. Its name was gradually transmogrified into the familiar 'Poets' Corner'. The seal was set on its function as a place where English poets might, and indeed ought, to be commemorated, regardless of their actual place of interment, in the middle years of the eighteenth century. Here, in what was rapidly becoming less like an exclusively royal church and more like a national pantheon, was an area largely devoted to the posthumous celebration of writers. Here distinguished citizens, and not the state, decreed that, with the Dean of Westminster's permission, men of letters might rest or be sculpturally remembered in the ancient Roman manner. In 1721 the architect James Gibbs designed a fine mural tablet in memory of Matthew Prior. In 1737 William Benson, a connoisseur of literature and the Surveyer-General of Works, paid for the setting-up of Rysbrack's posthumous bust of John Milton (d. 1674) and, three years later, a spectacular mural cenotaph, carved by Peter Scheemakers, was erected to the honour of William Shakespeare (who had been buried in provincial Stratford 124 years earlier). The monument, proudly inscribed with the words *Amor Publicus Posuit* ('The public's love placed it here'), was the outcome of an appeal for funds made by a committee which included Lord Burlington and Alexander Pope. Although Pope himself contributed notably to the Abbey's expanding collection of poetic epitaphs, he never received even the most modest of memorials in Poets' Corner. The honour was, however, accorded to James Thomson in 1762, to Thomas Gray in 1771, and to Oliver Goldsmith in 1774. In 1784, to affirm the Abbey's status as a national pantheon, the much respected Samuel Johnson was interred in the floor of the south transept at the foot of the monument to Shakespeare.

Edmund Spenser's conscious construction of a literary tradition, in which he was associated in life and death with the poetic example of Chaucer, had therefore been instrumental in establishing the significance of Poets' Corner in the minds of those who sought to define a line of succession in national literature. In common with many other self-appointed arbiters of public taste, however, the Abbey authorities were singularly behindhand in recognizing the marked shift in literary fashions in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. While relatively minor poets such as William Mason (d. 1797) and the author of the once celebrated *New Bath Guide*, Christopher Anstey (d. 1805), were commemorated in wall-tablets, the new generation of poets, many of whom died young, were initially conspicuous for their absence. Notoriously, in 1824 the 'immoral' Lord Byron was refused a tomb by the Dean of Westminster, a refusal compounded seven years later by the rejection of

Thorvaldsen's marble statue of the pensive poet specially commissioned by a group of Byron's friends. A memorial slab to Byron was somewhat shamefacedly installed only in 1969. Keats and Shelley, both buried in Rome, equally had to wait until the mid-twentieth century for an Abbey monument. By the early Victorian period, however, both public and ecclesiastical opinion deemed it proper to erect posthumous busts of Coleridge (d. 1834) and Southey (d. 1843) and a statue of the seated Wordsworth (d. 1850), all of them significantly clustered in the protective shadow of Shakespeare.

The enlightened Victorian Dean of Westminster, Arthur Stanley (1815–81), a former pupil of Dr Arnold's at Rugby, was instrumental in allotting the already over-occupied south transept its most visited grave, that of Charles Dickens (d. 1870). Stanley's decision to bury Dickens in the Abbey is notable for two reasons: he overrode Dickens's express desire to be buried in Rochester, and he also, for the first time, included a novelist amongst its eminent literary dead. The privilege had already been denied to Thackeray (d. 1863) and Elizabeth Gaskell (d. 1865) and was not extended to the agnostic George Eliot (d. 1880) (though it had been suggested to Stanley that she was 'a woman whose achievements were without parallel in the previous history of womankind') or to the singularly 'churchy' Anthony Trollope (d. 1882). After Stanley's time, however, the niceties of religious belief and unbelief were largely set aside as the graves of Browning, Tennyson, Hardy, and Kipling virtually filled the available space and gave the entire transept its popular, if narrow, character as a Who was Who of English letters. When one says 'English' letters, it should be remembered that Victorian inclusiveness insisted on the addition of busts of Sir Walter Scott and Robert Burns, on the commemoration of the American Longfellow and of Adam Lindsay Gordon, the 'Poet of Australia'. Since the nineteenth century, literary societies and informal pressure groups have systematically brought about the canonization by tablet of the particular objects of their admiration. Thus women writers (Jane Austen, the Brontës, and George Eliot) have received belated notice. The once overlooked or notably absent now have their busts (Thackeray by Marochetti, Blake by Epstein), their mural tablets (Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, Clare), or their engraved floor slabs (Cædmon, Hopkins, Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, Anthony Trollope, Henry James, D. H. Lawrence, Dylan Thomas, John Masefield, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and an *omnium gatherum* of poets who served in the First World War).

Poets' Corner has always commemorated a surprisingly arbitrary selection of writers and, like any parallel attempt to draw up a canon or a list, generally represents the opinions of what a certain group of influential people have wanted to believe mattered to them and to their times. What the memorials in Poets' Corner represent is a loose series of decisions, all of them, in their time, considered decisions, which have subsequently been interpreted as categorical and canonical. This is how most canons come into being. The trouble with canons is that they not only become hallowed by tradition, they also enforce tradition.

In its original sense, the idea of a canon included not just the biblical books approved as a source of doctrine by the Church, but also the list of saints whose names could be invoked in prayer and to whom a degree of devotion could be directed. There have always been writers who have sought to associate themselves with a secular canon and a secular apostolic succession as earnestly as the Christian Church hallowed its Scriptures and looked to its history in order to justify its continued existence. Chaucer was anxious to prove his credentials as an innovative English poet by appealing to ancient authority and by displaying his knowledge of modern French and Italian writers. Some 150 years later, Spenser insisted not only that he had drunk deeply at the well of Italian poetry, but also that he was nourished by a vernacular tradition that he dated back to Chaucer. Milton, in his turn, claimed to be the heir to the 'sage and serious' Spenser. In the nineteenth century such invocations of a tradition were supplemented by a reverence only marginally this side of idolatry. In the third book of *The Prelude*, William Wordsworth described his sense of intimacy as a Cambridge undergraduate, with the spirits of Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton, and the dizzy 'libations' drunk to the memory of the sober Milton in the poet's former 'lodge and oratory'. Later in life Wordsworth insisted to his nephew that he had always seen himself as standing in an apostolic line: 'When I began to give myself up to the profession of a poet for life, I was impressed with a conviction, that there were four English poets whom I must have continually before me as examples—Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton.' These four poets he claimed to have systematically studied and attempted to equal '*if I could*'. John Keats treasured an engraving of Shakespeare and fancied that the Bard was a 'good Genius' presiding over his work. He posed in front of the Shakespeare for his own portrait, and, when composing, was apt to imagine 'in what position Shakespeare sat when he began "To be or not to be"'. Sir Walter Scott had a cast of Shakespeare's Stratford monument placed in a niche in his library at Abbotsford and hung an engraving of Thomas Stothard's painting of Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims over the fireplace in his study. In 1844 Charles Dickens had a copy of the same engraving hung in the entrance hall at 1 Devonshire Terrace and gilt-framed portraits of his friends, Carlyle and Tennyson, prominently displayed in his library. When he acquired Gad's Hill Place in Kent in 1856 he was so proud of its loose Shakespearian connection that he had a framed inscription proclaiming the fact placed in his hallway. Before the privations of his career as a Jesuit began, the undergraduate Gerard Manley Hopkins asked for portraits of Tennyson, Shelley, Keats, Shakespeare, Milton, and Dante to decorate his rooms at Oxford. The grace of the literary tradition stretched even to the death-bed. Tennyson, who had been rereading Shakespeare's plays in his last illness, was buried clasping a copy of *Cymbeline* and crowned with a wreath of laurel plucked from Virgil's tomb. Even in the anti-heroic twentieth century this yearning to be associated with an established tradition seems not to have diminished. Amidst the plethora of his own images which decorate George Bernard Shaw's house at Ayot St Lawrence is a

Staffordshire pottery figure of Shakespeare; behind Vita Sackville-West's writing table in her sitting-room at Sissinghurst hang portraits of the Brontë sisters and Virginia Woolf; according to one of his recent biographers, T. S. Eliot acquired a photograph of Poets' Corner, with Dryden's monument prominent in the foreground, soon after his arrival in England.

An awareness of the significance, as well as the decorative value, of the English literary tradition was by no means confined to literary aspirants to that tradition. By the mid-eighteenth century English porcelain manufacturers were marketing paired statuettes of Shakespeare and Milton, designed to stand like household gods on refined middle-class chimney-pieces. The Shakespeare was modelled on the Scheemakers statue in Westminster Abbey, the Milton being given a similar half-column on which to rest a pile of books and his elegant left elbow. These models, with variations, remained current until well into the Victorian era, being imitated in cheap Staffordshire pottery (such as seems later to have appealed to Shaw) and in more up-market *biscuit* and Parian ware. The phenomenal popularity of high-quality Parian china in the mid-nineteenth century meant that there were at least 11 different versions of busts or statuettes of Shakespeare on sale to a mass public from various manufacturers. There were also some 6 distinct models available of Milton, 7 of Scott, 6 of Burns, 5 of Byron, 4 of Dickens, 3 of Tennyson, and one each of Bunyan, Johnson, Wordsworth, Shelley, Browning, Thackeray, and Ruskin. The pairing of Shakespeare and Milton as chimney-ornaments, in Parian china and in other cheaper materials, was reflected for Scots and Scotophiles by parallel figures representing Scott and Burns. It is interesting to note, despite political arguments to the contrary, how easily a popular view of the literary tradition seems to have assimilated both establishment and antiestablishment figures. Much as it balanced the 'classical' Milton against that 'Gothic' warbler of native wood-notes wild, Shakespeare, so it seems to have accepted the counterpoise of the (we assume) royalist Shakespeare and the republican Milton. So too, it balanced the Tory Scott and the radical Burns. Although this decorative art may have sprung from a hero-worshipping impulse, it was scarcely confrontational. The idea of possessing representations of famous writers (or, still nowadays, of composers) may have been stimulated by a desire to show off an aspiration to, or an acquisition of, an 'élite' culture, but it cannot properly be seen as a fashion imposed exclusively from above.

The desire to commemorate a line of development and to dignify certain representative writers did, however, have a distinctly gentlemanly precedent, one that went with the possession of a library, or rather with the luxury of a room set aside for books and private study. One of the most remarkable collections of English literary portraits to survive outside the National Portrait Gallery is that assembled in the 1740s by the fourth Earl of Chesterfield (1694–1773) and now in the possession of the University of London Library. Chesterfield bought pictures from the sales of two earlier collectors and patrons of literature—Edward Harley, second Earl of Oxford and Charles Montagu,

Earl of Halifax—and also commissioned new images of his own. The paintings were installed in the library of his grand house in Mayfair in 1750 with the portrait of Shakespeare (now in Stratford-upon-Avon) in pride of place over the mantelpiece. Chesterfield's selection of authors may have largely depended on what painted images were available to him, but the series of portraits still represents a sound guide to what his contemporaries would have regarded as the major figures in English writing up to their own day. Apart from Shakespeare, the collection included images of Chaucer, Sidney, Spenser, Jonson, Denham, Prior, Cowley, Butler, Otway, Dryden, Wycherley, Rowe, Congreve, Swift, Addison, and Pope (the last two painted expressly for his library). Chesterfield also owned two portraits once mistakenly assumed to be of Milton (one is now believed to show Edmund Waller, the other the minor dramatist, William Cartwright). Chesterfield's canonical selection would probably not coincide exactly with a list drawn up by a classically-minded modern scholar of pre-eighteenth-century literature. Given its exclusion of most medieval poets, most Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, and all the disciples of Donne, it would almost certainly clash with how most other twentieth-century readers would choose to view the literary history of the same period.

The drawing up of canons and the making of lists is always a fraught business, one conditioned not only by private tastes and transient public fashions but also by what successors are likely to see as ancestral myopia. But then, the present is always inclined to read the past proleptically as a means of justifying its own prejudices and emphases. The late twentieth century has not proved able to liberate itself from an inherited inclination to catalogue, calibrate, and categorize, let alone from an insistently progressivist view of history. When modern publishers periodically draw up lists of the 'Twenty Best Young British Novelists', or of the 'Ten Best Modern Writers', or when newspapers absurdly attempt to determine who have been the 'Thousand Makers of the Twentieth Century', they are only following pseudo-scientific habits of mind formed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We are more conditioned by Linnaean systems of thought than we often choose to recognize. The nineteenth-century European habit of inscribing famous names on public buildings, of placing busts in architectural niches, and of enhancing cornices with the statues of the great is a case in point. The habit followed from the idea that buildings could be *read* and it represented an attempt to petrify a particular view of cultural history. It was probably killed not by a wholesale revision of cultural history but by a reaction against representation and symbolic art in the 1920s and by the virtual abolition of architectural sculpture in the 1950s. If the names of half-forgotten composers still decorate the façades of opera-houses and the walls of concert-halls throughout Europe, certain prominent British buildings also proclaim the significance of 'national' literature. When, for example, a Royal Commission was established in 1841 to oversee the decorative scheme of the new Houses of Parliament, they determined that the subjects for *frescos* for the interiors should be drawn exclusively from British history and from the

works of three English poets: Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton. None of the designs originally proposed came to fruition, though, in the early 1850s, a series of literary frescos was executed in the Upper Waiting Hall, the subjects being taken from the works of eight writers: Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Byron, and Scott. This stress on national poetry in a building ostensibly dedicated to the workings of Victorian democracy is not really surprising. Literature was seen not only as an identifiable achievement of the British nation, but also as an expression of the unity and of the continuity of the institutions of that same nation (the inclusion of Scott amongst these eight poets was, in part, an acknowledgement of Scotland's place in the union; an Irish equivalent was evidently difficult to find). Only three English writers, Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton, appeared on the south front of the plinth of the Albert Memorial, finished in 1867, but then they had to jostle for eminence in the select company of thirty-six other European poets and musicians. Where one might have expected international, or at least European reference, in the domed Reading-Room of the British Museum, a list of names of exclusively British writers was chosen in 1907 to be inscribed in the empty panels above the cornice. Having faded, they were obliterated in 1952. Here in temporary gilt splendour the names of Chaucer, Caxton, Tyndale, Spenser, Shakespeare, Bacon, Milton, Locke, Addison, Swift, Pope, Gibbon, Wordsworth, Scott, Byron, Carlyle, Macaulay, Tennyson, and Browning overshadowed the labours of the latterday readers and scribblers below. The fact that the names were not replaced is a further illustration, if one were needed, of the very contentiousness of all attempts to formulate a canon.

Several distinguished modern commentators have argued that the most important attempt to fix a canon of English literature was that made in the late nineteenth century by those who introduced English as a university subject. As D. J. Palmer, Chris Baldick, Terry Eagleton, Brian Doyle, Peter Brooker, and Peter Widdowson have variously suggested, in England, at least, 'English' arrived belatedly and with an ulterior motive.¹ This, as Robert Crawford has recently observed, was England's anomaly.² In Scotland, it seems things had been ordered differently, or at least ordered so as to direct the attention of aspirant Scots to their proper place within a United Kingdom and a substantially united literature. The tradition of teaching rhetoric and *belles-lettres*, established at the universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow in the mid-eighteenth century, was designed to introduce students to the supposed refinements of the classics *and* to the superior felicities of modern English stylists as a means of

¹ See D. J. Palmer, *The Rise of English Studies* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1848-1932* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); Brian Doyle, 'The Invention of English', and Peter Brooker and Peter Widdowson, 'A Literature for England', in Robert Collis and Philip Dodd (eds.), *Englishness, Politics and Culture 1880-1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 89-115, 116-63. See also Ian Michael, *The Teaching of English from the Sixteenth Century to 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

² Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

weaning them away from narrowly provincial preoccupations. The teaching of English began, therefore, with some clear ideological intent. In attempting to suppress a certain 'Scottishness' this programme remained distinctively Scottish by the very fact of its aim of shaping Scottish intellectuals in an enlightened European mould. Contemporary Edinburgh was reconstructed as an Athens, and not a London, of the North.

The English language as used by British, and not exclusively English, stylists, was seen in Scotland as an essentially unifying and progressivist force. When the teaching of English literature and history was introduced to the colleges of the new University of London in the 1830s it had a distinctly Scottish bias. Although the first Professor of English at both University and King's College, the Reverend Thomas Dale, was a Cambridge graduate, the pattern of lectures and undergraduate study that he devised bore a marked resemblance to the courses in rhetoric already established in Scotland. By the late 1850s, when the first part of the London BA examinations included an obligatory paper in English language, literature, and history, the teaching of English had evidently become a moral as well as an ideological exercise. As the emphatically Christian *Handbook of English Literature* published in 1865 by Joseph Angus, MA DD, 'Examiner in English Language, Literature and History to the University of London', stresses, however, the grandly imperial idea of England and its culture had come to embrace all aspects of the written literature of the island of Britain. English literature, Angus writes, was 'the reflection of the national life, an exhibition of the principles to which we owe our freedom and progress: a voice of experience speaking for all time, to any who are willing to hear'. 'No nation', he adds, somewhat chauvinistically, 'could have originated it but in circumstances like those of England, and no nation can receive and welcome it without reproducing in its life the image of our own.' Although Angus warns his readers of the dangers of much modern prose fiction ('*mentally*, habitual novel reading is destructive of real vigour; and *morally*, it is destructive of real kindness'), his book is generally thorough, broad-minded, and wide-ranging. He deals with early literature, with poetry, drama, and prose from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, and he includes subsections on historical, philosophical, theological and, somewhat more warily, rationalist writing. His main fault lies in his largely unrelieved dullness, a dullness which very probably derived from his and his university's strictly factual and chronological approach to the new subject. Angus defines no restrictive canons, no patterns of saving literary grace, and no theories of literature. All he can do at the end of his *Handbook* is draw the lame conclusions that study broadens the mind, that a student's style could be improved with reference to established models, that history has a tendency to repeat itself, and that literature ideally ought to be 'studied under the guidance of Christian truth'.

A more restrictive and prescriptive line of argument is evident in Thomas Arnold junior's *Manual of English Literature* (1862, expanded and reprinted in

1868 as *Chaucer to Wordsworth: A Short History of English Literature, From the Earliest Times to the Present Day*). Arnold (1823–1900) had been appointed Professor of English Literature at Newman's Catholic University in Dublin in 1862; he later held the chair at its successor institution, University College, Dublin. His *Manual* manages to proclaim both the liberally progressivist virtues insisted on by his firmly Protestant father and, to a lesser degree, the Catholic sensibility that he himself had espoused (and which his university embodied). Nevertheless, Arnold's study is both lively and engaging. He sees Elizabethan England, with its imposed Protestantism, as still managing to enjoy 'a joyous, sanguine, bustling time'; it was an age 'in which the movement was all forward, and the cold shade of reaction had not as yet appeared'. He finds the late eighteenth century, by contrast, a period of 'dim and dismal twilight', a twilight relieved only by the blazing lights of the emergent Romantic poets, 'young men full of hope and trust, and fresh untried vigour, whose hearts and imaginations were most powerfully acted upon by the great moral and political eruption in France'. Although Arnold ends his survey with these same poets, and although he warns in his Preface of the dangers of 'confounding the perishable with the enduring' in judging all modern writing, he firmly believes in the future potential of both English literature and of the study of English literature. The last sentence of his *Short History* refers prophetically back to Oxford, his own Alma Mater: 'A century hence, Englishmen will scarcely believe that England's most ancient and important university was still without a chair devoted to the systematic study of the national literature, in the year of grace 1868.'

If the tendency to view English literature as if it were a historical progression of worthy authors determined the University of London syllabus until well into the twentieth century, the ancient English universities, once they got round to establishing chairs and then courses of study, felt obliged to make English acceptable by rendering it dry, demanding, and difficult. The problem began with the idea that English was a parvenu subject largely suited to social and intellectual upstarts (a category which it was assumed included women). In order to appear 'respectable' in the company of gentlemanly disciplines such as classics and history, it had to require hard labour of its students. In the University of Oxford in particular, the axis of what was taken to be the received body of English literature was shifted drastically backwards. The popular perception of a loose canon, like Arnold's, which stretched from Chaucer to Wordsworth (or later Tennyson), was countered by a new, and far less arbitrary, choice of texts with a dominant stress on the close study of Old and Middle English literature. Beyond this insistence on a grasp of the earliest written forms of the English language, the Oxford syllabus virtually dragooned its students into a systematic consideration of a series of monumental poetic texts, all of which were written before the start of the Victorian age. In the heyday of the unreformed syllabus, in the 1940s, the undergraduate Philip Larkin was, according to his friend Kingsley Amis, driven to the kind of protest

unbecoming to a future university librarian. Amis recalls working his own way resentfully through Spenser's *Faerie Queene* in an edition owned by his college library. At the foot of the last page he discovered an unsigned pencil note in Larkin's hand which read: 'First I thought Troilus and Criseyde was the most *boring* poem in English. Then I thought Beowulf was. Then I thought Paradise Lost was. Now I *know* that The Faerie Queene is the *dullest thing out. Blast it.*'

It was in reaction against syllabuses such as those devised by the universities of London and Oxford, and against the well-bred vacuousness of the first King Edward VII Professor of English Literature at Cambridge, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (1863–1944), that F. R. Leavis (1895–1978) defined his own ideas and his own canon. Although Quiller-Couch had defended the study of English against charge of 'easiness' and against the narrow oppressions of a strict and particular sect of medievalists, his published lectures suggest the extent to which he merely cited favourite books rather than interrogated or scrutinized them. Amid his classical tags and his elegant blandness he attempted to offer candidates for the new English degree (introduced in 1917) a grand overview of the subject, suggesting at one point that students might 'fasten on the great authors' whom he lists in select little groups (Shakespeare; Chaucer and Henryson; Spenser, Marlowe, Donne; Bacon, Milton, Dryden, Pope; Samuel Johnson, Burke; Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, Byron, Shelley; Dickens, Browning, Carlyle). With the reform of the Cambridge English Tripos in 1926, and with the appointment of Leavis as a probationary lecturer a year later, a far more rigorous approach to the study of English began to emerge. In his own lectures, Leavis took a malicious delight in citing examples of what he considered 'bad' poetry, extracted from Quiller-Couch's once standard anthology, *The Oxford Book of English Verse* (1900), expatiating on them as reflections of the anthologizer's standards and taste.

Leavis's influence was not, however, confined to Cambridge lecture halls or to his intense tutorial interaction with his personal students. In 1932 he founded the journal *Scrutiny* as a vehicle for the wider dissemination of his ideas and it was through *Scrutiny* that he and his disciples systematically explored a series of provocative critical judgements based on what he deemed to be life-enhancing principles. From this moral basis, established by Leavis and his approved contributors, there evolved a new canon of writers who were seen as part of a tradition that was 'alive in so far as it is alive to us'. Out went the non-critical, annalist, historical approach that Leavis associated with the Victorian critic, George Saintsbury (1845–1933); in came a dogmatically defined series of 'lines of development'. In *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (1936), derived from essays first published in *Scrutiny*, the influence of T. S. Eliot's radical protest against Milton's style led Leavis to an alternative stress on a 'line of wit' stretching from Donne to Marvell. Shelley too was to be disparaged as one who handed poetry over to 'a sensibility that has no more dealings with intelligence than it can help'. *The*

Great Tradition (1948, also derived from *Scrutiny* essays) opens with the unequivocal statement: 'The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad . . .'. It barely pauses to reflect upon the fact that James was an American novelist or that Conrad's roots were distinctly un-English; it relegates Richardson, the Brontës, and Dickens to relatively minor roles; it ignores Thackeray, Gaskell, and Trollope; it insists that although Fielding deserved the place of importance given him in the despised Saintsburian literary histories, 'he hasn't the kind of classical distinction we are also invited to credit him with'; and it sees Scott as primarily 'a kind of inspired folk-lorist, qualified to have done in fiction something analogous to the ballad-opera'. Leavis's new canon was in some significant ways defined retrospectively. If, as he seems to suggest elsewhere, all 'lines of development' culminated in the work of D. H. Lawrence and Eliot, and not in that of Joyce or Woolf, so, reading back from Lawrence and Eliot, a new tradition was established, one that included Donne and Bunyan while excluding Spenser and Milton, one that added James while subtracting Sterne, one that praised Blake while remaining silent about Tennyson. It was only in 1970 that Dickens was allotted his place in a 'great tradition' that seemed formerly to have got on well enough without him (though, as Leavis's apologists were quick to point out, an 'analytic note' of 1948 had proclaimed that the then neglected *Hard Times* was a masterpiece).

As Lawrence's self-appointed mediator and advocate, Leavis made his critical readings of English literature central to a moral mission to redeem England from the consequences of its empty secularism. It was a mission which, like missions before and since, depended on dividing sheep from goats and distinguishing 'them' from 'us'. 'They', the goats, were confusingly various. 'They' controlled both the popular press and the academic journals; 'they' were upper middle-class dilettantes and Bloomsburyite intellectuals; 'they' were the demagogues of the right and the would-be tribunes of the people; latterly, 'they' were the underminers of civilization through television and all those who had failed to respond to Leavis's prophetic voice. 'We' (his readers) were, by contrast, a small élite who recognized the saving grace of the life-enhancers named in the select canon. To dismiss Leavis for his lack of a theoretical basis to his criticism, as certain Marxist critics have always done, is to miss the point of his mission. He suspected theory as much as he disliked historical criticism, because he considered it irrelevant to the real business of critical debate and irrelevant to the kind of careful textual analysis that he advocated. The narrowness of his insistence on 'close readings'—hermetically sealing texts from reference to the biographical, historical, social, political, and cultural circumstances which moulded them—has some parallels to the methods employed by Structuralists. Both now seem time-locked. More significantly, Leavis's determination to straighten and redefine the canon of English literature in the name of civilization looks like an attempt to halt both civilization and redefinition in their tracks.