



Hyder Edward Rollins

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Hyder Edward Rollins¹

SINCE Hyder Rollins and the Widener Library were so intimately associated for more than forty years it was appropriate that the advent of these two Harvard institutions should have coincided. When he first climbed the steps of that newly opened building in 1916 he was a young Texan who had come to take his Ph.D. at Harvard because, as he said then and later, it was 'the greatest university in the world.' When, as Gurney Professor of English Emeritus, he descended those steps for the last time forty-two years later he was ending a career that had long since become a part of Harvard legend.

Although a scholar's name is usually writ in water it is unlikely that Hyder Rollins' work will be soon forgotten. In every respect his achievement was uncommon, and in terms of bulk alone it was probably unique. The staggering total of forty-one books and one hundred thirteen articles and reviews — as well as the supervision, as editor or coeditor, of some twenty volumes in *Harvard Studies in English*, *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, and *A New Variorum Shakespeare* — suggests one dimension of his work, and the direction of more than a hundred doctoral theses suggests another; but his real impact on Harvard and on literary research cannot be put in quantitative terms. Hundreds of articles and books had their origin in his courses, where many leading scholars of the present day were trained, and hundreds more were submitted to him for correction and approval. As a result, no other teacher of his day received so many dedications, and these attest not only to his erudition, which was fabulous, but to his warmth and value as a friend. Generations of his 'boys,' as he called his graduate students, remembered his instruc-

¹ The HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN is honored by the opportunity to publish Professor Baker's tribute to a scholar whose steadfast support will always be one of the editor's brightest memories. This support was manifest not only by Hyder Rollins' own frequent contributions (eight in all, beginning with Volume I, Number 1) but by the still more numerous contributions of others channeled by him to the BULLETIN. Above all, however, was his heartening belief, freely and widely articulated, in the BULLETIN's editorial aims.

The article here printed will form the preface to a bibliography of Hyder Rollins' writings to be published during the present year by the Harvard University Press; its prepublication in the BULLETIN has been generously allowed by the Press. — G. W. C.

tion, his hospitality, and his lasting interest in their work with a glow not generally associated with advanced degrees. For them he was and will remain the scholar-gentleman *par excellence*. Despite his extraordinary production he regarded teaching as his most important and most gratifying job. The fact that in three decades he never missed a class and never took a sabbatical leave enforces his assertion, on retiring, that his students, not his books, were his only source of pride. Actually, of course, it was a false distinction, because his teaching and his scholarship were never far apart. His pursuit of learning gave force and unity to everything he did, whether in the classroom or in his Widener study. The intellectual integrity that irradiates his edition of the *Sonnets* also informed his noted seminars, for in his books, as in his teaching, he showed that scholarship could have an austere splendor of its own.

Although the discipline of learning gave shape and texture to his life he was not a dusty pedant, but a highly cultivated man of many friendships, interests, and affections. Born in what was then the frontier town of Abilene, Texas, on 8 November 1889, he came of pioneer stock. His father was a native Texan only fourteen years younger than the state itself, his mother the daughter of a circuit-riding Methodist preacher, and they inspired in him a filial devotion, perhaps made deeper by an only sister's early death, that was a central factor in his life. In his own later years and their extreme old age their relationship was as warm and tender as it had been for more than six decades. At the ripe age of fourteen he entered Southwestern University, and after time off for teaching country school — when he himself was just a boy — he took his first degree in 1910. There followed four years of graduate work and teaching at the University of Texas under the formidable Morgan Callaway, Jr, one of the most exacting scholars of his day, then a year at Johns Hopkins, and finally, in 1916, the Harvard Graduate School. A year later he received the Ph.D., and three months after that event he enlisted as a private in the Army Signal Corps, with which he served as a second lieutenant for the next two years in France. In 1919 he went back to Europe on the Sheldon Travelling Scholarship that he had earlier declined in order to enlist. In 1920 an appointment as assistant professor at New York University began his quick ascent up the academic ladder. He became a full professor four years later, and in 1926, at the age of thirty-seven, he received a call to Harvard. In 1939 he succeeded his revered teacher

George Lyman Kittredge as Gurney Professor of English; in 1956 he retired; and on 25 July 1958, at the age of sixty-eight, he died. It was a life that despite its even tenor had been full and satisfying, and it ended with a cadence — the publication of his majestic edition of Keats's *Letters* — that implied complete repose.

Although his publications ranged from Chaucer to O. Henry, until about 1945 he centered his research on the English Renaissance. Merely to itemize his contributions in this field would be like reading a tray of cards from the Widener catalogue. His early interest in popular poetry of the Tudor age led to the publication, in 1920, of *Old English Ballads*; he followed this with almost a book a year, and sometimes two, until he capped this phase of his production with the eight volumes of *The Pepys Ballads* between 1929 and 1932. Meanwhile his work in broadside ballads had led him to Elizabethan non-dramatic poetry, and his superb editions of all the major poetical miscellanies between *Tottel's* and *A Poetical Rhapsody* sealed his reputation. Punctuating this endless stream of books were scores of articles, many of them basic contributions to our knowledge of the Elizabethan novel, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century biography, and the stage history of the Commonwealth. In his own books, as in those he supervised for *Harvard Studies in English* and *Harvard Studies and Notes*, he achieved new standards of editorial excellence. Having served for several years as general editor of *A New Variorum Shakespeare*, finally, toward the end of the thirties, he addressed himself to the task that he of all men was best prepared to do — the variorum editions of Shakespeare's poems and sonnets. These works, which appeared in 1939 and 1944, would have made the name and fame of a dozen lesser men, and despite his modest deprecation of almost everything he did he himself used to say, in his more unguarded moments, that he perhaps would be remembered for these books. After a year away from Cambridge, when he nursed his mother through a lingering illness, he returned to his teaching and research, but in a different field. Perhaps looking for new worlds to conquer, he began to work on Keats. The results were what one might expect: a flood of articles and books that promptly made him a Keatsian of international repute. The first big product of these final years was *The Keats Circle* in 1948, an edition of letters by Keats's relatives and friends that placed the poet more fully and firmly in his milieu; the last, published three weeks after he had died, was his authoritative edition of the *Letters*.

One feature of this huge production is its even texture. From first to last it is of a piece, as notable for quality as quantity. Even before reaching Harvard he had begun to build his massive bibliography, and if the thirteen articles that he published on O. Henry and other Texas subjects between 1914 and 1916 do not anticipate his later interests they do show that he had found his *métier*. His apprentice work, like his editions of Shakespeare and Keats, is marked by the crisp and lucid style, the control of his material, and the precision and attention to detail that were to be the despair and inspiration of his students and the envy of his colleagues. The master of a pure and swift expository style, he abhorred writing that was vague and grandiose. If you must be fancy, he used to tell his students, be sure that you are also clear. It is unlikely that he ever wrote a fuzzy sentence; if sometimes his prose seems almost too astringent it at least is never imprecise. In things like his notable 'Historical Sketch of the Broadside Ballad, 1640-1660' prefixed to *Cavalier and Puritan* his style, of course, is taut and serviceable; but even when he wrote of Keats and Joseph Severn — men in whom his own emotions were involved — he resisted any show of feeling.

Such reticence was not a mannerism. He thought that a scholar's first and hardest duty was to ascertain and state the truth. Only rarely did he permit himself the luxury of airing his opinions or expressing his emotions. The acid test of such self-discipline was no doubt his great edition of the *Sonnets*, for which he was obliged to read and summarize more crackpot works of alleged 'interpretation' than most of us could dream of. As all know who have quailed before his erudition about the Dark Woman (whom he refused to call a lady) or the Rival Poet or the autobiographical content of the *Sonnets*, he nobly did a scholar's duty. Occasionally, to be sure, his notes betray a certain skepticism, or even sarcasm, and in his preface he quoted the remark that 'Shakespeare is the happy hunting ground of all minds that have lost their balance'; but by and large his assertion that he had tried to give 'fairly — and without exclamation points — the opinions of scores of writers, with many of which I have no agreement' must be regarded as heroic understatement.

He was, of course, extremely learned. Not only could he sweep through half a dozen languages, as in his notes on *Tottel's Miscellany*, but he could ferret out the most obscure details, in the life of Keats as well as that of Martin Parker, with what looked like careless ease.

He sometimes reveled in his learning like the virtuoso that he was. Thus in an article on the borrowings in Brian Melbancke's *Philotimus* he coursed through a dizzying array of sources, only to comment in conclusion that 'no copy of the book is now accessible to me, and in reading it through hurriedly in the Bodleian I merely jotted down those passages that I could recognize immediately and a few others that seemed to be taken from poems, although I have not yet been able to identify them. A careful examination by some one more widely read in Elizabethan poetry than I would no doubt lead to the discovery of other striking borrowings.' As he said in a later article of the same sort, 'such sport could go on indefinitely.' In at least three large areas — Elizabethan poetry, the broadside ballad, and the Romantic poets — his erudition was unmatched, but he moved through all of English literature with astonishing control. His reading and his memory knew no limits.

Skeptical of mere subjective commentary and frankly hostile to journalism that masquerades as scholarship, he built his work on knowledge. Styles change in scholarship no less than in hats and naval tactics, he once wrote, but solid work has 'a provoking habit' of enduring, and his whole career exemplifies this fact. Probably no scholar of his or any other age has done so much work that runs so little danger of being superseded. It is hard to imagine the day when his editions of the broadside ballads and the Tudor miscellanies will not command respect, or when scholars will not profit by his work on Elderton and Ralcygh, Shakespeare and Keats, Wyatt and Deloney, and a dozen other writers. He himself held what he called 'the old-fashioned notion that a man should really understand the language of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, or Wordsworth before indulging in flights of higher — or lower — criticism,' and his own scholarship and teaching confirmed this high ideal. As Professor Kittredge used to say, he was very learned, very fast, and very accurate; but also he had a remarkable capacity for hard and painful work. He would spend a week in running down a date and months in checking 'facts' that he had reason to suspect. Every word and reference in the thousand pages of his variorum *Sonnets*, for example, was verified at least three times — in typescript, in galley proof, and in pages — before he would consent to publication. As a consequence his work carries exceptional authority. One of the great editors of this or any other century, he was a virtuoso in presenting and elucidating texts, and his knowl-

edge, common sense, and accuracy stamped everything he touched as with a signature.

His scholarship, like his behavior and attire, was fastidious and even elegant. As many grateful students came to know, he could be infinitely patient with those less learned and less skillful than himself, but he had an unerring eye and a very caustic tongue for what was shabby, lazy, and dishonest. Thus he never mentioned Edmond Malone without a sign of deference, and he could even condone 'the riotous, if learned editorship' of a swashbuckling pioneer like J. W. Ebsworth; but in writing of the pretensions and deceits of John Payne Collier he did not mask his deep contempt, and when he called another of his predecessors 'slack' the word was loaded with opprobrium. Once it was his lot to review a silly book about Shakespeare by a titled amateur who had written, as he said, 'various other scholarly books and articles which read somewhat like fiction and several works of fiction that abound in the paraphernalia of scholarship.' Since he was dealing with a lady, he was of course genteel in exposing her pretentious ignorance, but he was withering none the less. That a college professor, in his preface to the book, should say the author's 'new and exciting ideas' would keep more humble scholars busy for another twenty years puzzled him, but 'I heartily agree with him,' he said, 'that much of it is "wondrous strange."' Of another hapless book he wrote, with crushing finality, that it showed 'signs of haste as well as of unfamiliarity with the material and with the period,' but he was prompt and generous in saluting solid work like C. C. Baskerville's on the Elizabethan jig and Robert Gittings' on Keats, and in view of his high standards an accolade from him was enough to establish a young scholar's reputation.

Much of his own work was done in an effort to rectify the perpetuated errors that had achieved the status of received opinions. At one end of his career, for example, he showed that none of the many commentators on *A Handful of Pleasant Delights* had recognized that charming little book as a collection of 'broadside ballads, pure and simple' or had even dated it correctly. At the other end he undertook to fix the sequence and the text of Keats's letters. In a historic review of his predecessor's work on these famous letters he observed that nobody, 'however painstaking his effort, can print two hundred fifty odd letters with absolute accuracy. The present writer, at any rate, has no illusions about his own ability to do so. . . . Nevertheless, after

four golden opportunities (1931, 1935, 1947, 1952) in four editions (most editors never have a second chance) more reliable texts of all the letters might reasonably be expected.' It was in order to satisfy that expectation that he himself finally, and with real misgivings, took on the heavy job. Working with an intensity made poignant by the knowledge that both his vision and his health were failing, he finished reading proof a few weeks before his death. As the reception of this last book shows, there is no doubt that Keats's letters have at last attained an authoritative form.

Most of us can take comfort in Dr Johnson's remark that no man is obliged to do as much as he can. It was, perhaps, a part of Hyder Rollins' greatness that he declined the limitation.

HERSCHEL BAKER

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