

PLATE LVIII



C. T. ONIONS

## CHARLES TALBUT ONIONS

1873-1965

CHARLES TALBUT ONIONS, the last of the four lexicographers who made *OED* an international symbol for sound etymology and exact definition based on full literary evidence, was born at Edgbaston, Birmingham, on 10 September 1873. The family name, which is of Welsh origin, being based on the form *Einion*, occurs frequently in the registers of St. Martin's, the old parish church of Birmingham; and C.T.O. liked to point out that some of its numerous variants resemble those recorded in *OED* s.v. *onion*. Talbut was the name of his maternal grandfather. His own father was a designer and embosser in metal, but the habitual occupation of the Onionses had been bellows-making; a John Collingwood Onions was bellows-maker to the French Court and to the Queen's Board of Ordnance.

He received his first formal education at 'an excellent board school', and later attended the Camp Hill branch of King Edward VI's foundation. Onions described the headmaster, the Reverend Arthur Jamison Smith, as a man of sterling character and scholarly outlook, and he owed much to Smith's humane influence. Littré's French Dictionary and the fascicules of the *New English Dictionary* (as it was then called) were kept in the class-room. Thus Onions, like his colleague Craigie, who saw the first part of *NED* in the hands of his Dundee schoolmaster, was early aware of lexicography as practised on the grand scale. He retained throughout his life an admiration for such nineteenth-century practitioners as Hatzfeld, Darmesteter, and Diez.

As a boy he was equally influenced in a different direction by one John Heywood, a Tractarian organist and choirmaster and pioneer in the adoption of a free-rhythm psalter. The only early photograph extant shows him as a choirboy. His religious sentiments, once fixed, never varied. They later found support in the Oxford of the Cowley Fathers ('the Cowley Dads', as he called them) and he was to worship for some sixty years at the Church of St. Mary Magdalen in St. Giles'.

With a leaving exhibition he entered Mason College, which was to become the University of Birmingham, and studied for

the London BA, which he gained in 1892—with no more than third-class honours in French; an MA followed in 1895. At school he had begun to compile an Anglo-Saxon glossary from glosses found in Aldis Wright's editions of Shakespeare, a diversion that was to bear fruit in future years; but at college he attended chiefly to Latin and French, taught there by E. A. Sonnenschein and C. M. C. Bévenot respectively. His liking for French later brought him (at Oxford) into touch with Henri Berthon whose friendship he retained for half a century and with whom he frequently collaborated. Sonnenschein in due course enlisted him as a contributor to the Parallel Grammar Series, in which his *Advanced English Syntax* appeared in 1904. It was often reprinted, but without the additions and corrections that he was constantly accumulating; some of them found a place in a new edition published after his death.

It was Edward Arber, the prolific and industrious professor of English at Mason College, who introduced him to J. A. H. Murray when the latter was eking out his stipend as editor of *NED* by examining at Birmingham in 'Oxford Locals'.<sup>1</sup> Murray had a penchant for the plumage of honorary degrees, the hoods of which he would wear *en masse* when supervising such examinations. Onions had only his London hood of black stuff, edged with red. 'Shall I put it on, sir?', he asked, when they first met. 'I don't think you need', muttered Murray between his teeth. 'Obstinate Onions' at once donned the hood. Murray's own early career had been much like Onions's: none of the *OED*'s four editors were *Oxonienses*, save by adoption.

When in September 1895 Onions accepted an invitation from Murray to join the staff of the Dictionary the tin shed that housed Murray's Scriptorium had been standing in the garden of 78 Banbury Road, Oxford, for ten years. But Onions, like Bradley and Craigie before him, was accommodated in the Old Ashmolean. It was conveniently close to the Bodleian, and remained the scene of Onions's labours till the Dictionary and its supplement were completed. It was not connected by telephone to Sunnyside, whither Onions would from time to time be sent with urgent messages or enquiries, on bicycle or horse-drawn tram. That he sometimes worked also in the Scriptorium is evident from the recollections of Murray's children, who remembered him turning their skipping-rope (when their father was out of sight) and who chanted 'Charlie is

<sup>1</sup> For Arber's long-standing acquaintance with Murray see the Index to Elizabeth Murray, *Caught in the Web of Words*.

my Darling' behind his back. Illustrative of the communications between the two work-rooms is a note from Onions dated Dec. 8/05:

Dear Dr. Murray,

We have just had occasion to look up the suffix *-phily* (for word *Microphily*), but it does not appear in its alphabetical place. Thinking, however, that it might have been tacked on to *-philous*, I looked for it there. But *-philous* itself seems to have been overlooked although there is a cross reference (with q.v.) under *-phil*.

I write immediately to inform you of this in case there is time for its insertion. In the column where it should be (782/2), room could easily be made for it by excising *philostorgy* or *philo-theosophical* which probably no one would ever miss.

A lemma *-philous* was duly inserted, and the entry *philo-theosophical* disappeared.

Edwardian Oxford was the home of philological giants: Henry Sweet, Joseph Wright, Henry Bradley, William Craigie, Arthur Napier, and Murray himself. They were all men of strong character and their rivalry was not always without tension. Sweet lacked the advancement that came to Wright: 'It was sweet to have Wright but it would have been right to have Sweet' was said of a certain election. All were under pressure of one kind or another; and a tartness of judgement that showed in some of C.T.O.'s *obiter dicta* is perhaps traceable to the years of his apprenticeship. Yet he was not one to undervalue the debt he owed to the other three Atlantes who were then shouldering the chief burden of the Dictionary. To pass from Murray to Bradley, he wrote, was a remarkable experience: 'it was to pass from the practical professional teacher to the philosophical exponent. Murray gave formal instruction; Bradley taught by hint, by interjectional phrase, or even a burst of laughter.' Onions, who penned two lapidary memoirs of Bradley, and contributed to DNB the entries under J. A. H. Murray and Henry Sweet, displayed in his riper years the virtues of both methods. But initially he felt a little handicapped by a stammer, which was still noticeable in the thirties: hence his fellow-feeling for A. W. Pollard, and for King George V, from whom he was to receive the insignia of CBE. 'Do you know what the King said to me?', he would ask. 'He said " . . . . . uh . . . . . uh . . . . . "'

By the time that Onions joined its staff both the methods and the form of *OED* had long been fixed. It was essentially a co-operative enterprise, and a full assessment of Onions's

contribution would have to be related to the accounts of his predecessors given in earlier volumes of the Academys' *Proceedings*. Suffice it here to state that he helped to make it one of the great lexical works of modern times, outstripping even Du Cange in that it provides a history of the pronunciation, etymology, and meaning (or meanings) of every word recorded. Of earlier English dictionaries—as catalogued by Onions himself in an exhibition held in the Bodleian in 1928—perhaps only Johnson's and Richardson's (1838) keep their place on a scholar's shelves; the latter because it will still often provide evidence from the poets that is not incorporated in *OED*.

Craigie had been an assistant editor for some years when Onions arrived on the scene. Their personal relations were never close, though there was mutual respect. Craigie was to have the greater share of academic rewards, though Murray's son Harold once said that his father had wished Onions to succeed him. In 1907 Onions married Angela, youngest daughter of the Revd Arthur Blythman, Rector of Shenington, by whom he was to have seven sons and three daughters. So he came to need a large house, which he eventually found in Staverton Road, North Oxford. For many years he kept an allotment on the other side of the Banbury Road, and in the little time left over after a seven-and-a-half-hour day grew his own vegetables. For holidays, when the children were young, he would rent a village school. Certainly no misanthrope, he could never afford the entertainments that figured largely in the lives of married dons of the Edwardian time. He recalled a luncheon with the Craigies as an event.<sup>1</sup> From 1904 he supplemented his meagre earnings by preparing small editions for the Camelot Classics and editing various textbooks of French grammar and composition. But by far his most substantial early work was the *Shakespeare Glossary* (1911, and constantly reprinted, with some addenda). That this was what would nowadays be described as a 'spin-off' from the Dictionary is shown by such a note as the following, addressed from The Rowans, Highfield, Oxford, 9 Jan. 1911:

<sup>1</sup> During the meal a telegram arrived, which Mrs. Craigie opened. 'There's Davy dead', she exclaimed—Davy being Craigie's brother. 'Ah, weel', said Craigie, and continued his talk with Onions. It is not surprising to find that Craigie had postponed his honeymoon to join the *NED* staff. Yet he was a kindly and considerate man, always eager to help young scholars.

Dear Sir James,

*Testril*

seems to belong exclusively to the Shakespearian vocabulary: I find no other reference in my books here. I think it's intended for a jocular or affected form—it is put into the mouth of the absurd Sir Andrew Aguecheek—and formed by suffix substitution: *-ril* (= I suppose, *-erel*) for *-ern* in *testern*, another Shakespearian form. A comparison occurs to me, but it is perhaps hardly acceptable in the way of etymology: viz.

custron: coistrel  
           custrel  
 testern :testril  
 testorne  
 (?testrone)

Might it not be well provisionally to put the (as far as one knows) modern dial[ect] *testerel* separate from the Shakesp. word? Then *custrel* might be compared with the dial. word for meaning. Of course connexion in meaning can well be imagined between the coin (cf. 'turn up like a bad penny') and the abusive epithet, but without evidence it seems hazardous to link the words.

I fear all this is *Beaucoup de bruit pour rien*.

With best wishes for the new year

Yours truly,  
 C. T. Onions

In the event, neither *testril* nor *testerel* found a place in *OED* but the former is entered in the *Shakespeare Glossary* as: 'fanciful form of tester = sixpence'.

The *Glossary* was much more than a collection of such words. 'The elucidation of idiom, the definition of colloquial phrases, and the detailed illustrations of specialised use of pronouns and of the so-called particles', he wrote, 'are points on which I have displayed much care.' He surveyed not only the folio and quarto editions and conjectural emendations thereof, but also stage-directions (e.g. *sennet*). He always relished the dialect of 'Brummagem' and Warwickshire (and other distinguishing features of their denizens), and especially enjoyed demonstrating the use to which Shakespeare put his native dialect. The entries in the *Glossary* under *Basimecu*, *mobled*, *muss*, *wheel* provide examples of his original contributions; and he was pleased to vindicate on dialectal grounds Dr Johnson's adherence to the reading *minnick*, *minnock*, in *MND* III. ii. 19. With the Johnson of Lichfield, Warw., he had much in common both in career and disposition: he could be gruff and bearish, even *sournois*, but was never churlish. The *Glossary*

remains a handbook indispensable to the reader of Shakespeare; and C.T.O. would have approved the decision of the Clarendon Press to produce a Chaucer Glossary on much the same lines (1979). He returned to the illustration of Shakespearean usage when completing the edition of *Shakespeare's England* (1916) in succession to Sir Sidney Lee—he included a select glossary of musical terms—and thirty years later adverted to it in his magisterial contribution to *The Character of England*. A valuable account by him of Shakespeare's language was printed in an edition of *Nine Plays of Shakespeare* edited by George Gordon (1928).

Not till 1913 did he begin independent editorial work on the Dictionary, though he had prepared portions of M, N, R, SE-, and SH. From 1914 till the completion of the work in 1928 he was co-editor, and as such responsible for SUB-SZ, WH-WORLING, X, Y, Z—including the cross-reference 'Zyxt, obs. (Kentish) 2nd sing. ind. pres. of SEE, *v.*' which was the last form entered and hence gave a brand name to 'the last word in soaps'. In the Supplement he attended to A-K, S, T. Six years before the main work was completed he had been made editor of the abridgement that became known as *SOED*. It appeared in February 1933 and was at once reprinted. A third edition, revised with addenda, was printed in 1944.

His work as editor was interrupted in 1918, when he went to the Naval Intelligence Division of the Admiralty with the rank of honorary Captain, RM, and began his service reading German script letters. From 1920 until 1949 he held a university lectureship (converted into a readership in 1927) that required him to lecture regularly in term. He liked to repeat the quip that 'a Reader is one who reads, a Professor one who professes to read'. He would always begin a lecture by raising his academic square and scanning his audience to see whether they were wearing gowns and female members were wearing their caps. He preferred to lecture on early Middle English texts. His textual reconstruction of passages from *The Owl and the Nightingale* (*Essays and Studies XXII*, 1936), like his later 'Comments and speculations on the text of *Havelok*' (*Philologica: The Malone Anniversary Studies*), shows his eye for dialectal and metrical niceties. With J. R. R. Tolkien and C. L. Wrenn he set a pattern for Anglo-Saxon and Middle English studies. The production of sound texts and the resolution of *crucis* became the primary purpose. But Onions kept a place on the lecture schedules for Chaucerian grammar and metre: teaching

that 'weight' (i.e. the combination of stress and syllable length) has always been the basis of English metre, and that the subtlety of English verse consists in the adjustment and variation in this weight. The articles he wrote for Cassell's *Encyclopedia of Literature* (1953) on prosody and various verse forms embody in typically concise fashion his mature thoughts on these topics.

By 1895 not only had the plan of the Dictionary and manner of proceeding long been fixed; the techniques of lay-out and printing had been refined. His reports to the Philological Society (the work's first begetter) indicate the nature of the difficulties that still arose. In one such report he speaks of 'the clogging morass of *un*-compounds through which Professor Craigie was painfully to drag himself, and the thorny problems of etymology and semantics which beset me as I pick my way as carefully as I can along the narrow path of *Wi*'. It was not amongst rare, learned, or archaic words that the lexicographer found the most difficult, or at least the most laborious, part of his task, but among ancient monosyllables like *while* (which with its compounds covers some 40 columns) *will*, *with*, *wrong*. Entries like those under *Whit Sunday*, or *whitlow* or *widow* show how much we owe simply to Onions's method of presenting the evidence. The criticisms of this method sometimes voiced ignore the inevitable restrictions placed upon the editors from the outset, and must not be taken to indicate that Onions and his colleagues were indifferent to 'the structure of complex words'.

By 1926 Craigie (now Sir William) had taken a chair at Chicago, where the *Dictionary of American English* was in train, and was spending only half the year in Oxford. More duties, or at least more correspondence, fell on Onions, and he continued to consult any expert easily accessible about the *minutiae* that now prove to give the work a value far beyond the lexical. Thus we find him in 1927 sending to the Provost of Oriel a proof of his article on *workhouse*, asking if he should speak of *task-work* in this connection or quote other acts of parliament in addition to those cited. The corrected reissue with its Supplement, which appeared in 1933, involved similar careful scrutiny, and similar appeals for aid. Lists of *desiderata* (earlier instances) had been issued in the *Periodical*, a house journal of the University Press, and Onions was meticulous in acknowledging contributions—including two from the *Children's Newspaper* (which provided earlier examples of *baking powder* and *central heating*). Thanks to Craigie the Supplement included many Americanisms



not found in the original volumes, but even these did not pass without scrutiny: it was Onions who altered the entry s.v. *Beatemest*; a US dial. correcting the derivation from past participle. *beaten* to 'app. f. *beat* 'em + est . . .' Craigie's delays in providing etymologies of American words tested Onions's patience, whilst several of his assistants were suffering from nervous exhaustion. The Supplement occupied 866 pages; its entries were selected from a specially prepared basis of material, which was itself extracted from a collection of closely packed slips occupying some 75 linear feet of shelving. At the last minute five pages of additions and emendations were added—including the earliest instance of *principal*, head of a college (from Early Chancery Proceedings 1438: 'one Roger Grey, Clerk, principalle of Brasenose in Oxynforde').

On the completion of the main work, Oxford, Leeds, and (appropriately) Birmingham had conferred on him the honorary degrees of Doctor of Letters, and he was made CBE in 1934. He was elected a Fellow of the Academy in 1938.

Meanwhile, since 1922, Onions had been at work on the Abridgement of the larger work that was also to appear, in 1933. It had a warm reception, though as usual some reviewers showed that they were not skilled in using dictionaries: the *Morning Post* claimed that 'non-stop' and 'tote' were omitted and Onions felt it necessary to point out that this was not so, and that information about the Australian origin of the latter was duly given. To later editions he supplied new and topical entries, including the RAF term 'Mae West'; his definition of this life-saving jacket prompted some who had worn it to attempt (without success) to arrange a meeting of the lexicographer and the actress whose name it bore, when she visited Oxford.<sup>1</sup>

To the publishing powers in Walton Street, in particular to R. W. Chapman and Kenneth Sisam, Onions had long since proved his worth. They regularly consulted him on lexical and editorial projects. He was entrusted with the revision of Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader* though 'reverence for the opinion of a great master' restrained the correcting hand both in 1921 and in later years. For a decade he kept a watchful eye on the Fowler brothers lest their book on English usage became unmanageable. He chuckled over Fowler's definition of adultery,

<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile a German lexicographer, *mirabile dictu*, had conjectured that the term derived from Scots airmen shouting as their planes were ditched in the Channel, 'Mae West' ('strike out more to the West!').

which could have included the sexual intercourse of married couples and (perhaps in the light of college usage) quarrelled over the meaning of *nem. con.* (which he could not accept as equivalent to 'unanimously'). In the early days of the BBC he served for a time on its Committee on the Pronunciation of Doubtful Words, an activity that brought him into touch with Bernard Shaw; but he thought that his advice was disregarded and the honorarium inadequate. For the Society for Pure English (which with Bridges and later George Gordon as president was very much an Oxford enterprise—its committee met over lunch at Magdalen) he wrote (in Tract XXIII) a few characteristic pages on the phrase 'Distance no object'. When the Arthurian Society was in 1932 transmuted into the Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, he became the editor of the new journal *Medium Aevum* and presided over it for 25 years. Its editorial committee seldom if ever met and Onions, whilst consulting other scholars on occasion, made himself entirely responsible for its contents, enlisting an impressive band of reviewers, some of whom still contribute to it. He ensured that its range should be as wide as the range of medieval literature, history, and learning, and the Index to Vols. I–XXV is a roll-call of English scholars, including several, like N. R. Ker, who first appeared in print in the journal and several others, like Mary Lascelles, Helen Gardner, and Mario Praz, who were to become distinguished critics of later literatures. He was also able to enlist such diverse reviewers as Sir Charles Sherrington, E. F. Jacob, Claude Jenkins (once a fellow schoolboy), and F. J. E. Raby. As with Onions's other enterprises it operated on a 'shoe-string' budget, without benefit of office or other staff. Many editorial decisions were made after casual meetings in Broad St. or 'the High'. His successor, summoned as he thought for the laying-on of hands and the transfer of bulky files, received only a tiny scrap of paper bearing the names of three neglectful reviewers, and the injunction 'get after them'. The Anniversary Issue compiled in his honour, with contributions from C. S. Lewis, Beryl Smalley, Alfred Ewert, Mildred Pope, Ethel Seaton, Eugene Vinaver, and Roger Loomis, testifies to the respect and regard in which he was held by medievalists. It includes a reproduction of the portrait by William Dring, RA, which was painted in Magdalen Library and now hangs in Magdalen Lower Common Room. Onions showed that he had read the issue carefully by reproving its compiler for a *lapsus calami*

and for allowing a contributor to spell Diefenbach with two fs. An earlier tribute on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday had taken the form of a list of his published writings up to that date, published at the Clarendon Press (1948); it includes some of his reminiscences and a photograph showing him in relaxed mood, with the pipe that he then favoured.

But the recognition that he most prized was that shown by Magdalen College when in October 1923 it elected him a Fellow by Special Election *in locum Henrici Bradley*, in the unstatutory phrase used by President Warren on that occasion. When the College statutes were revised a few years later he chose to stay under the old clauses—to everyone's advantage. He remained a stipendiary fellow until his death, and at the renaissance of college life after World War II he became the unofficial *doyen* of a Senior Common Room that included C. C. J. Webb, Godfrey Driver, Gilbert Ryle, Ellis Waterhouse, A. J. P. Taylor, C. S. Lewis, J. L. Austin, Bruce McFarlane, C. E. Stevens, Peter Medawar, J. Z. Young, N. R. Ker, and, occasionally, John Betjeman, for whom he was always 'the Doctor'. Austin and Ryle liked to draw him out at lunch over points of grammatical logic, or tease him about questionable definitions in *OED*. His customary chair in the Smoking Room was next to the cabinet containing it, and rarely did a post-prandial session pass without appeal to it. 'They fool me to the top of my bent', he would grumble with a pleased glint in his eye, imitating Sir Frank Benson's enunciation of Hamlet's phrase (*məb'nt*). It was one of the rare proofs that as a young man he had occasionally allowed himself the luxury of a visit to the theatre.

By the time of the Second War (during which his wife died and a son was taken prisoner) austerity had become part of his character. The college was bereft of most of its active fellows. He twice refused the Vice-presidency ('though I could have done with the cash'), on the grounds that it would hamper his work on the Etymological Dictionary then under way, but later accepted without reluctance the duties of college librarian. In the bitter post-war winters he economized on library heating by draping himself in a blanket in the Dictionary bay, which increasingly became almost his second home: he never had rooms in college and slept in a college only once—when examining at Cambridge. In the Library he kept his piercing eye on undergraduate readers, sometimes offering help, sometimes noting their potentialities, sometimes bellowing 'Harris!' down the stairs, to summon his assistant.

The war also brought Onions the Honorary Directorship of the Early English Text Society, on the Council of which he had sat only since 1944. In 1945 he succeeded R. W. Chambers, Robin Flower having for some time been acting Director. He supervised the Society's publication programme for ten years. Much of the work preparatory to the twice yearly council meeting was done on a bench in the Long Wall quadrangle of Magdalen, close to the Library. Seated there on a sunny afternoon, with Miss Mackenzie (Secretary) on one side, and Miss Kean (Treasurer) on the other, he looked like a cheerful mandarin imparting wisdom to his neophytes. He was also transmitting his own high standards of accuracy and consistency: he felt responsible for every page of every volume the Society published. It regained its strength under his benevolent rule, which in some ways resembled that of the Society's founder, F. J. Furnivall. And 'if anybody attacks Furnivall,' he wrote, 'he had better set about doing the same amount as he did—and better'. He induced the Society to sponsor the edition of the Paston Letters that in the event appeared under a different *aegis*. He had hoped that it would have a hand in the Yale *More*—'my feeling is that it would be a great score'. And he long nursed the project of a diplomatic or facsimile edition of the Winchester MS of Malory, which the Society did eventually produce after his death.

Fortunately Sir Ernest Barker had early enlisted him in the team of writers (but for 'fate and a general election' it would have included Clement Attlee) who contributed to the weighty but still very readable volume on *The Character of England* produced at the Clarendon Press in 1947. In his essay on The English Language (of only 20 pages) his skill in compression showed at its best; every detail is carefully chosen, and never have the distinctive features of English—its genius for naturalization, its verbal mosaic, its wealth of synonyms and of phrases from literature, its facility in word-construction, its use of variant forms in different meanings ('blessed, blessèd, blest'), its ubiquitous use of the gerund, its pregnant and direct conciseness—been singled out and illustrated so compactly: the illustrations range from Dryden's *double-entendre* to Shaw's *Superman*, from the 'Scotticisms' *outcome*, *uptake* to contemporary applications of *quisling* and *atomic*. 'With all the faults—the redundancies and the deficiencies—that may be alleged against it (he concludes), the English language is a superb instrument for statement and exposition . . . it combines vigour with

flexibility, ease with directness, boldness with subtlety.' The phrases are those in which he might well describe his own style. On other occasions he would more colloquially characterize the language that he loved as 'a rum go'.

But for the last thirty years of his life his constant and continuing pre-occupation was with the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, which will be his most enduring monument. It was conceived in Walton Street in 1933 as providing for Onions's immediate future. 'All the materials are at hand', wrote Sisam then, 'if he will—driven by commercial necessity—refuse to waste time on looking for more.' Onions agreed that the body of the work might be ready in three years. But soon Sisam and Chapman were 'battering at him from many sides', as he resisted attempts to make the work popular. 'I shall hope to *teach* etymology', he wrote, 'as well as display its results. . . . I cannot appear before the learned world in words of one syllable.' He was paid in dribs and drabs and found it necessary to supplement his income by regularly examining in the Schools. In 1939 he had been awarded a Leverhulme Fellowship, but he was not re-elected in the following year, despite support from the Clarendon Press, and his plea for a book-grant fell on deaf ears. In February 1940 he could speak of 'a final effort to wind up the preparation and so to be arranging for the printing'. But by August of that year his eyes were giving him trouble. Meanwhile all letters from users (intelligent or not so intelligent) of *OED* were being forwarded to him, and duly acknowledged: they sometimes provided useful information. By 1947, when (*aet.* 74) he was still setting Schools papers, he was 'mortally afraid of breaking down, and breaking up'. But by then rolls of tattered, heavily corrected and annotated galleys were beginning to appear, bulging out of his pockets or strewn on his table in Magdalen Library. When he finally retreated to Staverton Road, where his desk was almost inaccessible because of piled books (now in the Library at Canberra) and rows of shoe-boxes holding dictionary-slips, he would spread out the galleys on the dining-room table and a visitor or young researcher—he supervised several notable theses, including those by E. J. Dobson and G. V. Smithers, which took many years to mature, and N. R. Ker—would be treated to little lessons in etymology and lexicography. He was glad to invoke at this stage the help of an old and trusted colleague, G. W. S. Friedrichsen, born in Hanover, once (1909–11) a collaborator on the *OED* and an acknowledged authority on

Gothic. 'Fred', as he was known to Onions and others, had been sent to the Pentagon after the War and, marrying in America, never returned to England, though before his death in June 1979, aged 92, he insisted that his coffin should be draped with the Union Jack. He was a scholar after Onions's own heart, and a great support in the last years, when he revised some etymologies and read proofs. But day-to-day assistance, beginning with journeys to the Bodleian on days when Onions felt too frail to climb its stairs, was rendered by R. W. Burchfield, a New Zealander whom he had first spotted in Magdalen Library as a likely lexicographer. R. W. B. helped to see *ODEE* through the press and his apprenticeship under Onions qualified him to edit the new supplement to *OED*, in which Onions's influence can yet be felt. He recalls that what gave his mentor greatest pleasure was to re-read some of his own amazingly compact entries in the letter W in *OED* and to compile 'little gems' of entries like that for *pilcrow* in *ODEE*.

**pilcrow** pi'lrou paragraph mark ¶. xv. unexpl. alt. of *pylcrafte* (*Medulla Gram.*), var. of *pargrafte* (*Ortus Vocab.*), for \**pargraf* (cf. *AL. pergraphum*), contr. of *paragraf* PARAGRAPH. Cf. PARAPH.

'The patient attention to detail, the assurance that the editor knew precisely what such things as the *Ortus Vocab.* and *AL.* were, and the cautious assertion of the uncertainties, demonstrate in miniature the kind of authoritative scholarship that this great philologist and lexicographer believed in and produced over a period of more than sixty years.'

To read Onions's correspondence with Walton Street over the thirty years that *ODEE* was in the making is to find a duplicate of Murray's pleadings and protests half a century earlier. He once spoke of 'the scandalous history of Oxford lexicography', but there is some evidence that he would not have favoured the publication of the biography of Murray proffered by his son, who had claimed that even when his father lay dying he was pestered for more copy. It is Onions's communications to other scholars, usually on densely-covered postcards, that reveal how active was his mind, even in his eighties. Thus in November 1957 he writes in commenting on a suggested interpretation of a phrase in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

I will pass over your double negative—I never can understand them for sure—and will pass straight to philology. Imprimis, I cannot accept

*ver* as a variant of *vair*, in the absence of other evidence. May not *visage* mean appearance? And can you not bear to think of the poet being capable of a clumsy sentence, as I believe he has committed here? The *hit* of *hit semed* I take to be a repetitive subject pronoun. And what grounds are there for assuming the wearing of a fur collar by (? close up to) the face. But an elegant poet has surely—not for the only time—made a mess of his constructions.

Craigie's treatment of this *ver* in NED is very characteristic.

You might have given it a *hatch*.

C. T. O.

The comments, brief as they are, exemplify in little the care for *minutiae* that he found lacking in 'interpretative' critics and that he instilled into his pupils by precept and example. Lexicography, as Bacon might have said, maketh an exact man. Of a certain literary historian he wrote: 'He doesn't seem to know what he wants to say, with the necessary result that he succeeds in conveying no meaning. It is really beyond all and everything, as we used to say in Birmingham.'

Friedrichsen once remarked that 'Onions' notes can be very ornery'. In 1934 he had written: 'Some forty years' subjection to the animadversions of three devastating critics should have been sufficient to purge resentment; but it may take more years still to quench my ebullience.' His script, on proof or postcard, grew crabbed towards the close of his life, but the flow of comments and speculation did not dry up. They could be on the semantics and syntax of 'happy-go-lucky', on points that had escaped him in his various revisions of the *Anglo-Saxon Reader* ('I'm a bit like Sweet himself in casualness! *longo intervallo distans* in all other ways'), or on the Shakespearian use of *look* (as in 'Look where he stands', for which he found an OE parallel).

He was not given to eulogy, and his courtesies were of the old-fashioned sort, of a piece with his innate conservatism.<sup>1</sup> The present writer, who owed him much, felt the force of this *saeva indignatio* when with several of his colleagues he was rash enough to sign a letter of protest against the Suez adventure in 1956. The gesture so shocked Onions that he kept away from College for many days, and penned a long private expostulation. He saw it as yet another sign of the decadence he associated with the 'Farewell State'. His pungent comments on fellow

<sup>1</sup> But the reviewer of *ODEE* who read 'Oxonian prejudice' into the description s.v. *radical* (sb.) 'at first a phrase in very bad odour' ignored the fact that C.T.O. was simply quoting *The Times* for 16 August 1819.

scholars were usually attached to some locution or pronunciation that they favoured: e.g. J. R. R. Tolkien always said 'none the less', instead of 'nevertheless'. His first remark after T. S. R. Boase became President of Magdalen was that he, like Nichol Smith, pronounced *therefore* in the Scots fashion. Another colleague was questioned about his use of the cliché *crystal-clear*. A letter to Norman Davis on a point in the Paston Letters concludes in Pastonian style:

I do stille mervayle how the yoong and other of this aage do followe the one the other in the using of a certayne sorte of sayeng, as to weete 'it is abundantly clear'.

As late as November 1961 he was making war on the formula *altered from* instead of *alteration of* in footnotes to an EETS edition just as earlier he had protested against *abridged from* on the title-page of *COD*.

Of the trimmings and organization of modern scholarship Onions had the deepest suspicion. When asked to sit on a Committee considering a plan for a Welsh dictionary, he replied (not wishing to stir from Oxford, which he had not left, except to visit members of his family, for thirty years) that all that was needed was a carpenter to build racks for housing the boxes of slips as they were assembled. He was equally sceptical about modern linguistics and phonetics<sup>1</sup> though by no means uninterested in linguistic theory—he greatly admired the matter and style of Sir Alan Gardiner's *Theory of Speech and Language* (1933), a work written in a tent in the Egyptian desert. To Ernest Weekley and Eric Partridge he was less reverential. His Etymological Dictionary does indeed mark the end of an era that began with the brothers Grimm and that embraced the careers of such giants as Zupitza, Luick, and Max Förster (with whom he was in correspondence as late as 1953 over the etymology of *girl*). Even the larger *OED* has for many of a recent generation become a monument to be respected rather than a tool to be used in teaching as much as in 'research'. The historical approach to the study of the mother-tongue is falling out of use just when the means of pursuing it have become accessible.

In the last few years of his life he rarely stirred from his home,

<sup>1</sup> 'I notice', he wrote in 1952, 'that Daniel Jones, in one of his recent discourses on the phoneme, suggested in a footnote that if so and so turned out to be what-not the doctrine of the phoneme would have to disappear. And why not? *I say*.'



but continued to watch over the final preparation of *ODEE*. He died in the Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford, after a short illness, on 8 January 1965 at the age of 92. His contemporaries had long predeceased him, and he had wished that no memoir should be published as it must necessarily be deficient in its account of his early life. The history of modern English learning, however, would be incomplete without some record of his character and achievement. And *Pietas* requires that the record, however belated and fragmentary, should be put in print.

J. A. W. BENNETT