



ESMOND DE BEER

Esmond Samuel de Beer 1895–1990

THE BRITISH ACADEMY possesses neither an achievement of arms nor a motto. Were it to make good what some might consider to be chinks in its armour it would be hard put to it to match the regal dignity of the coat of its sister Academy, the Royal Society, or the rigour of that Society's *Nullius in verba* motto. As regards the latter, the Academy's dedication to the advancement of humane letters ought certainly to set the tone; and of dedication to that noble aim there can have been no better exemplar than Esmond Samuel de Beer—not only by virtue of his monumental scholarly contribution (though few can match that) but also (and uniquely) on the grounds of his intelligent, munificent, and unostentatious patronage of arts and letters both in Britain and in his native and much-loved New Zealand.

At his death on 3 October 1990 in his ninety-sixth year (he was born on 15 August 1895 in Dunedin into 'the world's most southerly Jewish community') Esmond Samuel de Beer was one of the Academy's oldest Fellows, though, since his election dates from 1965 only, he was by no means its most senior member. Moreover, the modest temper and unremarkable figure of this arch-editor of two major sources for the social and intellectual history of seventeenth-century England—John Evelyn's diary and John Locke's correspondence—gave little clue to his exotic origins. Yet these were decisive: they provided the financial base for a life devoted to independent and unremunerated scholarship, and placed him in the same sadly minute (and probably now extinct) class as the wealthy Quaker banker, Thomas Hodgkin, who, like de

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Beer, never held an academic post but who left behind him a major work of scholarship—in Hodgkin's case the seven-volume *Italy and her Invaders* (1879–99).

In de Beer's case the financial base was an interest in a remarkably successful New Zealand enterprise established by his maternal grandfather, Bendix Hallenstein. Hallenstein was a German Jew from Brunswick who saw commercial possibilities in the South Australian gold-rush in the late 1850s, met in Melbourne an English girl, Mary Mountain, travelled to England, and married her at Alford in her native Lincolnshire in February 1861. The couple returned to Australia and two years later sailed to New Zealand (and another gold-rush), settling at the southern extremity of the South Island. Bendix was clearly a very successful entrepreneur and became a leading figure in local commercial circles; he also served as Mayor of Queenstown and as a member of the Provincial Council. Mary remained an Anglican but the four daughters of the marriage were brought up in the Jewish faith. The second of these, Emily, married Isidore Samuel de Beer (a German Jew with no diamond connections) who became a director of 'Hallensteins', the family firm. Esmond Samuel de Beer was the second son of the marriage (his elder brother, Bendix, was killed in the First World War), and he and his two elder sisters, Mary and Dora, became beneficiaries of the large and growing family trust which was to underpin his life of scholarship.

Esmond de Beer always thought of Dunedin as 'home' and of London as his 'second home'. Dunedin was the place where he received his early education, but he ceased to live there in 1910 when his father's business interests brought him to London. The two boys were sent to Mill Hill School—an experience which he looked back on not without some regrets, though he admitted later that he owed a good deal of his education to his time there (Norman Brett James, the London historian, was an influential teacher).

In October 1914, when he entered New College as a commoner, de Beer became one of the first (apart from a dozen Rhodes Scholars) of the cohort of New Zealanders who were later to exert a powerful influence on the intellectual and administrative life of Oxford. Two years later he was a soldier and two years after that he was commissioned into the Indian Army. Active service ended for him at the end of 1919, and his Oxford undergraduate career terminated with an inevitable war degree in modern history in 1920.

On the face of it there was thus far nothing to suggest the life of

scholarship which lay ahead: rather, a career in the family firm. But Ernest Barker, his tutor at New College, had marked him out, and already as an undergraduate he had been brought into touch with the man whom he always regarded as his mentor and exemplar, the Regius professor of history, C. H. Firth, and through him with the concept of research and with the study of the history of seventeenth-century England. Firth was the collaborator and continuator of his predecessor as Research Fellow at All Souls, S. R. Gardiner, whose massive history had ended with the Protectorate, and was an uncompromising (and tutorially unpopular) protagonist of the documentary and prosopographical approach to history. He also believed that historical studies should be illuminated by contemporary literary, artistic, and iconographic monuments—as was evident from his six-volume edition of Macaulay of 1913–15 with its thousand or so plates. Moreover, he was a wealthy man who commanded a fine personal library of seventeenth-century books, prints, and broadsheets. In all these aspects he prefigured de Beer, whom he doubtless came to see as his continuator (as he had been Gardiner's), and the eventual historian of Restoration England. In that he was destined to be disappointed: de Beer belonged temperamentally to the deductionist rather than to the inductionist school; he was more the investigator than the speculator, and it is not without significance that some years later he was to abandon a planned monograph on Charles II. Be that as it may, probably at Firth's suggestion (and certainly with his encouragement) de Beer proceeded to cover his academic nakedness by starting on an MA thesis (submitted in April 1923) at University College London, on the development of political parties under Danby, 1675–8. Much of the research was done at the Institute of Historical Research of London University, recently established by (and under the direction of) A. F. Pollard, Firth's successor in 1908 as Research Fellow at All Souls. Over a third of the text of this pioneer investigation is devoted to a list of original sources and to a biographical dictionary of Court Party members. Here his respect for the *Dictionary of National Biography* (to which Firth had contributed 200, and Pollard over twice as many biographies) is manifest—as is also the cool judgement of the twenty-eight-year-old scholar who wrote: 'The articles in the *Dictionary of National Biography* vary considerably in value; most of them could be supplemented; some of them ought to be re-written.' The critical de Beer, though by nature in the camp of those who regard accuracy as a duty and not a virtue, was as ever prepared to supplement criticism with co-operation: it is typical of him that among

his earliest publications are contributions to the corpus of revised *Dictionary of National Biography* entries which Pollard regularly included in the *Bulletin* of the Institute from 1925 onwards. Between that year and 1943, de Beer published over ninety such contributions.

In the early 1920s de Beer was based in London and was able to accompany his parents and his sisters Mary and Dora on some of their travels in Europe, America, and Japan. It is at this period that his visits to art galleries and opera-houses refined his sensibilities and laid the foundations for the connoisseurship and intelligent collecting which developed on a large scale after the death of his mother (in 1930) and his father (in 1934). Their deaths meant that their incomes under the family trust devolved upon the next generation.

From 1926 de Beer had a base in Oxford where he continued his voluntary assistance to Sir Charles Firth and published occasional contributions on points of seventeenth-century British history. And it was there in 1929, when de Beer in his own words 'was hanging around Bodley at rather a loose end', that the New Zealand connection was to start the process of metamorphosing Sir Charles Firth's industrious and learned assistant into 'the prince of textual editors'.

Existing editions of the diary of John Evelyn—an essential source for the cultural, social, political, and religious life of seventeenth-century England—were known to be unsatisfactory since they all descended from an unscholarly printed text published in 1818 which was precariously based on inaccessible manuscript originals in the possession of the Evelyn family. By 1920 the combined efforts of A. T. Bartholomew, H. Maynard Smith, and Geoffrey Keynes had spurred the Clarendon Press into contemplating a more adequate edition and in 1921 the Evelyn family were persuaded to deposit the manuscripts in the Bodleian. By 1926 a transcript was available and Francis Meynell was showing an interest in producing a 'plain-text' Nonesuch Press edition to be printed at the Press using its Fell types. R. W. Chapman, the Secretary to the Delegates of the Press, himself a formidable textual critic, had suspicions about the accuracy of the transcript, and in February 1929 asked his Assistant Secretary, the philologist Kenneth Sisam (a sometime New Zealand Rhodes Scholar), whether he could suggest the name of someone who could cast an eye over it. Sisam thought that his fellow countryman, de Beer, was the obvious person for such a task and invited him to check the transcript. The document that he submitted left Sisam in no doubt about the competence of the reporter and the occasional unreliability of the transcriber (who read

at one point ‘vitals and sinewes’ as ‘rituals and sermons’). Chapman was evidently also impressed by de Beer’s report (he described de Beer in a letter to Meynell of 19 March as ‘a bigoted researcher’ and ‘a shy bird of independent means’) and at the beginning of April Sisam opined in a note to Chapman that ‘we should be well advised to commit our edition [i.e. the Clarendon Press edition] to de Beer with the help of Firth’. Meynell’s Nonesuch Press project of a plain-text edition was not withdrawn until September 1931, by which time de Beer was being described as the ‘heaven-born editor of the slap-up edition’ (Chapman’s words) of the diary which was to be his main (and unremunerated) occupation for the next quarter of a century.

Esmond de Beer came to his editorial task as a man of thirty-six with no academic affiliation and with not much more than a dozen sound and useful (if uninspiring) scholarly articles to his name. But he brought with him Sir Charles Firth’s support and other advantages which it is safe to say no other scholar of his day could have matched. In the first place, financial independence and the *Sitzfleisch* necessary for an undertaking that would inevitably extend over many years. He had a passion for accuracy, and—most important of all—a realisation that the commentator on a seventeenth-century English diary must enter into the intellectual and cultural milieu of his diarist. The second-hand would not do: knowledge of contemporary culture, politics, literature, language, art, architecture, and travels as evidenced in particular in the publications of the diarist’s day must be at the editor’s fingertips. And with this in mind de Beer began to build up his ‘Evelyn Collection’, a background library of sources for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century studies most of which was eventually to enlighten readers in the Library of Otago University in Dunedin.

Enlightenment for the readers of the *Diary* was to come in the shape of some 12,000 footnotes which illuminated the first satisfactory text to appear since Bray’s amateurish original edition of 1818. As a corollary of annotation on this Herculean scale de Beer also saw that the disparate information contained in both text and notes must be thoroughly indexed if it was to be fully exploited by the curious. In this he was ultimately following in the footsteps of another great editor, George Birkbeck Hill, who had pioneered indexing on the grand scale in his edition of Boswell (six volumes, Oxford, 1887), which was in the process of being re-edited in the 1920s and early 1930s at Oxford in the care of de Beer’s great friend, L. F. Powell, by whom he was much influenced.

No less important in de Beer's eyes were his biographical account of Evelyn, the description of sources and editorial method, the bibliographical lists, genealogies, and other reference materials which occupy more than a half of the 300-page first volume. These, together with the index (but excluding the footnotes) account for nearly one-third of the pages of the edition's six volumes which were in the press from 1947 until their publication at the end of 1955 (at the then substantial price of fifteen guineas). With characteristic open-handedness de Beer arranged for forty copies to be presented to friends and others who had assisted him, including W. G. Hiscock, with whom he had been in disagreement and who had been unable to help him over access to important Evelyn correspondence at Christ Church.

The *Diary* was widely and favourably reviewed by seventeenth-century experts who could appreciate its value as a source and the industry and learning of its editor and annotator. A suggestion by the reviewer in the *English Historical Review* that there were cases of excessive annotation was neatly counterbalanced by the judgement of the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer that 'the notes are never excessive'—and by the reflection that one reader's glimpse of the obvious is another one's useful addition to his (or her) stock of knowledge. An 'inexcusable' review in the *Spectator* (13 January 1956) suggesting that the *Diary* 'lacks human interest' and 'had been rendered almost unreadable by the Herculean scholarship of Mr de Beer' gave pain but could be dismissed on the grounds of illogicality—at least.

The 'heaven-born editor' was not allowed to rest on laurels which might have been regarded as crowning a life's work. A fellow New Zealander, Dan Davin, from 1946 to 1978 Deputy Secretary of the Clarendon Press, had him in his sights as a potential editor of John Locke's correspondence. The Clarendon edition of Locke's works (of which the correspondence would be the largest single component) had been the special concern of another of de Beer's New Zealand friends, Kenneth Sisam, who had been Secretary to the Delegates of the Clarendon Press from 1942 to 1948. Substantial materials for the edition had been acquired by the Bodleian since the 1940s (much with de Beer's financial support) but ten years later the correspondence lacked a competent and willing editor. Davin regarded de Beer, relieved of his Evelyn burden, as the ideal editor of the correspondence element of the edition. When approached, de Beer expressed a general willingness to take on what would certainly prove to be another unremunerated demi-life's work and typically, admitted to 'lack of qualifications in

philosophy and Latinity'. The Delegates of the Press were unmoved by de Beer's modesty and he was appointed to edit the correspondence on 11 May 1956. The edition was to be his main preoccupation for the next thirty years.

Though de Beer was probably the only living scholar equipped and willing to undertake the task which now faced him, that did not mean that the task was an easy one—even for him. For one thing, he was dealing not with a small number of originals (as in the case of the Evelyn) but with several thousand individual documents, and since the edition was not merely of Locke's own letters, he was concerned with over 300 correspondents. Moreover, since Locke was a citizen of the seventeenth-century latinate commonwealth of learning and had spent time abroad, some of those correspondents were in France and the Netherlands. Locke's (and his correspondents') intellectual range could be described as universal—theology, medicine, geography, economics, law, politics, travel, and botany all came within their purview: their editor had to be prepared to assume pantomathy. Characteristically, de Beer built on his Evelyn experience, expanding his own personal library by acquiring original editions of the books and journals which would have been on the shelves of Locke's and his correspondents' libraries. As before, Otago was to benefit from the fruits of his collecting.

The editor was assiduous in collecting the texts. Originals were mainly in the Bodleian, the Public Record Office, and in the British Museum, but there were substantial groups of letters in Amsterdam, Copenhagen, New York, and Paris and de Beer's imagination and persistence even tracked down a letter in Moscow and a cache in the loft of a Belgian farmhouse. He was able to employ transcribers but all transcripts were checked by him against originals or photographs. Economical and informative headnotes and footnotes (often on obscure personalities and esoteric subjects) much concerned and tried him and, in 1962, six years into the project, he reported that according to his latest guess 'another 8,000 working hours' lay ahead of him. This chilling forecast proved to be an underestimate: the first of the eight volumes did not go to press until 1974, eighteen years since de Beer had taken on his task. The eighth and final volume of the letters was issued in 1989, leaving the vital index volume, on which de Beer had worked 'while there was light' (and generously subsidised), still unpublished.

After de Beer became engaged on the Locke edition in 1956 the flow of articles and reviews declined, but it did not cease. They were sometimes stimulated by points of Locke annotation and concentrated on

aspects of life in Restoration England. London topography remained an abiding interest and his only monographic publication (elegantly printed for him in 1936 by the Oxford University Press) was an edition of Evelyn's *Londinium redivivum*. He honoured his gremial links with the Institute of Historical Research and during the war years, when many of its staff were away, became its honorary librarian (and 'saviour', according to some). He published articles in the Institute's *Bulletin* and reviews in the Historical Association's journal, *History*, which were balanced and, if necessary, merciless. For example, in 1940, when reviewing four monographs on Cromwell's generals (de Beer was Vice-President of the Cromwell Association) three were dismissed as respectively 'leaving important questions unanswered', 'being an attractive substitute for historical novels', or eliciting the regret that 'so much work should be so unsatisfactory'; the fourth, on the other hand, was brusquely characterised as 'a masterly account'. The economy of phrase is typical of a man who regarded the presence of an exclamation mark at the end of a sentence as an admission of syntactical ineptitude.

In 1934, after the death of his father (his mother had died in New Zealand four years earlier), de Beer set up idyllic house in Sussex Place ('in the Regent's Park', in his phrase) with his sisters Mary and Dora. Here (and from 1964 in Brompton Square) he had a comfortable London base and was well placed to give his support to learned societies and institutions. He followed in Sir Charles Firth's footsteps in becoming a Trustee of the National Portrait Gallery and Vice-President of the Historical Association. He became President of the Hakluyt Society and of the London Topographical Society and served on the committees of the National Art-Collections Fund, the Friends of the National Libraries, the London Library, and (though by then a self-described 'atheist'), of the Friends of Lambeth Palace Library. All these organisations benefited not only from his counsel but also from his often grand-scale generosity—especially when subsidy was needed to support publication. His appointment (1965) as an independent member of the government Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art, and the CBE which he received in 1969, were tributes to the respect in which the judgement of de Beer as a connoisseur was held. Other honours—honorary fellowships of New College, Oxford (1958) and of the Warburg Institute (1978), and the fellowship to which University College London, elected him in 1967, and honorary doctorates at

percipient Durham (1956), Oxford (1957), and Otago (1963)—gave much quiet satisfaction.

Great scholarship and great financial resources are regrettably rare companions. In de Beer's case his means supported both a secure base and the possibility of devoting his life to the advancement of the cause of humane letters not only by his own researches but by strengthening institutions which provide the raw materials for the advancement of learning. Libraries, art galleries, and learned societies were the main beneficiaries of his carefully considered lifetime (and posthumous) support. In Britain the remarkable collection of New Zealand literature in the Library of the University of Essex is due to his subvention over many years. The placing of the collection in Colchester is explained by the presence there as librarian of Philip Long, once of the Bodleian, and the author of the catalogue of the Bodleian's Lovelace Collection of Locke materials whose purchase de Beer had supported. His sensitiveness to the desirability of a special collection of New Zealand literature being available in a British academic library certainly owed something to the fact that his cousin, Charles Brasch (whose Oxford career he had unofficially supervised in the 1920s), was the founder and editor of *Landfall*—the leading New Zealand literary journal which he supported financially. The Bodleian itself frequently benefited from his generosity on a scale that caused his name to be added to its lapidary Benefactors' Tablet (a rare exception to the principle of anonymity which he could not well oppose). Other British libraries, for example, the British Library, the London Library, the Library of the Courtauld Institute, and Lambeth Palace Library were also beneficiaries, but his chief concern was that the Library of the University of Otago in his 'home-town', Dunedin, should be well equipped for research.

The benefactor's sense of the practical is clearly evidenced by his subscription on Otago's behalf to the 263-volume catalogue of the printed books in the Library of the British Museum. His passion for contemporary sources is exemplified by his purchase in 1958 of Iolo Williams's library of some 2,000 volumes (mainly English eighteenth-century verse) which also went to Dunedin. He added to that in 1982 2,000 volumes from his own Evelyn working library including several hundred early guidebooks. His Locke collection of over 500 volumes followed in 1984 and monetary gifts amounting to over \$NZ 170,000 followed in 1989. Such gifts, together with the anonymous establishment by himself, his sisters, and members of his extended family of three research fellowships (characteristically named not for the donors

but for Burns, Mozart, and Hodgkins) placed the University of Otago in the first rank of New Zealand research centres in the humanities.

The field of benefaction which has caused de Beer, his two sisters (who died within a few weeks of each other at the end of 1981 and the beginning of 1982, leaving their interests to Esmond), and his wider Hallenstein family to be described as ‘far away the greatest private patrons of the arts in New Zealand with gifts worth tens of millions of dollars’, is in the area of painting and the graphic and applied arts. There was a family tradition of collecting: their father had built up a distinguished collection of Japanese prints, and de Beer and his sisters collected from the mid-1930s partly that they might be surrounded by beautiful objects in their London houses, but entirely with the aim of their eventually enriching and rounding-out the Public Art Gallery in Dunedin. As part of a carefully planned policy de Beer was systematically acquiring pictures and other art objects which, as the result of a survey which he had made of the Dunedin collections in 1963, he knew would fill specific gaps. Many of these works were purchased and sent immediately, others remained in the London home. When a ‘gap-filler’ came on the market, de Beer was prepared to pay as much as £20,000 for it, and as a result of this inspired generosity the Dunedin Public Art Gallery possesses works by, for example, Jacopo del Casentino (Landini), Zanobi Machiavelli, Marcus Gheerhaerds the younger, Claude Lorrain, and Monet. Water-colours (including a Signac), old master and Japanese prints, and a few Russian icons made up the total of 172 works of art which reached the Gallery in 1982—the year of the break-up of the Brompton Square ménage. In that year de Beer, now eighty-seven and alone after his sisters’ deaths, moved to a flat in north London, but he found the mechanics of living difficult. In March 1984 he entered a home for the elderly near Milton Keynes where, in spite of increasing deafness and before ultimate blindness precluded reading, he completed his work on the eighth volume of the Locke correspondence. His memory did not fail him: favourite pictures and operas stayed in his mind’s eye and ear and he could find comfort in recounting to himself the texts of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English novels. There he died on 3 October 1990.

During his lifetime de Beer had been unfailingly generous to members of his extended family and to needy scholars as well as to institutions. After his death his will showed his continuing and precise concern for the latter: thirty-six per cent of his estate (probated at over £1 million) went to the Library of the University of Otago; the

Dunedin Public Museum received six per cent, and the Art Gallery four per cent. Six British libraries and institutions received five per cent, and Mill Hill School, New College, University College London, the Institute of Historical Research, the Warburg Institute, and Durham University were other substantial beneficiaries of the posthumous generosity of a man who was not unmindful of the institutions which had formed or honoured him.

Of de Beer it can be said without qualification:

He was reticent about himself and his own affairs and seldom expansive, but he had, and communicated, a sense of immovable confidence. He was completely loyal to his friends and to his side in any contention. He gave money generously to institutions and to people in need, often doing his alms in secret. In later life he had no religious beliefs. Having no liking for speculative thought, and considering how often minds are at the mercy of physiological processes or external accidents, he resigned himself to a kind of materialism; but lived up to an austere standard of duty.

The words are Sir George Clark's: they conclude his notice of Sir Charles Firth in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. The disciple did not shame his master.

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Note. This obituary owes much to Michael Strachan's personal memoir: *Esmond de Beer (1895–1990): Scholar and Benefactor* (Wilby Hall, Norwich: Michael Russell, 1995), which includes my bibliography (now in need of revision). No. 156.1 in the bibliography (R. Notman's article in *Bulletin of New Zealand Art History*, xv (1994), 33–54) is an admirable survey of the de Beer patronage of the arts in Dunedin, and Keith Ovenden's recent *A Fighting Withdrawal: The Life of Dan Davin* (OUP, 1996) gives an insight into the 'New Zealand contribution' to the publication of the *Locke Correspondence* at pp. 290–2.

Relevant manuscript collections are in the Bodleian Library and in the Archives of the Delegates of the Clarendon Press at Oxford. I am grateful to their owners for access and for permission to quote—and to the Archivist of the Press, Peter Foden, and to its Librarian, Celia Clothier, for exemplary co-operation.

The photograph of de Beer, taken in the Brompton Square house in January 1976, is reproduced with the permission of Professor Walter Elkan, a great-grandson of Bendix Hallenstein.

