

FOREWORD

This collection of essays and poems is presented to David Wilkinson by his friends and colleagues in Holland and other parts of the world on the occasion of his retirement from the chair of English and American literature at the University of Groningen, which he occupied from 1964 to 1987.

What brought him to Groningen from faraway South Africa he was inclined to ascribe to 'luck', but of course it was more than that. Some years before Professor Zandvoort retired from the chair of English in Groningen he organized a series of talks by guest lecturers from other Dutch universities. Wilkinson's lively lecture on Restoration drama, delivered with characteristic charm and energy, was so well received by the audience that it no doubt helped to earn him the Groningen chair of literature.

He had come a long way. Youth and university studies in Capetown were followed by four years as a secondary school teacher in the country of his birth, Rhodesia. Then came what he himself has called the 'pure magic' of Cambridge and its gifted teachers of literature in the days of F.R. Leavis, Basil Willey, M.C. Bradbrook, Dorothea Krook and many others. A temporary post at Leyden University brought him to Holland, a doctorate, a Dutch marriage and permanent settlement in a Dutch academic career.

What has distinguished David Wilkinson as a university teacher was well expressed by one of his students who, upon finishing her studies, said that she had especially appreciated the infectious enthusiasm which he had always brought to the teaching of his subject. Pope and Johnson in the eighteenth century, the Romantics, Jane Austen and the nineteenth-century novelists, together with some twentieth-century poets, were his special favourites. Students who came to him for supervision of their dissertations were given liberal support and encouragement. And all along, David has counted himself very fortunate in having his wife Han at his side, with her expertise in English literature, as incentive and inspiration.

His Cambridge years stamped his literary taste and thinking. In the best British new-critical tradition, it was the text itself and its human and moral content that were at the centre of his teaching. Every type of formalism he definitely disliked, let alone structuralism and other fads that followed. Not the theory of literary criticism, but the practical study of texts would stimulate students to develop their own response and sharpen their literary discrimination. The 'lit. crit.' course he himself developed he therefore considered the best he had to offer his students.

In administrative matters and as chairman of the department David often liked to assume his mask of innocent clownsmanship, pretending to feel rather helpless amid all the legalisms of Dutch university officialdom. Yet at the same time, his sense of humour created an atmosphere which made others feel there was scope to take initiatives and exercise their talents and imagination.

Since 1980 he has been involved in the publication of scholarly work as one of the editors of the journal *Neophilologus*. The quality of the essays he himself has published over the years leaves us hoping for more of them.

One of his most useful services to English studies in the Netherlands has been his more than twenty years of chairing and doing most of the work for the Harting Committee that annually selects twenty-five of the best students of English from the five Dutch universities and sends them for a year to some twenty different British universities and one Irish. The informal ease and quiet effectiveness with which he has always carried out this voluntary work has earned him the gratitude of all those engaged in English studies in the Netherlands.

It is in appreciation of David Wilkinson's qualities as a humane and stimulating teacher and friend that the essays and poems and the congratulations of so many have been gathered within the covers of this volume. Our good wishes go with David and Han in the years ahead.

Jos van Meurs