



Donald Francis McKenzie

*Photographed at Pembroke College, Oxford ca. 1990.
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Donald Francis McKenzie (1931–1999)

To the consternation of his many friends and admirers Don McKenzie died suddenly in Oxford on 22 March 1999. His cardiac troubles through the 1990s made us fear some such accident, but we hoped that, after he took early retirement from his *ad hominem* Chair of Bibliography and Textual Criticism in the University of Oxford in 1996, he would be able to complete at leisure the ambitious critical edition of the works of William Congreve on which he had been working for many years. This task is now for other hands, just as the multi-volume *Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, which McKenzie had so big a part in planning and organizing, will appear progressively over the next few years as a monument to his acumen and to his energy.

Don McKenzie was born on 5 June 1931 in Timaru, New Zealand, and educated in many schools as his working-class parents moved around the country. He left Palmerston North Boys' High at the end of 1948 and joined the New Zealand Post Office as a cadet. His part-time studies at Victoria University College in Wellington lasted for most of the following decade, bringing him successively a BA in 1954, a Diploma of Journalism in 1955 and an MA in English in 1957. When one remembers the snobbish disdain some people had half a century ago for part-time and evening students, it is salutary to note how the system allowed people of enormous talent like McKenzie to realize their potential. Further progress was rapid. After a period at Corpus Christi College, McKenzie completed in 1960 the PhD thesis that would become *The Cambridge University Press 1696–1712: A Bibliographical Study* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1966, 2 volumes). He then returned to Wellington, where he taught for the next quarter-century, becoming Professor of English in 1969.

It was in this decade that Don McKenzie clearly established his claim to be the most inventive and audacious bibliographer of his generation. On the one hand he never ceased to consider important the sort of hard documentary labour that is enshrined in the three volumes of *Stationers' Company Apprentices* (covering the years 1605–1800 and published in 1961, 1974 and 1978 by the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia and the Oxford Bibliographical Society). On the other, adding to his analysis of the remarkable Cambridge material an edition, with John Ross, of *A Ledger of Charles Ackers, Printer of The London Magazine* (Oxford, Oxford University Press for the Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1968), he felt emboldened to challenge the orthodoxy of an essentially North American approach to physical bibliography and textual criticism

that paid too little attention to the economic and social history of the printing trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. After a couple of semi-confidential airings, his views were stated cogently and at length in 'Printers of the Mind: Some Notes on Bibliographical Theories and Printing-House Practices' (*Studies in Bibliography*, 22, 1969, pp. 1–75). No paper in the humanities emanating from Australasia has ever had more impact in the international world of scholarship.

McKenzie's appetite for work and his taste for stimulating debate were not lessened in the thirty years that followed, despite a punishing regime of involvement in administration and in teaching. Even in the last years that were overshadowed by illness he contributed more than was reasonable. In 1986 he gave way finally to the pressures to move to the Northern Hemisphere, but he was able to take early retirement from the Victoria University of Wellington and to assume the style of Emeritus Professor. For a while he continued to return to New Zealand to teach, and Australia had the benefit of his occasional presence in the role of Honorary Research Associate of the Centre for Bibliographical and Textual Studies of Monash University. As Reader and then as Professor at Oxford he reinvigorated bibliographical studies and turned them away from a previous exclusively literary bent towards the now fashionable history of books.

Much of Don McKenzie's writing in his last quarter-century was a response to invitations—to give the Sandars Lectures at Cambridge in 1976, the inaugural Panizzi Lectures at the British Library in 1985, the Lyell Lectures at Oxford in 1988, the Clark Lectures at Edinburgh in 1997. Some texts were subsequently made available for limited circulation, the exception being *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (London, The British Library, 1986). This last little book has even had the honour of translation into French. Many people know McKenzie through it alone. Inevitably it gives a partial view of his thought and work, being of the nature of a testing of limits and of a provocation, something he saw as essential in the lecture mode. The same can be said of 'What's Past is Prologue', the Centenary Lecture to The Bibliographical Society in London on 14 July 1992 (Hearthstone Publications, 1993). It is not surprising that these contributions, not to mention his occasional papers on his innovative approach to editing Congreve and his *Oral Culture, Literacy & Print in Early New Zealand: the Treaty of Waitangi* (Wellington, Victoria University Press, 1985), have given rise to discussion. He would not have wanted it otherwise, though he would certainly have wished to carry the day in the argument.

McKenzie was by all accounts an unusually inspiring teacher. Anybody who heard one of his electrifying performances as an occasional lecturer will have no difficulty in believing this. He was heavily involved in theatre in Wellington—a profession that the son of his first marriage has followed—and he was an accomplished printer at the Wai-te-ata Press,

which he ran between 1962 and 1986. Few scholars can ever have had a more acute sense of the materiality of the literary artefact.

Those who have kept his letters have ample evidence of his vitality and of his generosity. The latter could be extended to unknown graduate students who wrote to him for advice on bibliographical questions. He was, in the best collegial tradition, always ready to help. This made him doubly persuasive when he espoused a cause like that of the History of Print Culture in New Zealand now successfully under way. As one used to doing all his own work without research assistance well into his years of international fame, he understood the virtues of collaboration.

This Academy elected him to an Honorary Fellowship in 1988, thereby recognizing not only his eminence as a scholar, but also what he had given this country through his involvement in the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand and, more particularly, through the Australia and New Zealand Early Imprints Project. Those Fellows who knew him personally will remember a quite exceptional being who deserved all the honours showered upon him by the Northern Hemisphere's scholarly world.

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