



HAROLD JAMES OLIVER

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1916-1982

Harold James Oliver died suddenly in Sydney on 26 July 1982. He had been a Foundation Fellow of the Academy, and had only recently retired from the chair of English at the University of New South Wales.

Harold Oliver was born on 17 September 1916, and was educated at Sydney Boys' High School, of which he was dux in 1932. He then studied Arts at Sydney University, graduating in 1936 with first class honours and the University Medal for English. He at first looked to a career in Law, and began studying for the LL.B. as the holder of the Wigram Allen Scholarship No. II, 'for the most distinguished student entering the Law School on graduating in the Faculty of Arts.' Although Oliver completed his first year of Law by sharing first place in his year, he relinquished his legal studies to take up an appointment as Tutor in the Department of English, and spent the next twenty-three years on the staff at the University of Sydney.

He had joined a department with a strong tradition in Elizabethan and Jacobean studies. Sir Mungo MacCallum had been succeeded in the chair by J. Le Gay Brereton, who was followed by A. J. A. Waldock. R. G. Howarth was already a member of the department, and Wesley Milgate was soon to join it. When Oliver took his M.A. in 1939, with first class honours and the University Medal, for a thesis on Izaak Walton, he was already showing a predilection for seventeenth-century studies. Although his work on Walton led to two articles in the *Review of English Studies* and one in the *Modern Language Review*, it was not the prose of the seventeenth century that was eventually to engage his attention, so much as the drama.

Oliver was prevented by the war from immediately studying overseas, but when he took leave in 1946-7 it was to make the first of many appearances at the Shakespeare Conference at Stratford, and to pursue research on Shakespeare and more specifically John Ford. The publication of *The Problem of John Ford* (Melbourne University Press, 1955) was the beginning of his international reputation. It led to an invitation to prepare a volume in the Arden Shakespeare series, then under the general editorship of Una Ellis-Fermor, and Oliver's edition of *Timon of Athens* appeared in 1958. It was the first of four Shakespeare plays which he edited, in three different scholarly series.

Oliver was promoted to a Readership at the University of Sydney in 1959, and in the next year took up the appointment of foundation Professor of English at the University of New South Wales. He faced the demanding task of establishing a new department in a university which at that time had a strong

orientation towards applied science and technology, and in which the Faculty of Arts did not enjoy the assured role which Oliver was used to at Sydney. He brought to the task an administrative flair, and a commitment to exacting standards. This commitment may have left him at times feeling besieged, especially as the movements in the 1960s for course 'options' and the 'democratised department' would have seemed to him to be distracting universities from their proper business. But he was not a man to give up easily in an argument.

His new responsibilities had no visible effect on Oliver's scholarly output. In 1963 came his substantial study *Sir Robert Howard 1626-1698*, published by Duke University Press, and in 1968 his edition of *Dido Queen of Carthage* and *The Massacre at Paris* in the Revels edition of Christopher Marlowe. He edited *As You Like It* in the New Penguin Shakespeare in 1968, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in the Arden series in 1971. When the new Oxford Shakespeare came to be planned, it was natural that Oliver should be invited to be a contributor, and it was characteristic of him that his edition of *The Taming of the Shrew* should have been one of the first titles to be completed and published. It appeared in the same week in which he died.

Oliver's secondary field of interest was modern literature, including American and Australian literature. *The Art of E. M. Forster* was the fourth title to appear in the monograph series of the Australian Humanities Research Council — which preceded the Academy of the Humanities — and it was reprinted in 1960 and 1962. In 1963 he edited the poetry of Victor Daley in the Australian Poets series published by Angus and Robertson, and in 1968 contributed two monographs, on Louis Stone and Shaw Neilson, to the series *Australian Writers and their Work* published by the Oxford University Press, Melbourne. He had a particular interest in Joseph Furphy, and wrote the chapter 'Lawson and Furphy' in the Pelican *The Literature of Australia* (1964). Oliver's interest in Adult Education went back to his early years at Sydney, and he served as Secretary to the Extension Board from 1949 to 1960.

Rosemary Sisson, the writer of the *Times* obituary on Harold Oliver, recalled her first impression of him at a Stratford conference in the 1940s as 'a tall, rangy Australian who looked as though he was about to turn loose a bouncer on some unsuspecting Pom'. Cricket was certainly one of Oliver's lifelong interests — though he was noted for turning or cutting the ball rather than for bouncing it — and he also played tennis. He listed 'racing' among his recreations, and when I became interested in Australian colloquialisms I found him a fund of information on the argot of the turf — the 'death-seat', the 'roughie', 'going for the doctor'. Oliver's familiarity with Australian idiom gave him a special access to Shakespearean English. One of his last publications was on Greene's reference to Shakespeare as 'Shake-scene', arguing that the sense of 'shake' as 'steal' (which survives in Australian English) had been overlooked by scholars discussing the problem.

It is for his work on Shakespeare that Harold Oliver will be best remembered.

It was appropriate that he should have been invited by Sir Keith Hancock, as the President of the Academy, to deliver the Annual Lecture in 1971, and that he should have chosen the topic '*Cur'd, and Perfect*': *The Problem of Shakespeare's Text*. His edition of *The Taming of the Shrew* in the Oxford Shakespeare marks the height of his achievement, and no other volume so far to have appeared in the series has received such critical acclaim.

G. A. Wilkes