

### FREDSON THAYER BOWERS (1905-1991)

FREDSON BOWERS, Linden Kent Professor of English Emeritus at the University of Virginia and renowned bibliographer and textual critic, died in his sleep at his home in Charlottesville on 11 April, two weeks before his eighty-sixth birthday.

When Professor Bowers received his university's highest tribute in 1971, the commendatory citation observed that 'Mr. Jefferson, the extraordinarily versatile man in whose honor this award is made, would appreciate the versatility of Professor Bowers.' It is that range of abilities, coupled with his gift for excelling wherever he applied himself, that may best characterize his life of prodigious achievement.

To supplement his income while an undergraduate at Brown University, the student Bowers led a small band in which he played saxophone and Hawaiian guitar in local night spots. His musical interest later found expression in the 1200 classical record reviews he wrote from 1939 through 1966 for the Richmond, Virginia, *Times-Dispatch* — until, he said, 'I ran out of adjectives.' His first book reflected what he later described as his temperamental disdain for 'theory without practice': *The Dog Owner's Handbook* (1936) drew upon not only his background as a judge of show dogs but also his experience in raising Irish wolfhounds.

His abilities became widely known to the scholarly world with the publication of *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (1940), a critical history of the genre extracted from his 1500-page Harvard dissertation written under 'my master Kittredge.' His last book, *Hamlet as Minister and Scourge* (1989), drew on similar material; the *Publications of the Modern Languages Association* identified its title essay as one of nine articles in the journal's first 75 years that 'really affected the course of scholarship and criticism.'

But Professor Bowers was best known for his work in analyzing the physical features of books and applying these insights to literary criticism and the preparation of critical editions. His name became an adjective, and his position was sufficiently known for him to be satirized in 1963 as 'Smedley Force' in *The Pooh Perplex*. As Nicolas Barker wrote in an obituary in the *London Independent*, 'To revolutionise any branch of human study is an achievement: to do it twice is a triumph. Fredson Bowers brought this off.' His earliest sustained contribution in bibliography was his *Principles of Bibliographical Description* (1949), a vade mecum that remains in print. His editions include five dozen volumes of authors from five centuries — among them Marlowe, Dekker, Beaumont and Fletcher, Dryden, Whitman, Hawthorne, Crane, William James, and Nabokov. Several of his nine books deal specifically with the theory of editing and have formed the basis for an effusion of scholarly editions over the past three decades: *On Editing Shakespeare* (1955), *Textual and Literary Criticism* (1959), *Bibliography and Textual Criticism* (1964), and *Essays in Bibliography, Text, and Editing* (1975).

The accomplishment perhaps closest to his heart was editing *Studies in Bibliography* from the time he founded it in 1948. It was here, according to a tribute in the *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* on his eightieth birthday, 'where one witnessed most dramatically the maturing of a discipline . . . To create a journal that is indispensable to a field, and to maintain its vitality and stature over

an extended period, is a rare achievement.' Similarly striking has been the receptivity of this annual to a variety of viewpoints and its publication of articles with which its editor was not in sympathy. Prospective contributors encountered — often in long, single-spaced letters — the qualities that characterized his work: rigor and vigor but fairness and disinterest, with the ability to identify the kernel of a good idea and then to work with its author to bring it to its best expression.

Professor Bowers joined the faculty of the English Department at Virginia in 1938, after teaching at Harvard and Princeton. During summers from 1949 through 1959 he also held a professorial lectureship at the University of Chicago. His teaching career was interrupted during World War II, when as a Commander in the U.S. Naval Reserve he headed a naval communications group that cracked Japanese ciphers. Of his various forms of professional service, perhaps none were as important as his roles during the 1960s first as Chairman of Virginia's English Department and then as Dean of the Faculty there. Through shrewd recruiting and indefatigable energy, he elevated his virtually unknown department to the rank of one of the most distinguished English departments in the country.

The numerous honors he received not only recognized his achievement but furthered it. He held a Fulbright Fellowship and, twice, a Guggenheim Fellowship. His invitation to present the Rosenbach, Sandars, and Lyell lectures produced some of his most important writings on bibliographical and editorial theory. He was a Fellow of both the British Academy and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; he was a Fellow Commoner at Churchill College, Cambridge, and twice a Visiting Fellow at All Souls College, Oxford; he received the Bicentennial Medal from Brown University, the Gold Medal from the Bibliographical Society, London, and the Julian P. Boyd Award from the Association for Documentary Editing; and he held honorary degrees from Clark University, Brown University, and the University of Chicago.

In recent years he suffered from persistent health problems that competed with his work for his concentration. Since 1988 he also mourned the death of his wife, the novelist Nancy Hale, whom he married in 1942. But his energy — the same force that propelled him to wrestle a 50-inch rotary mower over his five-acre lawn with its view of the Blue Ridge mountains — remained high, and his intelligence keen. He relished his spring visits to the Huntington Library, where in the past decade he resumed work on the bibliography of restoration drama that he had begun a half century earlier; at his death, those notes lay open on his desk. On the day he died, a paper of his was being read at a meeting of the Society for Textual Scholarship in New York.

In instructions accompanying his will he noted that he found academic memorial services embarrassing and asked that there be none for him. But he added that he didn't mind if his friends wanted to gather and reminisce over sufficient drink. Such remembrances of his friendship and prodigious accomplishment undoubtedly will occur around the world.

David L. Vander Meulen,  
University of Virginia.

## FREDSON THAYER BOWERS (1905-1991): A PERSONAL MEMOIR

IN MY LAST YEAR AS AN UNDERGRADUATE I attended a lecture at Nottingham University on the poetry of John Gay given by Martin Battestin, the distinguished Henry Fielding scholar. Martin Battestin was then and still is at the University of Virginia, and was instrumental in my arrival there in September 1965. The rigorous interview, conducted in London, seemed to involve a large meal, lashings of Jack Daniels, and searching questions on my attitude of *Tristram Shandy*. I don't know how I got back from London at the end of that day in Jermyn Street, St James's; but I still think that was the most civilised and pointed interview I have ever had. It served as my first introduction to the graceful and highly professional standards of Virginian scholarship.

Having graduated, my tutor had suggested that I proceed to Oxford to take the B.Litt. I said no, I would rather go to the University of Virginia. My first contact with Charlottesville was by letter, and the letter I received back was a cordial, informative, and welcoming one from the chairman, Fredson Bowers, quaintly known, as were all the other professors at Mr Jefferson's academical village as 'Mr. Bowers.' His letter was, I came to understand later, a characteristic mixture of promises of funding which would be kept, and confident assurances that Virginia was the place to be for what I wanted to do. He was right. And what a department it turned out to be: Irvin Ehrenpreis taught Swift; Mr Bowers taught Shakespeare; Joe Blotner taught Faulkner; Robert Kellogg taught medieval literature; Robert Langbaum taught the nineteenth century; and George Garrett was the writer-in-residence. Fredson Bowers was in full flight, building one of the best English departments in the United States. Among my own circle of graduate students there was the future novelist Alexander Theroux, who had tried for a long time to get to Virginia. When Alex finally succeeded, it was in large part because of Fredson Bowers's hunch that this was an unusually gifted man, remorseless in his determination to become famous. And so it turned out.

My first contact with Fredson Bowers was also memorable. He seemed to smile with only one side of his mouth, a disconcerting but insignificant trait. At a time when all students (and they were almost all male) were expected to dress neatly, Fredson was immaculately dressed, rather like an East Coast dandy, or (in the rusty tweed suit) an English squire. At a time when everyone seemed to drive either Volkswagen Beetles or gas-guzzling, slab-sided monsters, Fredson Bowers drove a very small blue Alfa Romeo — fast. I was but dimly aware of his scholarly eminence, but sensed everywhere the awe in which he was held. I signed up for his graduate Shakespeare class, and at the end of sixteen weeks of weekly two-hour seminars we had 'covered' two and half acts of one of the five plays (the Kittredge Shakespeare editions) on the syllabus. I can still talk for about an hour on the first scene of *Hamlet* (omitted in the recent Franco Zeffirelli film version), and I don't think anybody knew more about that play (or Elizabethan ghost psychology, or the problems of textual transmission of Elizabethan texts, or simply the vertiginous depths of literary semantics) than Fredson Bowers. For several weeks we listened to an extraordinary store of accumulated knowledge being unpacked in front of us. It

was a technique of *explication de texte* carried off at the highest level, and I have never experienced it since.

His graduate student parties, co-hosted by his wife, the novelist Nancy Hale, at what was known as 'the pink palazzo' on the outskirts of Charlottesville, were large and lavish affairs, with the mountains of the Blue Ridge as a backdrop. Everybody seemed to be invited, and nobody missed these occasions.

After returning to England I kept in touch only sporadically, most recently as a contributor to *Studies in Bibliography*, which Fredson continued to edit until he died (on 11 April this year: he would have been 86 on 25 April). My letters from him were always typed on his own machine, neither hand-written nor word-processed, and towards the end carried a distinctly elegiac tone, a barely suppressed regret that certain standards in the textual scholarship (of unnamed others!) had become if not unintelligible then certainly ill-phrased. He was perfectly well aware that a not-so-quiet revolution in textual studies had taken place, and was, I think, not unhappy with anything he had done. Indeed, when I saw him last (in November 1990), at a private party at the Battestins, and again at a very large gathering of the Friends of the Library (where a first quarto of *The Duchess of Malfi* was presented on his behalf), he manfully preserved an outward and ready charm, but at the same time felt that he had exhausted life, that there was nothing else left for him to achieve. I know that even many years after his retirement from Virginia his wise advice was discreetly followed to good effect in the running of the Department of English. But when the Departmental library was named the 'Fredson Bowers Library', he waspishly queried any suspicion that it was a memorial to his *past* glories. Nevertheless, he was, in the words of one of his two closest friends, a very great man, a scholar whose influence on generations of students and colleagues is probably incalculable.

Clive Probyn,  
Monash University.

## LET US TALK OF GREAT MEN: FREDSON BOWERS

SOLITARY IN HIS HOME before the Blue Ridge mountains in Charlottesville, Virginia among the papers of the ongoing projects with which he knew that against time he was concluding his life's work, and clear of mind yet alone, a widower, to contend with encroaching ailments and dysfunctions of the body, Fredson Bowers died in his sleep on 11 April 1991, just two weeks before his eighty-sixth birthday. He wished for no other memorial than that of living in the memory of his friends when and where they would come together and talk of him. Such was the scope of his mind, the breadth of his interests and activities, his daunting clarity of judgement, loyalty to men and ideas, and his charity and warmth in love and friendship, that they will have a wealth of memories to relate of a singular scholar and a great man.

The epitome of my experience of Fredson Bowers was sitting next to him working in the rare books reading room of the new Bodleian Library in Oxford one bright day in June 1983 — he had turned 78. As I was applying myself to the focussing of that dinosaur of bibliography, the Hinman collator ('You know, Hans, I have never worked with the machine!'), I took in, out of the corner of my eye, that he was readying himself, spreading play quartos before him, for another morning's stint on the perfection of his own continuation of the *Bibliography of the English Printed Drama* beyond Greg into the Restoration period. It was a project, a *magnum opus* by itself, that, after early years of intense work and decades of rest, had reaffirmed its claims and, rekindling both his bibliographic passion and his sense of duty, was accepted a life's challenge until his end. After a while, from the flicker of the collator I looked up — and was amazed. An extraordinary transformation had taken place. There, at his collation, sat a youthful figure, supple and upright, detached from the back of his chair, with hands as of a pianist arched over the books before him, his eyes bright and his face translucent with concentration and joy.

The joy at the powers he was able to command — be it those accruing in institutional organisation and leadership, in the methodological guidance of nationwide projects for scholarly editing, or behind the wheel of fast, quality cars; or, more essentially, those innate powers of logical thought and clear reasoning, of creative imagination and charisma — that joy, perhaps more than anything, was a key to his personality. The powers and the joy rendered him both irresistibly forceful and humane. It was a gift, moreover, as well as the result of a life-long self-discipline, that he was capable of utter abandonment to concentration on whatever task of thought or deed was making its demand of him. Immersed in a problem or a project, he lived in it. Yet when he had 'seen the light', as he would say, when the problem was solved and the task completed, he would put it aside so decisively that it was difficult sometimes to argue a case or elicit a detailed response until he had made the effort of thinking himself back into the framework of matters and questions he had left behind him.

In formal bibliography, textual criticism and scholarly editing, the second half of the twentieth century was the era of Fredson Bowers. It was due to his superior scholarly individuality that, within the Anglo-American academic world, and after

the death of Sir Walter Greg, the centre of gravity in these fields moved from England to the United States. His *Principles of Bibliographical Description* of 1949 made explicit and standardised Greg's formidably systematised practice of the bibliographic formula. His edition of the *Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker* realised the old-spelling edition on bibliographic principles, and besides, an innovative division, as well as an advanced short-hand notation, of the textual apparatus for plays of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. Bibliography and textual criticism became synonymous in Bowers's scholarship, editing and teaching. Although his ambition to assume the responsibility for a scholarly edition of the works of Shakespeare never was realised, his prolific writing on analytical bibliography and the principles of textual criticism essentially paved the way for the standards and state of Shakespearean textual scholarship and editing today.

For over forty years, Fredson Bowers edited the annual *Studies in Bibliography* for the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia. Within the broadest frame conceivable under the bibliographical dispensation, it has given scope to views and approaches to textual criticism and editing ranging widely, yet conjoined under the editor's exacting standards of high excellence. He took pride in having solicited for the English Institute, and subsequently for publication in the 1950-51 column of *Studies in Bibliography*, W.W. Greg's seminal paper 'The Rationale of Copy-Text.' It was from the combined platform of that article, its implications developed in Bowers's writings and his editing of eighteenth-century English and nineteenth-century American texts, and of the catholicity of *Studies in Bibliography*, that bibliography-based and intention-oriented textual criticism was generalised and became the orthodox theory of scholarly editing in America and England. That generalisation, it is true, carried within it the seeds of developments beyond bibliography. The present is a time of deepening search for new directions in textual scholarship. The era of Fredson Bowers has fulfilled itself. Yet when, as it ends, we mourn the death of the man who shaped it, we sense in sadness the loss of a preceptor who, with imaginative empathy, even in ranges of thought outside all that his scholarship stood for, ever discerned consistency, clarity and integrity and commanded unceasing attention and respect in the scholarly dialogue. Symbolically, as he lay dying, his last paper was read at the conference of the Society for Textual Scholarship in New York. His voice and example live on in the memory of his fellow scholars.

Even before my first encounter with the man, I recall being strangely moved by his voice in his writing as, in *The Library* for 1959, I came across his obituary for Sir Walter Greg. I will remember Fredson Bowers, finally, in his own memorial words:

The effect of a great scholar is not to be measured only in terms of the influence of his writings, or even of his private conversation and criticism. That such a man existed was in itself enough to make us feel an inspiration and also an incentive. Certainly, knowing that he would apply his standards, whether in private or in public, to any work we produced acted as a remarkable stimulation to excellence. In many unknown ways, he set for us all standards that as a matter of pride we had to try to meet. This is the kind of unconscious impress that a great man makes upon his world.

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