John Donne Journal
Vol. 27 (2008)

Book Reviews

How Tom Eliot Met John Donne

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Dayton Haskin, *John Donne in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xxvi + 315 pp.

Dayton Haskin's book on the development of Donne's reputation in the nineteenth century has clearly been long in the making. Some of the forerunner articles that went into the book date back more than twenty years, although, since Haskin also published a book on Milton in 1994, it would seem that the research and writing on these two projects overlapped. As the finished book now stands, it is closely related to Haskin's labors over many years on the Donne Variorum project, to various volumes of which he has contributed references on the reception and interpretation of Donne in England and America over the nineteenth century. It is, therefore, a work of thorough and solid scholarship in the best sense. It has involved many years of tracking down and combing through primary sources, print and manuscript, and long consideration of how to fit all these scraps and pieces together and understand them.

Early in the book, Haskin describes what it was like to work with Harvard's Houghton Library collection and in the stacks of Widener Library, where one could begin the quest simply by moving along the shelves, pulling out books, and checking to see whether or not they contained anything relevant. Having been at Harvard myself in the 50s

and 60s, I have done much the same thing—sometimes standing by a shelf in dim light and checking one table of contents or index after another, sometimes carrying a stack of books back to a desk for a seated survey. Such grub work did not guarantee that one would find everything, but the stacks were remarkably complete—having basically squirreled away almost every book of interest that was published over a period of several centuries—and it did guarantee finding odd, unexpected items that likely could never have been found in any other way.

I recall from my own browsing in the Widener stacks that, as Haskin remarks, there were numerous rare books and first editions from the nineteenth century (and sometimes the eighteenth) which had been bought or donated and shelved soon after they were published. They still remained on the shelves like any ordinary book. For instance, when I wrote a paper on Hawthorne for an independent study course with Harry Levin, I began by reading everything that Hawthorne wrote. Most of his novels and stories could be found there in the stacks in first editions as well as later ones, sometimes in their original bindings, sometimes rebound in cloth or leather. So, as Haskin explains, he could simply move systematically along the shelves, open books and periodicals, find the relevant volume of a set or a collection, and quickly discover whether or not they contained anything of interest about Donne. Then, as the twentieth century drew toward its close, the librarians finally concluded, prudently but regretably, that what had once been thought of as ordinary books had grown increasingly rare, antique, and vulnerable, yet were still being read and sometimes dog-eared by anyone with permission to use the stacks.

So all those older books were weeded out and sent to a distant depository, from which they could be ordered one at a time—but, unfortunately, only if one somehow knew what book to ask for. Now that the golden age of ancient and accessible stacks has ended, how will future scholars find anything new about Donne, never discussed or mentioned in catalogues or reference works, which might make a variorum commentary more accurate and complete, if it is locked away in a distant vault and unobtainable unless one already knows what to look for? Perhaps one answer will be to put every word of all the books, manuscripts, private letters, and lecture notes in the world into a vast electronic database. But surely that will make it more difficult for future scholars to understand how readers in the past became acquainted with

writers like Donne in the twentieth century and the nineteenth, by way of college courses, browsing in stacks, and talking and writing to friends. "Say you've noticed," Haskin writes, "that in 1819 an editor named Ezekiel Sanford published out of Philadelphia a series of *Works of the British Poets*." A hopeful researcher could summon "all twenty-five volumes" from the depository "one by one," charge them out from the desk, and check to see if Donne is found in any of them. "It is completely impractical, however, to perform this operation for thousands of books and periodicals. And forget about serendipitous discoveries from desultory browsing" (p. xvi). In other words, the kind of massive and thorough primary scholarship that Haskin has undertaken so successfully—first establishing the details and then the comprehensive overview that emerges from those details which has enabled advances in understanding like the Donne Variorum and this book—may no longer be possible for future scholars.

Perhaps, if Google or another organization or consortium manages to put everything into an electronic database that can be searched for key words, the old habit of browsing will return in a new form. But it will not be the same, nor will it help us understand how readers might have become acquainted with a writer like Donne in nineteenth-century England and America. Coincidentally, Vernor Vinge touches on similar complexities and cultural puzzlements in his recent science fiction novel, *Rainbows End* (2006). Vinge imagines, as one plot element, the use in 2025 of giant machines, which are set to work grinding up all the books in the library at the University of California, San Diego, turning their pages into whirling snowflakes of paper, in order to scan and digest their texts into the digital virtual universe. Regrettably, the books are destroyed in the process. With the opposite of such destructive intentions, yet with much the same results for scholars and readers, the physical and cultural experience of browsing through shelf after shelf of old texts is becoming increasingly obsolete.

It would be hard to summarize all of Haskin's findings, or even his broad conclusions, in a brief review. One recurrent theme is that there were, in effect, two Donnes: the Dean of St. Paul's found in Walton's *Lives*, hero of English biographical history and familiar to most in the nineteenth century, and Donne the poet, admired by such writers as Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Browning. Although this split tended to either/or, the real Donne, of course, included both. Some readers tried to

make him an evangelical hero of the Church of England at the time when Hooker was building his foundations. Others of a different inclination tried to turn him into a figure in the gradual secularization of culture and advancement of thought from its medieval roots. Still others saw him as reviving the best energies of the Middle Ages amidst a decadent Renaissance. Most deplored his Catholic connections, which they presumed to be the likeliest explanation for his regrettable lapses into sexual perversity, but a few sympathetically revived the story of his family's persecution and his brother's martyrdom. Since specific examples are too numerous to detail, perhaps one may begin with one of the earliest readings of the Donne revival, Coleridge's familiar poem, which Haskin quotes from an early nineteenth-century source:

> With Donne, whose muse on dromedary trots,
> Wreathe iron pokers into true-love knots;
> Rhyme's sturdy cripple, fancy's maze and clue,
> Wit's forge and fire-blast, meaning's press and screw.
> (p. 53)

These lines (which I first heard Douglas Bush recite in an undergraduate lecture) are not a bad introduction to Donne's poetry.

Near the end of the nineteenth century we may take as a suitable closing example another rhymed criticism of Donne, from an annual celebratory dinner presided over by William Lyon Phelps, who brought the new vogue for Donne from Harvard to Yale. At a 1905 dinner called "A Session of the Poets," there was a skit in which "Apollo ascends Parnassus to judge a contest between the Metaphysicals and 'Bill Wordsworth and his Pals.'" The student impersonating Donne recited the following poem, which Haskin found in a typed program in the Yale libraries:

> When I'm dead-drunk, and doctors know not why
> And my friends' curiosity
> Will search my pockets to find out the means.
> When will they find *thy* ticket in my jeans.
> I think a sudden gleam of hope
> Will tell them how I got the dope.
> They'll pawn their watches for whate'er they'll get.
> (I think the night will be extremely wet.)

"What is typical is that the skit makes Donne, Crashaw, and Herrick witty, while rendering Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning wooden and boring. With Donne, the program proclaims, 'All is warmth, and light, and good desire'" (pp. 249–250). Haskin does not insist that this skit is one of his most important pieces of evidence, but in an odd way, so it seems to me. What students proclaim in good fellowship at drunken dinners is likely to represent what they really like and find important in their lives. Although Haskin does not say so, this recorded incident is reminiscent of later incidents when students at Oxford and Cambridge (also possibly drunken) were heard on balconies, proclaiming favorite lines of T. S. Eliot's "Waste Land" to admiring audiences below.

One thing Haskin makes abundantly clear is that everything converged at Harvard, toward the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, where professors of the new discipline of English literature proclaimed the power of John Donne's prose and poetry and where the Brahmin society of Greater Boston helped spread the word. It was in a freshman course at Harvard that T. S. Eliot first was introduced to Donne, and even to something like what he later referred to as Donne's unification of thought and feeling, by such professors as Le Baron Russell Briggs, who taught Donne in his freshman course, and Charles Eliot Norton. Later, Eliot returned to Harvard in 1932–1933 to give the Norton lectures (and a second time in 1950 to deliver the Theodore Spencer lecture). From Harvard, Donne's reputation spread to places like Yale, Penn, Stanford, and Johns Hopkins, as well as back to England, where the metaphysical poet Donne finally succeeded in overshadowing Walton's Dean of St. Paul's.

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