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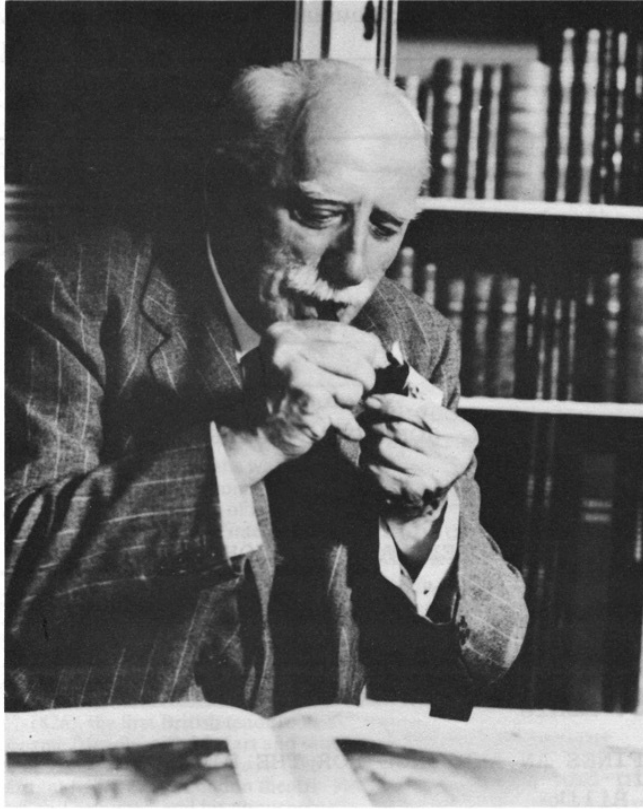
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LAWRENCE FITZROY POWELL, 1881-1975

From a photograph taken for Donald and Mary Hyde,
Four Oaks Farm, Somerville, N.J., 23 September 1959.

LAWRENCE FITZROY POWELL, 1881 - 1975

J.S.G. Simmons
All Souls College, Oxford

Lawrence Fitzroy Powell, whose magisterial edition of Boswell has placed him in the select company of the eponymous editors, was born at 235 Cowley Road, Oxford, on 9th August 1881, the youngest of the seven children of Harry Powell and of his wife, Anne, née Budd. Many years later it was a source of amusement to L.F. that he was sometimes taken for Sir Ernest Swinton, the holder of the Oxford Chair of Military History from 1925 to 1939. The confusion was understandable, for the resemblance was close and L.F.'s appearance and bearing were military. There was, interestingly enough, good family reason for this: his grandfather had served for thirty years in the dragoons and hussars in India, and his father's thirteen years in the Thirteenth Light Dragoons included the Crimean campaign. On the "ever-memorable 25th of October 1854" Harry Powell had ridden as a trumpeter in the Charge of the Light Brigade - and had survived (his charger, the "Balaclava mare", though wounded, carried him throughout the day and was later presented to Queen Victoria). From Harry Powell's reminiscences, which went through three editions between 1876 and 1881, we learn of his admiration for two of his commanding officers, Lieutenant-Colonel Lawrenson and Lieutenant-Colonel Fitzroy Maclean, and it was from these two heroes that L.F. derived his baptismal names "Lawrenson Fitzroy" - though he is not known to have used the "Lawrenson" form.

After leaving the army, Harry Powell came to Oxford where he was for some time trumpet-major of the Queen's Own Oxfordshire Yeomanry Cavalry. He died in 1886 and the difficult circumstances in which his widow found herself meant that L.F.'s schooling was curtailed. However, his interest in books may well have declared itself early; his first employment was in the Library of Brasenose College, whence he soon transferred to the Bodleian. The selection process favoured by Bodley's then Librarian, Nicholson, was - like many other aspects of that unusual man - idiosyncratic (L.F. recalled great stress being placed at the interview on the applicant's proficiency at swimming), but Nicholson had a remarkable eye for a promising lad - as the later careers of so many 'Bodley boys' of his choosing testify. The atmosphere which the Bodley boys absorbed was one of hard work and academic self-improvement (they received considerable tutoring from their seniors, including Bodley's Librarian himself); and in those unregenerate days their spare-time activities were participatory rather than spectatorial - L.F. became a noted pedestrian and cyclist.

L.F. must have made his mark among these young men, for in 1901 he was invited to join W.A. Craigie's team on what was then denominated the New English Dictionary, which shared accommodation with the Bodleian in the Old Ashmolean building. Lexicography became his main concern for the next twenty years, and to the familiarity with books that he had acquired on the Bodleian staff he was to add the clarity, concision, and the critical approach to sources which are the essential stock-in-trade of the well-found lexicographer - and annotator, one should add. It was while he was working on the Dictionary that he met and married (in 1909) a colleague, Ethelwyn Rebecca Steane. There was one child of the marriage, a boy, whose later success as headmaster of the School and Mayor of the town of Chard in Somerset was a great source of pride to L.F.

L.F.'s career at the Dictionary was interrupted by the First World War. He broke with family tradition by serving at the Admiralty where, he would recall with satisfaction, he was a colleague of one of the sons of the arch-lexicographer, Sir James Murray. After the War he returned to the Dictionary. By this time he had some published work to his credit: in particular, his edition of Nicholas Love's Mirror of the Blessed Lyf of Jesus Christ - a work presented to the Roxburghe Club in 1908 by the second Baron Aldenham on behalf of his father, the first Baron (Henry Hucks Gibbs, the banker), who had died while the book was in the press. Lexicography was doubtless responsible for L.F.'s involvement in the book, for the first Baron had been one of those who had planned the New English Dictionary and he was certainly the only banker of whom it could be said that he had read and annotated every proof of the Dictionary to within a few weeks before his death.² Apart from this edition (in which he acknowledges help received from his future wife), by 1919 L.F. had contributed substantially to three volumes of the Dictionary itself. It was probably time for him to make a move if he did not wish to devote the rest of his life to what Dr. Johnson termed "poenam pro poenis omnibus unam". The opportunity came in 1921.

Dr. Krebs, the Librarian of the Taylor Institution (the University's modern language and literature library) was due to retire at the end of September 1921. In May of that year a Sub-Committee was appointed to consider applications for the Librarianship and to submit a short-list to the Curators of the Institution. The Sub-Committee consisted of C.H. Firth (the Regius Professor of History), H.T. Gerrans of Worcester College, and the Secretary of the Taylor Institution, the formidable lexicographer, Joseph Wright. The names of

the other candidates and, indeed, of others on the short-list are not recorded, but surely at Joseph Wright's prompting, his fellow-lexicographer was appointed to the Librarianship on 16th July 1921.³

The retiring Librarian of the Taylorian had been something of an eccentric, and his departure offered the Curators possibilities of developing the Library which no sinecurist could have exploited: and, indeed, with the support of a small but dedicated staff, L.F. enormously improved and expanded the Taylorian Library during the twenty-eight years of his librarianship. But even so, in the relaxed atmosphere of the early 1920s it was expected that the change from full-time lexicographer to Librarian of the Taylorian would allow him to embark on a major scholarly undertaking. The earliest reports of a move in this direction neatly coincide with his new appointment.

Johnson and Boswell are unlikely to be strangers to any decent English lexicographer, but we have no evidence of L.F.'s explicit interest in the theme until 14 July 1921 (two days before his appointment as Taylorian Librarian), when he wrote to R.W. Chapman, the Secretary to the Delegates of the Clarendon Press, pointing out an error in the Birkbeck Hill text of the Life. Chapman had joined the Press in 1906 and had succeeded to the Secretaryship in January 1920, after Charles Cannan's death. He was already Johnsonianus, and in the year of his appointment had published a collection of essays which included an elegant piece on Johnson in Scotland, written on active service in Macedonia in 1918. He became the acknowledged "prime mover" in L.F.'s Johnsonian studies; many years later, L.F. was to repay something of his debt with one of the best articles that he ever wrote - his notice of Chapman in the Dictionary of National Biography.

Not long after his appointment as Secretary, Chapman observed that the stocks of the 1887 Birkbeck Hill edition were nearly exhausted. The Press did not possess plates, but - ironically - Harpers in New York had the plates which had been used for editions printed without authority in the U.S.A. At first Chapman considered the possibility of a reprint from the Harper plates, but he was uneasy about the text and wished to have it checked against Birkbeck Hill. On 30 November he wrote to H.W. Fowler (the connection between lexicography and editing seems inescapable) enquiring whether he would be prepared to undertake the task. The single-minded Fowler evidently declined the invitation, for on 17 December 1921 Chapman wrote to L.F. telling him that he was seeking two people to read

the American text against Birkbeck Hill "of an evening". He had written to the right man: on the same day a postcard was sent off to him starting with the words "Dear Mr Chapman, Yes...". L.F.'s connection with the Press and the new Birkbeck Hill had begun. The reading made rapid progress, but an alternative possibility arose which promised to make the use of the Harper plates unnecessary: the Press became aware of the feasibility of reprinting the Oxford text "anastatically" after minor errors had been corrected. This alternative, too, was to be quickly discarded. Chapman felt that a critical edition of the Life was needed (he points out the lacuna in a letter to L.F. of 24 June 1922) and on 24 November he wrote to L.F. asking him to collate parts of the Birkbeck Hill text with the first and second editions of 1791 and 1793. The results of L.F.'s collation evidently convinced Chapman that the Birkbeck Hill text was itself imperfect, and on 23 January 1923 he informed L.F. that he had decided in favour of a re-set edition - retaining, of course, the original Birkbeck Hill pagination.⁴

The undertaking - as Chapman and L.F. conceived it - could not be a light task. It had to include in addition to the four volumes of the Life a volume containing the Tour to the Hebrides and the Journey into North Wales. It would also involve the compilation of a sixth, index volume - this inevitably an entirely new work. Texts would have to be collated (a virtually new text of the Journey had to be prepared), and the great accretions to Johnsonian and Boswellian learning of the post-Birkbeck Hill period had to be digested and fitted into the near-Procrustean bed of his pagination. (The astonishing manuscript discoveries of the later 1920s and the 1930s lay in the future - fortunately, perhaps, for their implications might have daunted even L.F. and the Press.)

L.F. was not the man to neglect his duties as Taylorian Librarian and during the next dozen years - until the publication of the four volumes of the Life in 1934 - work on the edition took up almost all the time that he could spare from his library duties. None the less, contributions to Notes and Queries continued to flow, and there were articles, reviews, and letters in, for instance, the Review of English Studies and the Times Literary Supplement; but for the most part these were parerga to the great edition - often foretastes of the results of his patient and determined tracking down of references and identifications of persons whom Boswell had failed to particularise.⁵ When the four volumes appeared they were immediately recognised as a masterly solution to an editorial problem of daunting complexity. Birkbeck Hill's commentary had been skilfully and respectfully

revised - and the revisions had been ingeniously inserted in such a way that they met Chapman's requirement that page-references to the Birkbeck Hill edition should be valid for its successor. The results of L.F.'s collation of the text were inserted between text and footnotes, and "that truth might not be sacrificed to typography" a total of some three hundred pages of supplementary notes **was** added in the form of seven Appendices at the ends of the four volumes.

The fifth volume - covering the tours - and the index volume remained to be done. L.F. knew the Welsh ground, but Scotland demanded an excursion in the footsteps of Dr. Johnson. By now he was known by his works on both sides of the Atlantic, and it was with one of the earliest of his American friends, the late Dr. James Osborn, that he made a memorable motor-car visit to the Scotland of Johnson and Boswell in the autumn of 1935. The tour lent a fresh dimension to his work on the volume, which was already agreeably complicated by the discovery (or rediscovery) of manuscript materials inaccessible to, and certainly unused by, Birkbeck Hill. L.F.'s capacity for correction and supplementation of the commentary had, moreover, vastly increased; there was much to be done on the index volume; and the Second World War brought additional responsibilities for L.F. and threw the plans of publishing houses into confusion. All these factors help to explain the delay in publishing the last two volumes. There were items on the credit side of the ledger, however. A grant from the Leverhulme Trust and the generous attitude of the Curators of the Taylor Institution allowed L.F. to devote the vacations of the academic year 1936/7 to full-time work on the edition; and retirement from the Librarianship in 1949 also provided a measure of relief. Even so, the fifth volume and the crowning index volume did not appear until 1950 - sixteen years after the appearance of the four volumes of the Life.

In their divers ways these two volumes epitomize L.F.'s scholarly virtues. In the Scottish and the Welsh journeys of the fifth volume we recognize the insistence on the original texts and their careful handling, the grateful and judicious use of the accumulated learning of other scholars, and (in the 137-page Appendix) we see the innumerable additions to knowledge due to his own untiring researches and unrivalled command of the Johnsonian milieu. In the index volume we recognize his common sense, enviable accuracy and admirable judgement in the arrangement of tens of thousands of references, and a noble readiness to sacrifice years of his own time that others might save minutes of theirs. It is on these six

volumes (the two last in their much improved second editions of 1964) that L.F.'s claim to be numbered among the great editors must, and can safely, rest.

L.F. used to recall with amusement and some pride that he had not sat for an examination since he left school. In an Oxford context this left him at a disadvantage. However, the University complimented him with an Honorary M.A. in 1927 (he fortunately escaped the unseemly protest of the following year at the time when others who had been concerned with work on the Oxford English Dictionary received Honorary Doctorates).⁶ In 1933 he achieved academic respectability with an M.A. by decree through St. Catherine's Society - thereby, at the age of 52, at last becoming a member of the University. Two years later, in the year following that of the publication of the four volumes of the Life, Durham University (at the instigation, one imagines, of its Professor of English, Claude Collier Abbott, the cataloguer of the Fettercairn papers) showed perspicacity in awarding him its Honorary Doctorate of Letters. Henceforth he was happy to be referred to as "Dr. Powell" - the honorary title becoming as much part of him as it is intrinsic to Dr. Johnson himself.

L.F. was an eminently clubbable man, and was a member of the Johnson Club and of the Johnson Societies of Lichfield and London, presiding over them in 1963, 1950, and 1967 respectively. Honours and pleasures of other kinds showered on him in his late seventies and eighties. His transatlantic fame rivalled the honour which was paid to him in his own country. He was invited to join the Editorial Board of the Yale Johnson and, with Professor W.J. Bate, edited and annotated for it Johnson's Adventurer contributions in a volume which appeared in 1963. By then L.F. had two visits to the United States to look back on: one in 1959 when he addressed the Johnsonians at the 250th anniversary dinner in New York; and a second, in the Autumn of 1962, when he delighted his friends at Yale and elsewhere with his reflections on the editing of Boswell. He returned from these visits invigorated and full of a modestly surprised gratitude for the generosity and hospitality of his hosts, among whom the names of Donald and Mary Hyde deservedly received first mention.

In Oxford, too, the 1960s were a splendid decade for L.F. He was drawn into the teaching and examining activities of the English Faculty and a few fortunate graduate students were sent to him for supervision. His methods and the environment in which the supervision took place might be unconventional, but his example and counsel were decisive.⁸ His pupils, some of

whom hold distinguished appointments not only in England but in the United States and the Antipodes, bear witness to the effectiveness of his teaching. The Colleges also showed that they were conscious of L.F.'s distinction: St. Catherine's and Pembroke conferred Honorary Fellowships on him in 1966; and the membership of Common Room which Brasenose offered him was accepted with especial pleasure - coming, as it did, from the College which he had served in a humble capacity seventy years earlier. He received the final accolade, the Honorary Doctorate of Letters of his own University of Oxford on 7 June 1969. It was by no means too soon, for two months later he became seriously ill. An operation was successful but a relapse followed, and in February 1970 he was again in hospital. At the end of the month he was moved to the nursing home in Banbury where he was to remain until his death five years later.

L.F. in Banbury was unbowed by physical weakness. He continued to collect materials for yet another edition of the Life, to write letters to his many correspondents (and, of course, to The Times), and to entertain his visitors - including many loyal and generous American friends - with anecdotes whose capacity to amuse both their hearers (and their narrator) somehow lost nothing through repetition. His cheerfulness and sense of proportion seemed to be enhanced rather than impaired by their less ample context, and he retained these supreme qualities until, after gradually increasing weakness, he died within three weeks of his ninety-fourth birthday, on 17 July 1975.

To the end of his long life L.F. was always looking forward: he was interested in the news, in fresh developments, in his friends' plans. But had he been minded to look back he would have found much cause for satisfaction. He had risen by his own efforts from a simple home and had earned (and in the end had received) the highest academic honours. Admittedly he had not written a great work of literature or criticism (his temperament and his opportunities did not furnish the prerequisites for this), but he had been a contributor to the sum of human knowledge on a grand scale. For more than a quarter of a century he had directed an important library, he had participated in work on a dictionary which ranks among the noblest monuments of British scholarship, and he had added to the gaiety - and more - of nations by providing a vastly enriched commentary on the greatest biography in the English language. He had done all this while remaining a modest, kindly and humorous man (his ready laugh is unforgettable), who had a perfect natural dignity, who knew what was due to

himself - or to a peer of the realm - but who was ready to welcome and help the humblest genuine seeker after truth. His memory will live in the minds of those who attempt to follow in that path of true scholarship which, by his example, he made so plain.

Documentation

1. Recollections of a Young Soldier before and during the Crimean War. Copies of the first and third editions are in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.
2. Dictionary of National Biography, Second Supplement (Oxford, 1912), II, 103.
3. Information in this paragraph is based on the Minute Books of the Curators of the Taylor Institution, and was kindly supplied by Mr. Giles Barber, the Taylorian Librarian.
4. I am grateful to the Secretary to the Delegates of the Oxford University Press for permission to consult relevant correspondence.
5. For a bibliography see Johnson, Boswell and their Circle, ed. M.M. Lascelles et al. (Oxford, 1965), p.320 seqq.
6. See L.R. Farnell, An Oxonian Looks Back (London, 1934), pp. 321-3.
7. For his American visits see Mary Hyde in Our Friend L.F.: Recollections of Lawrence Fitzroy Powell (New York: privately printed for the Johnsonians, 1976).
8. See J.D. Fleeman's remarks in the pamphlet referred to in the preceding note.

