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978-0-521-10599-6 - Duet for Two Voices: An Informal Biography of Edward Dent Compiled from his Letters to Clive Carey

Hugh Carey

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He was a tall, weakly built young man, whose clothes had to be judiciously padded on the shoulder in order to make him pass muster. His face was plain rather than not, and there was a curious mixture in it of good and bad. He had a fine forehead and a good large nose, and both observation and sympathy were in his eyes. But below the nose and eyes all was confusion, and those people who believe that destiny resides in the mouth and chin shook their heads when they looked at him.

Philip himself, as a boy, had been keenly conscious of these defects. Sometimes when he had been bullied or hustled about at school he would retire to his cubicle and examine his features in a looking-glass, and he would sigh and say, 'It is a weak face. I shall never carve a place for myself in the world.' But as years went on he became either less self-conscious or more self-satisfied. The world, he found, made a niche for him as it did for everyone. Decision of character might come later – or he might have it without knowing. At all events he had got a sense of beauty and a sense of humour, two most desirable gifts . . . All the energies and enthusiasms of a rather friendless life had passed into the championship of beauty.

E. M. Forster, *Where Angels Fear To Tread* (1905) p. 116

'You look on life as a spectacle; you don't enter it; you only find it funny or beautiful. So I can trust you to cure me. Mr. Herriton, isn't it funny?'

E. M. Forster, *Where Angels Fear To Tread* (1905) p. 313

I always imagine Dent as the Serpent telling Eve about the Apples. 'My dear Eve . . .' pointing at blemishes on them, with back-hits at God and Adam, and a rumour that the Holy Ghost was *enceinte*. But so kindly.

Rupert Brooke, Letter to Geoffrey Keynes, March 1911

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Preface

I never thought that I should be the biographer of the Old Serpent – a name Edward Dent acquired from the occasion of *The Magic Flute* in 1911: when he appeared before the curtain to announce that Mrs Fletcher could not sing Pamina the shrill excited voice of a well-briefed child cut through the momentary silence with ‘Is that the Serpent, Mummy?’. I used to meet him occasionally when my uncle, Clive Carey, took me to the opera at Sadler’s Wells, and between the acts Dent, his chin characteristically tucked below his shoulder, let fall a few aphorisms about the performance. By then he was stooping and cadaverous, and very deaf, but his comments were pithy enough and wonderfully like the imitations in which his friends delighted. Evidently he was vastly learned, and I was too ignorant to make much of him.

Of my uncle I knew both much and little. My father and his brother and sisters took one another for granted. Margery painted, Clive sang, Gordon wrote and taught, Dorothea apparently could do many things but didn’t; none of them ever suggested that any of the others were really *good* at what they did, and all tended to depreciate their own work. Thus, while I loved to hear Clive sing folk-songs downstairs at the piano or at school concerts, or on gramophone records, and much as I enjoyed the infectious charm of his company, I knew little of his real eminence. When we went to Sadler’s Wells together I was aware that he was in some way in charge, but he gave no indication of being an important person. Sometimes I used to join him and his wife at the end of his (and my) day’s teaching and we would go to a Chinese restaurant together, but he never mentioned that his pupils included Elsie Morison and Joan Sutherland. In his last years I visited him almost every weekend; it could still be fun, for his charm never entirely left him; by now I knew what I wanted to ask him about the past, but he was not often able to remember.

After his death I found myself, by the courtesy of other members of the family who had recently by force of

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circumstances been less close to him, the heir to a great collection of letters. From these it was clear that Clive had meant to attempt a memoir of Edward Dent, his old friend and mentor. There were answers from one or two friends to whom he had written for 'old serpentine letters', and he had tried to sort his own, but energy and powers of organisation had failed him; a request for a brief biography of Dent from the Dictionary of National Biography had been set aside and the task was not attempted.

When I mentioned that I was sorting and transcribing the large amount of material that had come into my hands, many friends encouraged me to continue. Jill Vlasto led me to a number of Clive's letters in the Rowe Music Library at King's College, Cambridge; Frank Howes and John Dykes Bower cast their more expert eye on the letters and reported well of them; Keith Falkner helped in the search for a publisher; Evelyn Broadwood with diligent loyalty played his part in arranging a commemoration of Edward Dent and Clive Carey at Sadler's Wells; Philip Radcliffe answered my questions with enthusiasm and kindness; friends helped with their typewriters and the book took shape.

I must emphasise that the outcome is not a full-dress biography either of Dent or my uncle. Where there are gaps, they have been left unfilled. For some readers it may be disappointing that there is nothing about Dent's work as Professor in organising the faculty of Music at Cambridge; for others that Clive's work in folk-song and dance, as a recitalist or with the English Singers, receives scant attention. The reason is that they did not write to one another about them, or perhaps in a few instances that Clive's letters on these topics have not survived. I have never felt myself competent to write Dent's life, but I believe that through the medium of his prolific correspondence he came near to writing it himself.

Once the text was complete, it became clear that much would be gained by contemporary illustrations. Again as an amateur in a professional world I discovered the remarkable helpfulness of their colleagues at Cambridge and at Sadler's Wells. Geoffrey Keynes generously lent the programme of the first Marlowe Society performance and, on behalf of Rupert Brooke's trustees, allowed quotations from his letters; George Rylands gave other useful information; Geoffrey Dent kindly sent photographs of Ribston Hall in his uncle's boyhood; and Mrs Frida

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Knight lent pages from her sketchbook. Dennis Arundell also opened his scrapbooks and his memories of Cambridge music, and the Fitzwilliam Museum provided Mrs Cockerell's lovely designs for the costumes for *The Fairy Queen*; Nick Furbank handed on some photographs he had collected as E. M. Forster's biographer. For the later years the Rowe Music Library, the Mander and Mitchenson collection, and the Victoria and Albert Museum were helpful, and Harry Lloyd lent his design for Clive's production of *Riders to the Sea*. The early years of opera at the Old Vic are hard to illustrate – probably Lilian Baylis thought photographs an unnecessary waste of scarce resources.

Had he not been busy with greater matters, my cousin Anthony Elliott could have written this book better than I have done. It is a great regret that he is not here to enjoy the book that I would so gladly have dedicated to him.

Crawley, Winchester