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978-0-521-18085-6 - The Enduring Legacy: Alexander Pope Tercentenary Essays

Edited by G. S. Rousseau and Pat Rogers

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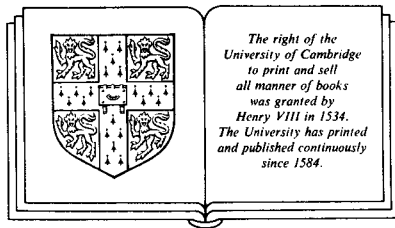
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Preface

This volume originated in the summer of 1982 in leisured conversations between its two editors who, while rambling through Henry Hoare's magnificent eighteenth-century gardens at Stourhead in Wiltshire, wondered what, if anything, the tercentenary of Pope's birth in 1688 would signify for his reputation at the end of the twentieth century.

One of the editors lamented that Pope's poetry had long ago ceased to communicate any essential humanism to the educated masses and that, more recently, the criticism of Pope's works had been transformed into a rarefied dialogue among an ever-diminishing number of specialists. He inquired if there were some way to retrieve Pope's reputation and bring it, so to speak, before the educated reading public once again. The other editor affirmed, more optimistically, that Pope was still a great poet and would always find some readers, no matter how few in number or how perpetually diminishing; he saw less need for retrieval and wished that more attention could be expended in careful reading and close analysis.

As we wandered past the Temples of Ceres, Apollo and Flora, over Colen Campbell's Palladian bridge, and by the grotto at the springs of the river Stour to which Pope himself contributed an inscription, we also wondered about Pope in the brave new world of the twentieth-century *fin-de-siècle*. We inquired if a new generation of readers would restore Pope the poet to the high position he seems to have occupied after the Second World War, especially now that Professor Maynard Mack's classic biography has appeared. These speculations – in turn sincere, enthusiastic and nostalgic – prompted us to conjecture more soberly about the biographical Pope living the first decade of his own life in the 1690s; about the reversal of his poetic niche (for the worse) as the French Revolution took its toll in the 1790s; about the effect of pejorative Victorian criticism of the entire eighteenth century on his reputation; about the only complete Victorian edition of his works by Elwin and Courthope published on the eve of the 1890s; and now, as the 1990s approach, about Pope's late twentieth-century fate among readers whose interests continue to shift.

Soon we found ourselves planning a volume of tercentenary essays. From the start it was our hope to reach a wide reading audience by including at least a few general essays with broad contemporary interest, rather than cater to a narrow group of Pope specialists and their students. But at the same time we realized the vanity of this all too human wish, and accepted the facts of literary life, which mean that a commemorative volume ultimately relies on the best talent available, no matter how specialized the concerns of those authors. Eventually we compromised, as our table of contents abundantly demon-

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trates. From the beginning it was imperative that this enterprise be an international venture. We had no concept – and still harbour none – of a commemorative volume written by native English-speaking authors only. It is therefore the work of chance that no Continental critic–scholar is represented in these pages. There are, of course, fine readers as well as fine critics of Pope in Europe, but neither of us was lucky enough to have come upon them at the right moment or in the right place, and we hope that none of our readers will consider our project provincial as a consequence of this all too apparent omission.

Nor should readers expect to find any systematic coverage of Pope's life and works in these very eclectic essays. The contributors were invited to write about any aspect of Pope in which they were interested; indeed, the editors guaranteed them free rein as well as the freedom to duplicate the interests of their fellow contributors. The balance and emphasis found in this book are therefore as random as the absence of contributors from the European Continent, and the fact that *The Rape of the Lock*, for example, captures two essays whereas other major poems by Pope claim none signifies nothing more calculated than the preference of these particular contributors. To what degree these topics and approaches signify 'trends' in contemporary criticism and theoretical filiation, both intrinsic and extrinsic to Pope, we leave it to our readers to judge.

Almost from the first day, the project began to acquire friends who are too numerous to list here by name. Virtually all the contributors helped out in one way or another, either in the early stages of planning or later on when the dedication to detail became everything, and our respective universities also contributed their share by providing us with typists, and then, word processors. Even so, we must single out three staff members of the Cambridge University Press for the assistance they have continuously given us throughout the long course of this enterprise. Dr Andrew Brown, a sensitive literary critic in his own right, recognized the boon for Pope studies a celebratory volume would have, and encouraged us to persist on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean; Kevin Taylor, whose energy has never flagged despite our inevitable delays and crossed wires, has proved how well he understands what Pope meant by being wedded 'to the dull duty of an editor'. And Karin Horowitz prepared our manuscript for the printer with editorial care rarely found these days.

Finally, George Rousseau is particularly grateful to his research assistant, Mrs Leila Brownfield, who checked obscure references in several of the essays and proofread the entire manuscript, and also acknowledges his gratitude to the Academic Senate of the University of California at Los Angeles which provided him with a modest research grant to edit the typescript for publication. Jointly we acknowledge the New York office of the Cambridge University Press, which acted as a clearing house for our transatlantic telecommunications, and whose staff soon began to refer to our pipeline communications as the 'Popeline'.

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Abbreviations

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| Brownell | Morris Brownell, <i>Alexander Pope and the arts of Georgian England</i> (Oxford, 1978) |
| <i>Collected in himself</i> | Maynard Mack, ' <i>Collected in himself</i> ': <i>Essays critical, biographical, and bibliographical on Pope and some of his contemporaries</i> (Newark, Delaware, 1982). |
| <i>Correspondence</i> | George Sherburn (ed.), <i>The correspondence of Alexander Pope</i> , 5 vols (Oxford, 1956) |
| Dryden, <i>Poems</i> | James Kinsley (ed.), <i>The poems of John Dryden</i> , 4 vols. (Oxford, 1958) |
| <i>E-C</i> | Whitwell Elwin and W. J. Courthope (eds.), <i>The works of Alexander Pope</i> , 10 vols. (1871–89) |
| <i>Early career</i> | George Sherburn, <i>The early career of Alexander Pope</i> (Oxford, 1934) |
| Guerinot | J. V. Guerinot, <i>Pamphlet attacks on Alexander Pope, 1711–1744</i> (London 1969) |
| <i>Pope: a life</i> | Maynard Mack, <i>Alexander Pope: a life</i> (New Haven and London, 1985) |
| Spence | J. M. Osborn (ed.), <i>Observations, anecdotes, and characters of books and men</i> , 2 vols. (Oxford, 1966) |
| Swift, <i>Correspondence</i> | Harold Williams (ed.), <i>The correspondence of Jonathan Swift</i> , 5 vols. (Oxford, 1963) |
| <i>TE</i> | John Butt <i>et al.</i> (eds.), <i>The Twickenham Edition of poems of Alexander Pope</i> , 11 vols. (London, 1938–68) |