



Wesley Milgate

Wesley Milgate (1916–1999)

Wesley Milgate was born in Leura, NSW, on 18 January 1916, and died in Sydney on 15 July 1999. He was educated at the University of Sydney, where he graduated with first class honours in English in 1935. At that time it was usual for Arts graduates, hopeful of a livelihood, to take the Diploma in Education at the Sydney Teachers College after finishing their degree. Milgate successfully completed the course, but is not listed as holding the Diploma in Education. A. G. Mitchell, whose situation was the same, once explained to me that while passing the course was a necessary qualification for teaching, the award of the Diploma incurred a fee of some three pounds, which not everyone could spare. (I have not found the name of A. D. Hope among the Diplomates either.)

Milgate held teaching appointments at Leeton and at Belmore, in Sydney, and in this period worked on his MA on John Donne. The degree was awarded with first class honours and the University Medal in 1943. Milgate joined the staff as Teaching Fellow in 1946, and became Temporary Lecturer in 1948. In that year he was awarded the first Nuffield Foundation Dominion Fellowship in the Humanities to study at Oxford. He was attached to Merton College, where the chair of English Literature was held by F. P. Wilson, doyen of Elizabethan scholars, while at St Hilda's nearby, a new Oxford edition of Donne was being undertaken by Miss Helen Gardner. Milgate quickly established a reputation in this environment, and was invited to participate in the editing of Donne, having his Nuffield Fellowship extended for a second year.

Meanwhile the unexpected death of A. J. A. Waldock in January 1950 meant that the Challis Chair at Sydney had fallen vacant. With some reluctance Milgate was persuaded to apply, with the modest expectation that this might enhance his prospects of a senior lectureship. His application was made from Oxford, and in 1951 he was appointed to the chair. This may have seemed an adventurous appointment (allowing that in 1938 Enoch Powell had been appointed to the Chair of Greek at the age of twenty-five), but Milgate quickly demonstrated that the confidence placed in him was well founded.

I was an undergraduate in English when Milgate joined the Department and a junior member of staff when he returned from Oxford. To revisit these years is almost to reconstruct a forgotten chapter in University history. The English Department then consisted of A. J. A. Waldock, A. G. Mitchell, R. G. Howarth, H. J. Oliver, I. R. Maxwell, W. Milgate and Thelma Herring. When Maxwell left to take the Melbourne chair he was

replaced by F. W. W. Rhodes, who died suddenly in November 1949, to be replaced later by G. H. Russell. The two Teaching Fellows in the Department were myself and B. K. Martin. Academics at this time referred to one another by their surnames only, so that at seminars one member of staff might address another as 'Waldock' or 'Oliver'. This practice eventually disappeared along with the habit of wearing gowns to lectures, although in the 1960s I would still receive letters from F. P. Wilson or Bruce Dickins beginning 'Dear Wilkes'.

When Milgate came to the chair, Sydney was still the only University in the state, with a college at Armidale. It fell to a Professor of English to act as Chief Examiner at the Leaving Certificate, to chair the Syllabus Committee, to respond to invitations to address the Dickens Fellowship and the Shakespeare Society, to support the English Association and the Poetry Society, and give educational broadcasts for the ABC. Milgate assumed all this as part of his academic role, and it was probably a more creative activity than the current professorial lot of supplying endless data for the bureaucratic treadmill.

It was also a mark of his dedication to his subject. Students learned to take the study of English Literature seriously because they saw that Milgate took it seriously. While he was a Donne specialist, he belonged to the generation of academics who worked freely outside their designated area, and were prepared to lecture on any author on the syllabus. Students at Sydney would recall Milgate's lectures on Pope and Dickens, on Dorothy Osborne and the writers of the Nineties. MA candidates began by discussing their topics with him, and went away with a reading list and a sense of his personal interest in their work.

Milgate made an eloquent statement of his view of English as a University subject in his lecture on 'The Language and Literature Tradition' in the commemorative volume *One Hundred Years of the Faculty of Arts* (Angus and Robertson, 1952). He worked tirelessly to put it into effect in the decade that followed. He renovated the curriculum, developed the tutorial system, reorganised postgraduate studies, introduced courses in critical theory, and was indefatigable in building up the Library holdings in the field. The Literature staff of five with which he began grew to more than three times that number, and he presided over the changes with an unflinching good humour and forbearance, always a model of civilised behaviour in trying circumstances.

One attainment which has not received due recognition was Milgate's role in the establishment of the first Chair of Australian Literature. When every Australian university now offers courses in it, it is hard to realise how the 1950s were preoccupied with the credentials of Australian Literature as a university subject. The issue came into focus with A. D. Hope's article on 'Australian Literature and the Universities' in *Meanjin*

XIII (1954) 165–9, which drew further comment from Milgate and A. N. Jeffares (pp. 429–36) and from Vance Palmer and E. Morris Miller (pp. 591–6). In 1956 the University of Sydney decided to establish a Chair of Australian Literature if sufficient funds could be found from outside sources, and by 1960 £20,000 had been raised by public appeal. Milgate not only engaged in the uncongenial task of fundraising, but had the principal role in the University of gaining academic support for the project, and, when the public funds fell short of the target, of persuading the Professorial Board to recommend the establishment of the Chair. It was advertised in 1961.

By now even Milgate's stamina was being taxed, and he was dissatisfied with the progress of his work on Donne. In 1961 he resigned the chair, and after an interval of recuperation at Leura, returned to Oxford to complete his edition. The text of Donne's *Satires and Verse Letters* was delivered to the printer in November 1965. At that time Milgate accepted a Readership in the Department of English in the School of General Studies at the Australian National University, and began a second successful teaching career, complemented by a strong record in research. He again contributed at all levels of the Department's work, and was in much demand from other universities as an examiner for higher degrees.

The completion of the text of Donne's *Satires and Verse Letters* coincided with news of the death of R. C. Bald, the Australian-born scholar who had been working for years on a biography of Donne. In his will he nominated Milgate to complete it. This very demanding task was undertaken with characteristic self-effacement, and the *Life* appeared in 1970 under Bald's name alone. When in 1972 the Bodleian Library acquired a holograph of Donne's 'A Letter to the Lady Carey and Mrs Essex Riche', which was published in facsimile, Milgate was modestly pleased that this newly discovered Donne manuscript broadly confirmed his own earlier editorial decisions. He now engaged on what he referred to as 'Donne iv', the last volume of the edition by himself and Dame Helen Gardner, devoted to the *Epithalamions, Anniversaries and Epicedes*. It was published in 1978.

Milgate was elected a Fellow of the Academy in 1970. He was appointed to a Personal Chair at ANU in 1971, and on his retirement in 1976, the 'Milgate Room' was named in his honour. It is not accurate to speak of Milgate as belonging to a past generation when his work and his example continue into the present. One may nevertheless ponder how his unique complex of qualities would be measured by the 'performance indicators' which have been devised as though for academic robots since.

Milgate discovered an interest in automobiles rather later in life than usual, and this served him well when from a base in Leura he seemed to drive from church to church in the Blue Mountains, helping out as an

organist. His interest in music was of long standing. I never knew him to speak of his religious beliefs, except once to say that his being christened Wesley was an indication of his upbringing (though his mother called him John). In his retirement he was drawn into the ecumenical venture of modernising the hymnal, and he was largely responsible for *The Australian Hymn Book* (1977), reissued as *With One Voice* (1979), *Sing Alleluia* (1987) and *Together in Song* (1999). He contributed at least one hymn himself, with Leura specified as the place of composition.

Milgate moved from Leura to Bondi in 1985, and after that to Toorina, near Coffs Harbour. His Christmas messages made no reference to emphysema until 1998, when he looked forward cheerfully to the possibility of an operation. I did not realise that it was an effort for him at this time to get from his bed to his desk, to finish his work on the hymnals.

Milgate remained a bachelor, and was embarrassed from time to time when others saw this as a waste. His devotion to his extended family, and the qualities of generosity, wit and good fellowship communicated to so many students, colleagues and friends, show that such a concern was misplaced. The image I retain of Milgate is of him joining a table at lunch, probably in the old Refectory at Sydney University, and of the welcoming expressions on the faces of those already seated, when they looked up to see who it was.

G A Wilkes