

Norman Davis 1913-1989



Norman Davis and his wife Lena (at left). Norman Davis Papers, AG 813/04. Hocken Library

Born in Dunedin on May 16, 1913 Norman Davis was the only child of James John and Jean Davis (née Black). Described as ‘lively and witty’ people, it has been suggested that he ‘inherited some of his dry and quizzical sense of humour from them’. Davis was educated at Otago Boys’ High School (1926-29) and at the University of Otago, where he gained an MA in 1933. Awarded the Rhodes scholarship in 1934, he went to Merton College, Oxford to continue his studies in English language.

“[I’ve] had a marvellous life, and the best job in the world” – Otago Daily Times, 2 May 1984.

Early in his academic career, Davis lectured English abroad at Kaunas University, Lithuania (1937), and at Sofia University, Bulgaria (1938-39). During World War II, he served as a Press Attaché in the British Legation in Sofia. Due to his linguistic talents, he was enlisted as a covert operative, and according to Irvine (1984), ‘he grew a mustache big enough to be seen from behind’. While in Istanbul he was condemned to death in absentia by the Bulgarian courts for conspiracy. Fortunately, the death sentence was later revoked. He was awarded the MBE in 1945 for his contribution to the war effort.

After the war, he married Magdelene (Lena) Bone and returned to academic life. Initially, he worked as a lecturer in English at the University of London, and then at Oxford

University. In 1949 he became a professor at Glasgow University, a position he held for ten years.

In 1959 Davis returned to Oxford University to succeed Professor J.R.R. Tolkien as the Merton Professor of English Language and Literature. Davis had studied under Tolkien during his student years and was thought by Tolkien to be ‘the best student of recent years that I have known in English studies...’.

Throughout his academic career Davis was involved in research, particularly in the field of medieval English. He became known and respected as ‘one of the worlds leading authorities in early medieval English’. His most noted work was on the Paston family letters, a study of some 900 letters written by three generations of this 15th century family.

In 1984 Davis returned to Dunedin to receive an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Literature from the University of Otago. He died on 2 December 1989 at Oxford.



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