A Serious Traveller: Esmond de Beer as Scholar

(Talk for the exhibition ' Portrait of a Gentleman scholar: the Life and Legacy of Esmond de Beer', 20 March 2002, de Beer Gallery, University of Otago Library)

No single portrait of Esmond de Beer as scholar could do full justice to his achievements. Fortunately Jock McEldowney and I today offer our separate brief insights as preliminaries to the splendid exhibition you are about to inspect.

I have chosen to begin with the photographic image on your invitation which catches Esmond in full evening dress at a meeting in 1965 of the Samuel Pepys Club, the epitome—to adapt a line of Yeats—of a seventy-year-old smiling public man'. A glass of champagne in his hand, covered by design, is entirely appropriate, both for this occasion and because in this very year Esmond was elected a Fellow of the prestigious British Academy. It was not his clubbability or philanthropy however, that had brought him to this scholarly eminence, but a sober, serious and life-long dedication to historical research. The seal on his reputation had been set ten years before by the publication of his monumental edition of the *Diary* of John Evelyn, and there was a great deal more to come.

I first met Esmond in the early 1960s both in here in Dunedin and in London. There he invited me to tea at the new house in Brompton Square which he shared with his sisters Mary and Dora. Later that year he took me to a memorable meeting of the Johnson Club in Banbury. He went out of his way to take an interest in the research project that I was just beginning, and under his friendliness I registered that only the best work would meet with his full approval.

This kindly man was recognisably the same person whom his younger cousin Charles Brasch had judged when at Oxford in the late 1920s as ' very correct and very polite, in part to disguise his shyness' (*Indirections: a memoir 1909-1947*, 1980, p. 148). The ' shyness' was perhaps exaggerated and partly to be explained by Esmond's distaste for outward show, especially resulting from intellectual conceit or arrogance. His tendency was to look outward rather than inwards, so it's not surprising that unlike Charles Brasch Esmond left no autobiography. Whereas his poet cousin, with something of Wordsworth in his nature, was concerned to register how the world struck *him*, Esmond sought rather to understand how the external world worked, and specially in other times and places. He was ambitious, but not to have all eyes on *him*. He confessed his underlying motivation in the Preface to his edition of Evelyn's *Diary*: ' I have tried to work for the whole republic of learning'. This is a huge claim, but notice the careful modesty of ' tried' as well as the emphasis on ' work'. This project had taken Esmond 25 years of hard slog from beginning to end. And on its completion he moved straight on to his even more massive edition of the correspondence of the philosopher John Locke, which one reviewer summed up simply as' consummate'. This second enterprise was to take him well into his 80s, until he was blind and could no longer work effectively

Esmond's reference to the 'whole republic of learning' was no exaggeration. His expressed aim in his edition of the *Diary* was quite heroically ' to reproduce what Evelyn wrote … and to bring it by means of annotation into relationship with the knowledge of Evelyn's time and our own.' To achieve this latter aim he drew very heavily (and shrewdly) on the work of many scholars past and present. The authorities he cites amount to no small library of texts published somewhere or other in Europe over the preceding four centuries. More revealing still is the number and calibre of contemporary scholars whom he punctiliously acknowledges. He names at least 100 in his Preface to the Locke, adding judiciously that not all help was equal in value. We gather that the ' republic of learning' is

not limited to one time or place, any more than subjects of inquiry are to be limited by passing fashion. Members of this ideal society of equals are always conscious of worlds beyond the here and now; they are great voyagers in mind and very often in body.

How did Esmond come to aspire to membership of this select group? His curiosity about other ways of living and thinking was first stirred during his formative years in Dunedin. Aged 6, at home in Dunedin Esmond would sit reading Shakespeare rather than go out to play. He tells us that at his first school—a private preparatory school attached to Selwyn College—I handled older books' (Michael Strachan, *Esmond de Beer (1895-1990)*, 1995, p. 14). These belonged to the collection of William Arderne Shoults now very fittingly housed in this Gallery. Esmond was exceptional at that time in taking an interest in Shoults's books, which the rest of us have more slowly come to value as a treasury of rare and ancient printed works of European scholarship. At secondary school in London Esmond won prizes for modern languages and general knowledge. No doubt he felt freer to follow the path of learning after 1912 when his older brother Bendix entered the London office of Hallenstein Brothers. In 1914 Esmond went up to Oxford to read History and came under the influence of Sir Charles Firth, Regius Professor of Modern History.

However, the Great War soon made its demands. In 1917 Bendix was killed in action and Esmond went to serve in India. At the end of the war Esmond was awarded a shortened wartime degree, and was old enough at 24 to know what he wanted to do. (Perhaps he suffered none of the parental pressure that Charles Brasch so keenly felt.) After joining in a Grand Family Tour, Esmond returned to Great Britain, where in 1923 he completed an MA in history at the University of London. He then moved back to Oxford to work for Firth as his voluntary assistant. Firth's speciality was British 17th-century history, and Esmond followed him in making this century his own. The two men were alike in many ways and I believe that Esmond saw him not only as mentor but as model. The similarities between the two men are many and striking. Both believed in the gospel of work; had private means and used them to build up remarkable working libraries which they readily shared with others; both had little interest in speculative thought or personal religious belief.

No surprise that Esmond should have been so impressed by the older man, who was a dominant figure in his day. Firth worked in the great European tradition of historical scholarship which devoted itself to publishing accurate documentation of the past illuminated with searching annotation. The great 19th century names to conjure with were on the Continent those of Leopold von Ranke and those associated with the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, and in England William Stubbs and others involved in the printing of government and other records. In the same mould was Sir Leslie Stephens' *Dictionary of National Biography*, to which both Firth and Esmond contributed much. It was this somewhat stern and nationalistic tradition of scholarship to which Esmond devoted himself mind and body.

What did Esmond himself achieve in this line? The crudest measure is by quantification. Esmond edited five books, two of which stand out as major achievements by any standard. The first and arguably the most notable was his 6-volume edition of *The Diary of John Evelyn*, published by the prestigious Clarendon Press. The second and in some ways more ambitious task, his edition of *The Correspondence of John Locke*, appeared in 8 volumes published between 1976 and 1989—the last volume was completed by other hands, and the index volume is yet to appear. Other books include a minor edition of *London revived*, Evelyn's plan for rebuilding London after the Fire. This appeared in 1938, when Esmond was 43 years. Was he a slow developer? The proper answer is that major works inevitably take time. And of course he published as he went along. Of his published articles and notes I count 105, the first in 1924. Add two score and more reviews, and remember that peer review is essential to the health of scholarship, also that no review by a good

scholar should be overlooked. Not to be overlooked is that large but less visible portion of any active scholar's life: giving advice, reading proof, writing publisher's reports, &c. He helped for instance with the edition of Newton's *Correspondence* by J. F. Scott, 1967.

Esmond also strenuously supported several learned societies. During the World War II he almost single-handedly ran the Institute of Historical Research, as Acting Librarian, publications editor, and so forth. He was also very active for many years in the Historical Association and the Hakluyt Society. J. C. Beaglehole's distinguished edition of Cook's *Journals* was published by the Society with every kind of help from Esmond. Strachan p. 50**)**

To appraise the *quality* of a major work is altogether more demanding. I spent several weeks late last year sampling Esmond's edition of Evelyn's *Diary* in order that I might risk a few generalisations.

This is not so much a diary as a set of memoirs written up from notes made often long before by a careful but not infallible observer, one who had lived through stirring times. These notes he later elaborated with help from printed and other sources. The Diaries' attraction to Esmond was as a major port of entry into a period and way of life in many ways formative of our modern era. Its earlier part covers Evelyn's travels through Europe as a Royalist exile during the 1640s and 50s. Esmond calls it 'a private guide-book' *Diary*, 1955, I p. *81***)**. After the Restoration Evelyn was able to observe much of the English national life, being well placed in various not unimportant official posts near the centres of power in London and Westminster and at the Court of Charles II. He was a horrified witness of the Great Fire and within 11 days showed the King his bold plan for rebuilding. He was also an active member of the new Royal Society.

Esmond's aim as editor of this great resource was ' to reproduce what Evelyn wrote as type can follow manuscript, and to bring it by means of annotation into relationship with the knowledge of Evelyn's time and of our own' *Diary* I p.v**)**. He had therefore to master the cultural, political and social history of the period, including for example the sixteenth and seventeenth-century European literature of travel. This was his motive for building his superb collection of guides.

His edition of Evelyn will last for another century, and then it will take a team of experts to rework the material. It must be conceded however that the authorities Esmond cites continue to recede into the past. Even in 1955 many of them were already a century or more old and accessible only in older great libraries, while new ones appear every few years. However, one part of Esmond's work will not date. This is his astonishingly good index. It is not its size—600 pages in double columns— but the intelligent attention through the use of subject headings: 30 pages on London, 11 on Rome, others on music, printing and travel. However, Esmond was not one of those bookfull blockheads who throw everything in. His determination was always to say just what he considered needful and to say it clearly and succinctly. His conspicuous quality is good judgement based on sound knowledge. I give you an example of his style almost at random. ' Charles II's Whitehall is frequently assumed to have been peopled almost exclusively by the heroes and heroines of the *Memoirs* of Grammont and their victims, men without heart and women without shame, deceived husbands and deluded wives. This view is false' (I p. *24*). The rest of the paragraph places the sober, God-fearing, loyal and hard-working John Evelyn among other public servants, friends and associates, such as Christopher Wren and Samuel Pepys. Good stuff!

I end by stressing Esmond de Beer's integrity and wholeness of vision. At the centre is his dedication to learning, from which came his good works, both those he created and those others more usually referred to as benefactions. The link between the two different kinds of gift to posterity places Esmond in the best company. The point is splendidly made by the wording on the marble tablet outside Duke Humfrey's Library in Oxford, where

below the names of significant donors down the ages, including that of Esmond himself, is cut in the universal scholarly language of old ‘ Plurimi pertransibunt et multiplex erit scientia’‘(a multitude will pass through and manifold will be the knowledge’). Esmond was ambitious that the University of Otago too should one day possess a great library: ‘ not only a first rate teaching library but also a great research collection so that scholars can do as valuable work in as many fields as possible’ letter to Peter Havard-Williams, c. 1957—Strachan p. 54**)**. As we look around today we see that his high hopes have largely been realised. It is up to future library users to emulate his example of hard and intelligent work.

Keith Maslen Sept 2001, March 2002