

# Brook Memoir by Alan Shelston

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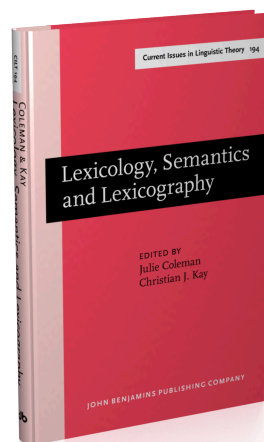
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# G L Brook: 1910–1987

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George Leslie Brook was Smith Professor of English Language at the University of Manchester from 1945 until his retirement in 1977, having previously been a member of the English department since 1932. From 1951 the title of his chair was extended to include Mediaeval Literature. A Yorkshireman from Huddersfield, Brook completed his doctorate at Leeds but his forty-five years of service to Manchester were uninterrupted, even by the war, since his poor health disqualified him from active service. When I first encountered him at my interview for an assistant lectureship in 1966 he already seemed, sitting at the end of the table, a remote and slightly frightening presence, but it was he who not only stayed behind to congratulate me on my appointment, but saw fit to add a few words of advice on what would be expected of me. Throughout my years as a colleague I continued to feel the remoteness, and sometimes the threat, but I came to interpret the former as shyness, and the latter as a matter of reputation as much as of reality.

But then I never worked directly for him. During his reign at Manchester the department was very clearly divided into ‘Language’ and ‘Literature’ and while assistant lecturers were appointed in ‘English’ lest they think too readily of themselves as specialists, the two paths in fact rarely crossed. Brook had a strong sense of hierarchy, and it would be fair to say that those who came directly under his command had little room for manoeuvre. Those of us on the ‘literature side’ however could afford to take a more detached view. When he joked, as he did for example at an examiners meeting that he wanted to ‘keep my options open so that I can give him a third’, or remarked of a Professor of Education who had got into the news that ‘I remember him well — he failed Intermediate English’, we saw this as character acting: those who knew him better would have argued that these were not jokes at all. He was in the

department every day, a short, rotund, slightly asthmatic and very myopic man who would progress along the corridor, occasionally pausing to peer at a name on a door, wondering perhaps whether some newcomer had arrived in the night without his knowledge. In his own room — which few actually entered unless directly summoned into the presence — was a large and very old upholstered sofa, while around the walls were his books, many of them volumes of considerable value.

For Brook, for all that he was Professor of 'Language', was also a literary man. His publications were predominantly in the field of language — notably his *English Dialects* (1963), his editions of the *Harley Lyrics* (1968) and, with R. F. Leslie, of Laȝamon's *Brut* (1963, 1975), and the surveys by which the undergraduates came into contact with him, *An Introduction to Old English* (1955) and *A History of the English Language* (1968) — but he also published *Dickens as a Literary Craftsman* (1966), *The Language of Dickens* (1970) and *The Language of Shakespeare* (1976), and if these now have a very old-fashioned ring the last two of them at least are still cited. He certainly knew his literature — the seventeenth century dramatists and religious writers and the nineteenth century novelists in particular; furthermore he collected it. For many years I had to resist the temptation of the three volumes of a first edition of *Felix Holt, the Radical* which rested just by the half-open door; only the thought that Brook himself might be behind it saved me from crime. At that time in Manchester it was still possible to collect on an academic salary: first editions of Dickens — albeit shabby ones — were left out on Eric Morton's tables for less than five pounds, while for the more discriminating there were Shaw's and Gibb's, then still operating as antiquarian booksellers. Brook invested well, and by the time he died his collection was worth a considerable sum. The university became the beneficiary of his expertise when he left the bulk of his collection, including rare first editions of the first part of *Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Holy War*, to the John Rylands University Library. The leading part that he played in the Manchester Bibliographical Society was a further reflection of these interests; he was also an active member of the Manchester Mediaeval Society, the Philological Society, and the Lancashire Dialect Society, whose journal he at one time edited.

I have suggested that Brook was a difficult man; I came to understand that he was both a lonely and a shy man. Sadly his eyesight deteriorated to the point where he began to learn braille, although as much as a precaution as for immediate use. The loneliness was intensified after the death of his wife Stella

Maguire, herself a scholar of the language of the English liturgy and intermittently a teacher in the department. Just once did he call me into his room, after a long department meeting. I cannot remember the exact pretext, but after we had dealt with whatever it was he surprised me by moving into book talk and reminiscence. The talk went on for some twenty minutes, until he equally suddenly stopped and withdrew from this unusual moment of near intimacy. It was as if he had said too much, and needed to retreat, but it was a revealing moment to someone who had respected him, sometimes joked about him, but never ever spoken more than a few nervous words to him directly. I had a feeling that even that twenty minutes was more than most people had been allowed.

What cannot be denied about Brook was his generosity to the university and to the department that he had served for so long. As has been mentioned, his collection of over four thousand items found its way to the John Rylands University library where it is divided into separate Drama and Theology collections. He founded undergraduate prizes — one in his name alone, and one in the name of Stella. There is also a family link to the Maguire Prize, established in the name of Stella's father. In his will he left a sum of money to his colleagues with the instruction that they enjoy themselves. More permanently, he endowed a postgraduate prize to be awarded for research in language studies and he provided the substantial investment which funds the biannual Brook Symposium, the 1998 session of which this volume commemorates. It would be fair to say that these were bequests whose generosity surprised as well as gratified some of their beneficiaries, but that perhaps reflected more upon them than on him. Certainly they revealed the place that English at Manchester had in Brook's priorities. As on so many previous occasions it was he who had the last word.

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