

ARTHUR SALE: 1912–2000

Based on the text of an obituary published in The Times, 4 May 2000, and in the Magdalene College Magazine (1999–2000), 14–15, with a list of publications new to this version. The author, John Constable, was a pupil of Arthur Sale from 1983–1986 whilst an undergraduate of Magdalene College, Cambridge.

Arthur Sale, who died last week at the age of 87, was one of the most remarkable teachers of English literature in the University of Cambridge. Born in the Black Country, from which his family moved when he was two, the son of an engineer, Arthur Sale grew up in the Nottinghamshire village of Gedling, and attended West Bridgford Grammar School.



Arthur Sale, aged 16.

An undergraduate of the University of Nottingham, at that time offering degrees from the University of London, he took his degrees with considerable distinction ('Firsts and things, of course'; BA honours 22 July 1932, 1st class; MA 11 July 1934, 1st with distinction), but a heart condition resulting from rheumatic fever contracted whilst working as a schoolmaster for a year prevented him from pursuing a career as a university lecturer, as he was expected to, and he moved to Cambridge in 1936, where he was able to teach correspondence courses for an educational trust, the University Correspondence College, and carry out the extensive 'hack editing', his own words, which he had undertaken for the trust's sister company, the University Tutorial Press. These textbooks – Dryden's *All for Love* (1938), Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* (1939), Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour* (1941), Crabbe's *The Village* (1950), Jonson's *Volpone* (1951), Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1965), Jonson's *Alchemist* (1969) – are models of their kind, and even today amongst specialists the introductions and notes have an occult following. Of

more formal academic criticism there was little – two articles on Melville, both seminal, another pair on Crabbe, a flurry of book reviews, all of these pieces appearing in the late forties and fifties, and some brilliant yet unpublished lectures on Jane Austen about which Sale himself was misleadingly dismissive ('They were too short for a book, but I had nothing else to say') – and soon he renounced the activity, explaining that he did not regard it as constructive, merely controversial: 'You can only show the others are all wrong.'

In 1956, a chance meeting with John Stevens, then director of studies at Magdalene, secured an invitation to supervise for the college, where he eventually became Lecturer in English (1965), and, latterly, Fellow Commoner (1980–). From his dark and intensely atmospheric upper floor set overlooking Magdalene's First Court, a room filled with books, decorated with pictures and masks by his son Bevis, and ornamented with a litter of objects as various as the tine of a combine harvester and a dry wasp's nest, Arthur Sale quietly discharged his duties, teaching across the entire syllabus, with special emphases on American writing and on the novel.



Arthur Sale, between supervisions in First Court, Magdalene.

He retained his room and continued to supervise long after his official retirement in 1980, an anomaly in an increasingly anomalous university. In this long association Arthur built up a following of ex-students remarkably diverse in character and influence, as a few names will suggest: Monty Don, Michael Hoffman, Bamber Gascoigne, Alan Rusbridger, Nicholas

Shakespeare, John Simpson. In correspondence with this secret army he found an outlet for the descriptive and interpretational acrobatics that university criticism had been too dreary to deserve. A selection of these would be a rich and remarkable book.

Possessed of an extraordinarily retentive memory he could astonish undergraduates by effortless quotation of verse, or detailed accounts of the plots of minor fiction he had read once when himself a student. Rarely did his recollections play him false, while his judgment in selecting that which would aid the discussion in hand, rather than merely crush his listeners, was infallible. Indeed, though possessed of all the personal means, except height, to subdue his students, he permitted and fostered rebellion, but respected it only if vigorous enough to survive the sharpest criticism. Most of his students remember as personal educational landmarks their first judgement successfully offered in dissent. He did not care to be proved wrong, any more than the rest of us, but his delight in seeing a student carry a point with tact and precision was wholly unaffected.

No careerist, subversive on marking committees ('Arthur can find a redeeming feature in even the most palpably third-rate script'), and skeptical of institutions – he was a lifelong anarchist – his position at Magdalene and the respect in which he was held there is a tribute to the tolerance and wisdom of the Collegiate system, a fact which he himself would occasionally appear willing to admit.

Already writing poetry in the 1930s – work of his appeared in the programme of the Surrealist Exhibition of 1936 and led to long friendship with Henry Moore – he published little until later in life, when his first collection, *Under the War* (1975) appeared. The volume has its devotees. Beside the Cambridge University Library catalogue entry someone has written in neat black ink, 'il miglior fabbro'. This was followed by a further collection, *Scrambled Particles* (1990) and most recently by *Selected Poems* (1999). The verse is highly unusual, both typographically in its use of spaces of various lengths as punctuation, and in its tone, which perfectly reflects the occasionally blood-curdling humour and expert face-pulling of his conversation.

In 1936 he married Ellen Webster, with whom he had two sons, Jonathan, a journalist, and Bevis, a painter, printmaker, and sculptor. Following Nell's death in 1989 he married an American musician, Penny Moffett, and in her company visited the United States for the first time. The experience changed some of his opinions on the literature he had taught for the previous forty years, but he persisted in suggesting, purely to mortify minds younger and less playful than his own, that the Pink Panther should be considered as representative an American as Walt Whitman.

Arthur Sale, teacher of literature and poet, was born on 7 August 1912. He died on April 18 2000 aged 87.

List of Publications

1. Edited with notes. *John Dryden, All for Love* (University Tutorial Press: London, 1938; 2nd ed. 1957) xxiii, 223.
2. Edited with notes. Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub* (University Tutorial Press: London, 1939),
3. Edited with notes. Ben Jonson, *Every Man in His Humour* (University Tutorial Press: London, 1941; 2nd ed. 1949; 3rd ed. 1968). A selection from the 'Introduction' is reprinted in Jonas A. Barish, ed., *Ben Jonson: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1963), 75-81.
4. 'Chaucer in Cancer', *English*, 6/35 (Summer 1947), 240-244.
5. Edited with notes. George Crabbe *The Village* (University Tutorial Press: London, 1950),
6. Edited with notes. Ben Jonson *Volpone* (University Tutorial Press: London, 1951; 2nd ed. 1956; 3rd ed. 1959).
7. 'Captain Vere's Reasons', *Cambridge Journal*, 5/1 (October 1951), 3-18.
8. 'The Development of Crabbe's Narrative Art', *Cambridge Journal*, 5/8 (May 1952), 480-498.
9. 'Emily Dickinson' [Review of Richard Chase, *Emily Dickinson* (Methuen: London, 1952)], *Cambridge Review*, Vol. 74 No. 1802 (24 January 1953), 244-5.
10. Review of Ronald Mason, *The Spirit above the Dust: A Study of Herman Melville*, and William H. Gilman, *Melville's Early Life and Redburn*. *Cambridge Journal*, 6/5 (February 1953), 314-320.
11. [Review of Merrell R. Davis, *Melville's Mardi: A Chartless Voyage*], *Cambridge Journal*, 6/11 (August 1953): 698-700.
12. 'The Proof' [poem], *Cambridge Review*, Vol. 77 No. 1879 (3 March 1956), 405.
13. 'Inside the Redcurrant Bush' [poem], *Cambridge Review*, Vol. 77 No. 1880 (10 March 1956), 432.
14. '*Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography*' [book review], *Cambridge Review*, Vol. 77 No. 1885 (19 May 1956), 599-602.
15. 'The Green Table' [poem], *Cambridge Review*, Vol. 77 No. 1886 (26 May 1956), 620.
16. 'The Glass Ship: A Recurrent Image in Melville', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 17/2 (June 1956), 118-127.
17. Review of F. N. Robinson, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*. *Cambridge Review*, Vol. 79 No. 1921 (18 January 1958), 233-5.
18. Review of T. H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (eds.), *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. *Cambridge Review*, 80/ (1959), 357-358.
19. 'New Poems by Crabbe' [book review], *Cambridge Review*, Vol. 82 No. 2006 (27 May 1961), 557-560.

20. Edited with notes. Alexander Pope *The Rape of the Lock* (University Tutorial Press: London, 1965).
21. 'Slaughter's Bridge', *Granta* Vol. 70 No. 1245 (Summer 1965), 14–17.
22. Edited with notes. Ben Jonson *Alchemist* (University Tutorial Press: London, 1969).
23. 'Victorian Novelists and their Illustrators', *Cambridge Quarterly* 5/3 (Spring 1971), pp. 278–291.
24. *Under the War and Other Poems* (Hutchinson: London, 1975).
25. *Songs of Willow* (Winchester: The Green Horse, 1976).
26. [Memoir of Empson], *Magdalene College Magazine and Record*, No. 28 (1983-1984), 9–11.
27. *Scrambled Particles* (Hobart: 1990).
28. *Selected Poems*. With a 'Foreword' by Helen Vendler. (Pentland Press: Durham, 1999).