

MR. COLIN ELLIS

by

JACK SIMMONS

Mr. Colin Ellis died on 4 July 1969. He was elected a Vice-President of the Society in 1937. He succeeded Sir Robert Martin as President in 1961, and on his retirement in 1966 he became President Emeritus until his death.

Colin Dare Bernard Ellis was born in 1895. His great-great-grandfather, Joseph Ellis, was a Quaker farmer, who established the family in Leicestershire as an immigrant from Yorkshire. His two sons were both men of note: John, who became Chairman of the Midland Railway; and Joseph, the founder of the well-known firm of coal and builders' merchants Ellis & Everard. Colin Ellis was descended from Joseph. He was educated at Bootham School, York, and King's College, Cambridge. He joined up in 1915, and served as a Lieutenant in the Leicestershire Royal Horse Artillery throughout the remainder of the war. He was mentioned in despatches, gained the Military Cross, and was severely wounded. On his return from the war he joined the family business. He married Ethel Clarke in 1922.

In the second World War he became Director of Home-Grown Cereals in the Ministry of Food, which involved a four years' residence in Colwyn Bay. He became Chairman of Joseph Ellis & Sons Ltd. in 1944 and of Ellis & Everard Ltd. in 1952, serving in both offices until 1963. He was President of the National Association of Corn and Agricultural Merchants in 1953 - 54 and was appointed C.B.E. in January 1955.

Throughout these years he gave varied public service to the city and county of Leicester: as Vice-Chairman of the Governors of Wyggeston's Hospital, for example; as a Trustee of the Leicester General Charities and of Bradgate Park; as a member of the Council of the University College and for a time as Chairman of its Finance and General Purposes Committee.

But his most distinctive contribution was made to the visual arts and to archaeological and historical studies. He had, for more than twenty years, been a co-opted member of the Museums and Libraries Committee of the City Council. As Chairman of its Arts Sub-Committee he gave time and thought and the fruits of his good judgment to the purchase of pictures for the City Art Gallery, which owes perhaps as much to him as to any other one man save Alderman Squire. He played a very active part in the production of its admirable catalogue *Local Portraits* (1956), to which he contributed a series of pithy biographical notes that are a model of their sort.

PLATE X



COLIN ELLIS in 1953

When, early in 1936, the archaeological investigation of the Jewry Wall site in Leicester came under discussion, Ellis was chiefly responsible for forming the Excavations Committee, which represented many interests, and became Chairman of the Executive Committee that did most to support Miss Kathleen Kenyon in her work and to prepare the ground for the City Council's enlightened decision to preserve the site as an open space. In the Introduction to her report Miss Kenyon paid a handsome tribute to him and to the Secretary of the Committee, W. K. Beddingfield, to their diplomacy and to their "great kindness and inspiring enthusiasm". The tribute went beyond convention and was well merited.

Ellis was indeed always at pains to help those who were seriously engaged in the wide range of studies that interested him. A question on some point of detail would draw from him a letter of two or three pages, in his admirably clear handwriting, giving references and arguments, not infrequently offering to pursue the matter further if he could. Such kindnesses came from him all the more generously in his later years, when he was burdened with long ill-health.

It was the Jewry Wall excavations that first brought Ellis into contact with the Leicestershire Archaeological Society. After the war he became closely involved in its work, occupying the onerous and sometimes troublesome office of Chairman of its Committee for two years (1955 - 56). More than local recognition came to him in 1940 when he was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London.

He gave good service, then, in a variety of ways to the community and to individuals within it. But he will be most widely remembered as an author.

The historical writing Ellis produced falls into two divisions: the brief contributions he made to co-operative work and his own three books.

His earliest published essays in this field are to be found in the admirable *Historical Guide to the City of Leicester* produced in 1933 when the British Association met there. The first part of that little book was written by S. H. Skillington, with all his characteristic terseness and point, taking the story down to the close of the seventeenth century. Ellis's contribution was no less clear and elegant. In twenty pages he sketched the city's modern history and provided a compact account of "the way about Leicester". Two years later he selected from his mother's reminiscences — "my rag-bag", as she called it — the material that made up her *Records of Nineteenth-Century Leicester*: a compilation that social historians will always use with profit.

Later he rendered other useful and self-effacing services of the same kind. It was essential that the third volume of the *Victoria County History* should include a good account of hunting, the activity for which Leicestershire is pre-eminently famous. Unfortunately Major Guy Paget, who had agreed to write the chapter, died in 1952 before it was finished; Ellis shaped up the material that he left, adding to it his own account of the Quorn Hunt and making it all into a coherent whole. Next he supplied his distinctive contributions to the two catalogues of pictures that have already been mentioned; they were published in 1956 and 1958. In the

later years of his active life he spent much energy in recording monumental inscriptions in the churches and chapels of the county, and their graveyards. This work was not published, but the notes for it are deposited in the Archives Department of the City Museums. They form a valuable quarry for students of history, and will become more valuable — like the similar records made by Nichols and his collaborators nearly two centuries ago — as the originals come to be obliterated by time and chance.

There remain the three books. Two came out in the same year, 1948. The first of them was privately published: a brief but extremely workman-like centenary history of Ellis & Everard Ltd., making good use not only of the firm's own records but also of the diary of James Ellis, his great-great uncle, to show very clearly how the business was built up by a combination of hard work, enterprise, and meticulously economical management, side by side with the extension of the railway system. The other book of 1948, *History in Leicester*, combined in one interesting pattern three elements: narrative, the contemporary comment of observers in the past, and architectural description. All these were skilfully fused together, and the book was clothed in a form worthy of it, to be sold by the City's enterprising Publicity Department at a very reasonable price. A new edition of the book, including some supplementary matter contributed by others, appeared in 1969 — unhappily, just after the author's death. It remains one of the most attractive achievements in presenting local history to the ordinary reader that any English town can show.

Leicestershire and the Quorn Hunt was his biggest book, and in some respects the most important. It breaks firmly away from the usual patterns of sporting history, replacing the traditional account of the dynasty of Masters, interspersed with strings of jolly and breathless anecdotes, by critical and accurate research, designed "to show the Quorn Hunt against a local background". Ellis always appreciated the importance of "background", of relating the events he described and the people involved in them to the larger world of which they were part. *History in Leicester* constantly reminded its readers of the relationship between this one Midland town and the larger polity of England. In just the same way, he displayed the Quorn Hunt not simply as a sporting enterprise but as something that grew up in a particular countryside; hunt and countryside impinged on each other, and that lay at the heart of Ellis's story. His acquaintance with the country he was dealing with was exceptionally intimate: for he not only rode to hounds, he knew about corn, he appreciated the landscape with something of a painter's eye and he understood its history. The first appendix to his book, "Some Covers and Landmarks", is an invaluable contribution to Leicestershire topography. At the same time he never distorted his story by claiming the Quorn wholly for Leicestershire: he saw the exotic elements too, and he often did memorable justice to them. It is this range of interest, the sense of scale, proportion, and depth, that most of all distinguish the historian from the antiquary. Ellis was emphatically a historian.

But he was something else too, which made him, among historians, a rarity indeed. He was also a poet. His first historical essay appeared

in 1933, when he was nearly forty. Before that, however, as a younger man, he had written a substantial number of short poems, which he had collected together in two small books. The first of them, *The Dispassionate Pilgrim*, was a thin paperback, published by Blackwell at Oxford in 1927. The second, *Mournful Numbers* (Macmillan, 1932), reprints all but half-a-dozen of the first collection and adds some more. These additions include nearly all the best, suggesting that he found his feet as a poet between the appearance of his first book and his second; and since there was never a third we may infer that he felt he had then had his say. Immediately after *Mournful Numbers* was published, he turned to writing history in prose.

The wry titles of these two volumes give at once a clue to the character of what they contain. Their chief themes are dislike and pleasure. The dislike is not hatred—more often it borders rather on distaste. But it is concentrated into a number of mordant epigrams, which owe something to Herrick and by no means disgrace their parentage. A few of them reflect the political despair of the time. One at least, is occasionally apposite still:

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

To kill its enemies and cheat its friends
 Each nation its prerogative defends;
 Yet some their efforts for goodwill maintain,
 In hope, in faith, in patience, and in vain.

More often these poems are portraits, of bores and humbugs. One or two are more extended sketches:

FISHING ACQUAINTANCE

The Colonel's flask is full of Scotch,
 His hat is full of flies,
 His head is full of cotton wool,
 His mouth is full of lies.

His tweeds are of the latest cut,
 His boots are spick and span,
 And, at his heel, his net and creel
 Are carried by his man.

Correct, intolerant, assured—
 Wherever he is met
 The Colonel clings to all the things
 We travel to forget.

No thoughts of freedom and release
 His spirit may cajole;
 In any act he guards intact
 The Simla of his soul.

His fellows up and down the earth
 In lonely grandeur roam,
 An alien race in every place,
 For Colonels have no home.

They have no home where they can leave
 Their dignity behind:
 Let all good men have pity then
 On Colonels and their kind.

The touch of compassion in the last two stanzas is characteristic. It does not sentimentally cancel the dislike that inspired the poem; it just serves to remind us that the Colonel is not an isolated figure, that he is a product of the world he grew up in.

The masterpiece of this kind is "The New Vicar of Bray"—a biting commentary on changing social habits, not of the clergy alone, during the break-up of the Victorian world. It is too long to quote here, but J. C. Squire (who gave many of Ellis's poems their first publication in the *London Mercury*) chose it to ring down the curtain on his famous collection of parodies, *Apes and Parrots*.

Many of the poems concerned with pleasure are delightful. Their themes are love, and the physical and visual enjoyments of life. Ellis experienced these with an intensity that communicated itself to his language. Take, for example, these two stanzas from "Oh it's my Delight", a poem to celebrate the other field-sports he enjoyed besides hunting:

Not only when the boughs are bare
 The trumpet sounds to summon me,
 But when the mayfly takes the air
 Or when the salmon leaves the sea,
 Or when the coveys cower close
 And corn is cut and fruit is ripe,
 Or when the sun brings out the rose,
 Or when the frost brings in the snipe.

Only two of these poems have any specifically local reference, to Leicestershire or the Midlands. Both have found their way into anthologies. "Rugby to Peterborough Line: a Song from Bradshaw" is a beautifully deft piece of versifying. "Living in the Midlands" goes deeper. Though it was written forty years ago, it speaks for many of us still:

LIVING IN THE MIDLANDS

When men offer thanks for the bounties
 That they in their boyhood have known,
 When poets are praising their counties,
 What ought I to say of my own?

Its highways are crowded with lorries
 And buses encumber its lanes;
 Its hills are used chiefly as quarries,
 Its rivers used chiefly as drains.

The country is all over-ridden
By townsmen, ill-mannered and proud,
And Beauty, unless it is hidden,
Is trampled to death by the crowd.

Disforested, featureless, faded —
Describe me a place if you can
Where Man was by Nature less aided
Or Nature less aided by Man.

And yet, though I keep in subjection
My heart, as a rule, to my head,
I still feel a sneaking affection
For —————,¹ where I was bred.

For still, here and there, is a village,
Where factories have not been planned,
There still are some acres of tillage,
Some old men still work on the land.

And how can I help but remember
The Midsummer meadows of hay,
The stubbles dew-drenched in September,
The buttercups golden in May?

For we who seek out and discover
The charms of my county can be
As proud as a plain woman's lover
Of beauties the world does not see.

¹ Shall we say "Middleshire"? (*Author's note*)