

## IN MEMORIAM

WILLIAM DENNIS ELCOCK

(1910-1960)

Professor W. D. Elcock died very suddenly on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1960. He was 49 years old, and had been Professor of Romance Philology and Medieval French Literature in the University of London for thirteen years.

Dennis Elcock was born at Wolverhampton on December 11<sup>th</sup>, 1910, and was educated at Ashby-de-la-Zouch Grammar School and Manchester University. His undergraduate career at Manchester was one of exceptional distinction: he obtained First Class Honours in French in 1932, at the same time studying both Spanish and Italian. He was awarded three research Fellowships in succession, and began linguistic research immediately after taking his degree, travelling in Portugal and Spain, spending the winter of 1932-3 investigating Pyrenean dialects, and settling in Barcelona to write his first thesis, which gained him the Manchester degree of M.A. Another product of this period was his first published work, "Vocabulaire de la ferme dans une région des Pyrénées Centrales" (*Anuari de l'Oficina Romànica*, 1935).

From 1933 to 1936, Elcock studied at the Universities of Grenoble and Toulouse, gaining his Licence ès Lettres in 1934, and continuing the dialect studies which bore fruit in his second thesis, *De quelques affinités phonétiques entre l'Aragonais et le Béarnais*. (He had, from the beginning of his researches, been struck by the linguistic and social resemblances between the French and Spanish slopes of the Pyrenees). For this thesis he was awarded a Doctorat de l'Université by Toulouse in 1938, and it was published in book form in the same year; this was

also the year of his marriage to Hilde-Elisabeth, daughter of the late Judge Ernst Goldmann. *De quelques affinités* deals with two subjects, the preservation of unvoiced intervocalic occlusives, and the voicing of occlusives after a nasal or liquid; the problems are studied rigorously and in great detail, and the author's exposition is supported by 26 word-maps. In this book, as in his later work, Elcock shows a quality which attracted the praise of Spanish critics: the firm grounding of his views in first-hand knowledge of the area and of the speech of its inhabitants. (Menéndez Pidal, even in an attack on Elcock's findings, calls him 'un autor que ha trabajado con esmero y con gran fruto en la geografía lingüística', *Orígenes del español*, 3.<sup>a</sup> ed., p. 301).

In 1936, he took up his first appointment in a British university, an Assistantship in French and Spanish at Edinburgh. Thus his first post, like his first book, reflected the dual interest which was to continue throughout his life — he was always as much at home in Spain as in France. Promotion came quickly: in 1937 he was appointed to a Lectureship in French at Sheffield, and taught there until war intervened. One of his last acts before leaving academic life for the Royal Navy (in which he served for five years) was the preparation of an article which developed a point already touched on in his thesis (1), 'The Enigma of the Lizard in Aragonese Dialect' (*Modern Language Review*, xxxv, 1940). Elcock here rejects the theory of Iberian origins for some of the words, preferring to derive them all from LACERTUM. By so doing he illustrates his refusal to subscribe to fashionable dogma, whether (as in this case) the substratum theory, or the structuralist school's appeal to scientific prestige (on this point, compare his hard-hitting review in *French Studies*, xii, 1958, pp. 90-92). At the same time, Elcock never allowed his suspicion of dogma to become itself a dogma, and he was willing to be convinced on specific points: his treatment of the Castilian and Gascon change of F- > H- comes much closer to accepting the substratum

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(1) *De quelques affinités* maps 23, 24. Further research on this subject is embodied in a review which Elcock contributed to *Revista Portuguesa de Filologia* iii, 1949-50, 353-5.

explanation in his second book than in his first (cf. *De quelques affinités* pp. 175-7 with *The Romance Languages* pp. 423-6).

Immediately after the war, Elcock was appointed to a Lectureship in French Philology and Old French Literature at Oxford, but he held this post for little over a year, since in 1947, at the age of 36, he became the first occupant of the newly-created Chair of Romance Philology and Medieval French Literature in the University of London, a post which carried with it the Headship of the Department of French at Westfield College. Elcock spent the remainder of his life at Westfield, seeing his department grow and his own reputation and influence grow with it through his publications, his careful supervision of many research students, and his contacts with scholars in other branches of his subject.

His publications, interrupted by the war, were resumed in 1949. First came 'A Semantic Group in Alpine Romance' (*Studies... presented to R. L. Graeme Ritchie*), in which the evidence of Rhetto-Romance is used to cast doubt on the Iberian origin of Aragonese *agüerro*, Bearnese *agqr*. In this article, a broadening of interest may be observed, one which was ultimately to take in the whole Romance field. At the same time Elcock's contacts with Portuguese scholars, especially those of Coimbra, led to a critical bibliography, 'The Contribution of English Scholars to Romance Linguistics, 1939-1948', in the bibliographical supplement to the *Revista Portuguesa de Filologia*. His stature in Aragonese dialect investigations brought invitations to address the first Reunión de Toponimia Pirenaica, and the first, second and third International Congresses of Pyrenean Scholars. The papers that he contributed were concerned with Upper Aragonese toponymy, Aragonese development of -LL-, the prefix RE- in Pyrenean toponymy, and toponymy in the Sierra de Salinas. It was also in this field that he contributed to the *Atlas Linguistique de la Gascogne* (vol. I, 1954). Apart from this, there were a popular account of methods of dialect research (*Clavileño*, 1952), a reconsideration of the chronology of the changes discussed in *De quelques affinités* (*Mélanges offerts à Mario Roques*, vol. IV, 1953), 'Substrats phonétiques dans les parlers romans des Pyrénées' (*Boletín de Dialectología Española*, xxxii, 1953), and two complementary studies: an investigation of toponyms in the Aragonese valley of

Tena (*Studies... presented to John Orr*, 1953) and, arising out of the name Tena itself, a study of Western Romance derivatives of TĒNUIS.

Though the majority of Elcock's articles are focussed on the Spanish slopes of the Pyrenees, they represent only a fraction of his scholarly activity. His research students were chiefly those working on French dialects: not only the dialects of France herself, but also those of the West Indies and Channel Islands. He brought his etymological experience to bear on the elucidation of a phrase ('pleine sa hanste') of the Oxford *Chanson de Roland* (*French Studies*, vii, 1953), and he made one excursion into pure literature, studying Du Bellay's reputation in England and the qualities of his neglected *Les Regrets* (*Modern Language Review*, XLVI, 1951). He was a regular reviewer for *Archivum Linguisticum*, *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, *French Studies*, *Modern Language Review* and *Romance Philology*. The most important aspect of his later work was reflected in the range of subjects covered by these reviews, and in his lectures. Here he increasingly concentrated on the origins of the Romance languages and on their relationship to each other, and he emphasized the underlying unity of all branches of Romance philology. All of this culminated in his last book, *The Romance Languages* (1960), designed, as he put it, to 'relate the story of how Latin became Romance more intimately to the whole European saga, to the familiar background of humanistic studies'. This volume of well over 500 pages was designed for students, but has much to teach more experienced scholars; Portuguese readers will be particularly interested in pages 427-35, but they will also find that Portuguese words illustrate most of the topics discussed elsewhere. Such a vast undertaking must inevitably have its drawbacks, and specialists will no doubt make corrections here and there within their own fields; it is also a matter for regret that pressure on space precluded a fuller treatment of the Romance tongues of Eastern Europe. But most of Elcock's exposition will be gratefully accepted by present and future scholars, and will stand as a fitting memorial to him. An impressive amount of praise has already appeared in the learned journals, and several reviewers have commented on the way in which Elcock managed to convey in a few passing

sentences something of the methods, the aims and the excitement of philological research.

In the spring of 1960, a sabbatical leave enabled Elcock to spend some time in Portugal, and he delivered lectures at Lisbon and at Coimbra. His Coimbra lecture, 'La pénombre des langues romanes', was a distillation of his last years of study, and it has fortunately been preserved, in revised form as an article, in *Revista Portuguesa de Filologia*, xi, 1961.

His strength had been more heavily taxed than anyone realized by his work, and by the arduous administrative duties which he never shirked (he was a member of the Council of the College and of some of its most important committees; President of his local Association of University Teachers from 1951 to 1954; a member of the Board of the Faculty of Arts; an external examiner for several other universities; and, from 1958, Chairman of the Board of Studies in Romance Languages and Literatures). In the summer he was hard at work on a revised edition of W. J. Entwistle's *The Spanish Language*; this he left almost completed, and it is to be published shortly. The new academic year had only just begun, and he was full of energy and plans for the future, when, without any kind of warning, he died. His friends and colleagues in London were profoundly shocked, and they, with Romance philologists throughout the world, remember him with grateful affection and offer their deepest sympathy to his widow.

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