

W. G. WISEMAN: Appreciation of an Editor

Joint Editor of *Transactions* 1983-2008

BILL, as he is universally known, is in very distinguished company. When first elected Joint Editor of *Transactions* in 1983, few would have guessed that he would retire at the AGM in 2008 as one of the longest-serving editors in the history of the Society. Only R. S. Ferguson (27 years with the Old Series) and W. G. Collingwood (25 years with the New Series) have served as long or longer. However, even they did not have to adapt to the challenges of a fast-changing world in the same way as Bill has steered the Society into the digital age with such sure-footed success, unlikely as this might have seemed to him at one stage. The strength and quality of the Society's flagship publication today is very much his legacy.

Recruited by Fred Hughes, then President, who brought him in to join Bruce Jones after he and John Charlton stood down as Joint Editors in 1983, it proved an inspired recommendation as Bill and Bruce gelled to form a close and sympathetic partnership. Bruce, then shortly to retire as County Archivist, was to be the academic editor with Bill initially concentrating on proof reading, indexing and the production of the volume. Being based in Kendal, he was right on hand to steer the volume through the printers at Titus Wilson, while Bruce, in Carlisle, assessed the papers and dealt with the authors.

However, not long after this arrangement was set up and working well, Bruce Jones found that his wife's increasingly debilitating illness was preventing him from giving as much time to editorial work (and his own research) as he had planned. Therefore Bill found himself picking up more and more of the editorial duties. He had always relied heavily on Bruce's academic expertise and judgement, but found in time that he himself had acquired a strong sense of a good paper. As a layman, being free from the academic controversies that can often break out in the archaeological and historical communities, he was able to exercise a commonsense judgement of what constituted an acceptable article – this in the days before papers were refereed. He was always able to take the view of the discerning member receiving their copy of *Transactions* and expecting to be able to read any paper without undue obfuscation or academic obscurantism. Furthermore, he was always keen to encourage members themselves to offer papers for consideration, taking infinite pains to help authors order their papers in a way that would be acceptable. A few were almost entirely rewritten, but many benefited from his careful nursing and encouraging editorial eye. Nevertheless in the end all papers had to meet the same uncompromisingly high standard before going forward to publication.

Bill was fortunate, as he himself often admitted, that the consistent flow of papers submitted to the editors allowed them to make up a well-balanced volume for virtually every year of their period in office. He was always aware of the danger of a volume being over-weighted towards one particular discipline or one aspect of the Society's



Photo: K. J. Tallon

work being emphasised above another or certain parts of the county receiving more scrutiny than others. In this he was, of course, at the mercy of what authors chose to submit, but this was never evident in the finished product. Since he was lucky, for most of his period, to have a bank of articles to draw on, he was able to ensure a consistently fair balance in each volume, while adhering to the general rule of allowing only one paper per individual author per year, though short notes were excluded from this restriction. He was fortunate too in having one or two contributors who produced papers with such exemplary regularity that he always had a head start each year, while on the other hand others might have to wait a year or longer before their papers reached an acceptable standard or made up the required balance. Only for a year or two did the flow of papers falter and cause the volume to be made up more of necessity than by choice. Moreover, the editor also had to operate within a limit of 300 pages set by an intransigent treasurer when the Society's finances were less secure in the 1980s.

One of the major elements in Bill's success as an editor was his meticulous eye for detail, which he brought from his long experience as prosecutions inspector with the Cumbria Constabulary at Kendal, ensuring that no case was presented without all the 'i's dotted and 't's crossed. His skill at proof reading was exceptional, though not entirely infallible. The discovery of the tiniest error slipping through past the final stages to the published volume would cause him a disproportionate degree of anguish, such was his commitment to the highest standard, even though most went unnoticed by the reader. One exception was the unwitting transposition of 'i' and 't' in the first

word of the header of the article *Marital Fertility at Penrith, 1557-1812* in *CW2*, xcvi, 105-114, but this might be forgiven for the unexpected dimension it afforded to the natives of Penrith in their ancestry. Similarly he would take great care to compile an index to each year's *Transactions* and thus sign off the volume.

His insistence on quality when it came to the production of the volume was uncompromising too. Every volume of *Transactions* from the Society's inception, both the Old Series and the New, had been printed by Titus Wilson, of Highgate, Kendal, right up to 1990. It took some nerve in a Society so imbued with historical tradition to breach such a long-standing arrangement and find a new printer following an unacceptable breakdown in the quality of the production leading to the late issue of *CW2*, xc. The firm was in some difficulties and had moved premises, but despite the good working relationships built up over many years, Bill threatened to go elsewhere. He was as good as his word as he would not allow the possibility of further problems in the following year to interfere with producing the volume on time. After considerable and careful investigation, he took *CW2*, xci to Alan Sutton Publishing at Stroud and had to negotiate a deal that ensured the continuing high quality of the volume. Despite the unaccustomed distance involved in dealing with printers in Gloucestershire, at a time just before technology would render that less significant, Bill ensured that the flow of *Transactions* was unaffected for the next five years. However, it was with a sense of relief that 'normal service' was resumed in 1996 after problems with Suttons and a reformed Titus Wilson offered a return home, since which time the firm, now subsumed in Dixons Printing of Kendal, has maintained its customary high quality. The volume has been ready for distribution each November without fail ever since. It is appropriate to add here that Bill would be the first to acknowledge the skill and commitment of Ray Fielding and the late Oliver Turnbull, and currently David Pointon, of Titus Wilson to the Society and the maintenance of its *Transactions*.

Adaptability was Bill's other great strength. The Society had received its first computer thanks to the generosity of the late Tony Jabez-Smith in the late 1980s and, with the enthusiastic assistance of the late Jim Cherry, Bill took it on. Initially cautious about the advent of the new technology, he soon came to realise its advantages to the editor and thereafter embraced the timesaving it brought about. As developments came on, so Bill proved able to master them to a degree sufficient for the purpose of preparing the volume for the printer, including the way in which digital photography has changed the whole nature of reproduction. He also proved adaptable to the introduction of the refereeing of papers, despite early misgivings about this possible additional hurdle to his programme of preparing the volume. He had always been able to sound out Bruce Jones about articles of which he might have had doubts, but he saw the advantages of a more formal system of referees in affording a measure of protection to the editor, besides maintaining the academic status of *Transactions* as a refereed journal. His wide range of contacts ensured that suitable readers were always available for this purpose.

Similarly the reconstitution of the Editorial Committee in 1994 gave the editors a more effective forum in which to report and raise issues and receive support when necessary. The reactivation of the Society's publication programme also made some adjustments imperative, for not only did Bill prepare the *Transactions* each year, he also took on the

production of some additional volumes in the Extra Series, notably *West Cumberland Coal 1600-1982/3* (1988) and *The Stained Glass in the Churches of the Anglican Diocese of Carlisle* (1994). This unreasonable burden was lightened by the introduction of a General Editor's post to take on the work of preparing all other volumes in their respective Extra, Research, Record or Tract Series, a task more than equal to the expertise brought to it by Pat Ball. With the enforced inactivity of Bruce Jones and his eventual retirement in 2006, and also more demands on his own domestic time, this was most welcome. The Committee (now renamed the Publications Committee) led by the late John Todd also proved helpful with the approach of the new millennium and the inauguration of a new Third Series of *Transactions*. While the existing format was retained, it was agreed to abandon the grey of the New [2nd] Series and introduce a brighter colour. Bill came up with royal blue and red lettering for the soft back volume (and the existing gold for the case bound copy), while Pat Ball's design of the new colophon to replace the Collingwood seal was also accepted. Thus the new look volume has confidently entered the new century.

Such long and notable service to the Society has been recognised by a Fellowship, deservedly, but his legacy lies in that exceptional run of *Transactions* from 1983 to 2008, during which he somehow still found time to pursue his own research and publish several articles on a wide variety of topics ranging from the medieval Hospital of St Nicholas at Carlisle to the Trollope family in Penrith. Let us hope that circumstances will permit further papers to appear in due course in the pages of the journal that he has done so much to secure as one of outstanding and enduring quality.

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