

## Neil Ker on his Life<sup>1</sup>

*[An informative and charming letter details aspect of his life for a biographical account]*

March 14<sup>th</sup> 1965

Dear Godfrey,

I do think it is particularly nice and kind of people to be willing to tackle this chore and I must try and satisfy you as far as I can. And the writer must have a free hand to put in or leave out what he thinks important or unimportant. So I don't think there are any things that I don't want referred to: I can't impose vetoes of that kind.

### Parentage.

Only son, and there were no children by my father's first marriage. Perhaps I should have said Major R. M. Ker in my answer to Brunt. My father was always called Major Ker by everyone and he had this army rank and served in the South African war – when he was a captain – and in the 1914-18 war. But he was not a regular soldier. His regiment was Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.

### Birth.

London and to be exact I believe 46 Pont Street. Prep. school was St. David's, Reigate, now defunct and turned into a place where they train the fire service. Not I think memorable. One of the chief things I remember is that one of the masters whom we all liked very much told us stories at mealtimes, or those of us who were lucky enough to be at his table. And fired by this – I suppose – I told stories (sort of serial thrillers, I think) during walks on Sundays, and held a small audience spellbound: I can't think of anything more completely out of character.

### Eton.

I went there in September 1921. Not ever an unhappy Etonian and rather definitely a happy one in my last year: I pled with my parents and they let me have an extra two halves at the end, which was probably more than they could easily afford: 26<sup>3</sup> and 27<sup>1</sup>. I suppose, if I didn't mention it to Brunt, that you may want to know that my earliest published work is to be found in *Notes and Queries* 13<sup>th</sup> series i (1923), 426, and on pages of ii (1924), the fruit of many hours spent in the churchyard of Upton-cum-Chalvey. Austen-Leigh wrote to me suggesting that there was useful work of this kind to be done

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<sup>1</sup> A letter to Godfrey [surname?] contained in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. 21050/75.

at Eton itself, and I was so alarmed – it would have been in full view of other Etonians – that I never even plucked up courage to answer his letter. One of my best Eton memories is of supper with other sixth formers with MRJ,<sup>2</sup> when he read us *The Rose and the Ring*: it was about my only real contact with him, and I don't think he was in any sense an influence. College Library on Sunday afternoons certainly was, but I don't remember ever seeing MRJ there.

### Magdalen.

Yes, C. S. Lewis deflected me from P.P.E. to English. It is difficult to say about W. P. Ker,<sup>3</sup> whether I was influenced by his example; I think probably not directly, because my whole interest was in English Language, and not Literature. I mentioned my change of school to John Buchan and he said 'Oh yes, English, an easy option'. I don't think he was right, but I am sure he was thinking of Eng. Lit. and I thought then and think now that Literature was/is not at all my line, not much more so than PPE. Certainly no notable feats as president of OUMC.<sup>4</sup> President in a lean year when there was no one more suitable.

### Palaeography.

This about beginnings is all very difficult. Somewhere I have a diary which I kept from about 1926 to 1929 which might help, if I could find it: it is the only time I have kept a diary. But the Lowe, Beneventan script episode, must be as late as about 1935, and by then I am sure I was fairly off to an interest in English manuscripts at least, and I think probably more generally. Science was beyond me, but there was some latent desire to find out why things were what they were, which took the form at one moment of trying to discover why Glasgow was the shape it is, and after I had changed from PPE to English, and was reading things like *Havelock* and *Canterbury Tales*, I felt I wanted to see what the manuscripts looked like, rather than the printed texts. I can't remember when I first saw the manuscripts exhibited in the Dormitory at Durham, but I was very impressed, particularly by the predominant blue – or so it is in memory. My B. Litt. thesis was palaeographical and inspired by Sisam's first two articles on Bodley 340 and 342 in *Review of English Studies*. I looked at the manuscripts and thought I would like to go much more thoroughly into the things that he had touched on. I was looking for something other than what Wrenn had put me on to, an edition of *Poema Morale*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The great medievalist, bibliographer, and ghost-story author, M. R. James, who was Master of Eton College during Ker's time there.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Ker's second cousin was the medievalist W. P. Ker.

<sup>4</sup> Oxford University Mountaineering Club.

<sup>5</sup> C. L. Wrenn, Oxford medievalist.

Marriage.

Jean's father is regular army, but not, alas, Indian army. His mother and my grandmother were sisters. Jean was 23 when we got married, but I had not really known her at all before she was about 19, I should think. (There is a photograph, much treasured, of us holding hands, when she was about two and I was about nine, but it was an isolated incident).

Doctorate.

Yes, Reading were kind enough to doctor me in May 1964. I think *Who's Who* 1965 is out, isn't it?

I don't remember what I said to Brunt, but if there are gaps you want to fill, let me know.

Yours,

*Neil*

I was Vice President at Magdalen for the 21 months ending 30 September 1963. It is normally a two-year appointment, but we decided that it was more sensible to appoint college officers anew on Oct. 1 instead of on January 1, as had been the custom. So I got off three months.

As Librarian, I took over from [C.T.] Onions in 1955. If they say 1945 it must be so. We came to live here in 1947 – when are you and Betty coming to see us?



*Neil R. Ker with the German palaeographer, Bernard Bischoff, in 1979*