

## PROFESSOR PAUL SALMON 1921-1997

WITH the deaths of Princess Diana, Mother Theresa and Sir Georg Solti so fresh in our memory, no one needs reminding that last week was a very sombre week, and for this Society especially so, for in Paul Salmon we lost one of our most committed supporters.

The earliest conversation I recall having with Paul was exactly thirty years ago when I congratulated him on his appointment as Reader in German at Birkbeck College, University of London. He joked that this move was just a further leg of what he called his Cook's Tour of the University of London. For having graduated from University College in 1947 he had been appointed Tutorial Student at King's College, then returned to University College as Assistant Lecturer before becoming Lecturer and Reader at Royal Holloway College, and then at Birkbeck College. Eventually in 1970 he left London to take up the second chair of German at Edinburgh. Beloved of his students (whose subsequent careers he followed with great interest), he was a committed and enthusiastic teacher – but a stern taskmaster too. From his father, who was a printer, he had learned the art of close reading: forwards, backwards and upside-down, which rather perturbed many a student who, expounding a medieval text, might try to fudge the issue: Paul, facing him from the other side of the desk and reading upside-down, could and would always pick him up on anything he tried to skip over. Having this background in printing, of course, Paul took to computing and word-processing like a duck to water; and as a proof-reader he was second to none: witness the care he lavished on the memorial volume for Leslie Seiffert which the Society published in 1993 and to which, incidentally he contributed a fine essay on the reception of Herder's *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*. (The debate over the origin of language was one which he found perennially fascinating: his last essay on this topic, on Max Müller, appeared in our volume *Linguists and Their Diversions* last year.)

Paul Salmon was one of the dwindling band of British Germanists who had two research degrees. The first was the old University of London M.A., involving both a range of stiff written papers and a full-length thesis which in his case was an edition of and commentary on the fifteenth-century German translation of Jacobus de Theramo's *Consolatio Peccatorum*. He then embarked on his doctorate (which he completed in 1957) on *The Works of Hartmann von Aue in the Light of Medieval Poetics*. It was a happy choice, for Paul and the late 12th-century poet Hartmann von Aue had something in common: Gottfried von Straßburg praised Hartmann for his *kristalliniu wortelin*, his 'crystalline words', and indeed Paul too wrote with crystalline clarity and precision, no matter whether he was discussing medieval courtly literature, heroic poetry, Germanic alliterative verse, the link between grammar and poetics in the Middle Ages, the language of German romanticism, or Herder and others who debated the origin of language. His book *Literature in Medieval Germany*, published in 1967, is a model of its kind. But there was one respect in which Paul and Hartmann von Aue differed greatly. Hartmann tells us that he only wrote *swenne er*

*sîne stunde nicht baz bewenden kunde*, ‘when he could not make better use of his time’. In Paul’s case time never hung heavily on his hands. He was always interested in what was going on and, if he was not indulging his great love of music, he himself was always working. Whenever one saw Paul and Vivian they were always frantically busy, with many things on the go, devouring stacks of books in Bodley or at the British Library. In Paul’s case at least for the last two or three years, in addition to publishing original work in his own fields (he completed an illuminating essay on the history of the term ‘morphology’ just before his death), he had been chiefly occupied first with editing the entries for English-speaking linguists for Harro Stammerjohann’s *Lexicon grammaticorum* (published in 1996) and then above all with translating P. A. Verburg’s monumental *Taal en Functionaliteit* (1952) into English, meticulously attempting to check out every obscure reference, a task he thankfully completed just before he died.

Everyone who knew Paul – and indeed Vivian too, for Paul and Vivian have always (for over 50 years in fact) been (as they say today) very much ‘an item’ – will have been impressed by his (and her) friendliness and helpfulness. Despite his work Paul always had time for colleagues and friends and particularly for younger scholars. He was always willing to place the prodigious breadth of his knowledge at the disposal of all who sought his help and advice. No one who approached him went empty away. If ever I asked him whether he would not mind digging out some obscure Latin quotation in a sixteenth-century book in Bodley he would happily drop everything to do it. And of course he was always a most staunch and loyal supporter of Vivian in her many projects and undertakings. Nor was his assistance confined solely to things academic: I am told that he was never happier than when he was called upon to mend a broken electric plug in the Department or offer some other ‘hands-on’ assistance. After the untimely death of Leslie Seiffert he took over as Treasurer of the Philological Society and, by all accounts, made a splendid job of it. But nowhere was his helpfulness more manifest than in the Henry Sweet Society: Once Vivian Salmon, following up an idea that had surfaced in a conversation with Konrad Koerner, had conceived the idea of founding the Society back in August 1983, Paul and Leslie were immediately recruited as the very first members. For several years Paul served on the Executive Committee; even more importantly, as Editor of the *Newsletter* for several issues he ensured its regular and punctual appearance, and furthermore he single-handedly compiled and keyboarded the first catalogue of the Society’s library, issued to members a few years ago.

The Henry Sweet Society and the Philological Society were not the only learned societies to benefit from his membership. There was the London Medieval Society too, and for many years he was also an assiduous supporter of the Viking Society for Northern Research, for – like any Germanist worth his salt and treading in the footsteps of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm – he was interested not only in things German but things from the wider Germanic area. His interest in things Dutch, medieval and modern, is well known, but he was also quite at home adducing parallels in Icelandic sagas to illuminate German nineteenth-century literature. His interests indeed went right back to early Germanic times – indeed I understand that the last opera he saw, at the Edinburgh Festival a fortnight ago, was Wagner’s *Die Walküre*. (He was a passionate Wagnerian, but then nobody is perfect ...!) Given his enthusiasm

for the Germanic past, it is perhaps appropriate if I conclude this tribute by recalling what are probably the most famous elegiac lines of all in ancient Germanic poetry, from the Norse *Hávamál*:

*Deyr fé. deyja fraendr,  
deyr sjálfir it sama;  
ek veit einn at aldri deyr:  
dómr of dauðan hvern*

*Possessions perish, kinsmen die, and likewise one dies oneself:  
I know of one thing that never perishes: the reputation of a man who has died.*

Paul's reputation will long be cherished amongst us.<sup>1</sup>

John L. Flood June 29, 2003

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<sup>1</sup> Delivered at the 1997 Annual Meeting of the Henry Sweet Society for Linguistic ideas, held at the University of Luton on 12 September 1997. Paul Salmon died on Saturday, 30 August 1997.