YEATS AS ANTHOLOGIST

JON STALLWORTHY

I

NOTHING STIRS UP THE DUST of the literary arena so much as an anthology, and there can be few better examples of this than The Oxford Book of Modern Verse. Now that the dust of controversy has fallen away, it is possible to reconstruct the moves and countermoves of this minor, but entertaining, fragment of literary history.

In the summer of 1930 Humphrey Milford, Publisher to the University of Oxford, proposed to the Georgian poet Lascelles Abercrombie that he should compile an Oxford Book of Modern Verse. His reply has survived only in an extract quoted in a memo from Milford to Kenneth Sisam, the distinguished Anglo-Saxon medieval scholar who was at that time Assistant Secretary to the Delegates of the University Press, at the Clarendon Press, Oxford:

26 July 1930

Oxford University Press
Amen House
Warwick Square London E.C.4

Oxford Book of Modern Verse

Lascelles Abercrombie writes (25 July):

‘An Oxford Book of Modern Verse? I thought you had one, and a terrible thing it is. But a book to represent 1900 onwards —

1 I am grateful to the Delegates and the Secretary to the Delegates of the Oxford University Press for permission to examine and reproduce letters from their files; also to the Oxford University Press for permission to quote extracts from Dorothy Wellesley: Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley (1940).

A. N. Jeffares et al. (eds.), In Excited Reverie
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In Excited Reverie

that would be a delightful pie to cook, and I would love to have a finger, or even two, in it. Certainly I’ll come and see you about it when I get back.’

H I M

Abercrombie was almost certainly thinking of The Oxford Book of English Verse, A.D. 1250–1900, chosen and edited by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, which included poems by Binyon, Blunt, Gosse and Yeats, but none of his own. He agreed to edit the new anthology, and was to be assisted in his researches by Milford’s niece, Anne Bradby, later to become better known as Anne Ridler. All appears to have gone well, if slowly, until 1934 when the poet and playwright Charles Williams, an editor at the London office of the Press, wrote in a memo to Milford:

[Oxford University Press
Amen House
Warwick Square London E.C.4]

2 October 1934

L.A.: O.B. Modern Verse

I saw L. A. yesterday. He was in considerable distress over the book, both personal and moral. It has begun to dawn on him (i) that none of his poetic acquaintances are going to love him afterwards, (ii) and more bitterly, that he hasn’t really the time to exercise a proper judicious choice, and that his reputation may suffer (he said, as regards both i and ii that it was ‘going to take a long time to live down’), and (iii) that he’s hardly going to find time to do it all. I pointed out the financial advantages, and alluded to our difficulty. But I was so convinced that we should gain little advantage from having him put his name, and so dubious whether his name will — now — help very much, that I consented — subject to higher approval — to relieve him of the lists and see if we can manage another way. And I am very strongly of opinion that it would be profitless to try and force it through him. He swears he would like to be of any little use he can, but the whole task — it is now clear — he would muddle.

This leaves me with two alternatives: (i) to try and get another Name (ii) to do without a Name, and rely merely on the modernity

1 Addresses in square brackets indicate that a letter or memo has been transcribed from a carbon copy on unheaded typing paper.