

The precise handwritten initials—D.N.S.—encased within a laurel wreath are those of David Nichol Smith, Merton Professor of English Literature at the University of Oxford from 1929 to 1946. He wrote his initials to signify ownership of his cherished books, periodicals and pamphlets dating from the sixteenth century to the modern period. The laurel wreath, classical symbol of poetry and a modern symbol of excellence in literature, and the initials it encircles, have become synonymous with David Nichol Smith's books in the National Library of Australia's Rare Books Collection and with the David Nichol Smith Memorial Seminars.

Professor David Nichol Smith (1875–1962) played a significant role in promoting eighteenth-century literary studies and was a renowned commentator upon the works of Dryden, Johnson, Boswell, Swift, Defoe, Pope, Hazlitt and other notable Restoration and eighteenth-century writers, as well as those of Shakespeare. His scholarly collection includes many rare early editions of prominent and minor writers, first editions of literary journals, miscellaneous political pamphlets, periodicals including the *Examiner*, the *Rambler*, the *Gentleman's Magazine* and the *Grub Street Journal*, and almost all the eighteenth-century editions of Shakespeare and critical works written on the playwright.

The impact of Nichol Smith's work reverberated in academic circles in Australia and New Zealand. His erudite literary criticism was acknowledged here, as was his encouragement for postgraduate training, which in the 1930s he recommended to the Universities Bureau of the British Empire. Nichol Smith's list of publications stands as a testament to his prodigious scholarship and literary interests, which extended from seventeenth and

eighteenth-century French and English literature and poetry to the critical essays of Dr John Arbuthnot, and the rural and nationalist poems of the Scottish writers Allan Ramsay, Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott.

David Nichol Smith's library collection began when he was a young scholar in Edinburgh. One of the first

works printed in Anglo-Saxon type, intriguing pirated editions of well-known works, literary spoofs and satires, theatrical collections, Gothic novels, translations, and Greek, Latin and Italian books. Unlike many antiquarians, Nichol Smith was not so much interested in perfection as in completeness, and he described many of his books as 'ramshackle' but 'perfect in their limbs and absolute in their numbers of pages'. The

National Library describes the David Nichol Smith Collection as 'a scholar's research library rather than a collector's showpiece'. The rarity of many items would, however, gladden the heart of many collectors.

A respected academician and meticulous scholar active in the first half of the twentieth century, David Nichol Smith helped to establish the Oxford School of English and foster graduate and postgraduate teaching, attracting students from around the world to read English at Oxford. Generations of students respected his literary knowledge and honoured his profound, if sometimes austere, scholarship. Nichol Smith's editorial judgement was valued by the Delegates of the Clarendon Press and, in later years, his counsel was sought on important university matters. His literary authority was grounded firmly in Shakespeare and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although he never wanted to be entirely fixed in one century's works or on one nation's writers. Professor Herbert Davis, a colleague and close Oxford friend, remarked that Nichol Smith wanted to extend the limits of knowledge of writers of the period and was unafraid to mix biography and history and criticism. The breadth of the Nichol Smith Collection provides ample evidence of expansive scholarly interests combined with a focused eclecticism.

After graduating with First Class Honours in 1895 from the University of Edinburgh and spending a



**Over 30 years ago,
the National Library
acquired a unique
collection of seventeenth
and eighteenth century
scholarly works,
the treasured library of
David Nichol Smith.
Sue Rickard examines
the collection and
the academic
responsible for it**

books he bought was a 1619 copy of Heliodorus, *Aethiopicorum libri X*, (Lutetiae Parisiorum). He recalled that he had paid 'a whole half-penny for it'. Later acquisitions reflected scholarly pursuits, but his collection grew to include some of the first



scholarship year at the Sorbonne, Nichol Smith was first employed preparing the index to Professor George Saintsbury's *History of Nineteenth Century Literature*. He had been a student of Saintsbury, who had succeeded David Masson, both men influential literary nineteenth-century critics. In 1899 Nichol Smith edited Shakespeare's *King Henry the Eighth* for the Scottish publisher Blackie, and in 1902 he worked on *King Lear*. Later, when Professor of English Language and Literature at Armstrong (later King's) College, University of Durham, he was invited by Professor Walter Raleigh to become the editor of the Clarendon Press's *Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare*. Appointed to the Goldsmiths' Readership in Oxford in 1908, his name was inevitably linked with Shakespeare, although his abiding interests lay always with Johnson, Dryden, Swift and Pope, whose works he studied and wrote upon throughout his lifetime.

Born and educated in Edinburgh in the last decades of the nineteenth century, he readily acknowledged the critical influences under which he was trained and conceded to friends and colleagues that he remained essentially a nineteenth-century man. He wrote wryly of the year of his birth—1875—reminding his readers that he had lived longer under the reign of Queen Victoria than any other British sovereign: 'Remember this if you are ever disposed to say unkind superior things about the Victorians'. Modern poetry interested him little. His obituarist in *The Times* reported that, when asked what he thought of W.H. Auden, Nichol Smith replied predictably: 'I do not think of him at all'.

Beneath a rather serious exterior, Nichol Smith was an assiduous teacher, a subtle humourist, a responsive correspondent, a learned bibliophile and a generous benefactor of books. His bequests also went to the National Library of Scotland and

the Bodleian Library in Oxford, but the vital heart of the collection came to Australia. Before his death in 1962, he made it known that the greater part of his collection—approximately 9000 books and 1500 pamphlets—was to be acquired by the National Library of Australia for the benefit of scholars separated by distance from the great libraries of Britain, North America and Europe.

Following his retirement as the Chair of English Literature at Merton in 1946, David Nichol Smith travelled extensively, holding visiting lectureships and professorships in Great Britain, North America, Cairo, New Zealand and Australia. In 1950–51, he was Visiting Chair of English at the University of Adelaide.

Writing from Adelaide he noted in a letter to Herbert Davis, who was then visiting America, that, compared with America, Australia was a 'teenager'. He wrote: 'To my mind Australia has the "attractiveness of its years"... [it is] a real land of promise'.



Title page of *The Dunciad* by Alexander Pope (2nd ed. London: Gilliver, 1729)
David Nichol Smith Collection

(opposite) One of the 'new and curious set of sixty-two maps, in which are shewn all the Empires, Kingdoms, Countries, States, in all the known parts of the Earth; ... the whole composed and laid down agreeable to modern History' in *Atlas Minor* (or *Moll's Atlas Minor*) by Herman Moll (London: Thos Bowles and John Bowles, c.1732)
David Nichol Smith Collection

He also recognised that Australia was perceived still to be on the margins of the world: 'Unfortunately, Australia is very much further away from the average Englishman than the "old" country is from the Australian'. Despite an obvious enthusiasm for research and impressive evidence of scholarship, Nichol Smith was conscious that many Antipodean scholars, young and old, had limited access to eighteenth-century literary collections and the riches of libraries which he had been able to consult as a young scholar. Bringing the benefits

of his years of scholarship to Adelaide, he had a larger benefaction in mind. During his year in Adelaide he first entertained the suggestion that his library should eventually find a place in Australia.

Next month the Department of English, the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University, and the National Library of Australia, under the auspices of the Australasian and Pacific Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, will host the David Nichol Smith Memorial Seminar. The first memorial seminar was held in Canberra in 1966 and, three decades later, the tenth seminar takes place on 2–5 July. David Nichol Smith would have appreciated the title and context of July's meeting, 'Margins and Metropolis: Literature, Culture and Science, 1660–1830'.

This seminar is the foremost international conference on eighteenth-century studies in the region and offers scholars an opportunity to review the past and contemplate the future of eighteenth-century studies in an academic and critical environment which is changing rapidly. The organisers will welcome some of the world's leading scholars in the field. David Nichol Smith's 1902 edition of *The Oxford Book of Eighteenth Century Verse*, a seminal work, was superseded in 1984 by a new edition edited by Roger Lonsdale, who added to Nichol Smith's original edition. Lonsdale's updated edition incorporated previously marginalised or neglected writers and posed revised views on literature generated by gender studies, new cultural and historical perspectives, and critical theory. The 1996 memorial seminar aims to expand further to examine literature, culture and science as key sites of cultural interaction.

Nichol Smith would not have resisted the interdisciplinary approach of the forthcoming seminar nor have objected to its focus upon science and the enlightenment seen in the context of Australia and the Pacific. As early as 1909, in his inaugural lecture as Goldsmiths' Reader, he insisted that the function of literary criticism was, above all, 'to aid appreciation ... a judgement is of value only as a means



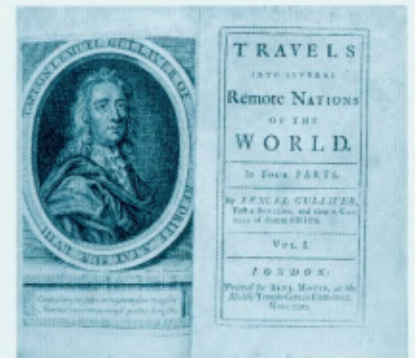
to appreciation; it need not presume to close the case ... verdicts are always open to revision'. For a scholar and literary historian who attained early wisdoms under influential nineteenth-century critics such as Courthope, Bradley, Raleigh and Saintsbury as well as Villeman, Guizot, Brunetiere and Cousin, this expressed a refreshing approach. David Nichol Smith was interested in theories of criticism and textual criticism, but he also believed strongly in understanding historical context and his subjects' lives. Like the poet whose work he is credited with making 'fashionable', Nichol Smith accepted Pope's dictum: 'The proper study of Mankind is Man'.

A valuable adjunct to David Nichol Smith's books is a small collection of correspondence from Hugh Macdonald to Nichol Smith. Macdonald was a writer and bibliographer who arranged for the republication of works by Andrew Marvell and John Dryden; he also acquired and exchanged books with Nichol Smith. The men shared a mutual love of literature and bibliographical sleuthing, and the Bodleian Library, affectionately known as the Bodley, gained from the combined talents of Nichol Smith and Macdonald. Over the years, the bibliophiles skilfully identified rare editions and annotated versions of works by seventeenth and eighteenth-century writers for purchase by the Friends of the Bodleian Library.

One letter written in June 1932 is illuminating. Macdonald opened his letter with the offer of a privately printed folio edition, but closed with the observation: 'I noticed your books overflowed from your study, so perhaps a folio would be a positive nuisance. If it will be in the way, please don't hesitate to pass it on'. David Nichol Smith's collection at his home at 20 Merton Street in Oxford filled rooms to capacity—his shelves often held two or three rows of books. Writing years later about his cherished collection, Nichol Smith referred to his books as if they were old friends, indicating that he wanted his collection to remain intact: 'I should have been sorry if after they had lived together in good companionship they should have been scattered again by the bookseller'.

In 1961 Nichol Smith wrote to Harold White, National Librarian of the National Library of Australia, that he had become 'more and more convinced that, if they [the books] are ever to leave this country, they must go to Australia ... to a national library ... which means Canberra'. Harold White set in motion the arrangements to make certain of the Library's acquisition. David Nichol Smith's collection arrived in mid-1962 to the delight of scholars in the humanities.

Not overflowing but 'passed on' to the care of Margaret Dent, the Library's Rare Books Librarian at the



Title page and frontispiece from *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift (London: Motte, 1726) David Nichol Smith Collection

(top) David Nichol Smith at Oxford, c.1948 From the Pictorial Collection

time, the David Nichol Smith Collection remains in good hands with no fear of scattering. His collection is honoured by researchers and is used precisely in the ways he would have appreciated. From July, visitors to the National Library will be able to see some of the treasures of the collection which will be on display to celebrate the tenth David Nichol Smith Memorial Seminar.

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