

TRANSACTIONS OF THE ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

HUGH HALE BELLOT

HUGH HALE BELLOT, who died at the age of 79 on 18 February 1969, became a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 1928, and served it as a member of Council, to which he was elected in February 1931, as Honorary Secretary (1934–52), and finally as President (1952–56), for more than twenty-five years. He was primarily responsible for the transformation of the library from the miscellaneous collection it was into the efficient tool for the student of British history it now is. *Texts and Calendars: an analytical guide to serial publications*, edited by E. L. C. Mullins, provided in 1958 the guide he had proposed to one of the re-organized sections of the library, and Council properly associated it with his name. He was wholly responsible for initiating and, in the face of great difficulties, for carrying through to completion, the series of bibliographies of *Writings on British History* from 1901 to 1945, devoting much of the last years of his life to editing the volumes for 1901 to 1933 and donating £1,000 to the Society in aid of their publication. It was a source of great satisfaction to him that the Institute of Historical Research should have agreed in 1965 to assume the task of continuing the series. With F. M. Powicke, at whose instance he accepted the Honorary Secretaryship, he was instrumental in securing a re-organization both of the Society's administrative machinery and of its publishing activities; with F. M. Stenton he piloted it through the years of the Second World War; and he continued to give it unstinted attention thereafter, despite the demands made upon him by the University of London, of which he became Vice-Chancellor. An Honorary Vice-President from 1956 till his death, he once again assumed the Secretaryship from May 1960 to March 1961 at a time when Council was in great difficulty owing to the illness of the then Honorary Secretary.

Bellot was the elder son of Hugh Hale Leigh Bellot (1860–1928) and Beatrice Violette Clarke, and was born at Addlestone,

Surrey, on 26 January 1890. He came of a professional family, and, both on his father's and his mother's side, of solid north-country stock. There had been Bellots at the hill farm of Castle Naze, near the village of Combs, on the borders of Derbyshire and Cheshire, since the reign of Henry III. But his great-grandfather had settled in Manchester as a surgeon; his grandfather and his great-uncle Thomas (whose career is recorded in the *Dictionary of National Biography*) followed the same profession; and his father, to whom, perhaps, may be attributed his own precise and legal cast of mind, was a distinguished international lawyer. From Bedales School, which he entered three months after the death of Queen Victoria and where he became Head Boy, he carried away a love of music, of Bach in particular, and of the visual arts—he painted with some skill; and from Lincoln College, Oxford, of which he was successively an exhibitioner, a scholar, and finally an honorary fellow, he gained an abiding interest in medieval as well as in modern history. In his final year, the College allowed him to spend several months at the British School at Rome, and the experience more than compensated him for narrowly missing a first on his return.

As a schoolboy Bellot had suffered an accident to his foot which confined him for many months to a wheel-chair and left him permanently injured. He was able to row in the College eight at Lincoln and to become Captain of Boats. But he was held to be unfit for military service in 1914 and spent the war years as a temporary master at Battersea Polytechnic Secondary School, as a housemaster at Bedales itself (where he saw the future Air-Chief Marshal Sir Roderic Hill, who was also to be his successor as Vice-Chancellor of the University of London, perform aerial acrobatics over the school cricket-pitch and crash into a hayfield), and lastly as a temporary clerk in H.M. Customs and Excise. His academic career was renewed in 1920, when he entered University College London as a post-graduate student, to be appointed, in the following year, to an Assistantship in the Department of History. A drawing by his friend Ivon Hitchens, now in the possession of the College, shows him as a strikingly handsome young man; and this tall, slim, handsome young man soon revealed himself also to be a vigorous and highly stimulating lecturer. He began to lecture on American history—a subject which must have been almost entirely new to him, but of which the legal and con-

stitutional aspects attracted him more and more—in the session 1921–22. But American history was not yet his major field of study. He spent several years writing the history of University College, an impressive volume published in 1929, and, meanwhile, in 1927, moved to Manchester as a Reader in Modern History. He returned to London as the first Commonwealth Fund Professor of American History in 1930. Thereafter the teaching of American history, and the establishment of effective libraries for its study, were the main preoccupations of his academic life. His *American History and American Historians*, published in 1952, was the long-maturing fruit of the one interest; the American history libraries at University College and the Institute of Historical Research stand witness to the other.

Bellot paid a number of visits in the nineteen-thirties to the United States, where he had many friends. But the Second World War, during which he became a temporary Principal in the Board of Trade, and thereafter his increasing responsibilities in and to the University of London, kept him at home. He believed passionately in the University and its central institutions and served it devotedly, on the Senate, the Court and the Academic Council, on the Councils of Westfield College and the Charing Cross Hospital Medical School, on the Board of Studies in History, on the Committee of the Institute of Historical Research, as the first Chairman of the Athlone Press, and in many other ways. He gave much of his time also to the problems of higher education in Africa, paying more than one visit there on behalf of the University and representing it on the Council of University College, Ibadan. He became Vice-Chancellor in 1951—an election which gave him great pleasure—and was re-elected in 1952. ‘Nothing in his life’, it has been said, ‘became him like the manner in which he discharged the duties of that office. He was clear in thought, incisive in action and utterly fair—a combination of qualities which won for him the admiration of his friends and the respect of those who did not happen to share his views.’¹ The University appointed him as its Creighton Lecturer in 1954—he chose to lecture on Woodrow Wilson—and conferred the honorary degree of LL.D. upon him in 1957. His last work was a short history of the University written for the *Victoria History*

¹ *University of London. Report by the Principal on the work of the University during the year 1968–69* (London, 1969).

of the County of Middlesex and reprinted separately a few weeks after his death.

Bellot never married. He was simple, even austere, in his tastes and not easy to get to know. But once his natural reserve was penetrated he was a firm and loyal friend. Hating inefficiency in scholarship as in life, he was a man of absolute rectitude of character who never swerved from what he held to be right. In Somerset, his second home, he was a member of the County Councils Records Committee and of the Council of the Record Society and he spent perhaps his happiest hours in the garden of his cottage at The Mill, High Ham, near Langport, now, with its old stone and thatch windmill, the property of the National Trust.

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