

James Sterling Wilkie: 1906–1982

A. C. Crombie

JAMES STERLING WILKIE was born in 1906 into a family that lived comfortably in London. He was educated first at Highgate School (when T. S. Eliot was for a time a master), then after the First World War at Chelsea Polytechnic. In 1924 he entered University College London, a year later left for Paris for two years to study the French language, and returned in 1927 to read zoology. He took his B.Sc. in 1929 with the award of the Gold Medal in Zoology. In the same year he was appointed Demonstrator in Biology at Guy's Hospital Medical School, a post he was to hold for fourteen years. At this time he lived in The Temple, supported by a private income and developing characteristic intellectual interests ranging from medical science to theology. He would recall having seen G. K. Chesterton break a chair by trying to sit on it. In 1937 his first book, *The Dissection and Study of the Sheep's Brain, as an introduction to the human brain*, was published by Oxford University Press. He remained in central London throughout the Second World War, serving as an air raid patrol warden. In 1945 he moved back to University College London as a special Lecturer in the Department of Psychology. He worked on the nervous system and sense organs, and in 1949 he took his Ph.D. with a thesis on *The Biologist's approach to the Mind-Body Problem*. I remember very well meeting him there one winter's day by the fire at coffee in the common room, shortly after I myself joined the Department of History and Philosophy of Science in 1946. In 1949 he resigned his post and moved to Cambridge where he lived on his private funds and applied himself to private study in a carefully selected variety of subjects including mathematics, philosophy, Greek, German and general history. At this time he began to develop a serious interest in the history and philosophy of science. His second book, *The Science of Mind and Brain* was published in the Hutchinson World University Library in 1953. He returned once more that year to University College London where I had suggested him (although considerably my senior) as my successor on my own appointment to Oxford. There he became successively Reader, Head of Department and Professor, until finally in 1968 he took early retirement at the age of sixty-two and moved back again to what became a new life at Cambridge. He was elected in 1970 into a Fellowship at St. Edmund's House, appointed to the office of Librarian, and ran the library in his own way with evident success. He built up with economical funds (often supplemented from his own pocket) a collection of books to provide both for student needs and what he believed an educated person should have read. During this second period at Cambridge he learnt Arabic, in order to undertake a major research project on Galen. He came to work especially with two historians of Greek thought, D. J. Furley of Princeton and G. E. R. Lloyd at Cambridge. He transcribed the Arabic manuscripts in a room in his house used only for his Arabic studies. Out of these came the notable discovery that an obscure passage in the Greek was restored to sense by restoring two transposed pages to their proper order as found in the Arabic text.

I should like to thank Dr. Simon Mitton, Fellow of St. Edmund's House, Cambridge for allowing me to use for this notice the text of his funeral address there.

With his combination of ingenious originality and exact scholarship Wilkie threw fresh light on a diversity of questions in the history of biology. He published important and influential papers on Harvey, on Buffon, Lamarck and Darwin, on Mendel, on Carl Nägeli, and on various general subjects. He had been working when he died on a history of biology in the 19th century. His work on Galen is due to be published. He saw the history of science in the classical manner as centrally the history of scientific thought. To that he made a lasting contribution. At the same time he had many other, idiosyncratic interests, in literature in various languages, in especially Prussian and military history and the American Civil War, in theology and in medicine. He had the habit of diagnosing his own illnesses while keeping in touch with his doctor. Central to his personal life was his deep religious faith as a member of the Roman Catholic Church. Those who knew him will remember above all a person at once highly individual, amazingly learned, always considerate to others, warmhearted and witty, unswervingly honest, and good.

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