



# LF POWELL: A BODLEY BOY

*If there are any ghosts haunting the august libraries of Oxford University then surely among them would be that of Elisabeth Downes' grandfather who, despite humble beginnings, attained one the highest positions in that University's libraries.*

Lawrence Fitzroy Powell (affectionately known as LF) was only five when his father died in 1886, and it was to help support his mother that he left school at barely 12 years of age to start work in the library of Brasenose College at Oxford University.

After two years at Brasenose he became, at age 14, one of 'Bodley's boys', working at the famed Bodleian library. Chief Librarian Edward Nicholson had introduced the practice of employing boys to relieve experienced staff from the more menial tasks and my grandfather often told the story of how, at his interview, he was asked by Nicholson, "Can you swim, boy?" Apparently one of the youngsters employed there had drowned in the river not long before. Did the spirit of this unfortunate lad haunt or inspire my grandfather? Certainly he would often ponder the fact that his ability to swim helped him along in his career as a librarian.

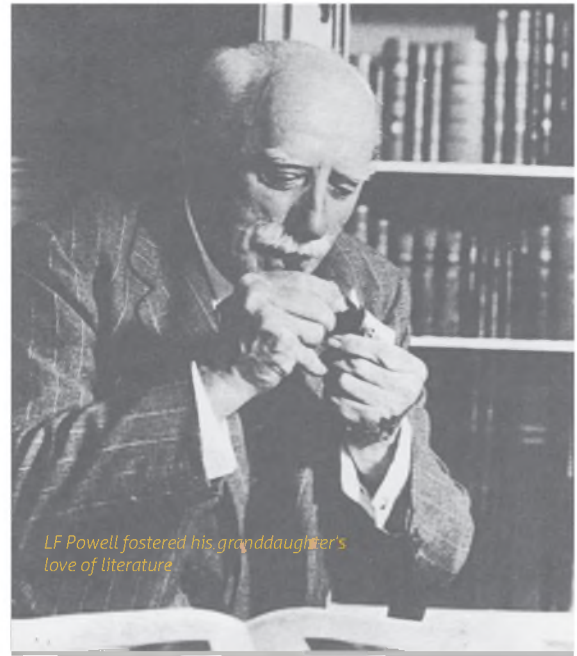
After seven years at the Bodleian, the young LF joined the team working on the *New English Dictionary*, later to become the *Oxford English Dictionary* - a huge undertaking. Here he met Ethelwyn Steane, whom he married in 1909. Their only child, my father, was born in 1910.

When WWI broke out my grandfather volunteered for active service, but being deemed medically unfit, he was given work at the Admiralty. After the war, he resumed his dictionary work until 1921 when he was appointed as only the third librarian at the Taylor Institution, which was, and remains, Oxford University's modern languages and literature library. Interestingly, it was expected that this move would allow him to become involved in major academic studies - surely something few librarians would have time for today. So, while LF was greatly improving and expanding the Taylorian's library collections during his tenure, he also developed his interest in the 18th century writer and lexicographer, Samuel Johnson, and embarked on the major task of producing a new edition of Boswell's biography of the great man.

Meanwhile my mother, who went to Oxford in 1931 to study French, found herself falling in love with a young Classics student. She later recalled her consternation at discovering that the learned-looking gentleman who presided over the library where she and her friends studied (and whom they regarded with considerable awe) was the father of her boyfriend! Luckily, her apprehension was unwarranted and she was soon welcomed into the family.

LF retired in 1949 but continued his academic scholarship and the supervision of graduate students well into his eighties. Despite having never taken an exam in his life, he received several honorary fellowships and honorary doctorates from both Durham and Oxford Universities. Colleagues and former students in Britain and America regarded him with great respect and affection.

To me he was a very personal and beloved hero, fostering my love of literature and libraries by his regular gifts of books throughout my growing-up. No Christmas would have been complete without his genial presence, while his Oxford house seemed to come straight out of CS



LF Powell fostered his granddaughter's love of literature

Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, with its long passageways, staircases, rooms filled with tottering piles of books, and the persistent aroma of pipe smoke.

I last saw my grandfather in 1970, shortly before I migrated to Australia, but six months after his death in 1975 I was in England again and visited the Taylorian. I felt his presence very strongly, but someone else's too. In a large volume, recording the enrolment of library members over past decades, I found my mother's youthful signature. And just as I was wondering if I was imagining the sound of a familiar, throaty chuckle and the whiff of a pipe, I turned a corner to find a charmingly informal photograph of LF hanging in a place of honour. I hope it is still there.

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