

Theodore Deodatus Nathaniel Besterman, in turn psychic researcher, world embracing bibliographer and writer on bibliography, then passionate rehabilitator and editor of *Voltaire*, not to mention the initiator of works in a multiplicity of other fields, was a scholar and editor who achieved a staggering amount through constant and single-minded energy and an intense concentration on the work in hand.

Theodore Besterman, as he was usually called, the second son (there were no daughters) of Benjamin J. N. Besterman, diamond merchant, and his wife, Golda Augusta Krengiel was born on 22 November 1904 in Lodz, Poland.¹ In common with others of his generation and origins, Besterman in his *Who's Who* entry preferred to leave another trail and gave Bradford (UK) as his place of birth, while letting the correct date stand.² It seems likely that his parents may have moved first to Amsterdam, then to London and that effectively his early years were spent there. He claimed that he was largely self-educated at the British Museum Library to which his mother despatched him with no more than an apple for lunch. A later (1967) *Who's Who* entry mentions private education, the Lycée de Londres and 'Oxford (extra-mural)'. He sometimes later let it be thought that he was at Magdalen College, Oxford, a view for which no evidence has been found.

In 1925 he appears (at the age of 21) as the chairman of the British Federation of Youth Movements. But Besterman already had other occupations more indicative of his long-term interests. In the previous year he had published a bibliography of the Fabian and theosophist Annie Besant (1847-1933).³ In 1925 too he joined the Society for Psychical Research (founded 1882) and became its honorary librarian in 1927. He acquired numerous early rarities for the library and compiled and published its

¹ Benjamin Besterman died in 1945, Golda in 1961. Golda's maiden name is sometimes given as Krengel or Cringle, the latter form probably being an Anglicisation by Theodore himself for *Who's Who*.

² *Who's Who* entries are based on material provided by the subject and some authorities, such as ODNB, require that such material be carefully verified if possible. In Besterman's case a birth certificate was located.

³ He also published a biography of her in the year after her death: *Mrs. Annie Besant, a modern prophet* (London, 1934).

catalogue in five parts (1927-33). From 1933 he was also the Society's Investigation Officer. He relinquished both posts in 1935. He published widely on associated matters, including, *inter alia*, *Crystal-gazing: a study in the history, distribution, theory and practice of scrying* (1924), an anthology *In the way of Heaven* (1926), and *The Divining-rod: an experimental and psychological investigation* (with Sir William Barrett, F.R.S., 1926), *Some modern mediums* (1930), *Men against women, a study in sexual relations* (1934), as well as bibliographies of Sir James Frazer (author of *The Golden bough*), of Sir Oliver Lodge, and *The Publishing firm of Cadell and Davies: select correspondence and accounts 1793-1836* (1938). He was also a member of the Council (and briefly Treasurer) of the Folklore Society (1926-37).

In April 1925 Besterman had married Henrietta Birley of Hampstead (b.1893/4), a secretary, the marriage lasting but a few years. Later, divorce not being respectable at that time, this union (childless) was omitted from his formal record. He later married Evelyn, the younger daughter of Arthur Mack of New York. Her son by a previous marriage took Besterman's name.⁴

In the early 1930s Besterman turned his attention again, and more generally, towards bibliography, starting in a logical manner with the publication of his important *The Beginnings of systematic bibliography* (1935). This was published in French as *Les Débuts de la bibliographie méthodique* (1950), translated from the third edition. He had become both special lecturer at the London School of Librarianship (1931-38) and joint editor of the influential, if short lived, series Oxford Books on Bibliography. He also edited two works for the distinguished Golden Cockerel Press: Mourt's *The Travels and sufferings of Father Jean de Brébeuf among the Hurons of Canada* (1938), which he also translated, and *The Pilgrim Fathers: a journal of their coming in the Mayflower to New England* (1939).

In his 'spare time' Besterman set up a very high-class private press in his own house at 100 Bunhill Row, London. The Guyon House Press, worked by Vivian Ridler (1913-2009), a brilliant young typographer and later a distinguished Printer to the University of Oxford (and husband of the poet Anne Ridler), produced in 1938 *Magna Carta and other charters of English liberties* (Latin text revised and translated by Noel

⁴ Edwin Melville Mack Besterman (5 May 1924 - 3 September 2007), an eminent cardiologist.

Denholm-Young). The 250 copies (plus six for the English copyright libraries) were printed in Tyrian red, blue and black with titling, head and tail-pieces by Berthold Wolpe, another of the great designers of the period. The press came to an end in December 1940 when the house was destroyed during the London *blitz*.

In 1939-40, not the best of times, he published privately the first edition of his *World bibliography of bibliographies*, a work destined to become a classic and to be found on the reference shelves of any serious library worldwide. He worked constantly at the revision of this book and, perhaps not entirely legendarily, is said to have arranged to be locked into the Library of Congress on a Sunday, that being the only day he could spare in Washington. The second and 'revised and greatly enlarged' edition appeared in 1947, the third and 'final' edition appeared in 1955. A fourth and 'greatly enlarged' edition in five-volumes was published in 1965-66 and reprinted in 1980. Being the work of one man, it has been said that it would have been better had a number of specialists also been called on but few could have worked with a man termed 'a master of near fabulous achievement'⁵ and the various editions were probably the major bibliographic tool in the post World War II world, making 'Besterman' a household name with librarians worldwide.

During the war Besterman indicates that he served in Civil Defence, the Royal Artillery and, doubtless more congenially and appropriately, the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, the latter foreshadowing his immediately post-war position as Counsellor, World Bibliographical and Library centre and Head of the Department for the exchange of information in UNESCO. Here he worked towards the ideal of universal bibliographical control, or as he saw it, the ultimate listing of every book that had ever been published. He travelled extensively and went on several lecture tours in the United States. He inspired and initiated the *British union catalogue of periodicals* (1944) and founded and edited the *Journal of documentation* (1945-), both fundamental and frequently used publications.

In 1946 Besterman published thoughts on *The Library of Congress and the future of its catalogue* but this period of his life was coming to an end. His vision of

⁵ Edward J. Carter, 'Theodore Besterman: a personal memoir', *Journal of documentation* 33 (1977).

bibliographical problems was extreme and his advocacy of his causes was ardent, impatient, rather than diplomatic, and around 1950 he turned to the study of, and thus the publishing of, the correspondence and works of Voltaire, a liberal spirit with whom he identified.

In 1929 the City of Geneva had acquired Les Délices, Voltaire's old residence (1754-1760 before moving out to Ferney), then on the outskirts of the town. It was progressively restored, became a museum and, in 1954, also a study centre. Besterman became its director and went to live there, taking with him his extensive library of and on Voltaire. There have been those who found Besterman's identification with his subject to have been extreme, if not excessive. Perhaps, in the light of his editorial and inspirational achievement, one must forgive much to one who daily thought, worked and edited the writings of an equally active and influential character, and who, as Besterman puts it in his biography of Voltaire, had been a lifelong admirer 'this side of idology' and had 'for over a decade lived in his house, worked in his library, slept in his bedroom'.

Numerous publications naturally signalled this new departure: the two large volumes of Voltaire's *Notebooks* in 1952, the first volumes of his magistral edition of Voltaire's correspondence in 1953 (107 volumes by 1965 when a second, 'definitive', edition was undertaken) and the general academic studies series edited by him, *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century*, started in 1955 and now at over 500 volumes.

Besterman's second marriage had been dissolved and in 1958 he married Marie-Louise van Muyden of Geneva. At this period he kept a large dog, called 'Jean-Jacques' and said by some to be so called in order that, as his namesake Rousseau he could be brought to order! Besterman also inaugurated the conferences which saw the creation of the International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, the first of which was held at Geneva/Coppet in 1963. It was memorable for the talks, the atmosphere, and the generous organisation including a dinner in the château at Chillon, ending with large sugar 'cygnes du lac' and a late-night private steamer back along the lake to Geneva. These international conferences, held every four years in a different location, have taken place at St Andrews (1967), Nancy (1971), Yale (1975), Pisa (1979), Brussels (1983), Budapest (1987), Bristol (1991), Münster (1995), Dublin (1999), Los

Angeles (2003), Montpellier (2007), and together with the creation of some thirty national societies for eighteenth-century studies and that of an *International directory of eighteenth-century studies* illustrate well the burgeoning of this field following Besterman's lead, ahead of, but also particularly in tune with, his times.

One can recall that Voltaire himself, similarly a personality of indefatigable energy, had assisted in the production of numerous more or less complete editions of his works, the earliest dating back to 1728 and the last to appear in his lifetime (Geneva, Cramer, 1775) comprising forty volumes. Horace Walpole had indeed greeted the news of Voltaire's death by saying that now that he was dead one could at last safely buy his works as they would be neither rewritten nor enlarged. The posthumous edition promoted by Beaumarchais at Kehl in 1785-89 comprised 70 octavo volumes as did that (to quote only the most significant) by Beuchot in 1830-40, while L. Moland's of 1877-85 took fifty. The floating and variable nature of Voltaire's texts creates particular bibliographical and interpretative problems which even Besterman's initiative, courageous and single-minded determination, could only bring to serious scholarly fruition by relying not just on his remarkable skills but also on the goodwill, work and talents of the best scholars and scholarship available. The new edition of the correspondence was supported by the Swiss authorities with a single post of an assistant and thus relied largely on Besterman's personal activity – and on the copying accurately of manuscripts in many different libraries and collections (he would telephone to the British Library from Geneva, arrange for a visit the following day and return that evening) as well as on the acquisition of many of the manuscripts which appeared constantly in the sales rooms.

Funding was a problem and when Besterman sold material he had collected both before and after his arrival in Geneva at Sotheby's, there was dispute with the local authorities as to its ownership. Besterman was pursued through the courts and could thus only attend the Nancy Enlightenment conference from Germany and with the tacit agreement of the French authorities in a car with blacked out windows. He eventually lost the case and had to make financial reparation.

These difficulties led him to move in the later 1960s back to London where he lived in St James', the only private resident in a block occupied by various banks. He still had a remarkable collection of English watercolours and negotiated,

unsuccessfully, with the English government to locate them (on what terms are unknown) in the house that later (1980) became the official grace and favour country residence of the Foreign Secretary at Chevening in Kent. His interest in art also typically led him to consider a large-scale venture in yet another field. In 1972 he published a provisional initial list of a series of books to be reproduced in facsimile: 'The Printed sources of western art', a number of which (texts by Dürer and others) actually appeared, his copies of the originals eventually largely finding their way to the Getty Museum in Malibu.

But Besterman needed a printer for his Voltaire editions nearer than the Lausanne one he had employed when in Switzerland and so moved to Northamptonshire to be near the firm of Cheney's at Banbury, acquiring the old manor of Thorpe Mandeville, an ironstone house of the late eighteenth century. Here he was within easy reach of London, of his printer and of the facilities of Oxford University. Members of the editorial team could attend there, driving down, doing business, having lunch, being walked round the gardens and admiring the black swans. On one occasion one black swan got a twisted neck. Besterman was particularly concerned since this was the male who therefore had to follow the female. Not ThB's view of things. He tried to consult the great ornithologist Sir Peter Scott and, failing him, the Queen's Keeper or Warden of the Swans, finally telephoning to the University of Oxford saying 'You must have someone researching on black swans. I need advice!' At this period he proclaimed his intention to borrow from an Oxford library and read the whole of the printed volumes of the Bibliothèque nationale catalogue. Despatch of a mere ten volumes at a time was negotiated but only one lot were ever required.

Already a Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, on 22 February 1964 he received an honorary degree from the University of Oxford (as he did later from Geneva and St Andrews), the Public Orator concluding: 'Praesento vobis indagatorem rerum indefessum, qui, si fas est dicere, Alexandrinum illum visceribus aeneis aequiperat, superat humanitate et iudicio, Theodorum Deodatum Nathaniel Besterman, Illustrissimae Francogallorum Legionis Equitem, ut admittatur honoris cause ad gradum Doctoris in Litteris.' Besterman gave a lecture on this occasion and later, in 1973 and in the presence of the Vice-Chancellor, the annual Zaharoff Lecture

(‘Voltaire and the arts’). Sitting at a table on the raised dais fully exhibiting very bright red socks he paused in his reading, on the sight of some misprint in his text, to take out his pen and carefully and unhurriedly correct the passage. ThB, whatever the occasion, did not believe in letting errors go by or time be wasted.

Later Besterman invited two representatives of the University to visit him and have lunch. After this social event with Mrs Besterman the men walked round the gardens and he indicated that he intended to leave the Voltaire Foundation to the University of Oxford, finishing ‘Well, that’s it and now perhaps you would like to go home!’ The Foundation, basically its goodwill and publishing stocks, would be accompanied by a bequest to further his scholarly interests, principally the completion of the edition of Rousseau’s correspondence prepared by Professor Ralph Leigh of Cambridge (52 volumes, completed in 1998), the completion of the edition of Voltaire’s complete works (including the revised version of the correspondence) edited by an international committee under his direction, and the permanent continuation of the series *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century*. After a brief illness he died at the Horton General Hospital at Banbury on 10 November 1976, shortly before his seventy-second birthday.

Numerous obituaries appeared and there is a short entry for him in the *Oxford dictionary of national biography*, of which the present text is a fuller and revised version. Theodore Besterman is also commemorated by the presentation by the Library Association of an annual Besterman Medal, awarded for the year’s best bibliography, and at Oxford by an annual Besterman Lecture (since 1998) given at the Taylor Institution where a special ‘Voltaire Room’ was established at his special request, providing on open access the principal materials for the study of the Enlightenment. There are also at Oxford the scholarly activities of the Besterman Centre for the Enlightenment, providing regular lectures and seminars, as well as the offices of the Voltaire Foundation. There is a portrait of Besterman by R. V. Darwin, at the Taylor Institution, where some of his papers are held, and an (unsigned) bronze portrait head at the Voltaire Foundation.

Besterman’s will made little provision for his widow, the principal bequest being to the University for the aims indicated above. The executors, who included Lord Dacre (at that time Professor Trevor-Roper), were uncertain that the sums involved

were sufficient and suggested employing a firm of publishers but this was declined by the University who appointed their own committee, cautiously including the Secretary of the University Chest (its chief finance officer) among the number. The two main editorial series were able to call on their existing editors, Professors R. A. Leigh and W. H. Barber, and had the valuable assistance of Besterman's former assistant in Geneva, Andrew Brown, who by chance had returned to Besterman's employ some few months previously. Mention must also and particularly be made of those who provided the academic editorial direction of the *Complete works* and the *Studies*: William Barber, formerly Professor of French at Birkbeck College, London, and a founder editor of the *Complete works*, who in retirement moved to Oxford, and Haydn Mason, another Oxford graduate and renowned *dix-huitiémiste*, Professor of French at Bristol, who equally took on the time-consuming duties of oversight.⁶ The University provided offices, since 1993 in a Victorian house at 99 Banbury Road.

But if the continuation of the publications was thus ensured administratively, the will was contested by Mrs Besterman on the grounds of the provision made for her, a process both lengthy and costly. The High Court judge noted that the bequest was to be used to continue a series of publications dealing with the Enlightenment and asked: 'And what was the Enlightenment?' The defence, seeing that the reference books of the day defined the term as 'the views of the French philosophers of the eighteenth century *and those associated with them in outright opposition to all forms of authority*', and mindful of current anti-terrorist concerns, asked Bodley's Librarian (Dr Robert Shackleton) and the Librarian of the Taylorian Library (Mr Giles Barber) to produce for the court a helpful, and perhaps more positive, statement – which was duly submitted. The court eventually made reasonable provision for the widow and accepted the academic (and thus legal) validity of the proposed research and publications.

Currently the Besterman bequest is administered for the University by the Voltaire Foundation Fund Committee, which has an international membership, for the

⁶ Among other founding members of the *Works* was Professor Owen Taylor of University College, London in whose memory was established at the Foundation the Owen Taylor Research Fund, which makes travel grants to young scholars in the field.

trust purposes outlined above; the publishing and research activities of the Voltaire Foundation come under the Director, Professor Nicholas Cronk, supported by some dozen members of staff.

Giles Barber

February 2010