K. J. Fielding

Patrick G. Scott

*University of South Carolina - Columbia, scottp@mailbox.sc.edu*

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K. J. Fielding

K. J. Fielding was a great scholar and a generous mentor. His career spanned more than fifty years—indeed, if you follow the pattern of *Who’s Who* or older application forms for British university posts, and start with his war service, more than sixty years. His first Dickens article in the MLA bibliography was from 1951, his first Carlyle article in 1954, and there are still publications of his forthcoming. His early critical book on Dickens (1958) was published both in Britain and the U.S. and was reprinted at least three times by 1965.

The great majority of his published essays were based on the skillful interrogation of primary documents, overwhelmingly documents he himself discovered or recovered. “Mr. Fielding” reported the *Dickensian* in March 1951, “who has been busily engaged for some time past upon the compilation of the new edition of Dickens’s letters under the direction of Mr. Humphry House, informs us he has found new Dickens letters in the Bentley Papers.”

Twenty-five years later, K.J. explained the genesis of a new essay on Froude and Carlyle: “I looked at his Will . . . From the name of the witnesses I saw who the solicitors were who had drawn it up . . . As they happened to be the same as Charles Dickens’s . . . I went up to London . . . I was allowed to examine a large deed-box” (as he told me at the time: “no one had bothered to go and look”).

His 2004 reassessment of the later Carlyle takes as starting-point “some of the unread papers of Alexander Carlyle” and a manuscript journal of Carlyle himself, the Ashburton Papers (“recently added to the National Library of Scotland”), John Forster’s letters to Carlyle at Baylor (“touched on by others but about which different views are possible”), and previously-unpublished letters from the Charles Eliot Norton papers at Harvard.

And the publications in which he appeared as author are themselves overwhelmed by the those he published as editor or co-editor: the great Clarendon edition of the Dickens *Speeches*, the early volumes of the Pilgrim Letters (though he was only formally co-editor on volume V), the thirty-plus volumes so far of the Duke-Edinburgh Carlyle (which, though announced and begun by others, only produced its first actual volume after he took on the Edinburgh end of the project).

He was already a famous Dickensian, and well-established in the Saintsbury chair at Edinburgh, when I moved there from Leicester in 1970. He was in his mid-forties, I in my mid-twenties. I approached him cautiously, and called him Sir. He reciprocated with a kind of shy goodwill and took a helpful interest in my work as the junior Victorianist.

Some of my more self-confident thirty-something colleagues rather pooh-poohed K. J.’s biographical research, low-key style, and prior career in a provincial teacher training college. He sometimes played up to this: he subtitled his Strouse Lecture at UC Santa Barbara on the drafts of Carlyle’s Cromwell as “The Writing of History and Dryasdust,” and confessed misgivings about his choice of topic (“Dryasdust for the General Reader”), yet he gave no quarter in maintaining its importance, leavened the manuscript scholarship with a stunning general survey of Carlyle’s earlier historical writing, and concluded with Carlyle’s claim, which was surely his own, that the true historian “brings back the Past vitally visible into the Present living Time.”

He didn’t like the Scottish tradition of huge introductory set-piece lecture classes (I think partly

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1 Even writings he signed are not always indexed as his: an early piece on Dickens’s speech at a charity dinner in 1848 which also printed a corrected text of a Dickens letter from the V. & A (Dickensian, March 1951, 70-71), though signed K. J. F., appears under his name neither in *NCBEL* nor the *Dickensian’s* own index.
because he couldn’t see the audience and he was rightly afraid they couldn’t hear), and he would mock the genre (I remember him once excusing himself at five minutes to the hour because he must “freshen up a lecture,” picking up his script from a file cabinet, and blowing the dust off it as he struggled into his gown, but he was a very thoughtful teacher, who taught a full load and effectively cajoled his tutees into discovering the complexities implicit in their own critical assertions.

He was also, as others have noted, a model graduate supervisor: in 1975-76 (when he was also associate dean), I would routinely hand him a 30 page handwritten chapter one afternoon, slightly later than I meant to, and receive it back with helpful marginalia the next morning. He and Jean (Mrs. Fielding to me) had me round for an occasional meal, were concerned at how I coped when my father died, welcomed my marriage, and accepted without reproach my subsequent departure for the U.S. He never talked to me about his daughter’s death from asthma, though he and Jean must surely have blamed it on his acceptance of the Edinburgh chair. Even during visits to their cottage in Grasmere, in the Lake District, he worked very hard. He also did stints as department chair and accumulated administrative duties whether he was chair or not. I recall a grueling year of long meetings on curriculum change, under another chair, with debate after debate, and K. J. reassuring me: “We will only end up saying the same things sitting down that we used to say standing up” (but I subsequently found him counting chairs, room by room, to ensure we had enough seats to implement someone else’s curriculum reform).

What haunts me sometimes when I am teaching is the echo of his characteristic syntax—the long tenacious paragraphs zig-zagging their way past apparently contradictory sidetracks to some firmly-held assertion or impish paradox. Take for instance this brief transition from the Strouse lecture:

But what was he doing with such sketches—especially bearing in mind that, though they are drafts, there are drafts of some of these drafts in the Forster MSS? I am not completely sure. Carlyle himself . . . .

Or this series of sentence openings from a 1971 essay on Hard Times:

What is rather strange is that in her account of their differences, Harriet Martineau, the exact and high-principled economist, is almost inconceivably irresponsible or forgetful about matters of fact. For instance, . . . Later . . . Now all this is rather astonishing. It is hard to accept that a regular journalist . . . It is odd that she should say . . . Her apparent belief . . . She even seems to have thought . . . It leaves one nonplussed . . . . There are several excuses to be made for her . . . Although she had many years in which to revise . . . she had been ill . . . She is possibly, as Walter Houghton suggests, . . . In addition, she may well have regarded herself as an acknowledged authority . . . All of which both helps to excuse and explain her; yet it does not prevent her account of her relations with Dickens from being misleading.

As K. J. himself wrote of writing about Carlyle: “I am uneasily conscious at making summary judgments . . . and so coming between you and the sound of his voice, imprisoned in those draft papers, instead of releasing them which is what I most want.” He was a documentary scholar who relished the complex echoing voices of the documents he recovered and edited. His extraordinary body of published scholarship preserves that relish—dry, clear-eyed, humane—reminding us, as Scott reminded Carlyle, that “the bygone ages of the world were actually filled by living men.”

Patrick Scott