

Ellwood's *Davideis*: a newly discovered version?

THOMAS ELLWOOD (1639-1713) owes his place in English literary history to his autobiography and to his friendships with John Milton and Edmund Waller, not to his own achievements as a poet, though for some of his contemporaries, Quakers in particular, these must have seemed considerable. But the judgment of one of them, Mary Tyndall, that "he hath mistaken his vocation as a poet", has proved true;¹ he lacked poetic genius, and the passing of time has brought the almost total disappearance of his verse from publication. A final, and it was believed, definitive edition of Ellwood's *Davideis* (1712), a life of David King of Israel, was made by Walther Fischer in 1936.² Fischer saw in the poem "... a contribution towards the development of the psychological and sentimental narrative in English literature." If that is so, the contribution was slight, and it is not surprising that the poem has again fallen from scholarly notice. Nevertheless, Ellwood's importance in the early history of Quakerism makes any new information bearing on his writing welcome.

Following his death in 1713 there was some criticism in Quaker circles of the theology and morality of the *Davideis*, despite the fact that Ellwood had intended it as an alternative to licentious post-Restoration reading and as an edification for the young. Richard Claridge (1649-1723) who had been at Oxford before becoming a Friend, requested permission from the Morning Meeting to prepare a revision. This was granted, but the matter appears to have been dropped since there is no further mention of it in the Morning Meeting minutes and no MSS which are conclusively Claridge's have been identified. At the same time, Claridge's proposal is the only historical clue to the origin of some MSS which have recently been discovered.

Several months ago two volumes containing three MSS of a poem entitled *Davideis* were lent to the Friends' Reference

¹ *Diary of Mary Tyndall*, ed. Ellen Marriage 1876, p. 92.

² *Thomas Ellwood's Davideis, A Reprint of the First Edition of 1712* with various readings of later editions, edited with an introduction and notes by Walther Fischer, Ph.D. Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1936.

Library by Mr. Ewart Steevens of High Wycombe. These came to him from his grandfather, Joseph Steevens and an aunt. The Steevens family had been members of the Society of Friends from the seventeenth century until the latter part of the last century and Jeremiah Steevens was a friend of both Ellwood and Isaac Penington. From these facts, it is natural to expect some correspondence between the MSS and Ellwood's poem.

All three MSS are in the same hand which, on comparison, does not seem to be that of either Ellwood or Claridge. Rather it seems to be a later, more flowery style differing in the formation of the letters from that of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. On the other hand, it is probably about contemporary with some poems at the end of the first volume, immediately after the second *Davideis* , which are copied from Martin's Magazine¹ for March 1758, April 1758 and August 1758, dated as such, using the name for the month rather than the figure.

The *Davideis* written on pages cut from the front of one volume appears to have been the first written and must be a fair copy taken from a rough draft. It is the shortest of the three and has few corrections. In the same volume, on the pages still attached to the binding, appears a version much enlarged and corrected from the first, but definitely the same poem. In the second volume is the fair copy of the latter, with only minor textual corrections.

On comparison with Ellwood's *Davideis* , the MSS, unlike the interleaved revision made by John Fry (1701-1775),² appears at first sight to be a quite independent poem written, however, using the same source which was the King James Version of the *Bible* . On closer examination correspondences appear which differ from the Biblical text and are unlikely to have occurred without the author of the MSS having a thorough knowledge of Ellwood's poem. In several places

¹ "The General Magazine of Arts and Sciences, Philosophical, Philological, Mathematical and Mechanical", published in London from 1755 to 1765, in 14 volumes.

² John Fry, who was a prominent Wiltshire Friend and three times Clerk of London Yearly Meeting, added to the complicated history of the *Davideis* by making important textual changes which he hoped would improve the poem's religious appeal. This revision, (thoroughly documented by Walther Fischer) was written into an interleaved 1712-printed copy of the poem, now preserved in the Library at Friends House; a facsimile of p. 119 is reproduced in Walther Fischer's book.

words and phrases are identical. For example, with reference to the parting of David and Jonathan, Ellwood says, "With Eyes cast back while either was in View" and the first MS, "And oft look'd back while either was in View". It may therefore be right to regard the MSS as a revision of Ellwood's poem, and not an original work.

Ellwood's style has a bold directness which is frequently pleasing in its economy of words but many times he had to try hard to complete the rhyme or metre as in, "Did good old Jesse the good Tydings hear". The author of the MSS did not improve on him very much in this latter respect but he added a good many frilly "literary" words and expressions. He did, however, feel free to break the slightly monotonous couplets with an occasional triplet, a thing which Ellwood seldom if ever did in his poem.

In his edition of Ellwood's *Davideis*, Walther Fischer mentions the possibility of the poet having used Cowley's poem of the same title (1656), but was convinced that, as Ellwood himself asserts, he had only a very slight knowledge of the earlier work at the time of writing. Cowley's treatment of the David story has quite a different character from that of the MSS with the possible exception of the first lines of each. Cowley begins, "I Sing the Man who Judah's Scepter bore" and the MSS, "I Sing the Man sprung from ye humble Plains", but the use of this epic device does not signify borrowing.

Since there was some discussion in the Society of Friends as to the orthodoxy and morality of certain passages in Ellwood's *Davideis*, more than one person may have undertaken a revision. However, unless the points are very subtle the theology of the MSS seems not much changed and the shifts in emphasis are not in keeping with the testimonies and strict morality of eighteenth century Quakerism, being elaborations of such episodes as the bloody battles and David's illicit love affair. Certainly the poem is longer and more detailed than Ellwood's and it does not show the "amendments or obliterations" called for by the Morning Meeting of 2nd December, 1713. The identity of the MSS remain unknown; possibly they are not Quaker documents at all, but the probability is that they are, and, on this assumption, what the author of the MSS did to Ellwood's poem has some bearing on the eighteenth-century Quaker view of the arts.

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