P. S. Allen: A Lifetime of Letters*

by Margaret Mann Phillips

When I went to see P. S. Allen in Oxford at the president's lodging at Corpus Christi in autumn 1927, all I knew about him was his eminence as the great editor of Erasmus' letters. There were a great many things I did not know. A very new graduate looking for a way to the future, I accepted his kindness as a porch through which I could pass, and the memory of that afternoon has never left me.

I could not know, for one thing, that I was one of so many who had enjoyed his hospitality. Looking at his correspondence as I have lately done, I am struck by the continuous strain of thanks and praise for the warmth of the welcome the Allens gave to all friends of Erasmus who crossed their threshold. As a Belgian scholar wrote in 1925: "The days I spent with you were days of thorough happiness... they were like a dream!" He calls Oxford and Corpus Christi "your fairyland of Renascence."

To me, to be introduced into the president's study, to be shown his books, to be taken into the wonderful old library of the college to which he had a private door, to be questioned gently about my aspirations, left an impression of great charm. He looked young, tall and slim as he was. Yet he was about the age of my own father, and within six years of his early death. He showed me Erasmus editions, and I was too shy to tell him I owned an Epitome adagiorum, an Elsevir. He asked me if I had any Greek, and I said, "Yes, a beginning." "Ah," he said, that's what matters. You can build on that." The presence, mainly silent, of Mrs. Allen, added to the atmosphere of peace. In those letters of thanks they are always associated, a perfect partnership.

It has been a great delight to me to live with the thought of him during the weeks when I have been preparing this talk, looking at the 270 boxes of Allen papers in the Bodleian, and returning often to Mrs. Allen's memoir of 1934. My object has been a simple one: to see him as a whole, to sketch his beginnings and the influences that went to mould him, to describe as far as I can his achievement, to try to assess his place in the great development of Erasmus studies in our century, to examine his relationship with some of

*This essay was written by Dr. Phillips shortly before her death. Notes to the published works have been added by Professor Anne M. O'Donnell, S.N.D.
the other scholars of his time, and to attempt to understand his own relationship with Erasmus himself.¹

I should perhaps say at once that this is not a sensational story. It starts in the Victorian age, but there are no stern fathers like Mr. Barrett, no compulsive efforts to shake off an inhibited childhood, no love-affair but one, no struggles of divided loyalties. We must be content to look at a mental landscape far removed from our own horrendous time: perhaps the more therapeutic for that. It is the story of a quiet life, dedicated to a true ideal of scholarship, and becoming more and more the nucleus of a European republic of letters. We have all used the great Allen edition, without much thought perhaps of the man (and woman) behind it. How did it come into being, and how did it take its steadfast way to the completion of its vision?

Percy Stafford Allen was born on July 7, 1869, the fourth child and younger son of Joseph Allen and his wife, Mary Satow. He was lucky in both father and mother. It is said that "les peuples heureux n'ont pas d'histoire," but there is a good deal of quiet history to be gleaned about this Victorian childhood, which reads like the children's books of that idealistic time. Joseph Allen's great-grandfather, William, had come to London from Yorkshire about 1750, had been handed a tract outside a Friends' Meeting House, and had become a Quaker. So had his younger brother Job, whose son (another William) worked with William Wilberforce for the abolition of slavery, was associated with the duke of Kent (Queen Victoria's father), and helped to pay off his debts, making it possible for Victoria to be born in England, a fact which she never forgot. The Quaker influence persisted in the family, through William's son and grandson, to the less successful Charles who is said to have "muddled away" his wife's fortune and his own, and exiled himself to Boulogne, where he died in 1838. He was Percy Allen's grandfather. His wife must have been a woman of character: she returned to England with her family of eleven children, and the eldest, Joseph, was sent to the Quaker school at Ackworth in Yorkshire. He went into stockbroking and banking, but did not remain a Quaker for long. On his marriage to Mary Satow in the Church of England, the Friends found he had transgressed their rules and turned him out. But the long connection with Quakerism seems to have some relevance in the choice by his son of such a pacifist as Erasmus.