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Associate Professor (Docent) Jessie Kocmanová, M.A., PhD., CSc. : a seventieth birthday tribute

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ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR (DOCENT) JESSIE KOCMANOVÁ, M. A., PH.D., CSc.:
A SEVENTIETH BIRTHDAY TRIBUTE



Scarcely believable though it may seem in view of her unflagging *élan vital*, our dear colleague and friend Associate Professor Jessie Kocmanová celebrated, on 5 October last year, her 70th birthday. Time is a relentless runner, however, and though he has spared her more than he has most of her contemporaries, he could not stop in his course for her sake, and thus offered her many friends, colleagues and students a most welcome op-

portunity to pay a sincere and respectful tribute to her distinguished work as teacher and scholar. And this very journal is, indeed, the most suitable place for such a tribute, for Dr. Kocmanová was one of its founders and, as the author of many weighty scholarly studies, she has helped to create its literary part.

Born in Edinburgh, Jessie Kocmanová studied English literature, the English and German languages, and history at Edinburgh University. At that well-known seat of learning, her first guides on the path to literary research were the world-famous scholars J. Dover Wilson and H. J. C. Grierson. In her university years she was already strongly attracted by the ideas of socialism; she worked in the students' socialist club and was the vice-chairman of the students' peace council. After graduating as Master of Arts with Honours in 1937, she worked first as a librarian in the Scottish National Library in Edinburgh and then as a cultural and social worker in the big Glasgow department store, Lewis's Ltd. But she felt drawn to the teaching profession, and therefore qualified as a grammar-school teacher at a postgraduate course of pedagogics, and in 1940 started to teach English and Latin at the experimental grammar school attached to the Pedagogical Institute in Edinburgh.

Her further fortunes were marked by the war. When taking part in voluntary work organized to help foreign allied units domiciled in Great Britain, she

became acquainted with her future husband, Vincenc Kocman, a former International Brigade fighter in Spain and member of the Czechoslovak Air Force serving in Great Britain (after the war he was decorated, for meritorious services rendered to the Czechoslovak state, receiving the highest Czechoslovak orders, the Order of the White Lion and the Order of the Red Star). She married him in 1941 and till the end of the war worked as a social worker with the Czechoslovak Red Cross in London. Simultaneously she devoted herself with great zeal and energy to public work: she was a member of the Union of Czechoslovak Women in London and of the preparatory committee for the foundation of the Society of Scottish Czechoslovak Friendship, in which she afterwards took an active part. In 1943 she became a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain. At the end of the war she was with her husband in Northern Scotland, where the Czechoslovak bombing wing guarded the North-Atlantic sealane to Murmansk.

After the war Jessie Kocmanová accompanied her husband to Czechoslovakia, which she accepted enthusiastically as her new homeland, and settled down in the city of Brno. Soon after her arrival she took up a lectureship in English in the Department of English and American Studies at the Philosophical Faculty of Purkyně University. From 1945 she taught English language courses and in 1948 she took her PhD. degree and commenced lecturing on the history of Great Britain and the U.S.A. and on English and American literature. In 1963 she took the degree of Candidate of Science (CSc.) and in 1966 was appointed Associate Professor (Docent) in English and American literature. Subsequently, until her retirement in 1980, she worked as head of the literary section of the department, and member of the state examining boards for granting the degrees of Doctor of Philosophy and Candidate of Science in her discipline. Even after her retirement she has continued, as an external lecturer and member of the above-mentioned boards, to share her knowledge and experience with her colleagues and students. Thus she has been actively associated with the promotion of English and American studies in Czechoslovakia for a full forty years, and has become a personality that cannot be thought of apart from her department. As a university teacher she has trained, guided and

constantly encouraged more than one generation of scholars and teachers of English. While she has never been willing to tolerate any failure to come up to her own high standards, her students have always known her as a friendly and understanding advisor. As one of them, I owe her a special personal debt, for it was her uncommon enthusiasm for literature, pervading even the language courses at the beginning of her university career, which I attended as a student, that determined the direction of my whole future life.

Throughout this uncommonly long teaching career, and despite the time-consuming duties involved in it, Dr. Kocmanová has always succeeded in finding time for research. Her scholarly interest has centred on the British literature of the end of the last century and of our own time, and she has cultivated this field with untiring energy, devotion and delight. In view of her life-long orientation towards Marxist theory and revolutionary practice, it is not surprising that from the very beginning of her research work she has been especially interested in progressive British writers. And no author has aroused such enduring interest in her as William Morris, the first British poet and prose writer to take a stand, as a declared Marxist, on the side of the working-class movement. To this zealous fighter for the highest ideals of humanism she has devoted a series of critical studies re-evaluating Morris's aesthetic purpose and its fulfilment in both his poetry and prose and thus providing a much-needed corrective to the mistaken appraisals of his achievement and significance current among both Marxist and non-Marxist literary historians. Thus her major work to date, the monograph entitled *The Poetic Maturing of William Morris* (1964), re-opened the question of the artistic value of the poetry created in the period reaching from *The Earthly Paradise* to *The Pilgrims of Hope*, which most critics dismiss as decadent or outmoded. Through a close analysis of its content and form Dr. Kocmanová has clearly demonstrated its positive qualities ("realistic observation, vivid image, narrative power, organising intellect, materialist thought and concern for humanity"), revealed its significance within the total context of Morris's work as an important step towards his mature creative approach in his socialist poetry and "a worthy complement to his mature work in prose", and

stressed its importance in the further development of British poetry. Worth special notice is her interpretation of *The Earthly Paradise* as "a harmonious structural whole", the artistic unity of which has been created by the poet's realistic modern approach to medieval Germanic legendary stories.

Of her shorter but no less pioneering Morris studies, two of particular note, published in 1966 and 1967 ("The Aesthetic Purpose of William Morris in the Context of His Late Prose Romances" and "The Aesthetic Opinions of William Morris"), cover another field inadequately treated by Morris's critics so far — the relationship of his poetry and prose to his general conception of the purpose of creative art and to his progressive philosophy of life. The former study draws attention to the remarkable continuity between the view of life expressed in Morris's early poetry and that in his unjustly neglected late prose romances and shows the close and logical dependence of his world outlook, aesthetics and creative work on his private and public experience. The latter study examines and assesses Morris's conceptions of art and literature, paying due attention to the impulses and influences which contributed to their formation and emphasizing the persistence with which the great poet stressed the collective and social nature of art, an attitude which has made him "a central figure in the development of the modern conception of art". Both these studies in fact present further evidence for the central thesis of Dr. Kocmanová's monograph, which rejects the hypothesis that there were abrupt reversals in Morris's ideological and aesthetic growth and underlines its continuity along a steadily ascending line, a line which was, except for occasional vicissitudes, consistently progressive. Dr. Kocmanová made further valuable contributions to this thesis and to Morris scholarship as a whole in her last two studies to date, dealing with Morris's prose style in general and the style employed in his late romances in particular ("The Living Language of William Morris", 1970), and with his unfinished novel from contemporary life ("Landscape and Sentiment: Morris' First Attempt in Longer Prose Fiction", 1975).

In view of Dr. Kocmanová's Scottish origin and political orientation, it is fitting that the second main theme of her research should be the literature of her native country and the three foremost

protagonists of its revolutionary traditions — Lewis Grassie Gibbon, R. B. Cunningham Graham, and Hugh MacDiarmid. Gibbon's work is the subject of a study commissioned by the English Department of the University of Santiago de Compostella in La Coruña (Spain) for a collection of essays on *English Literature and the Working Class* ("A Scots Quair' and its Relevance to the Scottish Proletarian Struggle of the Nineteen-Thirties"; in print). A sensitive analysis of the author's creative approach has enabled her to re-evaluate the underestimated last volume of Gibbon's trilogy, *Grey Granite*, as a faithful picture of Scottish proletarian life at the beginning of the 1930s, as well as to pinpoint the real weaknesses of the trilogy as lying somewhere else than they have been searched for — in Gibbon's non-dialectical conception of history. The shamefully neglected work of the militant socialist and anti-imperialist R. B. Cunningham Graham is the subject of a study published in 1964 that reassesses those qualities in his method and style which "entitle him to be considered a master of prose realism" and from which much can be learnt by socialist art. To Hugh MacDiarmid, a personal friend, Dr. Kocmanová has devoted three studies. In the first of these, "Art and Revolution in the Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid" (1962), she paid tribute to the great poet on the occasion of his seventieth birthday by making an overall assessment of his whole poetic output and of his contribution to Scottish literature and to literature in general. The study lays particular stress on the continuity of his artistic development and on the unity of content and form in his poetry, and evaluates him as a poet whose importance "far transcends that of the leader of a specifically localised 'renaissance'" thanks to his having taken his stand "among the exceptional figures of our time who have devoted their lives to finding the true synthesis of Art and Revolution". Her second study, "A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle: Literary Landmark?" (1977), presents a thorough elaboration of the views on MacDiarmid's greatest poem suggested in her preceding study, assessing it as one of the earliest reflections in British literature of the October Revolution in its direct reactions to the General Strike of May 1926 and convincingly revealing its ideological unity as the foundation

of its permanently valid revolutionary message. The third study, "Scottish Literature and Hugh MacDiarmid" (1979), is an obituary written at the request of the editorial board of the *Labour Monthly* and paying tribute to the poet's life-long struggle for the revival of the Scottish language and of Scottish literature and culture, as well as for revolutionary changes in Scottish society.

The above-mentioned subjects do not exhaust, however, the variety and scope of Dr. Kocmanová's scholarly interests. She has written with intimate knowledge, critical perceptivity and clear ideological vision on writers who in at least some of their works paid attention to the British working-class movement (George Gissing, Henry James, Joseph Conrad), on socialist realism in English literature and its relationship to the cultural heritage, on Rudyard Kipling, and most recently on the problems of genre in contemporary English prose fiction, particularly in the works of Elizabeth Bowen, Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing, and Muriel Spark. Generally assessed, all the scholarly works of Dr. Kocmanová are marked by a firm understanding of the motive forces of social development, a scrupulous grasp of literary historical fact derived from wide and intensive reading, a sensitiveness of aesthetic appreciation and, above all, the true critic's capacity for original and independent interpretation. All of them, and particularly her Morris studies, have therefore aroused critical attention abroad, and several of them have been published in foreign periodicals. Dr. Kocmanová is a member of the William Morris Society (London) and has many contacts with scholars outside Czechoslovakia. She has also reached a vast audience in this country through her public lectures given under the auspices of the Circle of Modern Philology, which is attached to the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. As a prominent progressive scholar she was also invited to be a principal speaker at the celebrations of the seventieth and seventy-fifth birthdays of Hugh MacDiarmid in Edinburgh, and to contribute to the International Seminar in English Language and Literature held at Debrecen in Hungary in September 1978, where she lectured on "Hugh MacDiarmid, Grassic Gibbon, and the Class Commitment of Scottish Literature in the Twenties and Thirties".

Associate Professor Kocmanová is an uncommonly versatile personality and the

range of her interests has always reached far beyond her pedagogical and scholarly work. She has never retired to any secluded study to "cultivate" research, but has taken an active part in the public life of her new homeland (in recent years in the Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters). Moreover, she has devoted a large part of her time and energy to the popularization of Czech literature in Great Britain through the medium of published or broadcast translations, which happily combine her unique translator's gift with her poetic talent. Scholars in other departments of the faculty and at other universities, as well as the organizers of the international music festival in Brno, have come to depend on her for translations of their own works or summaries, programmes of concerts, and studies on individual composers or on other matters concerning music at the festival. Indeed, her expert knowledge and love of music is one of the final points that must be touched upon to complete this portrait of Dr. Kocmanová's personality, along with her love of the fine arts and of the theatre. Her enthusiasm for the theatre has been most successfully realized in the superb annual productions of plays performed in English by her students, which are seen by teachers and students of English in almost all the university towns of this country. The most successful of these productions, which marked their twentieth anniversary last year, have been warmly reviewed by the Brno press and radio and have been awarded high prizes in the university students' Amateur Artistic Activities competitions.

It is impossible to note here in detail all the manifold activities of Associate Professor Jessie Kocmanová as teacher, scholar, public lecturer, translator, and citizen. And so all of us who love her and admire her work and personal character must content ourselves with joining together on this, the occasion of her seventieth birthday, to offer her our sincerest congratulations, our heartfelt wishes for many more years of fruitful work enjoyed in good health, unimpaired vigour and personal happiness, as well as our warmest thanks for the distinguished services she has rendered to her department, to Purkyně University in Brno and to Czechoslovak scholarship and culture in general.

Lidmila Pantůčková