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CHAUCER: HIS LIFE, HIS WORKS, HIS WORLD. By Donald R. Howard. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1987. ISBN 0-525-24400-X. Pp. xix + 636. $29.95.

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Like Moses, like Jeremiah, Donald Howard said no the first several times he heard the call to write a full critical biography of Chaucer. It couldn't be done, he wrote in 1968: "We do not know enough." He even listed the numerous things we do not know about Geoffrey Chaucer.

The only existing modern biography was a short popular account written in 1946, but the 493 known historical documents mentioning Chaucer were printed together in 1966. This resource attracted two biographers: Derek Brewer in 1978, combining a psychoanalytic approach with background on Chaucer's world, and John Gardner in 1977, fictionalizing where facts were not available. The literary biography still had not been written, the book that would cure our double-vision and bring into focus as one person those two very different Chaucers: the author who is at times so close to us in *The Canterbury Tales* or in *Troilus*, and the more remote Controller of the King's Custom and Subsidy of Wools.

An eminent Chaucerian with nearly forty years of scholarship and teaching, primarily at Johns Hopkins and at Stanford, Donald Howard finally accepted the call. The resulting book is monumental in its 500 pages of text followed by extensive references and appendices. Nevertheless, Howard's style makes it almost light reading.

"Most of us but slenderly know ourselves," he writes in the preface, bringing humility and personal warmth to his audacious task. He writes with

immediacy, speculating at one moment but reminding us next that the truth cannot be known. Did Chaucer have an only sister of about his age, as Kentish tradition suggests? If so, she would have been married off at 13 or 14 years of age, and could have been a source of Chaucer's preoccupation with vulnerable, victimized women. Did Chaucer ever meet Petrarch, whom he so much admired? Probably not, Howard ruefully concludes.

The book is aimed at a broad audience: some new to Chaucer, some perhaps members of the Modern Language Association but in need of marginal glosses to read the brief excerpts from the poems, and others professional Chaucerians. Three book clubs have selected the work, and it earned the National Book Critics Circle award as the best book in 1987 in the biography/autobiography category.

Like Barbara Tuchman, Howard uses a "prism of History" to display the realities within which Chaucer lived and the range of Chaucer's own possible reactions to events. For instance, he first considers the impact of the plague of 1348 on Europe as a whole (citing the Pope and Boccaccio and others), then on England and London, and then on Chaucer's family, who happened to be living in Southampton at the time. Deaths in the family caused Chaucer's parents to return to a crippled London to manage personally their businesses. Once the general and familial disruption is outlined, its effects on six-year-old Geoffrey are not hard to imagine. Furthermore, we learn that his schooling was apparently delayed and that there was disarray and a decline in the quality of education. The prism method works well to present the exact social and economic standing of Chaucer's merchant family within the small-town society of London, whose population in 1377 was less than 40,000, including only 4,000 franchized male citizens. Howard suggests that a basic cause of Chaucer's irony was the conflict of values he experienced in living between two worlds: the merchant world of his family and the courtly world to which he was sent for his career.

Because most of Chaucer's writing was done in the last twenty years of his life, for most of the literary analysis we have to wait until the final third of the biography. *Troilus and Criseyde*, "the first and greatest narrative poem of love in the English language, the triumph of medieval courtly poetry," receives 20 pages of excellent, detailed explication and evaluation with emphasis on the influences on Chaucer as he wrote it. Howard concludes: "Perhaps it was the fundamental myth of Chaucer's life to escape oblivion in the company of those *poetae* whose works outlasted their lives and their civilizations. And if this is so, he realized that hope in the *Troilus* while still in his early forties."

Quite moving is Howard's final chapter, including a discussion of Chaucer's retraction at the end of *The Canterbury Tales*. He takes the retraction quite seriously as Chaucer's "deathbed utterance written in advance," and no wonder; he was writing as his own death approached. Donald Howard died at age 59 (nearly the same age at which Chaucer died), victim of a modern plague. This his final book was published eight months later—the culmination of his life's work, a gift to all of us by God's grace.