



WILLIAM EMPSON

VOLUME II: AGAINST *the* CHRISTIANS

JOHN HAFFENDEN

WILLIAM
EMPSON



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JOHN HAFFENDEN

OXFORD
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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

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Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
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Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

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First published 2006

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Typeset by SPI Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India
Printed in Great Britain on acid-free paper by
Biddles, Ltd., King's Lynn

ISBN 0-19-927440-9 (Hbk.) 978-0-19-927440-8 (Hbk.)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to the Empson family for their friendship and hospitality, and for entrusting me with this task—primarily (with regard to this volume) the late Hetta Empson, Mogador Empson, Jacob Empson, Simon Duval Smith—and to Sir William Empson for countenancing the very idea in the first place.

I am particularly grateful to Empson's literary executors for granting me permission to print in this volume, for the first time and exclusively, the verses entitled 'The Wife is Praised' (first drafted in 1948). The Estate of William Empson declined to include the poem in *Complete Poems* (2000) on a number of grounds: these included the judgement that it is an unfinished 'private' poem; that it is not of the same quality as the published poetry; and that Empson could have published it during his lifetime if he had so wished. My own view is that it is an ingenious and witty, as well as astonishingly frank, manifesto, albeit unpolished, and I had proposed to publish it in the collected volume of poetry (among various reasons) because I knew that Empson himself was averse to keeping any literary remains 'under wraps' (as he put it in a review). Empson further claimed in a related context: 'I stubbornly won't hide anything.' Notwithstanding, it has to be said that his Estate was faced with a genuine dilemma (since Empson did not apparently try to publish the poem, and did not leave testamentary directions about it) and acted in good faith. More recently, however, the executors have come to the view that the poem is yet an important autobiographical record in verse, and on that basis they believe it is now appropriate to publish the work in the context of this biography. I am grateful to them for their generosity and faith.

I am greatly indebted to the British Academy for a Research Readership in 1989–91, and for a later grant-in-aid; and no less to the Arts Council of Great Britain, the Society of Authors, the Leverhulme Trust, and the Research Fund of Sheffield University, which have helped to meet the costs of my research over the years. I could not have managed without them.

Many libraries and other organizations and institutions have been generous in affording me accommodation, or in providing research facilities of one sort or another, and in granting permission for the publication of the Empson letters under their control. I am eager first of all to thank the Houghton Library, Harvard University (custodian since 1986 of the Empson Papers), and in particular Leslie Morris (Curator of Manuscripts), Rodney G. Dennis (former Curator), and Elizabeth A. Falsey (who undertook the awesome job of preparing an inventory of the papers). I am deeply grateful too to the authorities of Beijing University, Peking, who kindly hosted my visit to China in 1984; the British Embassy, Peking (Alan Maley, First Secretary, Cultural Section, British Embassy, and Martin Davidson; David Marler, Cultural Counsellor, British Council Representative in China); the British Council, London (Angela Udall, Leigh Gibson, Specialist Tours Department; Martin Carney; Adrian Johnson, Cultural Counsellor and British Council Representative, Beijing); and the British Embassy Cultural Department, The British Council, Tokyo; BBC Play Library, Broadcasting House (Deborah A. Halfpenny); BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham, Reading (Jacqueline Kavanagh, Written Archives Officer; Gwyniver Jones, Assistant-in-Charge, Enquiries; John Jordan, Enquiry Assistant); Beinecke Library, Yale University; Department of Manuscripts, The British Library (Sally Brown, Dr Chris Fletcher); Butler Library, Columbia University (Bernard R. Crystal, Curator of Manuscripts; Kenneth A. Lohf, former Curator); Chalmers Memorial Library, Kenyon College Archives (Thomas B. Greenslade, College Archivist); Chatto & Windus; Cornell University Library; Embassy of the People's Republic of China; Exeter University Library (Alistair Patterson); Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin (Ellen S. Dunlap, Research Librarian; Cathy Henderson, Research Associate; Elizabeth L. Garver, Intern); Modern Archives Centre, King's College, Cambridge (Dr R. Moad, Dr P. K. McGuire); Manuscript Division, The Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. (Fred Bauman, Reference Librarian); Lilly Library, Indiana University; Magdalen College, Oxford; Magdalene College, Cambridge; John Rylands Library, University of Manchester; Mills Memorial Library, McMaster University (Carl Spadoni, Research Collections Librarian); the National Archives, Washington, D. C. (Kathie Nicastro); National Library of Scotland (Murray Simpson); Library/Information Service, National Sound Archive, British Library (Lee Taylor); Princeton University Library (Jean F. Preston, Curator of Manuscripts); Reading University Library (A. J. C. Bainton, Michael Bott); Rockefeller Archive Centre, Tarrytown, New York;

St John's College, Oxford; School of Oriental and African Studies, London; Special Collections and Archives, The Library, University of Sheffield (Lawrence Aspden, former Curator); The Society of Authors; *Times* archive; The Library, University College London (Gill Furlong, archivist); The Library, University of Victoria, Victoria, B. C., Canada (Chris Petter, University Archivist and Head of Special Collections); and the Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge (Dr David McKitterick).

Individuals who have most kindly afforded me information, advice and assistance in various capacities include: Paul Allen, A. Alvarez, Professor Paul J. Alpers, the late Mulk Raj Anand, the late Professor Harry Armytage, Lawrence Aspden, Dr Charles Aylmer, Professor Shyamal Bagchee, Professor Bao Zhi-yi, Jonathan Barker, Sebastian Barker, A. Doak Barnett, Dr D. K. Barua, Professor Jonathan Bate, the late Professor Walter Jackson Bate, Trevor Baxter, Clark Beck (Librarian, Special Collections/Archives, Rutgers University), Stephen Becker, Dr Teresa Bela, Jonathan Benthall, Eric Bentley, the late Sir Isaiah Berlin, Professor Francis Berry, Robert J. Bertholf (Curator, The Poetry/Rare Books Collection, State University of New York at Buffalo), Andrew Best, Dr Matthew Bevis, Professor Bian Zhi Lin, the late Professor Max Black, the late John Blofeld, Meifang Blofeld, the late Ralf Bonwit, Professor James Booth, the late Margaret Bottrall, Margot Bottrall, the late Ronald Bottrall, Zack Bowen, Gordon Bowker, the late Professor Muriel Bradbrook, Andrew Braybrook, Dr Elizabeth M. Brennan, Lord Briggs, Baroness Brigstocke, Professor David Bromwich, John Brown, the late Walter A. Brown, Derek Bryan, Stephen Burt, Barry Callaghan, James Campbell, the late Peter Carnell, the late Alan N. Cass, Chang Chiu-tse, Professor Chao Chao-hsiung, Professor Maurice Charney, Peter Cheeseman, Igor Chroustchoff, Ken Churchill (The British Council), the late Douglas Cleverdon, Mary Coleman, Professor Thomas E. Connolly, Peter Conradi, Dr John Constable, the late Alistair Cooke, Sir Hugh Cortazzi, Professor D. R. Cousin, Jenny Cowan, Professor C. B. Cox, Dr Matthew Creasy, Professor Sir Bernard Crick, Anthony Cronin, David Crook, Sir Colin Crowe, the late Margaret (Biddy) Crozier, Mrs C. Cruickshank (Archivist, Faber & Faber), D. W. Cruickshank, Peter Currie, Gordon Daniels, Natalie Davenport, Roger Davenport, the late Gwenda David, the late Hugh Sykes Davies, Professor Frank Day, Paul Dean, Professor J. S. Deas, Vicki Denby, J. B. Denson, Professor Martin Dodsworth, Professor John Doheny, the late Francis Doherty, Dr Penelope Doob, Duan Hui-sien, Professor Douglas Duncan, the late Elsie Duncan-Jones, Professor Katherine Duncan-Jones, Eamon Dyas (*Times* archivist), Vieta Dyer (Svetlana Rimsky-Korsakoff), Brian Dyson (Hull

University Library), H. J. Easterling, Professor Roger Ebbatson, the late Professor Richard Eberhart, Professor Philip Edwards, Professor Arthur Efron, Mrs Valerie Eliot, the late Charles Empson, the late Sir Charles and Lady Empson, Tsutung Emslie, the late D. J. Enright, the late Professor Martin Esslin, Garrett Evans, the late Professor Inga-Stina Ewbank Professor Dick Ewen, Maggie Fergusson (Royal Society of Literature), the late Professor Leslie Fiedler, Morris Fink, Father Peter A. Fiore, the late Professor C. P. Fitzgerald, Mirabel Fitzgerald, Barry Fox, Mrs Paddy Fraser, Michael Freeman, Professor Norman Fruman, Mrs Rintaro Fukuhara, Professor David Fuller, John Fuller, David Ganz, the late Professor Dame Helen Gardner, Helen Gardner (Society of Authors), Professor Averil Gardner, Harry M. Geduld, Professor Alex George, the late Roma Gill, Victoria Glendinning, Dr David Glover, the late Sir Ernst Gombrich, Reg Goodchild, Adrian Goodman, the late Mrs Celia Goodman, Prof. W. Terrence Gordon, W. G. Graham, Professor Gayle Greene, Dr Eric Griffiths, John Gross, Professor Jay L. Halio, Dr Michael Halls, the late Ian Hamilton, Saskia Hamilton, Dr Jason Harding, Dr Henry Hardy, Pamela Hardyment, Claire Harmon, Rachel Harris, Richard Harris, George Hartley, Professor Ihab Hassan, Selina Hastings, Coleen Hatrick, Professor Michael Hattaway, Professor David Hawkes, the late Desmond Hawkins, Mark Haymon, the late Sir William Hayter, the late Sir Robert Helpmann, Sandra Henry, Bernard Heringman, Tim Herrick, Annemarie Heywood, Christopher Heywood, the late Professor Christopher Hill, Geoff Hill, Andrew and Geraldine Hillier, Charles Hobday, the late Professor Philip Hobsbaum, Dr Anthony Hobson, Theodore Hofmann, Richard Holmes, Professor Michael Hollington, Dr Michael Holroyd, Dr Eric Homberger, Dr Janet Hopewell, the late Professor Graham Hough, Professor Nicholas Howe, Professor Huang Ming-yeh, Martyn Hughes, the late Judge W. H. Hughes, Professor G. K. Hunter, Professor Yukio Irie, Kevin Jackson, Professor John Israel, Professor A. N. Jeffares, Elizabeth Jenkins, Dr Nicholas Jenkins, Linda Jean Jenner (Hanson), Mary-Lou Jennings, Professor James Jensen, Professor Jin Di, Professor Jin Fa-xin, the late Professor Jin Yuelin, the late John Henry (David) Jones, Paul Kafno, Professor R. Kajiki, the late Professor Harry Kay, Brian Keeble, Paul Keegan, Anne Kelly, Professor Richard J. Kelly, Tim Kendall, Dr Gilbert Kennedy, Professor Sir Frank Kermode, the late David Kidd, Professor Kim Jong-gil (Kim Chi-gyu), Garry Kinnane, the late Professor L. C. Knights, Roger Kuin, Professor David Laird, the late James Laughlin, the late Professor Eric Laughton, Aviva Layton, the late Sir

Desmond Lee, Revd. J. Philip Lee-Woolf, Dr E. S. Leedham-Green, the late Professor Peter Levi, the late Professor Li Fu-ning, Professor Li Zhiwei, Professor Grevel Lindop, Joyce Linfoot, the late Earl Listowel, Liu Jo-tuan, Liu Ruoduan, Liu Yuan Zi, Professor James J. Y. Liu, Helen Lo, Yann Lovelock, Evan Luard, Dr Richard Luckett, the late Professor Hyam Maccoby, Jim McCue, Ian McEwan, the late Professor Maynard Mack, the late Dr Eric Mackerness, the late Professor Ian MacKillop, Alan and Robin McLean, Ben Maclean, Ken Mclean, the late Jenny McMorris, the late Professor Charles Madge, Hugh Major, Nick Malone, Professor Charles W. Mann, Joyce Marks, Dr D. H. Marrian, Janet Martin, Lauro Martines, Professor William H. Matchett, Professor Giorgio Melchiori, D. H. Mellor, M. C. Meredith (School Librarian, Eton College), Professor Karl Miller, Professor Earl Miner, the late Professor Edward Miller, Professor Neville Moray, Blake Morrison, Professor Derek Mosley, Professor Andrew Motion, the late Professor Kenneth Muir, Ross C. Murfin, Professor W. A. Murray, Professor Shigehisa Narita, Professor Leonard Nathan, the late Dr Joseph Needham, Sir Patrick Neill (All Souls College, Oxford), the late Jill Neville, Professor Christopher Norris, Professor A. D. Nuttall, Mrs Diana Oakeley, Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien, Professor Darcy O'Brien, Professor Kazuo Ogawa, Sumie Okada, Dr Duco van Oostrum, Timothy O'Sullivan, A. E. B. Owen (Keeper of Manuscripts, Cambridge University Library), Dr Barbara Ozieblo, Dr David Parker, Tjarda Parker, the late Ian Parsons, the late Marjorie Tulip (Trekkie) Parsons, Peng Jingfu, David Perry, John Oliver Perry, Dr Seamus Perry, Theophilus Peters, the late Professor Frank Pierce, Professor H. W. Piper, Dr David B. Pirie, the late N. W. (Bill) Pirie, Dr Adrian Poole, Mrs Dorothy Poynter (secretary to the late Professor Kathleen Coburn), Vic Pratt (Donor Access, The British Film Institute), John Press, Dr Kate Price, the late Professor F. T. Prince, Professor Qi Sheng-qiao, Qien Xuexi, the late Sir Peter Quennell, Jonathan Raban, Craig Raine, the late Dr Kathleen Raine, Professor Claude Rawson, the late Dr Theodore Redpath, Olive Renier, the late Mrs Dorothy Richards, Professor Christopher Ricks, the late Anne Ridler, Professor Andrew Roberts, Professor Mark Roberts, Professor Neil Roberts, Peter Robinson, the late George (Dadie) Rylands, Susan Rieger, John Robson, the late Professor W. W. Robson, Professor Thomas P. Roche Jr., Lisa A. Rodensky, Allan Rodway, Earl M. Rogers (Archivist, The University of Iowa), Derek Roper, Professor S. P. Rosenbaum, Andrew Roth, the late Dr A. L. Rowse, Professor Alan Rudrum, Professor John Paul Russo, the late Lorna Sage, Victor Sage, Professor Roger H. Sale, Leo Salinger, Deidre Sanders, the late Wilf Saunders,

Professor Michael Schmidt, Sumana Sen-Bagchee, Fritz Senn, Miranda Seymour, the late Martin Seymour-Smith, Sidney Shapiro, Dr Catherine Sharrock, Mr and Mrs Russell Sharrock, Dr Erica Sheen, Professor Dominic Shellard, C. D. W. Sheppard (Brotherton Library, University of Leeds), Professor T. T. Shui, Dr Murray Simpson, the late Marg Smale, the late Mrs Norah Smallwood, Bryan Smith, the late Janet Adam Smith, Professor Nigel Smith, Pat Smith, Dr Richard C. Smith, John Solomon, Professor George Soule, Professor Ray Southall, the late John Sparrow, the late Sir Stephen Spender, Lady Spender, the late Nikos Stangos, Susan Stephens (Assistant Registrar, University of Sheffield), Professor Herbert Stern, Professor and Mrs Harry Stoneback, the late Dr Alice Stewart, Sir Roy Strong, Sharon Sumpter (Archives Associate, The Archives of the University of Notre Dame, Indiana), Sun Yu-mei, Professor John Sutherland, Richard Sylvester, D. J. Taylor, Kevin Taylor, Mrs Eleen Thierry-Mieg, Sir Keith Thomas, Ed Thomason, Mark Thompson, John L. Thorn, Anthony Thwaite, the late Professor J. B. Trapp (Warburg Institute), Professor Jeremy Treglown, the late Julian Trevelyan, Christine Tucker (The Open University Library), the late Professor John Unterecker, the late Richard Osborne, Mrs Sybille van der Sprenkel, Robert Vas Dias, Professor William Vesterman, Professor Sue Vice, Professor Brian Vickers, the late Igor Vinogradoff, the late Professor John Wain, William Wain, the late Keith Walker, Stephen Wall, Jemma Walton, the late Professor Wang Zuo-liang, Ed Walkins Dr George Watson, John Webb, Professor Stanley Weintraub, Fay Weldon, Professor David West, the late W. J. West, John S. Whitley, Don Wiener, the late Ann Willett, the late John Willett, Professor J. H. Willis, Jr., David Wilson, Professor Mark Royden Winchell, the late Professor Robert Winter, Professor Lewis Wolpert, the late Gordon Woodcock, the late Professor Wu Fuheng, Professor Xu Guozhang, Professor Xu Yuan-zhong, Xu Zongying, Gladys Yang, the late Yang Xianyi, the late Professor Yang Zhouhan, Zhang Jin-yan, Professor Zhou Jue-liang, Professor Zhu Guang-tian, and the late Lord Zuckerman. The list is long, yet it is on my conscience that there are individuals whose names I have forgotten or mislaid over the years: I regret any such omissions.

As in the first volume, I am eager to acknowledge how much I owe to the example and the writings of my fellow critics and editors of Empson; in particular, I am indebted to John Constable, Frank Day, Terry Eagleton, Paul H. Fry, David Fuller, Philip and Averil Gardner, Philip Hobsbaum, James Jensen, John Henry Jones, Frank Kermode, Christopher Norris,

Christopher Ricks, Lisa A. Rodensky, Roger Sale, Mark Thompson, and John Wain.

Certain parts of the critical sections of this volume have previously appeared, in varying forms, in my introductions to the various posthumous volumes of Empson's writings that I have edited over the last twenty years.

At Oxford University Press, I greatly appreciate the friendliness and superb professional care of Andrew McNeillie, Tom Perridge, Val Shelley, Jacqueline Baker, Christine Rode, and other members of the team. Last but not least, I am grateful beyond words to Tom Chandler, who has worked brilliantly and tirelessly for many weeks to edit the text of this final volume of the biography—it is a long book, I am afraid, but before Tom's incisive intervention it had threatened to be an impossibly long book. He has saved me from umpteen errors and excesses; those that remain are all my fault.

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2. Recording the poetry magazine *Voice*. Standing: George Orwell, Nancy Barratt, Empson. Sitting: Venu Chitale, J. M. Tambimuttu, T. S. Eliot, Una Marson, Mulk Raj Anand. BBC.
3. Hetta Empson: two studies.
4. Portrait of Empson by Rupert Shephard, c.1944. National Portrait Gallery.
5. Severe, suited and bearded, in Peking.
6. Empson in his study at 11 Tung Kao Fang, near Peking National University, late 1940s.
7. Group portrait: taking tea in the Summer Palace at Peking. Seated from the left: David Kidd, Walter Brown, Hetta Empson, John Blofeld. Empson looks on, and smiles.
8. An alfresco meal in the courtyard of 11 Tung Kao Fang, Peking. The Empsons and their children, Mogador and Jacob.
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14. Bright-eyed boys: Jacob and Mogador Empson in the 1950s.

15. The Empsons and younger son, Jacob (aged 12), in a tent erected within the cold cavern of the studio at Studio House, 28 December 1956. Photograph by Irie Yukio.
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20. Portrait of the old sage looking mischievous, by John Deakin.
21. British Museum: the portico. This atmospheric photograph by Eric de Maré happened to catch Empson shuffling in to work in the Reading Room; it was featured for many years on a British Museum postcard. Gordon Fraser Gallery.
22. Empson enjoying a drink and perusing an offprint at the Rosslyn Arms pub.
23. William and Hetta Empson sharing a joke. Photo by Judith Aronson.
24. The aged eagle, by Christopher Barker.

ABBREVIATIONS

A	Empson, <i>Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture</i> (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987)
BBC WAC	BBC Written Archives Centre
BL	British Library
Brotherton	Brotherton Library, Leeds University
CCBA	Chinese Central Broadcasting Administration
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
Constable	John Constable (ed.), <i>Critical Essays on William Empson</i> (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993)
CV	Empson, <i>Coleridge's Verse: A Selection</i> (London: Faber & Faber, 1972; with David Pirie)
<i>Complete Poems</i>	<i>Complete Poems of William Empson</i> , ed. J. Haffenden (London: Allen Lane, 2000)
EG	<i>Empson in Granta</i> (Tunbridge Wells: Foundling Press, 1993)
ESD	Eastern Service Director (of the BBC)
FO	Foreign Office
GS	Empson, <i>The Gathering Storm</i> (London: Faber & Faber, 1940)
Gill	R. Gill (ed.), <i>William Empson: The Man and His Work</i> (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974)
HE	Hetta Empson
Houghton	William Empson Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University
IAR	I. A. Richards
JH	John Haffenden
KMT	Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalists)
Magdalene	I. A. Richards Papers, Old Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge
MG	Empson, <i>Milton's God</i> (rev. edn.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981)
MOI	Ministry of Information
Peita	Peking National University

PLA	People's Liberation Army
<i>Poems 1934</i>	Empson, <i>Poems</i> (Tokyo, 1934)
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRO	Public Record Office
PWE	Political Warfare Executive
<i>RB</i>	Empson, <i>The Royal Beasts and Other Works</i> (London: Chatto & Windus, 1986)
Rodensky	Prefatory Note to <i>Some Versions of Pastoral</i> (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995)
<i>SCW</i>	Empson, <i>The Structure of Complex Words</i> (London: Chatto & Windus 1951; 3rd edn., 1977)
(Sheffield)	Sheffield University Library, Special Collections
<i>SL</i>	<i>Selected Letters of William Empson</i> , ed. J. Haffenden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)
<i>SSS</i>	Empson, <i>The Strengths of Shakespeare's Shrew</i> (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996)
<i>STA</i>	Empson, <i>Seven Types of Ambiguity</i> (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987)
<i>SVP</i>	Empson, <i>Some Versions of Pastoral</i> (London: Chatto & Windus, 1935)
<i>TLS</i>	<i>Times Literary Supplement</i>
TUC	Trades Union Congress
WE	William Empson

CHRONOLOGY

- 1906 27 September: born at Yokefleet Hall, Howden, near Goole, Yorkshire; youngest child of Arthur Reginald Empson (landowner and squire) and his wife Laura Micklethwait; his siblings were John ('Jack', born 1891), Arthur (1892), Charles (1898), Maria ('Molly') Eleanor Katharine, (1902).
- 1914 16 May: death of eldest brother, a lieutenant in the Royal Flying Corps, in an aeroplane crash.
- 1914 Enrols at a preparatory school, Praetoria House School, near Folkestone, Kent, where mathematics becomes his forte.
- 1916 15 March: death of father, aged 63.
- 1920 Wins an entrance scholarship to Winchester College; specializes in mathematics and science; falls under 'the drug of Swinburne'. Writes first known poem, 'Mother, saying Anne good night', by 29 June, *aetate* 13.
- 1924 December: wins Milner Scholarship to Magdalene College, Cambridge.
- 1925 Wins English literature prize at Winchester; comes second (*proxime accessit*) to the future Labour MP Richard Crossman in competition for the Warden and Fellows' Prize for an English Essay (John Sparrow, future Warden of All Souls College, Oxford, is third).
October: goes up to Cambridge, where his tutor for mathematics is A. S. Ramsey, father of the mathematical prodigy Frank Ramsey and the future Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey. Joins humanist discussion society, The Heretics.
- 1926 February–March: T. S. Eliot delivers his Clark Lectures, 'The Metaphysical Poets of the Seventeenth Century', at Trinity College, Cambridge. Although Empson does not attend all the lectures, he benefits from informal conversations with Eliot. Participates in debates at the Union.
- 1926 12 June: publishes his first literary notice in *The Granta*.

- 1926 June: gains 1st class in Part I of the mathematical Tripos; awarded college prize.
- 1927 5 February: acts in a production at the Cambridge ADC of his one-act play, *Three Stories*, a melodrama.
- 1927 Begins reviewing film and theatre, as well as books, for *The Granta* and the *Cambridge Review*. For 1927–8, while still a student of mathematics, becomes ‘Skipper’ (literary editor) of *The Granta*.
June: publishes first poem at Cambridge, ‘Poem about a Ball in the Nineteenth Century’; he is influenced by seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry, especially John Donne.
- 1928 June: Senior Optime (Upper Second) in Part II of the mathematical Tripos: a disappointing result.
October: registers for the English Tripos; tutored by I. A. Richards at Magdalene College; attends Richards’s lectures on ‘Practical Criticism’; begins work towards *Seven Types of Ambiguity*; becomes president of The Heretics.
November: launches avant-garde magazine, *Experiment*, co-edited with Jacob Bronowski, Humphrey Jennings, and Hugh Sykes Davies (it runs for seven issues, the last in May 1931).
- 1929 20 January: gives a talk at Cambridge on ambiguity in literature.
February: publishes ‘Ambiguity in Shakespeare: Sonnet XVI’ in *Experiment* (the essay will in due course form part of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*).
March: takes title role in *The Tragedy of Tragedies: or the Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great* by Henry Fielding, in a production by the Cambridge Mummings.
June: gains first class with ‘special distinction’ in English Tripos; awarded a Magdalene college prize; elected to a Charles Kingsley Bye-Fellowship for 1929–30.
July: discovered by college porters to be in possession of contraceptives; an extraordinary meeting of the Governing Body of Magdalene College resolves to deprive Empson of his Bye-Fellowship and remove his name from the college books. Empson removes himself to 65 Marchmont Street, London, where he lives as a freelance writer for the next two years; he is cultivated by literary figures including T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Harold Monro, and Sylvia Townsend Warner.
October: *Letter IV* published by Heffer’s of Cambridge. Six of the eighteen poems he has written to date feature in *Cambridge Poetry*

- 1929, published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press.
- November: publishes 'Some Notes on Mr Eliot' (a further preview of *Ambiguity*) in *Experiment*.
- 1930 November: *Seven Types of Ambiguity* published.
- 1931 29 August: begins three-year contract as a professor of English at Tokyo University of Literature and Science (Bunrika Daigaku); teaches also at Tokyo Imperial University.
- 1932 February: six poems are included in anthology, *New Signatures*, published by the Hogarth Press.
- 1934 *Poems*, in an edition of 100 copies, privately printed by The Fox & Daffodil Press, Kinuta-mura, near Tokyo
- 8 July: returns to London, where he spends the next three years as a freelance writer.
- 1935 May: *Poems* published in London.
- October: *Some Versions of Pastoral* published.
- Publishes translations into Basic English of two works by J. B. S. Haldane, *The Outlook of Science* and *Science and Well-Being*.
- Gains MA, University of Cambridge.
- 1936 W. B. Yeats includes an Empson poem in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*; Michael Roberts picks six for *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*.
- 1937–8 August: takes up appointment at National Peking University, arriving just as the Japanese invade China; journeys through China with I. A. Richards and his wife; works with the exiled Peking universities—amalgamated as the Temporary University—from November 1937 to February 1938 on a mountain at Nan-Yueh, Hunan Province; journeys to Hong Kong.
- 1938–9 Continues university teaching with the National South-west Associated University in remote exile, first in the town of Mengtzu and then in Kunming, capital of Yunnan province, near the Indo-China (Vietnam) border. In the autumn of 1939, sets off to return home by way of the USA, where he spends a period in Cambridge, Mass. (broadcasting on Basic English).
- 1939 28 January: arrives back in England.
- 1940 26 June: joins the Monitoring Service of the BBC at Wood Norton Hall, near Evesham in Worcestershire, working as a sub-editor.
- September: *The Gathering Storm* published in London.
- 1941 Transfers to the BBC Overseas Service in London, where he becomes a Talks Assistant and then Chinese Editor, organising

- talks to China and propaganda programmes for the Home Service; for two years, works alongside George Orwell.
- 1941 2 December: marries Hester Henrietta Crouse ('Hetta'), a South African artist, at St Stephen's Church, Hampstead, London.
- 1942 9 November: birth of first son, William Hendrik Mogador
- 1944 30 September: birth of second son, Jacob Arthur Calais.
- 1947–52 Teaches at National Peking University, his post being subsidized by the British Council; witnesses the civil war and the six-week siege of Peking late in 1948; the Communist takeover and the inauguration of the People's Republic of China, including the beginnings of reform and 'thought control'.
- 1948 24 March: *The Collected Poems of William Empson* published in New York.
July–August: teaches at Kenyon College Summer School, Gambier, Ohio, USA, on leave from Peking.
- 1950 Further summer visit to the Kenyon College Summer School.
- 1951 July: *The Structure of Complex Words* published in London.
- 1952 Summer: returns with family from China to England.
15 December: *The Poems of William Empson* broadcast by BBC.
- 1953 October: takes up Chair of English Literature at the University of Sheffield, where he works for the next 18 years, with occasional sabbaticals at American and Canadian universities.
- 1954 May: Gresham Professor in Rhetoric, Gresham College, London, lecturing on 'The last Plays of Shakespeare and their Relation to the Elizabethan Theatre'.
June–July: Fellow of the School of Letters, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.
27 October: *The Birth of Steel: A Light Masque* performed for Queen Elizabeth II at the University of Sheffield.
- 1955 29 September: *Collected Poems* published in London.
- 1956 6 December: birth of Hetta Empson's third child, Simon Peter Duval Smith.
- 1961 February: *The Collected Poems of William Empson* (New York) issued in paperback.
- 1961 *Milton's God* published.
William Empson Reading Selected Poems (Listen LPV3) issued.
- 1964 Autumn: Visiting Professor, English Department, University of Ghana, Legon, Accra, Ghana.
- 1968 Hon. D. Litt, University of East Anglia, Norwich.
Ingram Merrill Foundation Award.

- June–August: Visiting Professor, Department of English, State University of New York at Buffalo.
- 1971 Hon. D. Litt, University of Bristol.
Summer: retires from University of Sheffield.
- 1972 January–February: gives Waynflete Lectures on ‘The editorial choice of the text of a poem’, at Magdalen College, Oxford.
Publishes *Coleridge’s Verse: A Selection* (with David B. Pirie).
- 1973 Visiting Professor, York University, Toronto
- 1974 Lent Term: delivers Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, on ‘The Progress of Criticism’.
Hon. D. Litt., University of Sheffield.
Honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters/The National Institute of Arts and Letters.
- 1974–5 Visiting Professor of English, Pennsylvania State University.
- 1976 Autumn: Visiting Professor, Department of English, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware.
Fellow of the British Academy.
Honorary Fellow of the Modern Language Association of America.
- 1977 10 June: Hon. Litt. D., University of Cambridge.
- 1979 Knighted in New Year Honours for ‘services to English literature’.
Elected Honorary Fellow, Magdalene College, Cambridge.
- 1982 January–April: Visiting Professor, University of Miami.
- 1984 15 April: dies in London.
Collected Poems reissued; *Using Biography* published.
- 1986 *The Royal Beasts and Other Works* and *Essays on Shakespeare* published.
- 1987 *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture* and *Faustus and the Censor: The English Faust-Book and Marlowe’s ‘Doctor Faustus’* published.
- 1993 *Essays on Renaissance Literature*, vol. 1: *Donne and the New Astronomy*.
- 1994 *Essays on Renaissance Literature*, vol. 2: *The Drama*.
- 1996 *The Strengths of Shakespeare’s Shrew: Essays, Memoirs and Reviews*.
- 2000 *Complete Poems of William Empson*.
- 2006 *Selected Letters of William Empson*.

1



The BBC War

People keep writing for propaganda, which I can't do, but I hope to cash in a little on pretending to know about China when I get home.

Letter to mother, 2 June 1939

I gave up writing for ten years because I really thought allied propaganda important . . .

Letter to *Kenyon Review*, Autumn 1949

I dropped all my literary interests . . . because I got absorbed in the war; I thought the defeat of Hitler so important that I could do nothing else (it was a time of great happiness, looking back, and anyway of considerable pleasure, but I have just a steady trickle of mental productiveness, and it was then all directed into propaganda). I still think the war was quite important enough for that, and a good deal of my previous poetry had been concerned to say so . . .

Letter to Christopher Ricks, 19 January 1975

I had come back from China voluntarily for the war . . . I had returned feeling that the defeat of Hitler was of immense importance, to be sure, but also feeling reasonably confident that I would be allowed an interesting war by being let into the propaganda machine; and then again, I was protected by my obscurity, unlike the poet Auden who, I still think, was right in refusing to become the laureate of Churchill.⁷¹ Like Cyril Connolly, William Empson believed that the best artists of the age should be entitled and enabled to retain the purity of their work. He was modest about his own standing—he thought himself merely a ‘minor’ poet—but

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