Isobel Armstrong

Isobel Armstrong has been one of the most powerful, dynamic and inspirational figures in literary and cultural studies over the last three decades. She graduated with a BA English from the University of Leicester in 1959, and in 1963 she completed her PhD. That same year she took up the post of lecturer at UCL, where she stayed until 1970. From 1971-9 she worked as lecturer and then senior lecturer at the University of Leicester. It was there in 1972 that she published *Victorian Scrutinies*, a book in which she inaugurated her long and continuing involvement with the historical meaning and force of poetry.

When she took up her Professorship at the University of Southampton in 1979, English studies in this country were being to feel the bracing Gallic winds of structuralism and poststructuralism coming from across the Channel. Literary academics who were used to spending their seminars reverberating and responding to poems, or passing images back and forth like connoisseurs at an antiques fair, were distinctly rattled by the news from Paris, where it had apparently been decided that all meanings were undecidable, that the author was dead, and that the proper responsibility of the literary critic was henceforth not to be the celebration of truth and beauty but rather the deciphering of discourses. Perhaps because of her exposed maritime location on the South Coast, Isobel was quicker to pick up the scent of this bracing saline breeze and also to sense its invigorating properties. Displaying her genius for picking out and nurturing young talent, she attracted to Southampton some of the most radical thinkers of their generation, many of whom now are heading powerful and prestigious departments of their own. She encouraged a programme of postgraduate expansion and of conference organisation, which quickly made the University of Southampton the most adventurous and envied in the country.

While she was there, her book *Language as Living Form in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* appeared. This was a book that showed her distinctive critical power and style already at full strength. Her readings are exacting, absorbing and never factitiously smoothing over the jaggedness of particularity in the poems and poets she reads. But she also reads poetry with a seriousness, insisting on its philosophical and political importance in a characteristic way.

She held her post at Southampton for ten years. In 1989 we were at last able to snare her for the then Department of English at Birkbeck. We have a tradition of commanding female professors in the Department, a tradition we maintain to this day, and Isobel seemed a natural choice to follow Barbara Hardy and Miriam Allott to the established chair.

She blew into this place like a gale. She oversaw a period of unprecedented renewal and expansion for the Department of English. Since the time she joined us, we have doubled in size, according to every measure - except perhaps that of the budget we receive from the College. Her particular passion was for the establishment of a strong and vital group of graduates within the School. When she came, we had around 30 PhD students. In the week after her retirement, we greeted nearly 120 new and returning PhD students.

Her impact was felt far beyond the Department of English. On her arrival she saw that there was a limpid but inert pool of good intentions regarding the establishment of a course in gender studies. She set about whipping up a storm in that pool and had soon established a Masters course in Gender, Society and Culture. It was the first cross-Faculty Masters course in the College, and had, as it still has, the unique feature that depending on the route one took through it, one might end up either with an MA or an MSc. There were many other unique features of the course, for example the insistence, maintained against difficulties and objections of all kinds, that students work on a collective project as part of their work.

In 1995, she also began an important initiative to develop the recruitment and support of international students in the College. All of her powers of motivation, energy and persistence
were drawn on in her efforts to raise awareness of the many benefits of increasing the presence of international students in Birkbeck, and the needs that they have.

Her influence was felt beyond the college too. As one of the most important figures in the radical overhaul of literary studies that was undertaken in this country and beyond from the 1970s onwards, she has always been a highly conspicuous, sometimes outspoken figure in the discipline. She was always ready to speak at conferences, not just about her own areas of interest, but about the duties and opportunities of English studies more widely, and teaching in general. Unlike some of her more theoretically-minded colleagues, she has never lost her passionate sense of the importance of teaching.

And yet, the more eminent and respected she became, the more she continued to seek out and identify herself with what was stirring and incipient in the discipline. As a result, there is no senior figure in English Studies who inspires so much gratitude and respect from her younger colleagues. Isobel has been a lifetime an enabler of others' work, and has thrown her apparently limitless energies into work that promotes and encourages what is new in her field and beyond. She is the editor of the Writers and Their Work series, a project which began as a modest update of a series of pamphlets about English writers produced during the 1950s and 1960s by the British Council, but has ballooned into nothing short of the most magnificent remapping of the field of English studies. She founded and remains editor of *Women: A Cultural Journal*, one of the liveliest, most inquisitive and consistently provocative of journals in its field, that has forged a new audience and understanding of gender in culture.

For much of her career she has been one of a very small minority of 'female professors'. It is almost necessary nowadays to apologise for that phrase, which seems to imply that some freakish anomaly is being named, like a 'bearded lady', say, or an 'albino rhinoceros'. That the phrase should itself have come to seem rather quaint is due very much to the work of a generation of pioneering public academics and intellectuals of whom Isobel is so conspicuously one. Not so much a freak of nature as a force of nature.

All this time, she was continuing to produce her own hurricane work. Her book *Victorian Poetry* appeared in 1993 and immediately established itself as the one completely indispensable book on the field. She had already by this time thrown herself into a massive project of documenting and analysing the vast field of women's poetry in the nineteenth century. This wide-ranging, painstaking work, led in 1996 to the appearance of a huge anthology entitled *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets*, coedited with Joseph Bristow, which it would be fair to say has changed the face of nineteenth-century literary studies, making available the work of dozens of fine, fascinating female poets that had previously been forgotten and inaccessible to students. Subsequently, there have been two more anthologies of women's poetry, covering the Enlightenment and early nineteenth-century periods. Her most recent book, *The Radical Aesthetic*, published in 2000, mounts a compelling case for the power of art against sceptics both on the right and the left. Art, she argues, is not a mere repository of beauty or traditional value; rather it is a space of enquiry, invention and deeply purposeful play. At the same time, her own interests have been turning to the history of material culture, in her remarkable and inspirational ongoing research into the cultural meanings of glass in the nineteenth century.

Some years ago, Isobel wrote a piece for the 'Don's Delight' section of the *Times Higher Education Supplement* on the book that changed her life, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*. In characterising what she takes from that work, I think she does a good job of describing what her example gives to others: Hegel, she says, 'understands the complexity of thinking, which is at the heart of his writings - thought grasping thought with thought. A Bacchanalian revel...[but] also a labour on the world'.
A previous holder of the Chair in English, when asked how she would like us to mark her retirement, said thank you very much and could she have a full-scale production of *Hamlet* please - oh, and perhaps it would be alright if she played the part of Gertrude. The event with which Isobel Armstrong's retirement was marked was not quite so theatrical, but it was certainly a hugely dramatic production. Around 200 fellow-academics, friends and students past and present gathered in London for an extraordinary symposium to celebrate her work and its vast energising influence. She imparted to this occasion the same kind of glamour that has always spilled from her at Birkbeck - and she will be pleased to have me remind you that this somewhat shopworn word 'glamour' originally meant the literal power of enchantment, especially through the word: glamour is in fact first-cousin to the word 'grammar'.

She is herself a poet and has always maintained a passionate involvement with language and a mastery of it. Characteristically, she took over proceedings at the dinner the department held for her on her retirement by reciting an epic poem she had composed for the occasion: 'The School of English Rap'. She does not insist too hard on the links between her poetic and her professional writing, but nor does she agonise unduly about keeping them at a respectful distance. She is fond of quoting Adrienne Rich in saying that the responsibility of a teacher of English is to deliver their students into language, and her work has always been characterised by a vigilant responsibility before the word, its pleasures, its powers and its dangers. This has been unabating: whether in a seminar, on the page, or writing a reference, Isobel is always to be found looking for ways in which to surprise language into newness. Her own talk and writing show a wonderful balance of strenuous precision and a sort of windswept, gypsy wildness. It's a style which is as irresistible as it is inimitable, indeed, it is not so much a style as a kind of ethics of the word: the grammar of glamour, indeed.

The Oxford English Dictionary has this to say of the word 'fellow'. It derives from ON and OE *felaga*, and in its earliest English usages it means; 'one who shares with another in anything'; a 'co-worker', as well as, more uneasily, an 'accomplice' and 'one who lays out money in a joint undertaking'. Bringing forward a citation from 1611, the OED grudgingly concedes that the word is 'occasionally used of women'. More than anyone I have ever worked with, Isobel Armstrong has the power to ground her intellectual grandeur in an absolute and unswerving instinct for fellowship. This makes me feel very fortunate and very honoured to be able to welcome her formally as what she has anyway always been: a Fellow of Birkbeck College.