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The Church and Learning in Later Medieval Society Essays in Honour of R.B. Dobson/ Harlaxton Medieval Studies XI

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This volume is dedicated to Barrie Dobson, whose work over four decades on the peculiar clerical institutions and communities of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has been a model of scholarship, broad vision and human sympathy. In retrospect, we can see his work, which has focussed on the corporate bodies of northern England, as a fundamental contribution to understanding a leading distinctive feature of western civilization: the statutory community, fortified by property and privileges and inspired by the loyalty of its members to resist and outlast successive potentates (whether local warlords or national governments and their bureaucracies or ideologues with their general theories), the irreducible particularism of which has served to defend the liberties of individuals and to maintain beneficial local customs indefensible in principle. Durham Priory and the cathedral chapter of Carlisle were paradigms, in their time, of a network of limited powers which encompassed every European ruler, ecclesiastical or secular, and which in a very different form still remains and proliferates. Barrie Dobson has gone further than any other scholar in the understanding of such bodies? psychology and their subtle interrelation with the aspirations of individuals and here in his *festschrift* (in fact one of several) there is an opportunity to review the state of scholarship on the themes and ideas which have informed his work.

In one important respect, the contributors themselves represent the spirit of particularism. True to the Harlaxton formula, they cannot be corralled into a common focus on any specific theme, not even those which have preoccupied their honorand; in many, perhaps most cases they have started from a particular document or piece of material evidence and gone on from there. Only two of them acknowledge his influence, and in essays which do not exactly exhibit it. If there is a prevalent (not, certainly, a common) theme, it is an older concern ? the application of twelfth-century ideas of pastoral care, education and moral reform to the clergy and the religious life of late medieval England.

Scholarship on these lines goes back at least as far as the work of Marion Gibbs and Jane Lang on reforming bishops, published as long ago as 1934 (1), and has been taken much further by W. A. Pantin and Leonard Boyle, among many others. Benjamin Thompson reviews the career of a cardinal agent of reform, Archbishop Pecham ('The Academic and Active Vocations in the Medieval Church: Archbishop John Pecham'); Jeffrey Denton, in a wide-ranging study ('The Competence of the Parish Clergy in Thirteenth-Century England'), lays down better criteria for measuring the education of the thirteenth-century parish clergy; David Lepine perceptively puts the learning of the cathedral chapter of Hereford in the context of a new impetus to an active pastoral clergy arising from reactions to Wyclif?s challenge ('"A Long Way from University": Cathedral Canons and Learning at Hereford in the Fifteenth Century'); A. C. Reeves discusses the same theme more generally in 'Creative Scholarship in the Cathedrals, 1300-1500', though his search for signs of creative intellectual activity is rather anachronistic; Clive Burgess ('Educated Parishioners in London and Bristol on the Eve of the Reformation') demonstrates the vitality of parish life in Bristol and London about 1500, with particularly interesting evidence on the liturgical music of some churches; Fiona Kisby, taking Burgess?s theme further in time, collects the evidence for service books in London parishes before and after the Reformation ('Books in London Parish Churches before 1603: Some Preliminary Observations'); Joel Rosenthal argueson the basis of York clerical bequests that the importance of books to their private owners can however be exaggerated ('Clerical Book Bequests: a Vade Mecum, but Whence and Whither?'); while Claire Cross takes a more positive view of the learning of the York clergy in her contribution 'York Clergy and Their Books in the Early Sixteenth Century'.

A parallel concern of some contributors is the quality of monastic learning and education: James Clark, in a ground-breaking study 'Monastic Education in Late Medieval England', examines the education of novices in Benedictine houses and how it was transformed ? with startling and still unappreciated literary consequences; Martin Heale ('Books and Learning in the Dependent Priories of the Monasteries of Medieval England') considers the intellectual life of the dependent priories of great monastic houses, and Joan Greatrex analyses the medical and astrological knowledge of the monks of a larger body, Norwich Cathedral Priory ('Horoscopes and Healing at Norwich Cathedral Priory in the Later Middle Ages'). In each of these studies, the analysis of booklists and surviving codices has opened up hidden communities sharing reading and ideas. They show by implication how much subtler and more complex was the mind of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries than ordinary literary sources could ever reveal.

More arresting than perhaps any of the papers addressing the education of the English is Alexandra Johnston?s revisionist account of the *York Cycle* of pageant plays, in 'The York Cycle and the Libraries of York'. Almost alone of the contributors (David Lepine is another exception), she has taken account of the renewed impetus to implant a religious sensibility in the lay population which began with John Thoresby, Archbishop of York and was carried much further by his successor-but-one, Thomas Arundel. This northern initiative was a distinct phase, lasting from about 1360 to 1420, that gave shape to a whole school of Yorkshire contemplative writers, as Jonathan Hughes has shown. Johnston has now put the *York Cycle* into context, seeing it as a deliberate instrument of religious education on the part of a proactive clerical establishment.

Not all of the contributors dance to the pastoral tune; a smaller group follows more closely the Dobson model and concentrate on small communities or individuals within them. In his contribution 'The University

of Life and the London Charter-house: Practical Experience versus Scholarly Attainment within the Carthusian Leadership', Andrew Wines reconstructs the brief Carthusian career of Philip Underwode, the business-like procurator of the London Charterhouse in the 1490s, who put its financial affairs back on a sound basis. Alan Piper studies patterns of old age among the Durham monks. John Barron, in a splendid tour de force, 'The Augustinian Canons and the University of Oxford: the Lost College of St George', puts together the surprisingly abundant evidence for the small community of scholars in Oxford Castle, the putative St George?s College; and Carole Rawcliffe brings to life the wide-ranging activities, including education, of late medieval hospitals ('The Eighth Comfortable Work: Education and the Medieval English Hospital'). All these contributions deepen further the understanding of late medieval corporate bodies and communities that have been a main subject of Dobson?s work.

Another group of contributors offer an exegesis of a particular piece of evidence. Pamela King ('The Treasurer's Cadaver in York Minster Reconsidered') gives good reason to identify the cadaver-tomb in York Minster attributed to Thomas Haxey, as that of John Newton the Treasurer who died in 1414. If so, it is the earliest of its kind, and her case would only be strengthened by reference to Newton?s role in a York circle of clerks who popularized spiritual literature in the mode of Richard Rolle ? including *memento mori* tracts where putrid cadavers and wretched sinful bodies abounded, as they do in the wills of various Lollard knights, Archbishop Arundel, Henry IV and John Newton himself. David Crook uses an early Fenland monastic map to identify numerous chapels and perhaps the appearance of Spalding Priory, now destroyed ('Churches and Chapels on a Fifteenth-Century Monastic Map of the Lincolnshire Fenland'). Patrick Zutshi, in 'The Mendicant Orders and the University of Cambridge in the Fourteenth and Early Fifteenth Centuries' publishes two documents from the Vatican archives and one from those of Cambridge University, which together illustrate the tensions between the mendicant orders and the university. Pamela Tudor-Craig, in a subtle reconstruction ('The Iconography of Wisdom and the Frontispiece to the *Bible Historiale*, British Library, Additional Manuscript 18856'), explains the iconography of the frontispiece to John, Duke of Bedford?s *Bible Historiale* as the figure of Wisdom, deliberately set in a hexagonal building with seven pillars, one central, in accordance with the precept of Augustine. Nicholas Vincent?s reconstruction of the career of Elias of Dereham ('Master Elias of Dereham (d. 1245): A Reassessment') fits into none of the categories so far indicated; he convincingly reverses Hamilton Thompson?s separation of Elias the architect from Elias the bishop?s steward, and puts him back into a central position in architectural history at the opening stage of the English Gothic style. This brilliant work of synthesis would justify the whole volume, if that were necessary.

The independent paths of the contributors going in every direction are an impressive monument to the historical tendency (hardly a school) that might be termed Harlaxtonian Empiricism. The variety of the contributions shows that they recognize no master, not even Barrie Dobson. Yet there are limitations to the Harlaxton formula. The study of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England needs the stiffening wind of controversial general ideas, developed at length. It cries out for a vigorous comparative and European approach. Wyclif and the Lollards, who offer hope of refreshing historical disagreement, need the company of foreign religious leaders like Jean Gerson, Gerard Groote and Catherine of Siena to rescue them from suffocating insularity and narrowness. England was one sector of a north-west European theatre, which was integrated in the Lancastrian empire in France and its Burgundian associate in the early fifteenth century ? an economic and cultural phenomenon as well as a political entity which needs radical new approaches. All these contributors ? and your reviewer is as guilty as any of them ? would help to sweep the comfortable dust from these centuries by going to fewer conferences and writing longer, single-authored studies which challenge the tired assumptions of conventional late medieval English history. They would then certainly fall to sharp and invigorating controversy among themselves, as well as with other historians. It is time for the Harlaxtonian Empiricists to do some fighting.

Notes

1. Jane Gibbs and Marion Lang, *Bishops and Reform, 1215-1272, with Special Reference to the Lateran Council of 1215* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934).Back to (1)

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