

The Future of the Past*

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When I joined the Dominican Order in Ireland in 1943 at the age of twenty, I knew nothing of mediaeval studies. Any thoughts I had of an academic future were in terms of biblical archaeology, in which I spent most of my leisure time reading.

All of that soon changed. I chanced in 1945 on an article by Pierre Mandonnet on the Dominicans and the University of Paris in the middle ages, became fascinated by it, and in the next year published my first, and now long-forgotten, article on a mediaeval topic in the language I wrote best at that time, Gaelic. A result was that when I asked my superiors toward the middle of 1947 what were the chances of going into biblical archaeology, I was told that there were none, and that in fact I was being sent to Oxford to study under the distinguished Dominican mediaevalist, Fr Daniel Callus, then Regent of Studies.

I arrived in Oxford in late 1947 to live and study in the large and vigorous Dominican community at Blackfriars, in the centre of the city. There I remained for eight years, the first four of which were spent completing my theological studies, at the end of which I presented a thesis of no distinction whatever on an Oxford Dominican theologian and controversialist of the late

*Plenary address at the Society of Canadian Mediaevalists, Learned Societies meetings, Calgary, 1994.

thirteenth century, Richard Knapwell. The second four were spent in the University proper working on a doctoral dissertation under the supervision of W.A. Pantin of Oriel College.

When I began graduate studies, the plan was that I should work on the *De causa Dei* of Thomas Bradwardine, a mid-fourteenth-century English theologian, but that soon proved to be beyond me. Instead Pantin suggested that I should investigate the contents, authorship, and manuscript tradition of a little-known pastoral work, the *Oculus sacerdotis*, of an even lesser-known author, William of Pagula, a contemporary of Bradwardine at Oxford.

This proved to be highly congenial and rewarding, and I spent four splendid years communing with manuscripts of the pastoral care in the Bodleian Library and elsewhere. My view of what was pastoral was happily elastic and I read everything in manuscript or in print that might bear on the pastoral care: clerical education and learning, university and college statutes, canon and Roman law, popular manuals of any kind in any field.

Naturally some of my mentors worried about me, seeing me as a magpie who picked up pieces of information here and there without any concentration or discrimination. But I went my own way, encouraged by the dictum of Hugh of St Victor: “*Omnia disce. Postea videbis nichil esse superfluum.*” From the very start of my studies I had fiercely resisted being called a historian, preferring to be seen rather as a mediaevalist, and since I thought of myself always in this way, I was never tempted to consider anything superfluous. One day, some day, all would come sweetly together, I told myself, as it did finally in 1956, when, to the surprise of the worriers, I presented a long and not incoherent thesis of 750 pages.

It was a fortunate time to have been in mediaeval studies at Oxford. In those years just after the Second World War, mediaeval studies had a considerable stature and following in the University because of an exceptionally gifted and inspiring string of teachers, of whom only Richard Southern now survives: Beryl Smalley, Lorenzo Minio-Paluello, Robert Walzer, Richard Hunt, James Crompton, Vivian Galbraith, Neil Ker, Ernest Jacob, William Pantin, Derek Hall, F.M. Powicke, Daniel Callus, Dorothy Whitelock. Not all of these were known outside Oxford, and some never produced standard works of scholarship. But that does not matter. What matters, as it mattered to us as students in 1951–1955, is that all of these mediaevalists, with one or two withdrawn exceptions, were friends of ours. They treated us as equals and always had time for us. They met us regularly for coffee or tea; they discussed, argued, disagreed with us — and encouraged us enormously

the while. When they came upon something relative to what we were working on, they passed it on to us generously and without strings. I still have a sheaf of notes, the work of some years, with which Richard Hunt, then Keeper of Western Manuscripts at the Bodleian Library, presented me when he noticed me reading a manuscript on which he had once worked.

I was also lucky to have come to mediaeval studies at Oxford at a time when there was also an unusually cohesive body of young graduate students such as Robert Brentano, John Grassi, Enya Macrae, Hugh McKinnon, Donald Sutherland, Donald Watt, and James Weisheipl. Not all of these were greatly gifted or became household names afterwards, but what was remarkable was that without any effort or organization, they were, so to speak, “of one mind.” Though hoarding their pennies, they rarely missed coffee or tea together, often with the senior mediaevalists. Once every two weeks they met as a body, perhaps of fourteen or fifteen, in the evening in one of the larger lodgings, each taking it in turn to present an account of his or her research. The ensuing discussions were not always polite or meek and mild, but it was here more than anywhere else that one discovered just how much one did not know, how to enlarge one’s horizon, and, above all, how to listen. Where one could have expected some preening and some ruffled feathers, there was tolerance, understanding, respect, support.

Only one rule governed these meetings. If anyone was known to be or, as time went on, came to be overbearing or pretentious or fractious, the rule of exclusion was quietly applied by common consent. Although he was at Oxford in those years, I cannot remember that the author of a recent and rather sensational work entitled *Inventing the Middle Ages* was a member of that group in my time. At all events his picture of Oxford and of mediaeval studies there is very contentious, and the light he throws on our friends and teachers is, to say the least, highly personal. He seems never to have recovered, as he himself half admits, from the remark of Hunt of the Bodleian that he just did not have enough Latin to make headway as a mediaevalist.

This is not to pretend that all was idyllically mediaeval in those years. But there was a decent mixture of hard work and good humour. And there was always the certainty that if one ever asked a question, however silly, of one’s mentors or fellows, one would not be laughed to scorn or ridiculed. There was, of course, plenty of ignorance all around, but at least in that supportive atmosphere it had a fair chance of becoming a “docta ignorantia” — which is about all that any of us ever achieves.

I wish that I could say that I found the same sense of solidarity and support when I began to teach at the Angelicum, the Dominican University (now of St Thomas) in Rome in 1956. Instead of a community spirit there was isolation and disinterest. One taught one's classes hesitantly in Latin to students who, for the most part, wanted to get their degrees as soon as possible, then get back to real life. There was little or no spirit of research, and there were no opportunities at all for exchange or relaxed extra-curricular discussion. For myself, I used every moment I had free from classes to work in the Vatican Library or Archives, ranging further afield than I had done at Oxford. But there was little purpose to it. And if there was plenty of time for research, there was little or no incentive to publish. By way of diversion, largely because the Vatican Library and Archives were not open regularly in the afternoon, I dabbled in amateur archaeology in the excavations under the church where I lived, San Clemente, just above the Colosseum on the road to San Giovanni in Laterano.

I only discovered once more what a real community of scholars could mean when I went to Toronto in 1961 to teach at the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies.

I was not, of course, unaware of the Institute before my arrival there in October 1961. My early studies at Oxford in the Dominican House of Studies had been in scholasticism under Fr Daniel Callus. In my second or third year there, when I was already working on an edition of a Quodlibet of the Oxford Dominican Richard Knapwell, Fr Callus disappeared for a term to teach at Toronto. When he returned I listened as best I could to his many stories of the Institute, its spirit, and its course of studies — all this usually while cutting his hair once a month (a not very demanding task, since he was bald).

Not long after I came more directly in contact with it. For in January or February 1951, when I was approaching the time for presentation of my work on Richard Knapwell, the room next to mine at Blackfriars was occupied for some six or seven months by Fr Reginald O'Donnell of the Institute, then on a sabbatical leave. We were introduced to one another by Fr Callus, and since I was engaged in editing a text, Fr O'Donnell was always happy to discuss my textual problems and gave me much advice.

The next time I saw Fr O'Donnell, then on another sabbatical, was just ten years later. By now I was in Rome teaching, and I met him in the Vatican Library when he came for a short period from Florence to work on some manuscripts, notably the *Sapientiale* of Thomas of York, to which he was much attached. One evening, when I had been explaining to him what

I had been up to in the intervening years and had gushed about the course in Latin palaeography I had resuscitated at the Angelicum, he asked me if I would care to teach some time at the Institute in Toronto. I thought this to be highly unlikely. But some six months later I received a cable forwarded from Rome while I was on holidays at home in Ireland, asking if I could come to Toronto in October (this was August 1961) to help out for a few months, since Fr Joseph Wey, then teaching Latin palaeography, had just been elected head of the Congregation of St Basil to which he and O'Donnell and various members of the Institute belonged.

So it was that on Friday, 13 October 1961 I went to Toronto to help out for three months—and in fact remained for some twenty-three years, teaching Latin palaeography and in time Diplomatics (which I introduced), with, in order not to become hidebound, occasional seminars in university education, textual criticism, pastoralia, and the editing of legal texts.

When I arrived in Toronto in 1961, the Institute had been in existence for some thirty years and now had a staff of about twenty Fellows, with a nice mixture of priests and laymen. Some like Etienne Gilson, Theodore Eschmann, Anton Pegis, Joseph Owens, Joseph Ryan, Nicholas Haring, Edward Synan, or Armand Maurer, were already seasoned scholars. Others like Ambrose Raftis, Michael Sheehan, and Walter Principe were beginners like myself, and were in time joined by arrivals, some younger, some older, such as James Weisheipl, Brian Stock, Virginia Brown, Jocelyn Hilgarth, James McConica, Edouard Jeuneau, Roger Reynolds, Osmund Lewry, Martin Dimnik, and James Reilly, to mention only those who were colleagues before I departed Toronto for the Vatican Library in 1984.

The number of students directly attached to the Institute at the time was quite small, perhaps ten or twelve, but there was a notable influx of students from various departments of the University of Toronto, particularly from Classics and Philosophy. The building itself was small, with a minimum of classrooms and offices. But there was a fine, well-appointed library, with an exceptionally warm and intimate reading room (that, of course, was well before the present library was set up on the top floor of the new library of St Michael's College, to which the Institute is attached).

The fact that everything was on a small scale, and that everything was housed in the same small building, could have made for claustrophobia or indeed a frustrating lack of privacy or peaceful study. But this was not so.

Here indeed, to quote W.B. Yeats, "peace came dropping slow." Students and Fellows got on well together. More important, the Fellows were at ease with one another. As at Oxford, there was a genuine interest all round in what each Fellow and each student was doing, and there was a general rejoicing in common when someone published a book or wrote a striking article. Although there were undoubtedly some giants in the Institute, there were no *prima donnas*. Here if anywhere, "*docta ignorantia*" was honored in the observance. There were Fellows well-versed in turn in philosophy, Latin and vernacular literature, theology, patristics, liturgy, law, palaeography, Latin and Greek, diplomatics, textual criticism, art history, medieval archaeology, and sociology. But without a blush each could call upon and expose one's ignorance in a given subject to the Fellow whose speciality it was. The great strength of the place was plain mutual respect.

Where the "fraternal" or rather "fellowly" spirit came from I have no doubt. Without ever making a big issue of it, Etienne Gilson had passed on to the Institute his own good-humored and tolerant spirit (though these qualities of his were not always appreciated by others elsewhere). What he had wanted, and what indeed he achieved, was a modest, hard-working place in which those engaged in mediaeval studies would be introduced without undue stress to the basic tools necessary for an opening up of the middle ages, and, eventually, to an opening up of the mind.

For that reason, though his own interests were philosophy and theology, he had insisted from the start that the students should have an all-round grounding in basic disciplines such as mediaeval Latin, palaeography and editing, and a general introduction to the culture of the middle ages (vernacular literature, history, liturgy, law, theology, art history, music) before moving on to whatever special topic they had chosen in philosophy or theology or law, for example. This was not always understood. The student who wished to specialize in Byzantine theology or Anglo-Saxon homilies or the Ethics of Aristotle was not always readily convinced that he or she had first to endure classes and examinations in mediaeval Latin or palaeography or liturgy. The student who aimed at a study of Al Ghazali or Maimonides or Scotus often had to be heavily persuaded that it was to his or her advantage to have had first a good general sense of the middle ages, its institutions and culture, before embarking on such special topics.

Within five or six years of my arrival in Toronto, there was a notable change in the attitude toward mediaeval studies in the University. Where previously it had given no official recognition to the Institute, though attendance at courses there was accepted in practice, the University, prodded

by Bertie Wilkinson of the History Department, with John Leyerle in the wings, now began a process by which to integrate the Institute into the University, without, however, whittling away its independence or watering down its courses. What had happened, it may well be, was that the university then numbering some 30,000 students, had gradually awakened to the fact that outside Toronto and Canada, and particularly in the United States and Europe, the Institute was often better known in certain scholarly circles than the University itself.

Consequently, and with the full collaboration of the Institute, the University decided to set up a Centre for Mediaeval Studies (the original regulations for which were drafted by a committee of three, including the present writer, a few years later). In this the Institute would provide the basic teaching in the basic disciplines while the University at large would bring under the umbrella of the Centre all the courses in mediaeval topics that were taught in various departments, again without harming the autonomy of the departments or sapping their strength.

This worked wondrously. Within a year or so of the founding of the Centre, Mediaeval Studies, which in the Institute could count in the past on about twenty teachers, now in the Centre-Institute complex could call upon a roster of some eighty to a hundred professors — from Hebrew and Arabic studies, the English, French, Iberian, Italian and Germanic language departments, from Classics, History, History of Art, Museology, Music, Science and Technology, and from other departments.

What is more remarkable is that all of this was accomplished in a relatively short time and with the complete cooperation not only of the Institute but, *mirabile dictu*, of all the departments. Somehow or other the spirit of tolerance, understanding, and good will that, through Gilson, had become a characteristic of the Institute, had over the years affected the University at large.

This is not fanciful. Within five or six years of the setting up of the Centre, Mediaeval Studies had become one of the best-run, productive, and agreeable of all the specialized centres (as distinct from departments) in the University. And it was a centre where students and teachers worked hand-in-hand, as had the students and staff of the Institute.

To every university of course there will be scholars who are not slow to put down Mediaeval Studies as superfluous, niggling, or plainly futile. Recently a musicologist friend told me, speaking of musicology in general, that the future of musicology was about twenty years: by then there would be nothing left to discuss. There are, I am given to understand, those who

would predict a similar future for Mediaeval Studies: the whole area, it is said, is almost drained of originality; at best all that mediaevalists are doing today is scraping the barrel or blissfully recycling timeworn material.

We do indeed often lay ourselves open to the latter charge, at least. The sole claim to scholarship and fame of an edition of a text a few years ago was vested in the fact, unblushingly trumpeted in the preface, that the writer had been able to correct the punctuation in five places in, that is, the previous edition of the text a century before in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*.

I suspect that this singular instance of scholarly asinity is due to a malaise that all too often affects mediaeval and other studies (and which a Society such as the present one should help to offset): a failure, that is, to communicate with other scholars in the field, a tendency to work away in distant, sometimes disdainful isolation. A classic example of this was the almost simultaneous appearance twelve or thirteen years ago of three separate editions — one in Germany, one in England, one indeed at the Institute in Toronto — of the halting poems of a fairly obscure Irish bishop of the fourteenth century that are extant in a single, contemporary manuscript in Ireland — three editions, I may add, that were merrily judged by one reviewer to be each in turn defective and, on the whole, incompetent.

Needless to say, there have been scholars who have worked splendidly in isolation, but most of us have need of solid instruction and direction, and of the constant, sympathetic support and criticism of our colleagues. It is all too easy to flounder, perhaps sink, in mediaeval studies. The main drawback is that we have never lived in the middle ages. We do not know the Bible and the liturgy as most of those, cleric and lay, who composed our texts knew the Bible and liturgy day-in, day-out, in practice, and echoed them at every turn. We do not know the philosophical and theological currents that stimulated many of our authors, and are inclined all too much to treat them as boring or irrelevant, much as the old bibliographers in *Speculum* used to do, where they were listed, if at all noted, under “Folklore.”

Above all else, we are so sophisticated and sure of our own superiority vis-à-vis the mediaevals that we wind up not only misinterpreting our sources but neglecting them altogether, sometimes, as a result, missing the obvious. There have been, for example, some heated discussions in the past decade or more on the make-up and the paintings and drawings in the *Vergilius Romanus* (Vat. lat. 3867) in the Vatican Library, and notably, for my purposes here, on the significance of a “crude drawing” in the top margin of folio 82^r, where a semi-circle with a number of upright strokes has two long, dagger-like figures at either edge, and in the shelter of the semi-circle seven

small circles. Various interpretations have been proposed, particularly one that suggests that the drawing is a plan of the Carolingian crypt at Saint-Denis in Paris, where undoubtedly the manuscript was housed in the middle ages. In all the excitement the text of Vergil has been forgotten. For what the drawing shows is a harbour flanked by twin peaks (Vergil's own words: *geminique scopuli: Aen.* 1. 162), where the seven ships of Aeneas put in for safety. The mediaeval reader was simply illustrating the text of Vergil as it is found toward the bottom of this folio. Nothing more sensational.

Mediaeval Studies have been flourishing in Canada for over sixty years, first at Montreal and Toronto, latterly "a mari usque ad mare." In that sense the Société canadienne des médiévalistes is long overdue. But, on the other hand, the fledgling Society is now in the useful position of being able to draw on the experience of other and similar associations, some well-established, some newly-hatched.

A year ago, for example, the Fédération internationale des Instituts des Études Médiévales (FIDEM) put on a conference at Spoleto in Italy under the heading "Medieval Studies: Today and Tomorrow." All over Europe, not to speak of North America, there had been conferences since the late 1920s on mediaeval topics — law, theology, philosophy, medicine, mathematics, music, numismatics, codicology, diplomatics, palaeography, library catalogues, what have you — but there had not been, to my knowledge, a general conference on mediaeval studies in general before that at Spoleto: one that stood back from the subject, that looked at its strong points and weak points, that considered the past and the present of mediaeval studies in order to point a circumspect way to the future. What was envisaged was not a European Kalamazoo (which is what more or less Leeds will be in July next), but rather a periodic reckoning — a *bilan* — of the present state and future prospects of mediaeval studies, perhaps every five years: for example, what has been done or is being done that is really significant in its own area and in relation to mediaeval studies as a whole; what areas need revivifying; what aspects ought to be opened up; what methods or methodologies happily could be deployed or usefully could be dropped.

All in all the results were satisfactory, particularly for philosophy, theology, palaeography, and Italian history, where the speakers had really caught the spirit of the conference. Some others, art history and Byzantine studies,

for example, were from this point of view disappointing, being no more than the usual, if valid, disquisitions on some point or other.

Such a periodic reckoning in relation to Canada might not come amiss at the annual or other meetings of the Société, when questions such as the following could profitably be reckoned by someone of a wide purview and then bandied about by all:

- are basic disciplines such as Mediaeval Latin, Palaeography, Diplomatics, Codicology, Edition of Texts, adequately available to students in Canada wishing to engage in mediaeval studies?
- is there a need for summer schools in such disciplines?
- what are the helps of which beginning students feel most deprived?
- what exactly is the moving spirit or emphasis in the various institutes, centres and associations of mediaeval studies in Canada, particularly, to start with, Québec (Montréal) and Toronto?
- what are the projects relative to mediaeval studies that the Société might propose, foster, or put its collective weight behind? Perhaps the survey of mediaeval and Renaissance manuscripts in Canada that I began in 1979 or 1980 and dropped when I left for the Vatican Library? Perhaps the parallel survey of incunabula in which William Stoneman at my behest once had some interest?

Although money may be scarce at present, the climate in Canada in respect of mediaeval studies is not all that negative. Oddly, given that Canada is part of the “New World,” which only discovered western civilization some five hundred years ago, the prominence of Mediaeval Studies in Canada has caused no public outcry, though it puzzles many Europeans no end. Nor has it been seen as a drain on university funds and resources. This is largely due to the fact that, where there is good will and give-and-take, excellent programs in mediaeval studies may readily be set up simply by bringing mediaeval subjects in various departments under an umbrella. Far from emasculating departments, this actually strengthens them by placing teachers who perhaps had previously taught and worked in isolation into close proximity if not fruitful contact with each other.

From a less institutional or “human” point of view, the presence of these institutes or programs is seen as enriching not only a university, but

also the public at large. For example, the fine array of evening courses in the humanities that is available in Canada and the United States to workers, mature students, and senior citizens, draws heavily on students or graduates from mediaeval institutes and centres and programs who cover any and every aspect of the middle ages for two or three hours each night in classes of forty or fifty, theology, philosophy, history of art, and monasticism being particularly popular.

Clearly, in spite of what is so often said, the past, like the book, is far from dead. It has indeed a decided future, if only because we cannot get rid of it. The present, though perhaps too much with us in one sense, is in fact too fleeting to be appreciated properly. And so we are forced to enjoy it retrospectively, rather like watching a football match or a political event on a video that has captured the present before it becomes the past.

All of us, no matter what we study or research, in no matter what field, are at the mercy of the past. Even the thought we had two minutes ago is now a thing of the past and has to be recalled. In that sense the past always has a future. It makes us and it unmakes us.

Because it is a distant past, the study of the middle ages may seem to have less claim on our attention than the immediate past or indeed than what is presently passing into the past. But like any other record of the past, from classical and biblical studies to this morning's newspaper, the study of the middle ages has its place as a documentation of the human condition at a given time. Whatever the subject is, exegesis or astronomy or philosophy or theology, it is a record of the progress of the human spirit. It is precisely these epiphanies of the human spirit that we are trying to catch sight of, thus enriching our own minds in the present because we are recording the progress, however faint or feeble or faltering on occasion, of the past of the human spirit.

Of course, no one science can embrace all of these manifestations on its own. All we can hope for indeed in any given science is partial glimpses. Which is why cooperation and support and respect and an association such as the present one in Canada are so important. Each of us is working hard at seeing and perhaps even enhancing the human condition in the present from a study of the past. We are, in other words, attempting to make the wisdom of the past part of the present and of the future.

It is an unequal task. But if we share our resources, we may at least give the past the possibility of a better future, and, God willing, we ourselves may be enabled to arrive at a *docta ignorantia* that gets *doctior* and *doctior* every day, because shared, humbly and happily.

Prefect of the Vatican Library