

Fondly Remembering Dominica

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How did I—a woman—ever become a medievalist? I encountered few women academics during my studies in Scotland and France in the sixties and they were invariably caricatured as “blue stockings,” considered unfeminine compared to the idealized wife and mother of the era.

I was introduced to Medieval Studies in the early sixties, as a student at the University of Edinburgh, in Scotland. The French Department had a fine reputation and was recognized for its particularly strong program in Old French Language and Literature. Callow students arriving in first year from their Grammar Schools plunged straight into History of the Language, the rudiments of Old French and deciphered the *Lais* of Marie de France in the original language. Among the well-known medievalists of the era were Duncan McMillan, the Head of Department, A.J.(Tony) Holden, who edited Hue de Rotelande's *Ipomedon* and *Protheselaus*, the Occitan scholar Alan Press, and of course M. Dominica Legge, one of the few specialists in Anglo-Norman language and literature at that time.

Dominica was also the only woman in the French department other than the secretary! She had been educated at Oxford University and was reputed to be very erudite, the author of *Anglo-Norman in the Cloisters*, then engaged in writing her important history of the French literature of England, *Anglo-Norman and its Background*. But she was also somewhat eccentric. She was a big woman who cut a formidable figure as she stood in front of a large crowd of first or second-year students in her baggy cardigans and “wellies” (rain boots—it rained a lot in Edinburgh), with her round-framed glasses, straight grey hair and unmistakably upper-class English accent. A fellow-student of the time, Edinburgh born and bred, recalls that Dominica was the first person she ever heard pronounce “girls” as “gels.”

In the turmoil of the sixties, students were notoriously irreverent and would stamp their feet on the bare floorboards when they didn't understand what was said. This happened quite often with Dominica, as she was so much more learned than we were! Some of us never did appreciate the phonetic changes wrought by *yod* in the development of Old French. Yet she was remarkably attuned to the student mood in the lecture-hall, and would slip tantalising references to sleeping arrangements in medieval castles into her lectures on diachronic phonetics in order to keep boredom at bay. And students who stayed the course and reached the dizzy heights of fourth year were invited to her apartment for a glass of sherry, glimpsing the warm-hearted woman behind the medieval scholar. She might have had one foot in the Middle Ages but the other was firmly planted in the "here and now."

At the end of second year, having finished our written exams for Intermediate Honours, we were all waiting nervously in the corridor to be summoned for our oral exam, hoping to get the youngest and least intimidating of our instructors. To my consternation, I was summoned into the august presence of Dominica...who reviewed my written exam and said I could and should continue in Medieval Studies! That oral proved to be the catalyst. During my third year abroad I did a Certificate in *Grammaire et philologie françaises* at Lille University in Northern France and when I returned to Edinburgh for my final year, I signed up for a Tutorial in Anglo-Norman with Dominica. Subsequently, after a year studying medieval literature at Caen University in France, I went back and enrolled with Dominica for my Ph.D.

In later years, I would watch with fascination as, true to her reputation for eccentricity, Dominica would sit through guest lectures at Edinburgh or colleagues' papers at medieval conferences with her eyes closed. You could be forgiven for thinking she was asleep—but the moment the floor was open to questions, she would open her eyes and make some devastating remark or ask a searching question that demonstrated that she had heard every word. Her knowledge of French Literature in general and Anglo-Norman in particular was encyclopedic, and she had a keen intellect that made her a fearsome opponent in any debate. Woe betide the ignoramus!

But I remember Dominica with affection and gratitude, for she opened my eyes and mind to the challenges and rewards of being a medievalist. She was a great medievalist, whose work on Anglo-Norman is still cited today, forty or fifty years after it first appeared. She was also the greatest single factor in my decision to study medieval French literature, my Ph.D. supervisor and my mentor. But she was not my role model. The sixties was a time of social change, of challenging the *status quo*, rewriting rules

and renegotiating roles. To my relief, the women's liberation movement changed the perception that a woman scholar was necessarily a spinster and probably a blue stocking. And so I, a woman, became a medievalist.

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