

## AFTER COULTON

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IT is rather more than thirty years since Dr G. G. Coulton inaugurated the series of 'Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought'. In the interval between the two great wars a number of notable books appeared, including Eileen Power's *Medieval English Nunneries* and Coulton's own monumental *Five Centuries of Religion*, of which the recently-published posthumous volume appropriately terminated the series. It is now revived, under the general editorship of the Professor of Medieval History at Cambridge, 'to present as a single collection some of the work submitted for higher degrees or fellowships by young Cambridge medievalists'. Thus it will provide in some sense a parallel to the Oxford Historical Series.

The first two volumes to appear in the new series are both studies of ecclesiastical estates, and so carry on the tradition established by the late R. A. L. Smith in his *Canterbury Cathedral Priory*. Mr Edward Miller's subject is the abbey and bishopric of Ely<sup>1</sup>; while Mr H. P. R. Finberg writes on Tavistock Abbey.<sup>2</sup> In both cases, however, the ecclesiastical is strictly subordinate to the 'social' interest.

Mr Miller makes no excursions into the field of diocesan administration, but defines his aim as 'to draw out of the records of the Church of Ely some deductions about the progress of the lordship exercised by the abbots and bishops of Ely, and about the influence they exercised upon those fragments of medieval society which they had some real power to shape'. Mr Finberg, as he tells us in his preface, is concerned with Tavistock less as a community of men dedicated to the religious life than as 'an economic unit, a property-owning organisation, a producer and consumer', seen against the background of that part of Devon in which the estates of the abbey lay.

Both writers seek to illuminate the medieval social scene by a detailed and rigorously 'scientific' study of a single fragment of it.

1 Edward Miller. *The Abbey and Bishopric of Ely*. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought. New Series I. 1951. (Cambridge University Press; 25s.)

2 H. P. R. Finberg. *Tavistock Abbey*. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought. New Series II. 1951. (Cambridge University Press; 25s.)

Here, indeed, is a contrast to the vast canvases on which Dr Coulton delighted to record the impressions of medieval life gathered in the course of his omnivorous reading and strongly coloured by his personal prejudices and preconceptions.

Mr Miller's book is scarcely designed for the general reader. It is a scholarly and often highly technical study of the origin and development of the Ely estates from the re-foundation of the abbey by St Ethelwold in the course of the great monastic revival of the tenth century to the creation of the bishopric in 1109, and thence to the opening decades of the fourteenth century, when, in his view, the decline of medieval lordship set in. He describes the impact upon the abbey and its lands of the Norman Conquest. Ely was burdened by the Conqueror with the service of forty knights, and this could be secured only by granting out the demesne to men willing and able to perform it. Thus the abbey became a 'barony'—a feudal state in miniature—in which the abbot's Norman knights played in his honour court and household, and in administration generally, a rôle similar to that played by the king's barons in the realm at large. Meanwhile, lines of dependence, at all levels, were 'sharpened and rooted in the soil, and obligations were more rigorously defined'. If freedom did not wholly disappear, there was a general lowering of the social and economic status of the peasantry.

The reorganisation of the Ely estates to meet the new situation created by the Conquest was completed under the early bishops; but the military phase of feudalism was not of long duration. The loss by the bishop of his feudal authority was balanced by the development of those functions which he derived not from his private right but from 'the exigencies of public administration'. The thirteenth century saw the culmination of his franchisal power. The 'liberty of St Etheldreda', which involved the exclusion of the sheriff and complete judicial immunity, insulated the Isle of Ely entirely from the ordinary machinery of local administration. The bishop appointed his own judges, who had power to determine all pleas, even the pleas of the Crown. Yet, as Mr Miller shows, the authority he exercised was not arbitrary. It was not the law and custom of the Isle of Ely that was enforced, but the law and custom of the realm of England—the new 'common law' that was the creation of the Angevin monarchy. 'Episcopal lordship was constitutionally public service.'

This same period saw also the culmination of the bishop's lordship in its economic aspect. With the advent of the great age of 'high farming' in the thirteenth century, he found himself obliged to adapt his estate policy to the demands of an expanding and competitive economy. The old system of 'farms' in food or money was abandoned in favour of the direct and vigorous exploitation of the land to meet the needs of a peripatetic lord and a rapidly growing market; and forest was cleared and marsh land drained to accommodate an increasing and land-hungry population. If the lord was the first to profit by the changing economic situation, the enterprising peasant also found an opportunity of improving his fortunes and 'a class of thriving yeomen' gradually took shape. The transition from subsistence to profit farming on the episcopal demesnes was effected through the agency of the local reeves and bailiffs, held to account for the issues of the manor at the bishop's exchequer and controlled by itinerant auditors and stewards. An honorial bureaucracy had replaced the honorial baronage, and a new class of professionally-trained administrators had come into being, from which both private and royal administration could be recruited.

By the second quarter of the fourteenth century, however, the golden age of medieval lordship was passing. A catastrophic fall in agrarian profits led to the progressive abandonment of demesne farming. On the Ely estates Mr Miller notes 'a continuous drift away from cultivation', which had as its corollary the leasing of the demesne and 'the dispersion of all sorts of land into rent-paying tenancies'. The high-farming bishop was being transformed into a *rentier* landlord, and the peasantry were beginning to enter into his heritage.

Mr Miller has constructed from the records of the church of Ely a picture of the great medieval estate as a 'going concern'—the product of the interplay of many different forces and responsive in its development to many different stimuli. If the appeal of his book is chiefly to the student of economic and administrative history, it affords to the ecclesiastical historian fresh evidence of the extraordinarily complex rôle of the bishop in medieval society. The same man who, as temporal lord of a barony and holder of a franchise carried a heavy burden of political responsibility, was the spiritual ruler of a diocese which was a unit of administration of the Universal Church, with its own intricate governmental system and

hierarchy of courts. In addition he was often a royal official, a 'civil servant' like Bishop Nigel, who was one of the creators of the national Exchequer, or John of Kirby, who was treasurer to Edward I, or William of Louth, who was keeper of his Wardrobe. Even Hugh of Northwold, the ideal monk-bishop of Matthew Paris, could not wholly avoid duties of a political nature, although he is remembered chiefly for his high-farming activities, at a time when the monastic order was 'the nurse of intelligent and broad-minded landowners'. Small wonder if the spiritual responsibilities of the medieval bishop were sometimes overshadowed by his political obligations!

By contrast with the abbey and bishopric of Ely, Tavistock's rôle was a modest one. True, it was the most important monastic foundation in Devon, and the only one capable at the date of the Conquest of carrying the burden of military service. But although it held land in three counties, and by the middle of the thirteenth century had appropriated in addition a number of parish churches, its revenues in the earlier Middle Ages would seem never to have been commensurate with its responsibilities. Save during the abbacy of the able Robert Champeaux (1285-1324), the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries appear to have been a time of financial stringency, complicated by maladministration. By a strange irony, however, the last century of the abbey's existence was to see a remarkable improvement in its fortunes. John Dynyngton (1451-90) obtained from Edward IV the grant of Cowick, a former dependency of Bec, which had been confiscated as an 'alien priory' during the wars with France, and successfully petitioned the Holy See for the insignia of a mitred abbot. Richard Banham (1492-1523) was able to increase the numbers of the community and to secure the long-coveted exemption from diocesan control; while from 1514 onwards he was summoned as a spiritual lord to parliament, in virtue of a special grant by Henry VIII. It was at this time, too, that Dom Thomas Richard, who had studied at Gloucester Hall, Oxford, set up a printing press at the Abbey, which in 1525 produced a translation of the *Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius.

In the abbey's agrarian history Mr Finberg distinguishes two main phases. The first, which was complete by the end of the twelfth century, saw the transition from slavery—still widely prevalent at the time of the Conquest—to serfdom; the second, which

was still in progress at the Dissolution, witnessed the change-over from unfree to leasehold tenure. Change occurred more slowly in the west country than elsewhere, and Tavistock was still exploiting directly a part of the demesne a full century after Christchurch, Canterbury, had leased all but one of its manors. Besides encouraging conservatism, geographical isolation perpetuated local idiosyncrasies. 'Extensive' cultivation was the norm in Devon; but on the abbey lands the ill-effects of continuous cropping were counteracted by careful manuring, and dressing of the soil with sea-sand and ashes, so that, according to Mr Finberg's calculations, the grain crops produced were fully up to the contemporary standard and there was a steady surplus available for the market. Pasture farming was practised as the necessary complement of arable-farming, and surplus stock was marketed; while the milk-yield of the abbey's cows and ewes was made into butter and cheese for home consumption or for sale. It is interesting to note that the art of scalding cream was practised in medieval Devon, and that the abbot had a cider-press at Plymstock which supplied the needs of the community! He also owned a number of fish-pools, which were usually let out for a money rent or a proportion of the year's catch, and a salmon-hatch in the Tamar which seems to have caused some heart-burning among the abbey's neighbours.

The two local industries which touched most nearly the abbey's interests were tin-mining and the woollen manufacture. For a brief period in the fourteenth century the abbots held the Tavistock stannary in farm, and were from time to time shareholders in mining ventures; but in general they refrained from direct intervention in its affairs, and were content to profit indirectly by the prosperity which the tin trade brought to the borough, and the business which accrued to the fair and weekly market held there. Incidentally, it was from the abbey's printing press that there issued in 1534 the first printed edition of the Statutes of the Stannary enacted in the tinnners' 'parliament' of Crockernor.

Lack of capital seems to have prevented the monks from profiting by the thirteenth-century boom in the wool trade. The rapid expansion of the woollen manufacture two centuries later led to some intensification of pasture farming on the abbey's lands; but for the most part the abbots preferred to let out their pastures at substantial rents to local sheep-farmers and to grant leases of sites suitable for fulling- and edge-tool mills. 'While the abbey did its

part in fostering local trade', writes Mr Finberg, 'its rôle was that of a ground-landlord taking his profit chiefly in the shape of premiums for the granting and renewal of leases.'

On March 3rd, 1539, Tavistock Abbey was dissolved. Its possessions were shared between the Crown and John, first Baron Russell, 'a non-resident grandee', and its responsibilities for education and the relief of poverty were taken over by the parish. Although in the course of its long history it achieved no more than a 'golden mediocrity', and its last abbot was content to retire unheroically into 'cushioned ease' on a pension of £100 a year, we may agree that 'no comparably civilised institution took its place'.

Mr Finberg has not the Olympian detachment of Mr Miller; there is even a hint of partisanship in his approach to his subject. And despite his formidable columns of statistics he can occasionally be guilty of an inexactitude. It is not, for instance, correct to say that the Mortmain Statute of 1279 made the acquisition of land by 'ecclesiastical persons' subject to a special inquest and a royal licence. The ban it imposed was absolute. The inquisition *ad quod damnum* and the licence to alienate were later concessions.

Mr Colvin's book on the White Canons<sup>3</sup> is at once more and less comprehensive in its scope than the two Cambridge studies. It sets out to sketch the history of the Premonstratensian Order in England from its establishment in the twelfth century to its suppression in the sixteenth; but it is concerned rather with its 'constitutional' development than with its social and economic activities. The first chapter, which deals with the origins of the Order in France and Germany, has a special interest because of the relation of the White Canons to the Cistercians on the one hand and the Dominicans on the other. They borrowed the whole constitutional framework of their institute from Citeaux; while St Dominic, as is well-known, used the customs of Prémontré as the basis of the first 'distinction' of the constitutions of the Order of Preachers, which he thus placed deliberately in continuity with the latest development of the canonical movement. The Premonstratensians, however, never achieved that 'synthesis between monastic asceticism and apostolic activity' which was Dominic's aim. As Mr Colvin shows, missionary work such as that in which the German houses engaged among the Wends in the twelfth

3 H. M. Colvin. *The White Canons in England*. (Oxford University Press; 35s.)

century never became a regular feature of Premonstratensian life, and when Innocent III was in need of preachers to combat the Albigensian heresy it was to the Cistercians and not to the Premonstratensians that he turned. Thanks, however, to the right which the White Canons established to serve their appropriated churches, the cure of souls became one of the most characteristic activities of the Order throughout the Middle Ages; and Mr Colvin has a valuable section on the way in which the English houses discharged their parochial responsibilities.

The chapter in which he traces the progressive slackening of the bonds uniting the English abbeys to the centre of authority at Prémontré, from the crisis arising in 1296 over the bull *Clericis Laicos* down to 1512 when the English abbots obtained from Julius II the grant of complete autonomy, has a melancholy interest. The Abbot of Welbeck became head of the Order in England and Wales with authority to hold general chapters, carry out visitations, confirm elections and collect contributions *vice* the Abbot-General. As Mr Colvin writes, the history of the English White Canons in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is 'a demonstration in miniature of the forces which were bringing about the dissolution of Christendom itself', and in particular of the action of that incipient nationalism which was to make possible the breach with Rome.

The relations of the individual houses to their secular patrons is a fascinating theme on which Mr Colvin is able to throw a certain amount of new light. He shows, for instance, that, with the growth of 'bastard feudalism' in the later Middle Ages, 'maintenance' became almost as necessary to a religious house as it was to a secular person with interests to protect, and the great fifteenth-century lords whose fortified manor-houses dominated the countryside as the keeps of the Norman barons had done four hundred years before, numbered abbots and priors among their clients.

Mr Colvin has amassed much new material illustrating a number of different aspects of the history of the White Canons in England; and students of Premonstratensian institutions will be grateful to him for assembling it all between the covers of a single volume; but the general reader may well recoil before the mass of detailed information with which he is confronted. The book, though solid, lacks grace; it is essentially one to 'dig in' rather than to read.