

MEDIEVAL CHRISTENDOM: TWO PRESENTATIONS

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SCHOLARSHIP and reflection go together all too seldom. Two new books about the Middle Ages combine them in a quite exceptional way. It is no accident, but a sad commentary on present historical teaching, that one book was written by a professor in retirement, the other by a college tutor in a period of enforced rest. Both convey the rare and delightful impression of learning recollected in tranquillity. One remembers that the great Belgian medievalist, Henri Pirenne, wrote his *Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe* far away from his books and his students in a German prison camp in the First World War.

The Thirteenth Century (1216-1307) by Sir Maurice Powicke¹ falls into two parts; the change in method and treatment is easily discernible. The first part covering the reign of Henry III draws on the author's earlier book, *Henry III and the Lord Edward*, published in 1947. This large-scale work in two volumes summarized the findings of recent studies including the author's minute researches into the reign of Henry III. Here he condenses it into a crisp and exciting narrative. A few details are new, since the first book provoked discussion, and some fresh studies have appeared. But the main difference is that judgments stand out more sharply and the characters have clearer outlines. If Henry remains very much the same, a naïve, changeable, but 'fundamentally decent' person, his great friend and antagonist, Simon de Montfort, has become more sympathetic and intelligible. The incalculable trouble-maker, while still ambitious and erratic, now stands in closer relations with the knights and freeholders of the shires who supported his cause through their mistrust of royal promises. We can see better what was being fought for in the Barons' War and what was eventually gained by it. Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln, the object of so much study in recent years, emerges from the shadows that made him seem larger than life. Sir Maurice has been devoting much attention to Grosseteste. Better understanding does not make for better liking.

¹ Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1953. (30s.) Volume IV of the *Oxford History of England*, edited by G. N. Clark.

He has said elsewhere that Grosseteste 'expected the impossible from human nature' and was 'too certain of himself and too tidy-minded', in spite of his greatness as bishop and scholar, 'to keep in touch with the souls that he longed to save'.² This view of him colours the picture of Grosseteste in the new Oxford History. He is shown with a definite programme for the reform of the Church and for the relations between Church and State, but it is too abstract to be workable. Students of Grosseteste in his other capacities will feel a thrill at seeing him mingling with his contemporaries in English politics.

When Henry III has died, and Edward I returns from crusading for his coronation, we reach the second and longer part of the book. The preliminary work for this had still to be done. There were many monographs, but no general survey. So the evidence has to be presented, at least in part, as a basis for the conclusions, instead of being taken for granted as it could be for the period before 1274. The second part resembles *Henry III and the Lord Edward* in so far as the scale of the series will allow. This has meant a departure from the plan followed in all volumes of the *Oxford History of England* which have appeared so far. The present volume is both longer (there are 829 pages) and more specialized. Social and economic, intellectual and religious history has been omitted to make more room for political and constitutional. A reader who complains at this arrangement betrays more ignorance than enthusiasm. The history of the peasantry and even of the basic economic trends of the thirteenth century is in the melting pot. It will be a long time yet before the history of scholasticism in England can be presented in a coherent form. A few pages allotted to these subjects would have to be descriptive rather than narrative. Description shows society as static and nothing could be more misleading. The little that we know of economic history in the thirteenth century at least suggests rapid changes. To tell what they were and bring them into relation with other aspects of the period will be the next task for historians. As for intellectual history, Sir Maurice does something much more worth while than producing a few generalizations. He suggests the academic background of his personnel. Commentators on Aristotle's *Politics*, canon lawyers, rhetors and theologians from all over

² Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* xxxv (1953), 506.

Europe play their part in the English scene. They make far more impression on us as individual actors than they would do in the most skilfully contrived crowd. It is largely owing to Sir Maurice's width of interest, and to the encouragement he has given to students in many different fields, that the history of thirteenth-century England has become so unmanageable. A splendid bibliography guides the reader to those subjects which have been omitted as well as to those which have been fully treated.

Even within its self-imposed limits this is an over-populated book. The characters all belong to large families or to large circles. The author's favourite adjective is *busy*. His readers at first will have the sensation of a tourist alone in a foreign capital. People mill round him. All hurry about their affairs or discuss urgent matters with their friends in cafés. The stranger feels out of it. Later on, if he perseveres and takes up his introductions, he will come to value his experience and will pity those whom he sees being dragged about on a conducted tour. He will learn how foreigners look at things and how they behave. Similarly, readers of *The Thirteenth Century* will come to understand the mentality of the English baronage and of the Welsh princes. These were men of strong passions and of even stronger interests. We become familiar with them and an episode such as Llywelyn's vengeance on the marcher lord, William de Braose, will cease to surprise us. William, when captured by Llywelyn in border warfare, had an intrigue with Llywelyn's wife; according to some accounts she was also William's grandmother. Llywelyn discovered the secret after William's release and had him publicly hanged during a visit. He wrote to inform the de Braose widow, adding that this should not interfere with the marriage arranged between William's son and his daughter. Sentiment is kept apart from the practical business of a marriage alliance. We see Edward I in his familiar roles as administrator, lawgiver, diplomat, financier and warrior, but also in the less familiar ones of crusader and sportsman. He took his crusading duties seriously. And the terrible old king appears 'sumquat chilgered', like Arthur in *Sir Gawain*, when he defers the surrender of Stirling in 1304, so as to use a new siege engine under the eyes of his queen and her ladies watching from a specially constructed platform. Every reader, no matter what his personal field may be, will find some fresh and suggestive detail in the wealth before him.

The book is an interpretation as well as a narrative. It maintains a thesis. That is what makes it stimulating as a whole. Whether we agree or differ, we have to admire a closely knit argument. Many years ago Sir Maurice confessed that the guiding thread in history for him was men's striving to live together: their conflicts have less importance than the give and take which resolves conflict and finds a solution for common problems. This view appears in the first pages. The efforts to pacify England after the death of King John by the royalists working with a papal legate 'have been put in the forefront because they indicate the main theme of this book. They allow us to see in perspective the interplay of mind and character in all sorts and conditions of men, the success and failure of Simon de Montfort, the leadership in his best days of Edward, and the gradual evolution of our institutions, including parliament.' There was no fundamental clash of interest between king and magnates so long as the king could balance the influence of royal servants on the one hand, of the magnates, his 'natural advisers', on the other in his counsels. Henry III was unwise enough to upset the balance, thus driving the magnates into opposition. Even so, they 'soon discovered that they were royalist at heart'. Edward I, more astute and more reasonable than his father, kept them loyal except in a war-time crisis near the end of his reign. The lesser landholders, men of local rather than national standing, as they made an increasing contribution to local government and to national taxes, came to have a recognized place in parliament and to have their interests catered for in legislation. It was a natural process, speeded up by the various opposition movements under Henry III, but beginning before, and continuing afterwards. Logically it was implicit in the principles of Magna Carta. The Church played a prominent part in reconciling differences and in ensuring a fair deal. The passages on the Church in *The Thirteenth Century* should be read in the light of the author's brilliant essay on 'The Christian Life in the Middle Ages'.³ He always sees England as part of medieval Christendom. There were many cross currents, as we learn in the chapter on 'The Clergy under Two Rules of Law'. The clergy never stood together over against the laity as an order dedicated to an

³ Reprinted from *The Legacy of the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1926) in F. M. Powicke, *The Christian Life in the Middle Ages and Other Essays* (Oxford, 1935), 1-30.

apostolate. Their property and their family connections bound them to the world more closely than zealous reformers wished. The majority were happy blacklegs on such questions as the use of secular courts for civil actions when it suited them. Yet their leaders were still upholding the ideal of Christendom united against the infidel. To realize this ideal, Christians must have peace among themselves. They must accept a common moral standard and be guided by divine and natural law. 'This incessant tendency in medieval men or groups of men to come to terms with each other, even for a little while, implied more than a sense of coherence or mutual advantage; it implied a respect for law and a belief in something which could maintain law. The trickiest oath-breaker in Powys or La Marche was paying lip-service to something. In the thirteenth century this "something" was a common sense of decency, derived from various sources and expressed in the teaching of the Church. It was suffused throughout society, not forcibly imposed.' 'As soon as we touch medieval social relations, . . . we make contact with a system charged with moral and religious power. It was a strange system, curiously compromised by worldliness, and directed, in unexpected ways, towards other-worldliness. We may not like it; but it was there.'

This harmony and unity, imperfect and intangible at best, has begun to break down before the end of the period. The English episcopate ceased to supply men of the type of Stephen Langton or Grosseteste, who could unite or try to unite Church, king and baronage in a common programme. Of the late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century prelates, only Robert Winchelsey succeeded in 'stirring the old fires'. If one continues the story, Miss K. Edwards has shown how the bishops fell apart in Edward II's reign when Winchelsey's death left them without a leader.⁴ It is a paradox, pointing to the struggles of the later Middle Ages, that the religious orders, which had both expressed and strengthened the universality of the Church, contributed notably to fostering the anti-English feeling of the Welsh and Irish. The last ten years of his reign marked the failure of Edward's Scottish policy. His sensible plan for joining the two kingdoms, each with its own laws, under the rule of one king broke against the Scottish hatred of interference. The strain of war on many fronts, Gascony,

⁴ 'The Political Importance of the English Bishops during the Reign of Edward II', *English Historical Review*, lix (1944), 311-347.

Wales, Scotland and Ireland, cracked the bonds between king and magnates. Two baronial practices with a sinister future, the recruiting of liveried retainers and the sworn confederacy, date back to 'the time of disturbance' under Henry III, if not earlier. All this is pointed out to us. If we look ahead into the fourteenth century, we shall see the peasantry coming into the picture. The development of the common law had led to the depression of the vilein's legal status by drawing a clearer distinction between serf and freeman.⁵ This is the underside of the age of Bracton. The Peasants' Revolt in 1381 would mark the climax of a series of local risings and of resistance in various forms which go back into the thirteenth century.⁶ The last years of Edward I's reign begin a new chapter in English history, as Sir Maurice says, though here he has to treat it as 'an epilogue'. His chapter on the 'years of emergency' will be for many readers the most exciting part of the book. The suspense is unbroken. Edward dies leaving his problems to his son and to the writer of the next volume.

Mr Southern ends his account of medieval Christendom where Sir Maurice begins.⁷ Here we see the first construction of the system that we have watched at work. Mr Southern sweeps widely through time and space, from the late tenth to the early thirteenth century and from Spain to Byzantium and Palestine, from Scandinavia to Sicily. This is indeed a conducted tour, but of an unusual kind. We go by plane on a sunny day. Each feature of the landscape has the clarity of objects seen through clear mountain air. Mr Southern starts from historical geography, the changing relations between Latin Christendom and its neighbours, and goes on to 'the bonds of society', changing social relationships. Then he considers 'the ordering of the Christian life', the Hildebrandine and monastic reform movements, ending with the schools and early scholasticism and vernacular literature. None of these subjects is presented in isolation. The novelty of approach springs from the fact that the writer has scrapped every conventional category. The student will find no consecutive treatment of

⁵ A. L. Poole, *The Obligations of Society in the XII and XIII Centuries* (Oxford, 1946), 13.

⁶ R. H. Hilton, 'Peasant Movements in England before 1381', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, ii (1949), 117-136.

⁷ R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (Hutchinson's University Library; 25s.).

the growth of states, history of the Church or of institutions, economic and social history, *Geistesgeschichte*. Mr Southern is interested in these things much less for themselves than for their relations to other things. This is a history of causes and connections, though the treatment is factual rather than abstract. Familiar facts are shaken into a new pattern with others, less familiar. How different they look! And the pattern never stays still; it changes before our eyes. To give two illustrations: most text-books give us the history of medieval France in terms of the rise of the French monarchy to a predominant position *vis-à-vis* the great fiefs. The rise of the fiefs is usually disposed of in a few vague sentences. The power of dukes and counts in the early Middle Ages appears as a tragic consequence of the weakness of the last Carolingians and early Capetians. Here the creation of one of these fiefs, the county of Anjou, is presented as a positive achievement. The counts were truly creative. They made an orderly corner at a time when all secular authority was necessarily local. They come to life before us, with their conquests, their crimes, their social activities and their religious foundations. We have the same clean break with textbooks on the history of medieval thought. These tell us about the rise of dialectic to a dominant place in the teaching of the seven liberal arts and about the application of logic to philosophy and theology. They tell us how, with little clue to the why. Mr Southern has more to say on the why of the process: 'Logic was an instrument of order in a chaotic world'. His exposition of this thesis strikes me as the most masterly thing of its kind since Boissier in his *Fin du paganisme* accounted for the appeal of rhetoric to the Romans: rhetoric symbolized the dominance of mind over matter; a frail orator sways the angry mob. Mr Southern's picture of the logician setting his ideas in order is just as convincing and dramatic.

Sentiment and emotion, both religious and secular, receive delicate and feeling treatment. Beneath its gentleness, however, this is a ruthless book. Absence of civilized traditions may be a help rather than a hindrance in achieving stability. Power founded on robbery can make itself respectable. Law throws its mantle over the *status quo*. A successful reform merely changes the method of wire-pulling. The growth of comfort and culture for the upper classes hardly affect the medieval peasant. The latter, whether forced into a slavery that he detests or living in a legal

freedom that bears no relation to his economic standard, continues his old way of life: 'the produce of the land had increased six fold or ten fold during these centuries, but very little of this increase went into the pocket or the stomach of the individual peasant'. The author never forgets him. The peasants condition as well as support the medieval world. The most characteristic qualities of the schoolmen have their roots in a rural society, using primitive methods to wrest a living from the land. The last pages of the book suggest the influence of popular piety and popular ways of thought on the development of thirteenth-century devotions.

A book as original as this could only have been written by a scholar who supplements his special studies by amazingly wide reading. We get the benefit of his personal research on Berengar, Lanfranc and St Anselm and their circles. Some of it was hitherto unpublished, though the modest and untechnical presentation might conceal this fact. But Mr Southern is interested in other people's research, a rarer thing. He has digested the findings of recent scholarship of the most diverse and difficult kinds. Occasionally a reader may disagree with him, but only on a shade of emphasis. Perhaps the failure of the Second Crusade depressed and disillusioned contemporaries rather more than he suggests. Perhaps he allows too little importance to the translations of Aristotle made direct from the Greek, as against those made *via* Arabic. He has every right to his own interpretation of the evidence which he knows so well. As a scholarly, readable and original synthesis *The Making of the Middle Ages* will stand beside Marc Bloch's classic, *La société féodale*.

The student who begins with Mr Southern and goes on to *The Thirteenth Century* will have had a rich experience. He will have lived with medieval men; he will have examined the springs of their thought and their conduct. He will have seen England as a small but active part of Latin Christendom, and then Christendom as a background to England: both books are European in outlook, though one deals with European and the other with English history. He will emerge from his experience stimulated and possibly appalled at the prospect of so much achievement and frustration, so much growth and decay, so many unforeseen consequences of men's actions. He cannot remain passive. Both authors will whip him into thought.