

# Preface

## *A mind in love*

A *festschrift* for a priest is almost inevitably ambivalent and incomplete, for much that was most admirable in his life's work is someone else's secret. A *festschrift* for a scholar-priest must negotiate the danger of splitting the scholar from the priest, for the scholarship can be encountered publicly and assessed on its own terms. This collection of essays and poems by people who knew, loved and had their lives touched by Kenelm Foster is an attempt to hold together the Dominican, the priest and the scholar, and to place the man in his world. The task is lightened by the fact that the best of all tributes to a great scholar, a collection of his own essays, is in preparation by Kenelm's pupil, friend and colleague, Professor Patrick Boyde, and will be published by Cambridge University Press.

Kenelm Foster was a member of a generation in which Catholics were thinly represented in Britain's universities. The religious ethos in which he was formed was both pugnacious and defensive. To be a scholar and a Catholic then, certainly to be a scholar and a medievalist, was to be a Catholic scholar, in a sense which hardly, if at all, exists today. He retained some of the attitudes of that ethos—as in the early morning sermon aside that at the Reformation the English upper classes had created a church for themselves to be comfortable in. But, to a greater degree even than his elder contemporary David Knowles, Kenelm brought to his life work a passionate personal engagement with humanity which transcended sectarian polemic. His life work was the exploration of the cultural shape of grace. The writers he studied were never for him anything less than living, suffering, men and women struggling towards redemption, their writings a precious clue to our own humanity and God's ways with it. No-one who knew him failed to be moved by the intensity and reality of his encounter with the people of the past. Surely uniquely among Dante scholars he worried, as a priest, that the writing of the *Inferno* might have been morally destructive for Dante, that a sublime literary work might have been purchased for humanity at Dante's spiritual cost.

It was that quality of personal engagement that ensured that there was no distance between his religious vocation and his academic work. In his exploration of the literature of the Christian middle ages he explored his own passionate humanity. The process was often acutely painful; to the very end his mind and heart were questing, tentative, yet

extraordinarily clear-sighted. An essay on angels for the Blackfriars edition of St Thomas's *Summa Theologiae* might have been for others an academic exercise; for him it was an exhausting wrestle with fundamental problems of good and evil, the mysteries of choice, the meaning of damnation. His Dominican vocation, followed with unflinching integrity, was never for him an easy one, precisely because it involved this unending intellectual encounter with his own nature and that of God. It was the wisdom, the depth and the humanity which he drew from that wrestling which informed his priesthood, and which made him, to those who knew him, unforgettable.

EAMON DUFFY  
JOHN ORME MILLS OP

## A Sermon

### Robert Ombres OP

*Preached at Blackfriars, Cambridge, on Sunday, 9 February, three days after Kenelm Foster's death, to a congregation that knew him well. The readings for that Sunday were: Isaiah 6:1–8 (the call of Isaiah); 1 Corinthians 15:1–11 (Paul's testimony of Christ's death 'for our sins' and resurrection); and Luke 5:1–11 (the call of the first disciples).*

Kenelm would have been delighted at finding this Pauline reading, if he had been preaching today. He loved St Paul. He was his clear-favourite New Testament writer. Paul, who often spoke in the first person. Paul, who was like a boxer, and not in vain. Paul, who was always arguing, full of polemic and self-polemic. Paul, who could chart in his experience, even on his own body, the workings of grace, of grappling with the Saviour. Paul, who wrestled with meaning. We can even imagine Paul to be like his thought—tough, full of wiry strength. Kenelm had been a boxer at Downside and always kept some of the instincts and reactions of a boxer. Kenelm, who always asked awkward questions, even as a Dominican student; so he was banished to a parish as a kind of punishment, he who was so obviously clever. (But questions were not