

## DAVID KNOWLES

The Ecclesiastical History Society was founded in 1961 by the initiative and inspiration of Clifford Dugmore; and it was Professor Dugmore who invited David Knowles to lecture to the opening meeting, and proposed his name for election as first President. To their friendship the Society owes much. Already in 1950 they were associated in the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, and David Knowles remained a member of the Advisory Committee (from 1966 the Advisory Editorial Board) until his death. His first lecture to the Society was on 'The Medieval Archbishops of York';<sup>1</sup> and his Presidential (1962) was a very characteristic critical survey in his best manner on 'Some recent work on early Benedictine history'.<sup>2</sup> In our early conferences he was a familiar figure, an image of spiritual friendship and scholarly aspiration to inspire his colleagues; we saw in him one of the great ecclesiastical historians of his day, and our friend.

The outline of his life is familiar to readers of W. A. Pantin's appreciation in *The Historian and Character and other Essays* (Cambridge 1963); and he himself described his formation as a historian in his lecture on 'Academic History'.<sup>3</sup> 'At school I was never, either in fact or in desire, an historian. I was a classic, and in my school days the only spell that bound me was that of great literature.' He went on to describe how he passed on from the classics and English poetry to the great works of literary history: Macaulay, Gibbon, Grote, Clarendon and many others. He joined the Downside community in 1914, but it was only in the late 1920s that he became a monastic historian. His first book, *The American Civil War*, was published in 1926. 'My inspiration came, at an infinite distance, from Thucydides. I did not approach the subject primarily in order to discover the truth, but to share with others what the story had meant for me'.<sup>4</sup> He went on to describe how reviews of the book brought home the serious professional nature of the historian's task, and how, not long after, he began work for *The Monastic Order* by going through *Domesday Book* 'copying out every entry relating to a monastic house'.

<sup>1</sup> A bye-product of the related paper 'The English Bishops 1070-1532' in *Medieval Studies presented to Aubrey Gwynn, S.J.*, ed J. A. Watt, J. B. Morrall and F. X. Martin (Dublin 1961) pp 283-96.

<sup>2</sup> *SCH* 1, pp 35-46.

<sup>3</sup> 'Academic History', *History*, 47 (1962) pp 223-32.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* p 229-30.

## CHRISTOPHER BROOKE

*The Monastic Order in England* was published in 1940. 'There was something very heartening in getting such a book in the summer of Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain'.<sup>5</sup> Hitherto he had been known to a few historians; from now on his reputation grew rapidly wider. In 1944 he became a Fellow of Peterhouse; in 1947 he succeeded my father, Z. N. Brooke, as Professor of Medieval History at Cambridge, and he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy; in 1954 he was translated to the Regius Chair, from which he retired in 1963. He was much else besides: President of the Royal Historical Society (1956–60); honorary fellow of two colleges, honorary doctor of many universities, including his own.

He did not see the Church's history as divorced from the general study of man's past. 'The life of Napoleon, the influence of Neoplatonism in the twelfth century, and the origins and business methods of a great brewery or soap-factory are all equally the materials of history', he wrote.<sup>6</sup> But he went on: '. . . Nevertheless it is surely true that human understanding and sympathy and love have always been elements in the make-up of the greatest historians.' In his own mind and approach an intense involvement somehow combined with an objectivity almost Olympian. His judgements could be sharp; yet he was justly famed for his kindness and fairness. In 'Cardinal Gasquet as an Historian',<sup>7</sup> he reconciled Coulton and Gasquet, a feat even he could hardly have accomplished in their lifetime, in a feast of wit which was wholly fair to both, yet hid the faults of neither. 'Towards the end of his life, indeed, Gasquet's capacity for carelessness amounted almost to genius . . . He lacked that passion for absolute intellectual chastity, which . . . in an historian is as much an occupational requirement as is absolute integrity in a judge'. 'In Gasquet's case the triumphal car had a good start, but Vengeance came limping after in the person of George Gordon Coulton'. Gasquet had his virtues as a man, and even as an historian; and they are enumerated without fear or favour.

If he lives on in his friends and pupils as well as in his writings, then David Knowles will be seen to have made a major contribution to several branches of medieval history. But in this context, as a reminder of what he has meant to the history of the Church, let us dwell for a

<sup>5</sup> Pantin in *The Historian and Character*, p xxiii.

<sup>6</sup> 'Academic History', p 231.

<sup>7</sup> The Creighton Lecture for 1956, reprinted in *The Historian and Character*, chapter 11: the quotations are from pp 254, 261, 257–8.

moment on his greatest work, *The Monastic Order* and *The Religious Orders in England* (3 vols, Cambridge 1948–59). In the spoken word he could convey, all the more because of his still, small voice and figure, the power of his intellectual and spiritual stature. So in his best books these are revealed in some of the finest prose dedicated to historical writing in this century. Much of his happiest writing is in the last volume of the series, and its combination of spiritual insight with wit, shrewdness of judgement and detachment helps us to understand the way in which he won homage and fealty from secular historians – and so helped secure the recognition of his historical interests as a valid and important part of history. But my own favourite will always be the first volume, for it changed my life. I well recall *The Monastic Order* sitting on my father's desk, and he – always inclined to severity in his first judgement on books – astonishing me by the warmth of enthusiasm which he showed only when really roused. Soon after, to my father's entertainment, I began to read it and to note misprints and minor errors – and there were such in all David Knowles' works, fine scholar though he was; but when I began to try my novice scalpel on one of my father's own works, he felt the time had come for more constructive tasks. So began the work of collaboration out of which (other things apart) eventually came *The Heads of Religious Houses*,<sup>8</sup> and, long before (1942) my first meeting with David Knowles. When he began to work, literary and narrative history were going out of fashion among professional historians, and especially among medievalists, but he came to history from English literature, and first read and wrote history as literature. He had also been trained as a scholar, and had sat at the feet both of Abbot Cuthbert Butler and of Abbot Ramsay, whose work on the text of Cyprian he aided; he had met Edmund Bishop. Thus he came to *The Monastic Order* with a strong sense of the nature of critical scholarship and a love of narrative history; and he had chosen one of the few medieval fields in which the evidence supports and invites both ample narrative and analysis. He also brought a devotion to the subject which illuminates many of its pages. His final judgement was severe, for he quotes on the last page Christ's terrifying call to perfection, which he, following John Cassian and many others, expected a monk to answer. Yet the book is also infused with the warm charity and human understanding which fills so many of his writings, and which we knew in him. *The*

<sup>8</sup> Ed Knowles, C. N. L. Brooke and Vera C. M. London (Cambridge 1972); see p vii for the roles of M.D.K. and Z.N.B. in the origin of the project.

CHRISTOPHER BROOKE

*Monastic Order* wrought a change in monastic history and in much more; just as all of us who knew and loved him were touched and chastened by his presence.

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Additional note: the lecture on 'The Medieval Archbishops of York' referred to previously was published as the Oliver Sheldon Memorial Lecture (York Civic Trust 1961).