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A Monastic Renaissance at St Albans: Thomas Walsingham and his Circle, c. 1350-1440 (review)

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Reviews

A Monastic Renaissance at St Albans: Thomas Walsingham and his Circle, c. 1350–1440. By JAMES G. CLARK. (Oxford Historical Monographs.) Oxford: Clarendon Press. 2004. xii + 316 pp. £55. ISBN 0 19 927595 5.

IT MUST HAVE BEEN MODESTY that restrained Dr Clark from using the definite article and calling his study *The Monastic Renaissance at St Albans*, for the rehabilitation of the later monastic order is well under way, and he is an energetic contributor to the movement. Even so, the use of the word ‘renaissance’ is a challenge in itself. It is long and well known that the *renascimento* came later to the clod-hopping English than to anyone else, enmired as they were in medieval thought and modes until, and even after, John Colet first unfolded his notes on the Pauline epistles. That established, there seemed little point in disturbing the torpor of the monasteries by impertinent enquiry, and more or less a century ago the religious life of the later Middle Ages was neatly wrapped and labelled to be laid by.

Those assumptions have been challenged in recent decades by a number of enterprises. One of the most cogent is the investigation of the history of universities, where the monastic students outnumbered all other cadres from the fourteenth century onwards, and took a leading part in the intellectual life of the time. It is also notable that for all the strenuous work of the mendicants, Benedictine students were still the largest such group in Oxford in the sixteenth century. Another light has come from the development of codicology, which in its latest phases has revealed not only how busy the monastic students were, but also the extent to which their mother houses were involved in equipping them and maintaining their studies. Those ventures, and such work as Barbara Harvey’s notable exposition of the life of the community at Westminster, have entirely transformed the accepted picture of the last centuries of English monasticism. Other changes will follow.

Thomas Walsingham was born *c.* 1340, to judge by the record of his profession and ordination, and most probably on the Norfolk estates of St Albans. He seems to have studied in Oxford: although there is no record of his graduation, he was commemorated as a denizen of Gloucester College, and it is unlikely that he could have acquired his learning simply by his own endeavours in the abbey. V. H. Galbraith, who was apt to measure the health of the religious houses in the later Middle Ages by weighing their contributions to narrative history, saw Walsingham’s life as one of unfulfilled promise. Having continued the St Albans tradition by his drafts, and in the process revealed something of the political anxieties of the house, Walsingham had a brief experience of administration at Wymondham. He then returned, perhaps a little disillusioned, to the abbey and buried himself in the archives and the library. He held no further office, and the *Ypodigma Neustrie* was an unworthy omnium gatherum, eloquent of his failing powers. It is not clear that the *Ypodigma* as we have it was Walsingham’s work in anything but its title and implied aim, and the volume of his literary and other compositions suggests that he was anything but a recluse. Although he held no recorded office after his return from

Wymondham he was evidently respected as a senior member of convent to the latest years of his life.

There are at least three themes in Walsingham's career, which is the central thread of this thoughtful and well-presented study. After his formative years, including such time as he spent at Oxford, he revived and probably orchestrated the tradition of historical writing at St Albans, continuing the *Gesta Abbatum* and the great legacy of Matthew Paris's chronicle writing. He also, presumably during and probably after his time as precentor, wrote a treatise on music, and concerned himself closely with the maintenance of the liturgy at the heart of conventual life. Beyond that, however, he developed an informed interest in classical literature and antiquities, seeking out texts and compiling anthologies. His principal work was the *Archana deorum*, a commentary on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, beyond which he gathered a wide range of material for the *Historia Alexandri magni principis*, and for *Dites dictatus*, an account of the Trojan war based upon the *Ephemeris belli Troiani* of Dictys Cretensis, but reinforced with as much of the ancient and medieval traditions as he could find.

Those were enterprising and exacting compilations, but they were in a sense secondary to Walsingham's deep knowledge of the archives of the abbey, a wide variety of public records, and much contemporary historical writing. That he was able to balance his interests and maintain such an output of finished work over a career lasting some sixty years says much for the quality of his mind and the education that he had first acquired and then developed for his ambitious ends. His career, and the whole body of his work, has to be seen against the intellectual condition of the major Benedictine houses in his time, and the condition of medieval society at large. The *possessionati* were deeply committed to administering their houses as well as to meeting a variety of demands from their patrons, beginning but by no means ending with the needs of the crown. The picture of them sinking into a mire of self-indulgence, with private cubicles and pocket money for the brethren, distorts both their relations with a secular world that had changed greatly since the heroic age, when they enjoyed a lonely intellectual monopoly, and the use that they made of the resources at the time. Maitland's observation that the Middle Ages were not all equally medieval is well borne out by the intellectual activity at St Albans and its congeners. It was eminently rational to buy some of the services that secular society was now able to provide and that the monasteries had once to contrive for themselves and for others. Pocket money was spent on books as well as on penknives, and the condition of surviving manuscripts from St Albans suggests that they were well read. It is not difficult to believe in the light of Clark's searching enquiries that Walsingham's classical tastes looked forward to a transformed scholarship rather than back to a hidebound and derivative tradition.

Colchester

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WITHIN THE FIELD OF THE STUDY AND CATALOGUING of medieval manuscripts, some of the most complex and intractable problems are associated with sources written