

PLATE XXXI



*Photograph by Gilbert Adams*

DORIS MARY STENTON

## DORIS MARY STENTON

1894-1971

**D**ORIS MARY STENTON, the only child of Joseph and Amelia Parsons of Woodley, near Reading, was born on 27 August 1894. She was educated at the Abbey School, Reading, where, to judge from a remark once made to the writer, that she had a certain satisfaction in having proved that she had far exceeded the expectations of her headmistress, it seems that her ability had not been fully recognized. She was none the less mindful of her debt to the school which she served for many years as a governor and for some years as Honorary Secretary to its Council, always concerned to promote its well-being, especially on the academic side.

In 1912 she entered University College, Reading, as a day student coming in from Woodley on her bicycle, a good preparation for the long cycle rides she later took with her husband, as a contemporary who remained a friend all her life, commented.<sup>1</sup> History was one of the subjects she took for the London Intermediate examination and she once said that Sir Frank's first lecture in the course was like 'the opening of windows'. Her fellow student was quite overwhelmed with the excitement of her interest: 'I think they were attracted to one another at once and from that moment Doris was determined to get a First Class just as later Frank was determined to "save her from teaching" and to start her on research as soon as possible. At his suggestion she was cataloguing coins for a Mr. West of Abingdon even before we had taken finals.' In November 1916 she took her first class in the final examination of the London degree and, as she has said in her account of Sir Frank, she was enabled to start research on a small grant. In 1917 she obtained an assistant lectureship at University College, Reading.

When Canon Foster, the founder of the Lincoln Record Society, had begun the transcription of the dean and chapter's charters which he was later to publish as the *Registrum Antiquissimum of the Cathedral Church of Lincoln*, Doris went to Timberland, his parish fifteen miles to the south-east of Lincoln, to help with the work. She lived in a farmhouse in the village and during that time got an insight into village life in a countryside very different from that round Reading. It was a small

<sup>1</sup> Miss N. Evelyn K. Smith.

community in a county far more isolated than Berkshire. Her daily association with a most remarkable clergyman and scholar whose encyclopaedic knowledge of the county, its place-names, its agricultural customs and characteristics, its secular organization and problems, was of infinite value to a young scholar eager for every variety of additional experience. It must be emphasized that Canon Foster was much involved with the contemporary and not merely with the historic aspects of the church, both in the diocese and the parish as well as with secular country life, and the consciousness of the similarities as well as the contrasts between the past and the present is an invaluable asset in dealing with the records illuminating the daily life of ordinary people many hundreds of years ago. Her interest in the contemporary scene in those years was a warm one and extended to the later careers of the village girls, whom Canon Foster had trained as his clerks, and the successes of one of the farmers as a renowned breeder of Lincoln-Red cattle. Her work directly for the edition of the charters was not of very long duration but while the second volume of the *Registrum Antiquissimum* was dedicated to Sir Frank the third bore the inscription:

Doridi Mariae Stenton cum marito praeclaro in aevi medii studiis felicissime coniunctae inter amicos amicissimae hoc opus dedicat  
C. W. F.

For the forty-eight years of her married life most of her activities are already chronicled in her memoir of her husband but some are not touched on and there are some aspects which, in a much changed world, are worth stressing. From 1919, when she was twenty-five, she lived in a manner most conducive to the pursuit of learning. She already had a college lectureship and was fortunate in that Reading, unlike at least one modern university, did not ban husband and wife working in the same department. She had about her a remarkable private library which grew in succeeding years into the noble collection now a memorial to them both at Reading University. She had also access to the wide knowledge of her husband, opportunities of prolonged discussion on the subjects which concerned them both and his constant encouragement and pleasure in her work. She could direct the running of her house without having actually to cook, clean, and shop herself, she could entertain colleagues, friends, scholars from at home and abroad, and students with ease, having, as she has said, ample domestic help before the outbreak of war. Not that she was unskilled in the

domestic arts—I well remember Canon Foster telling me, before I had met her, that in addition to her historical activities she enjoyed the pleasures of dress and, he added in his deliberate distinctive voice 'she's a *very* good cook'—a more unusual accomplishment in a woman scholar in 1930 than now. This meant that in the more difficult domestic situation from 1939 onwards she was never at a loss even when the resident staff were a memory of the past.

As recorded in the memoir of Sir Frank, a decision was taken at Lincoln to resuscitate the Pipe Roll Society, which had been suspended since 1914. The first Council of the revived society was held in 1924 and from 1925 until 1962 Doris was its Honorary Secretary and General Editor. From this time there came the steady stream of those essential sources for the history of the period, the splendidly produced rolls for the reigns of Richard I and John, all edited by herself with the exception of 1 Richard I, already edited by Joseph Hunter in 1844, and those for 7 John and 14 and 16 John edited by pupils, Mr. Sidney Smith and Dr. Patricia Barnes (later to succeed her as General Editor), and 17 John, edited by Professor Holt. She also set in hand a number of volumes on related subjects, like the *Itinerary of Richard I* and a volume of the *Cartae Antiquae Rolls* edited by Mr. Lionel Landon; a second volume of the *Cartae Antiquae Rolls* by Professor J. Conway Davies, and the *Herefordshire Domesday*, edited by Professor Galbraith and the late James Tait. Another group of records, often published originally many years before, either in translation or abstract and much in need of up to date treatment, was the great collection of Feet of Fines. Those for Norfolk, 1198–1202, and for Norfolk, 1201–12, and Suffolk, 1199–1215, were edited by Miss Barbara Dodwell, a colleague; and those for Lincolnshire, 1199–1215, by Mrs. Margaret Walker, a pupil. Her work for the society and for history in general was recognized by the publication in 1962 of *A Medieval Miscellany for Doris Mary Stenton*, a collection of papers by friends and pupils on subjects most closely connected with her own work. This was presented to her at a party, most fittingly held in the Public Record Office, the scene of her work for so many years past.

She also served on the Council of the Selden Society from 1957 to 1969; and on the Council of the Royal Historical Society from 1943 to 1946, from 1947 to 1951, and as a Vice-President from 1953 to 1957, during which time she was a member of its library and publication committees.

After becoming a lecturer in 1919 she was in 1956 appointed one of the first Readers in the University. In 1948 she received the degree of D.Litt. and was the first person to take this degree at Reading on the basis of her published work, the other recipients in the previous twenty-two years of the life of the University having been honorands. Though a devoted member of the University she was not, as the Bursar said, 'a committee-minded person', but she served for fifteen years on the committee for Women's Halls and for a shorter period on that of the Museum of English Rural Life, and on the Joint Committee for Training Colleges.

Although Sir Frank had travelled frequently in France and Germany before the First World War they rarely went out of the British Isles after their marriage. This was perhaps partly due to their practice of spending vacations at Southwell in the early years and to their great love of their own country, especially the Danelaw and further north. Apart from a journey to Scandinavia they seem not to have gone abroad until 1963; in 1961 Doris was invited to give the Jayne Lectures for the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia in 1963. Sir Frank had declined an earlier invitation to the United States but, always delighted at any honour shown to his wife, he insisted that she should accept, in spite of her fear that the journey might be too great a strain for him. As it turned out they both immensely enjoyed their visit and the lectures published as *English Justice between the Norman Conquest and the Great Charter* contained as a fourth chapter the Raleigh Lecture delivered to the British Academy in 1958.

In 1953 she had been elected a Fellow of the British Academy; in 1958 the degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa* was conferred on her at Glasgow, and in 1968 she received the degree of Doctor of Letters at the Encaenia at Oxford; at the same time she was elected an honorary Fellow of St. Hilda's College.

It was well that in the months of desolation after Sir Frank's death in September 1967 she had much work of his to see through the press. The third edition of *Anglo-Saxon England* was in train and in its final stages, and in the editing of his collected papers *Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England* she had the unstinted help of Professor Dorothy Whitelock. An early lecture with much illustrative material, *The Free Peasantry of the Northern Danelaw*, which could not be included with the collected papers, was prepared for separate publication. When these and the memoir written for the British Academy were done she found

life ever more wearisome. She was asked to continue the history of the University from 1933 (where the first Vice-Chancellor's account ended), and on this she had embarked: but at her death only the chapter on the library, which Sir Frank and she had had a particular interest in building up, was completed. This chapter is to be included by Professor Holt who has now undertaken to write the work left unfinished.

She continued to live at Whitley Park Farm and was happily able to do so until the end, visited frequently by friends in Reading and by those from a distance when possible and supported by devoted daily helpers. But increasing deafness cut her off more and more from everyone at a time when conversation, especially perhaps about times past, would have been a solace. In August 1971 she stayed for two weeks at Oakham, which she had often visited since 1950. On four days within that time she was able to revisit places within thirty miles which had been the object of expeditions at intervals since her first stay there; the weather was warm and sunny on all except one day so her last memories of the Danelaw were happy. For some years she had suffered from heart trouble but her last illness, a stroke, lasted only a week, during the whole of which she was unconscious. When, on 5 January 1972 she was buried in Halloughton churchyard on a mild winter day, all who were there were glad for her that a life of great achievement and great happiness had not been clouded by many years of loneliness and ill health.

Doris Stenton's first printed work, like that of many other beginners in this field, was in the Notes and Documents section of the *English Historical Review*. 'Two Southern Sokes in the twelfth century' appeared in 1917 and in the same year she contributed 'A hitherto unprinted charter of David I' to the *Scottish Historical Review*. The latter was the result of her work at Timberland and was one of the remarkable series of documents concerning the church of Great Paxton in Huntingdonshire which at one time belonged to Holyrood in Edinburgh. Nothing further appeared until 1924 when she printed, again in the *English Historical Review*, a charter of Roger of Salisbury describing himself as 'Procurator Angliae'—she was already collecting material about Justiciars—but this was shortly afterwards shown by Charles Johnson to be a forgery.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In *Historical Essays in Honour of James Tait*, eds. J. G. Edwards, V. H. Galbraith, and E. F. Jacob, Manchester, 1933, p. 141.

In 1925 she produced the first of the series with which her name will always be associated, *The Great Roll of the Pipe for the Second Year of King Richard I*. As general editor of the new series she had made some alterations in the method of presenting the text, using certain abbreviations for economy's sake and italic type to show words and phrases added after the compilation of the roll, innovations which commended themselves to users and reviewers. Thereafter followed sixteen Pipe Rolls and one Chancellor's Roll, each with illuminating introductions, while the remaining rolls for John's reign were edited for three years by pupils and the last by Professor Holt, who had for some years past devoted his research chiefly to the reign of John. Thus in a manner which rarely happens in this country she directed a chronological series of a particular type of record, establishing a rigorous standard of accuracy and an acute assessment of the contents of the rolls, showing not only the financial developments but also the effect of the course of events on the political and economic scene and supplementing the narrative accounts of the chroniclers. She was also able to train up her successor, Dr. Patricia Barnes, who held her office until 1972, when she was succeeded by Professor Holt and Miss Dodwell, both of whom had contributed volumes to the series. Thus she gave continuity to the work of the Society in a manner which cannot always be guaranteed in this country of learned private enterprise. How much historians are indebted to that spirit of determined inquiry and ultimate publication of records in the face of great odds Doris well illustrated in her paper 'The Pipe Rolls and the Historians 1600-1883'<sup>1</sup> written ten years before she, a distinguished successor to the men who in the seventeenth century and later 'aimed at writing history that should stand for ever', handed over the editing of Pipe Rolls to her successor.

The other great series of records with which her name will always be associated are the legal records of the Crown from 1198. The first to which she gave her attention were the rolls of the Justices who travelled round the shires, the last four were the four volumes of the pleas before the King himself, as well as his Justices. In the year after the publication of the Pipe Roll for 2 Richard I came not only the Pipe Roll for 3 Richard I but also *The Earliest Lincolnshire Assize Rolls A.D. 1202-1209*. In the introduction, after speaking of the treatise that goes by the name of Glanville and of its excellencies, she says: 'But it is not

<sup>1</sup> *Cambridge Historical Journal*, vol. x, no. 3, pp. 271-92.

from Glanville that an understanding of the place of law in men's lives at the end of the twelfth century can be derived. Such an understanding can only be achieved by the study of the early records of the king's court.' She traces the interaction of the work of the Exchequer with the work done, often by the same men, in the courts near the king and on circuit, the reference back to the centre of cases too hard or without precedent for the itinerants; the increasing volume and complexity of legal business as the new writs were purchased by landowners all over the country. She makes clear the practical problems in ensuring that justice was done. 'Cases often dragged on for many years because of the numbers of people whose presence was necessary to the conclusion of the simplest suit. Besides the plaintiff and the tenant, men with local knowledge had to be before the justices at the same time. The amazing thing is not that the cases lasted so long but that they were ever concluded at all.'

Publication of records of this kind, especially by local record societies, always raises questions of the form in which it should be done. The statement in the preface of this Assize Roll is therefore worth noting as a practical solution of the difficulty of making such rolls comprehensible to the non-expert. 'It was intended that the rolls should be printed in Latin with a translation. But on consideration it seemed that while, on the one hand, the rolls as they stood in Latin might not be readily intelligible to readers unversed in medieval law and Latin, on the other hand, if they were literally translated into English they would not be a great deal more intelligible. The real difficulty lies in the form in which the entries are cast, rather than in the language that clothes them. The Latin is for the most part very simple, but the numerous abbreviations of sentences and the general economy of words hide the simplicity. It was felt that whether the rolls were printed in Latin and English, or in Latin only, much explanation would be necessary. At the same time the rise in the cost of printing made economy advisable. It was therefore decided that the best way of solving the problem was to print the rolls in Latin and omit a translation but add explanatory notes to the cases where any special difficulty arose and to print an introduction explaining as far as possible the type of case which is dealt with and the various stages of a suit in its passage through the court.' This method would be admitted to be successful, I think, by the users of the volume, whether Latinists or not, and the former are grateful for the skilled



guidance of the expert through the mazes of the developing law.

Only one other set of rolls was published in this way, *The Earliest Northamptonshire Assize Rolls 1202-1203*, for the subsequent editions of the *Rolls of the Justices in Eyre for Lincolnshire 1218-1219 and Worcestershire 1221*; *The Rolls of the Justices in Eyre for Yorkshire 1218-1219*; *The Rolls of the Justices in Eyre for Gloucestershire, Warwickshire and Staffordshire [recte Shropshire] 1221-1222*, as well as *The Pleas before the King and his Justices 1198-1202*, and those for 1198-1212, were published by the Selden Society, which in accordance with its general practice printed translations opposite the cases.

These magnificent editions with their illuminating introductions and splendid indexes were the basis of a more general treatment of the development of English law in her Raleigh lecture of 1958, 'The Courts of King John', and in the Jayne lectures *English Justice between the Conquest and 1215*. The Raleigh lecture was printed as the fourth chapter of this work, in which she surveys the legal history of the country, reviewing in the course of it much of the work which had appeared in the previous thirty years. Though her last two volumes of the *Pleas before the King and his Justices* did not appear in print until 1966 and 1967 this book provides the effective summing up of conclusions of a life-time's study.

In editing the Pipe Rolls she had for the most part followed the lines already laid down, making such changes as were desirable in consequence of a somewhat different outlook on details of the format. In her editions of legal records she was on relatively unworked ground and as a result decisions on editing, more especially on the insistence that all stages of a suit must be printed if a true picture of the process was to be given and names of all the judges before whom a final concord was levied must be included, were of particular importance, not only for those using the volume, but also as the pattern of future work. The omission of essoins from the Public Record Office series of *Curia Regis Rolls* she made good in the last four Selden volumes. No historian of the reigns of Richard I and John will be able to write without her editions as the basis and no one editing records of a similar kind will in future ignore the standard she set of meticulous presentation of the complete manuscript, the investigation of allied material, the careful annotation, and the exhaustive index without running the risk of producing work which will not stand the test of time.

In 1950 she completed the edition of *Sir Christopher Hatton's Book of Seals*, transcribed and largely annotated by Lewis Loyd before his death. This volume, which was prepared as a gift to her husband from his friends and pupils on his seventieth birthday, carried her back in various ways to her earlier years. With Canon Foster she had done some months of work on charters of a similar period and it was Canon Foster who had been shown this remarkable manuscript at Haverholme Priory in 1921 by its then owner, the thirteenth Earl of Winchelsea, and had brought it to the notice of Sir Frank and other scholars interested in early feudal history. *The Book of Seals* was deposited by its next owner with the Northamptonshire Record Society and it had been intended that the Society should publish it, but increasing costs precluded this and it was published by the Clarendon Press, with provision for copies to go to all members of the Northamptonshire Record Society.

The profound knowledge of such highly technical sources never at any time prevented her from seeing the people who lay behind their composition or who were revealed in the terse Latin of the clerks. Kings, Barons, Judges, clerks, litigants, witnesses, and citizens of all ranks passed before her mind's eye and were alive for her in such a fashion that she could make them live for others wholly unfamiliar with the medieval scene. For this reason the Pelican volume *English Society in the Early Middle Ages* so well illustrates the capacity of a scholar, steeped in knowledge of the past but with a continuous consciousness that, *mutatis mutandis*, men and their problems have similarities in all ages, to make the past live, from what many would suppose to be material dry as dust. In re-reading this volume one is struck by the extremely practical approach to the problems of medieval society, in such a fashion that a reader can compare his present-day comfort with the discomfort of the past or understand to some extent the restrictions suffered by all classes of society, though less by the great than by the peasant, through the forest laws. It was an unusual and interesting idea to start the description of the countryside with the forests rather than agriculture and the village and the account of urban life with the mints and coinage. The chapter on the church is as matter-of-fact as 'the hard headed practicality' which she attributes to medieval people in their attitude to the church. Illustrative examples are drawn from all over the country and there must be few readers whose interest will not be stimulated further by a reference to a town or church or village known to them or

by the vivid picture of a hermit like Wulfric of Hazelbury or the surprisingly unromantic description of the average knight.

To the study of chronicles Doris made a short but important contribution—the solution to the puzzle of the authorship of the chronicle that had long gone by the name of Benedict, abbot of Peterborough, though both Stubbs and Duffus Hardy agreed he could not have been the author. The Revd. John Dickinson discovered, in the fragment of the cartulary of North Ferriby, a small house of the Templars, a charter recording a grant by John of Hessele, of which the first witness was Roger, the parson of Howden, present with John at the siege of Acre. This charter Mr. Dickinson communicated to Doris who, reviewing the speculations of earlier scholars, printed the charter which finally proved their suppositions as to the identity of 'Benedict' to be correct.<sup>1</sup>

An important work, quite different from her austere editions and one which it is clear gave her much pleasure to write, was *The English Woman in History*, discussed, as she recalls, on a wet Sunday afternoon at Oakham in 1950, and published in 1957. Much material she had already at hand to the late thirteenth century but the long span of this book was something quite different from anything she had hitherto undertaken. Though in no way a feminist in the ordinary sense of that word, she herself had always consciously and gratefully enjoyed the complete freedom, so long denied to women, to develop to the utmost her intellectual faculties and to order her own life. The Anglo-Saxon attitude to women won her strongest commendation and her dislike of St. Paul's views on the proper place of females, accepted in feudal law and in the teaching of the church, was clearly expressed. Not only the writing of this book but the excitement of research of a different kind as well as the acquisition of memoirs, letters, and other works written by or about the notable women of the later centuries pleased her. Miss Kirkus's careful scanning of catalogues for such books resulted often in her producing with pride and enjoyment to visiting friends her latest purchase from the antiquarian booksellers.

As a reviewer she was thorough. 'As I have never hitherto been asked to review a topographical volume of the V.C.H. I have never before sat down to read one from cover to cover. These volumes have been for me reference books. . . . It had never occurred to me that it might be possible to read one

<sup>1</sup> *English Historical Review*, 1953, pp. 574–82.

of these volumes with enjoyment'.<sup>1</sup> The survey which follows communicates her enjoyment and should encourage others to embark on the same sort of reading. An editor herself, she could appreciate the immense labour of the editors of the *Curia Regis Rolls*,<sup>2</sup> or the care taken over the *Accounts and Surveys of the Wiltshire lands of Adam de Stratton*,<sup>3</sup> but no one could be more chilling or on occasion more blistering when she considered authors had embarked on a subject with what she regarded as hopelessly inadequate equipment or failed to do justice to the contributions of their predecessors.

There are those who do not rate at the highest level the editing of texts. A study of either the *Pipe Rolls* or the *Assize and Plea Rolls* should cause them to think again about such work. These editions could not have been produced without a first-class mind applied to highly technical records of fundamental importance for the writing of early medieval English history in all its aspects. Both in the provision of sources for others to use and in the books and essays she herself wrote from the depth of her patiently amassed knowledge Doris Stenton has put present and future generations in her debt. Never did she forget her debt and that of all historians to the pioneers, summed up best perhaps in the last note to her paper on 'The *Pipe Rolls* and the Historians', in her thanks to Sir Charles Firth, dead thirty years before, for introducing her to those great men of the past as she recalled 'conversations in a study where William Lambarde, Joseph Hunter and all others of their kind moved again as living men'. The tribute paid to her work by Sir Maurice Powicke as long ago as 1935, when he reviewed the first of her *Selden* volumes, sums up her qualities. 'She is a true historian as well as a fine editor and palaeographer and her insight like a good lamp burns with a clear and steady flame.'<sup>4</sup>

KATHLEEN MAJOR

<sup>1</sup> *History*, 1959, pp. 103-5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1958, pp. 132-3, 1960, pp. 257-8.

<sup>3</sup> *Notes and Queries*, vol. ccv, pp. 276-8.

<sup>4</sup> *English Historical Review*, 1935, p. 521.