

PLATE XV



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WILLIAM ABEL PANTIN

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1902–1973

WILLIAM ABEL PANTIN was born on 1 May 1902 at Blackheath, which was then on the edge of open country. His name, despite its French appearance, was entirely English, and his forebears came from Wychwood Forest near Charlbury (Oxfordshire), whence one Thomas Pantin (1762–1820), a woodman's son, went up to London and founded a small business which still exists. His eldest son Thomas went up to Oxford and took Anglican orders, holding the living of Woodcote (Gloucestershire), purchased for him by his father. There, as an anti-popey writer and editor of *Wyclif and Stillingfleet*, he earned an entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Pantin's father (1865–1932) inherited the family business which graduated from brush-making, through the timber trade, to its current manufacture of roller conveyors, and ultimately provided Billy (as he was known to all his friends and acquaintances) with a small personal income which made travel and the purchase of books a simple matter throughout life. Few of his friends knew that Billy in his last years held the sinecure post of chairman of the family company after his brother's death.

His mother's family came originally from Anhalt-Coethen and Hanover, where for several generations they served as court-musicians, one of them being a friend and colleague of J. S. Bach. This man's son, Carl Friedrich Abel (1725–85), a pupil of Bach, came to England and had a successful career, specializing in the viola-da-gamba. He was painted by his friend Gainsborough, and figures in the *D.N.B.* Billy's maternal ancestors came to England later, and his mother's uncle, Sir Frederick Augustus Abel (1827–1902), was a chemist of note, the inventor of cordite (*D.N.B.*).

The family moved into a large Victorian house on Shooters Hill in 1903, and this was Billy's home in vacations till his mother moved away in 1940. Billy's mother and father 'were a wonderful pair; one could not imagine more kind and understanding parents'.¹ There were three children, his sister and brother being older than Billy. His brother Carl (1899–1967),

¹ This, and all subsequent notes with the initials W.A.P., refer to autobiographical matter sent to me by Pantin in 1969.

educated at Tonbridge and Christ's College, Cambridge, returned to his university as Fellow of Trinity, F.R.S., and ultimately Professor of Zoology. His sister (1896–1958) married a soldier and after a spell in India lived in Dorset with her family. The three were united in deep affection throughout their lives. Billy was brought up a true Edwardian by a much-loved nannie, who continued to minister to members of the family for half a century. After an experience of kindergarten, a private tutor, and a local preparatory school, Billy went as a weekly boarder to Westminster, where he was in the History Sixth, along with Gregory Dix the liturgical scholar, under Lawrence Tanner. He was happy at school, with the Abbey and its monastic buildings, until his last year, when he found himself in the uncongenial office of 'monitor'. 'The only time in my life when I have been really unhappy.'¹

Meanwhile the interests were awakening that became part of his life. A large pile of ancient numbers of *Country Life* and a box of Gothic bricks fed his love of architecture, and he subscribed to *The Builder*. 'I cannot remember a time', he wrote, 'when I did not take the greatest pleasure in making things with my hands—drawings, plans, models, painting, carving, bookbinding.'¹ A family friend, daughter of an architect, gave him some of her father's books. She influenced him also in another direction. Brought up as an Anglican, as a boy he had moved towards Catholicism as seen in encyclopedias and liturgical books. The friend just mentioned introduced him to Wiseman's *Fabiola* and Newman's *Callista*. He bought a Roman breviary and missal, and acquired a copy of the Latin Vulgate. Shortly before going to Westminster he decided to become a Catholic. His parents did nothing to dissuade him, but suggested the delay of a year, after which he was received into the Catholic Church by a priest who became a friend of the family. He also introduced Billy to Anthony Milton, then curate at Canterbury, 'one of the two people who have had most influence on me—he, and Powicke, in two quite different ways'.² Fr. Milton introduced him to two remarkable men of Kent, Leslie Toke and Bernard Holland, and, with more significance, to liturgical studies and the works of Edmund Bishop.

In 1920 Pantin went up to read history at Christ Church, where Keith Feiling, whom he greatly liked, was his tutor, with

¹ W.A.P.

² W.A.P. He wrote a memoir of Fr. Milton for the *Downside Review* in 1940.

A. L. Poole for his adviser in European history. For a Special Subject he took Richard II, and attributed to this his lasting interest in England in the fourteenth century. He emerged from Schools with a First, and met Powicke for the first time at his viva. Powicke took to him at once, inviting him to dine on his two subsequent visits as external examiner. Another lasting friendship made at this time was with Dr. Justin McCann, Master of St. Benet's Hall, the Ampleforth house of studies, where he met also at table Dom André Wilmart and E. A. Lowe. 'Fr. Justin I loved dearly—my ideal of a monk',¹ he was to write.

He had already turned towards monastic history, drawn by his old love of Canterbury and its connection with Canterbury Quad at Christ Church, added to the influence of Fr. Milton, who for a time had tried his vocation at Downside. The nickname of 'the Canterbury lamb', given him by Gregory Dix, was felicitous. He was already familiar as an undergraduate with the works of M. R. James and Dean Armitage Robinson, and had chosen as a college prize the rare (1626) *Apostolatus Benedictinorum in Anglia* of Clement Reyner. With a research scholarship from Christ Church he decided to work for a B.Litt. on Canterbury College with H. E. Salter as supervisor, and he spent six months in lodgings at Canterbury. In those days the cathedral chapter library was open for only four hours in the week, and Billy had to depend upon the kindness of the deputy librarian, Canon C. E. Woodruff, to stay with him in the library or to lock him into the building. Billy attributed much of his later expertise to the hours spent among the Canterbury muniments. 'I still think that this is one of the best forms of research—to take a body of texts and documents, and find out all one can about them'.¹

In the summer of 1924 he dropped work at Canterbury to stand successfully for the Bryce research scholarship, taking as his subject *The Chapters of the Black Monks*. For this the sources were more scattered, at Durham, Worcester, Norwich, and elsewhere. Durham became a love second only to Canterbury. The honorary librarian was the remarkable J. Meade Falkner (1858–1932), sometime chairman of Armstrong–Whitworth, liturgist, musicologist, traveller, and author of the successful novel *Moonfleet*, with whom Billy lunched on Sundays. 'If I had a few extra spare concurrent lives, I would like to spend one at Durham, one at Canterbury.'¹ Some years later, about 1938,

¹ W.A.P.

Billy and Powicke went up to Durham to prepare a report on the muniments for the Pilgrim Trust, which resulted in a large grant from which the documents were reorganized in the rehabilitated 'Prior's Kitchen'. At Worcester the librarian, aged 88, was equally remarkable, Canon J. M. Wilson (1836-1931), a former headmaster of Clifton, thereafter scholar and editor of the Worcester *Liber Albus*. Here also the student was locked into the library. It is to be feared that cathedral closes are no longer graced by such coveys of characters from the stories of M. R. James; Billy realized that he was seeing the last of the Victorians out.

In 1925, with much more work still to do, and when he was growing anxious for his future—he had earlier made tentative moves towards the architectural profession and the ancient monuments department of the Office of Works—he received a letter from Powicke offering a lectureship at Manchester, then perhaps still the best history school in England. His Manchester period was made happy by two years of life in Powicke's home, where he was treated by all as one of the family. He became Bishop Fraser Lecturer in ecclesiastical history, and enjoyed the atmosphere of a small group of students, more cohesive than at contemporary Oxford. Light work and two free days a week enabled him to carry the *Chapters* sufficiently far to provide an essay which won the Alexander Prize (1927), offered annually by the Royal Historical Society. This later secured publication for his work in the Society's Camden Series.

Pantin had always hoped to return to Oxford, and in 1933 there was a vacancy for a medievalist at Oriel. Powicke, now Regius Professor and professorial Fellow of the college, no doubt recommended Billy for the post, but as a tutor for the whole of English history was needed, his limitations in this wide field were discussed and discounted, Provost Ross remarking: 'Oh well, he can get it up in the Long Vacation.' His university lectureship, when it came in 1937, was in Ecclesiastical Institutions, changed after the War to Medieval Archaeology and History. This reflected a shift, or a resuscitation, of interest; in some ways, Billy remained at heart an architect. In 1938 he was asked to become general editor of the publications of the Oxford Historical Society, but not finally appointed till May 1940, when he took over from H. E. Salter. In 1946 he was elected Keeper of the University Archives. He continued to fill these two roles with distinction till his retirement. He was also responsible, a few years later, for the suggestion, adopted by the

British Academy, of publishing a series of treatises on philosophy and theology by English medieval masters. He had been elected to the Academy in 1948, and proceeded D.Litt. in 1963. Meanwhile, for almost exactly thirty years, allowing for the hiatus of wartime, he lectured and taught at Oriel, and when, after the War, the new tide of research flowed strongly, he added to this the care of numerous students seeking the D.Phil. or B.Litt. in a department of historical activity that Powicke had unofficially corralled. In all these spheres he was unusually competent. Though never a lecturer to the masses, he attracted eager classes of moderate size. As a college tutor he was consistently inspiring, despite idiosyncracies such as bedside sessions for pupils when he felt indisposed. As a supervisor of research he was able to suggest subjects and sources from his wide knowledge of archives, and many of his students are now in academic posts, while still more became his lifelong friends.

Though a tireless student and editor of manuscripts for more than forty years, Pantin never planned or wrote a lengthy original work. Texts and articles were usually the end-products of his research, and the one apparent exception, his survey of the church in England in the fourteenth century, was composed as a series of Birkbeck Lectures at Cambridge, with the arrangements and limitations consequent upon their character.

His published work dealt with four main topics: English monastic history; the personalities and religious interests of the fourteenth century; the history of Oxford university in the middle ages; and the medieval architecture of Oxford and its neighbourhood.

After his Alexander Prize Essay, his first full-scale work was contained in the three volumes of his *Chapters of the English Black Monks* (1931-7). This was a major achievement of research and editing. A few of the documents had been printed in a rare volume of the early seventeenth century, Reyner's *Apostolatus*, but Pantin's work showed the chapters and their presidents in action for three hundred years, and gave a background and an historical foundation, hitherto lacking, for the study of administration and reform among the black monks. Without it, monastic historians would have continued to work in the dark, and Pantin performed his task excellently. These volumes will remain familiar to church historians when most contemporary writing has been forgotten. Equally laborious and accurate, though of less general interest, are the three volumes of docu-

ments concerning Canterbury College, Oxford (1947–50), which can serve as a paradigm for the whole class of monastic colleges. A third and shorter work, with Hugh Aveling, was his edition (1967) of the letters of Robert Joseph of Evesham, giving a unique view of monastic academic life on the eve of the Dissolution.

Among studies in the fourteenth century, his field of predilection, his principal contribution was contained in the volume of Birkbeck Lectures (1955). It is an important and very readable book, more comprehensive than the casual reader might suppose, and it is likely to hold its position for many decades. Long articles on Adam of Easton and Uthred of Boldon show unsuspected intellectual interests, while that on the hermit of Farne revealed an unfamiliar life of spiritual endeavour in the age, though not in the character, of the English mystics.

Academic history was represented by several collections of letters and formularies, his edition of Salter's survey of Oxford (1960), his articles on the medieval halls, and his last slim volume of informal addresses on university administration and discipline in medieval Oxford, in which more of his personality and wit appears than in any other work.

Finally, in medieval archaeology he was an adept long before it became a popular pursuit and an academic discipline. He contributed frequently to *Oxoniensia*, and treated of medieval domestic architecture in the *Antiquaries Journal* and later in *Medieval Archaeology*. This interest showed itself first in 1936, when he surveyed some houses in the Broad that were cleared out of the way for the New Bodleian Library. Thenceforward, as a member of the committee of the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society, he led troops of young men and women amid the dust and débris of houses under demolition, measuring and investigating the remains. Among the promoters of the Society for Medieval Archaeology, he was also an active member of the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments, and a pillar of the Oxford Archaeological Excavations Committee, and later was an active chairman of the British Committee for the History of Towns. He was a pioneer in the study of medieval small-scale domestic construction, and in this field his own favourite publication was that on Tackleys Inn, the nucleus of Oriel, in *Oxoniensia* (1943). Mr. T. G. Hassall writes: 'Billy's great talent was his ability to reconstruct authentically medieval and sub-medieval buildings from both documents and archaeological evidence. He was undoubtedly a pioneer in the realm of

vernacular architecture.' In addition to these writings Billy, as the bibliography of his works shows, wrote several articles on medieval personalities, and contributed to memorial volumes and *festschriften* (Powicke, 1948; Aubrey Gwynn, 1961; Feiling and Callus, 1964). Finally, there were his notable memoirs of Salter, Powicke, and Ernest Jacob.

Pantin rarely had the opportunity to display in his writings his wide knowledge of the medieval world. Within the limits of his extensive but not total perspective he was unrivalled, but he was not primarily interested in scholastic theology and philosophy, or in constitutional or literary history, or even in such a monastic occupation as manuscript illumination. But on any of the familiar 'difficulties' of medieval sentiment, such as monastic forgery, the perpetual litigation among monks and clerics, or their ambivalent attitude to the papacy, he had a happy talent of seeing into the minds of medieval men, while on the familiar technicalities of medieval history—the demographic curve, estimates of population, feudal relationships, and the newcomers such as 'bastard feudalism' and military indentures—he could supply a *précis* of the situation with an elaborate bibliography. The climax of Billy's teaching was a Special Subject on St. Bernard, which he ran for some ten years with Beryl Smalley, later afforded with Colin Morris, now in the medieval chair at Southampton. Professor Morris writes of this class, omitting his own share in its success: 'The Beryl-Billy partnership seems to me one of the very best teaching combinations I have ever encountered: Oxford education at its scintillating best . . . I remember well the supply of brightly coloured ideas which Billy released for the delectation of his pupils, many of which ideas were promptly shot down by Beryl with an accurately aimed dart. . . . As I remember, he did not tell them very much, but produced this endless supply of questions for them to answer, and suggestions for them to try out.' This observation may be compared with another from an old research student: 'In the mid-50's Galbraith and he used to hold an unofficial court between 10.30 and 11.30 every morning during term at The Tackley in the High. Around them clustered a group of undergraduates and graduates fascinated by what amounted to a very enlivening double act. It was Galbraith's role to say something deliberately outrageous, and Billy's to point out gently his logical and other fallacies.'¹

Billy's recreation, apart from social intercourse, and from his

¹ Letter of Dr. Barrie Dobson.

wide reading in biographical literature of all kinds, was foreign travel. He went abroad almost every year from 1920 to 1972, save for the years of European war. These visits resulted in a large collection of postcards and photographs, and an enrichment of his teaching, but somehow Billy's travels did not colour or widen the scope of his writings or his conversation. Considering his total lack of engineering lore, and his unathletic frame, it is remarkable that he should have owned a car, driven it without catastrophe, and even taken it across the Channel and as far afield as Calabria without serious mishaps or breakdowns. Earlier in life he had been a menace to a companion on a bicycle ride, becoming absorbed in a conversation and setting a collision course from time to time. He often took with him abroad one of his friends or former research students, Leslie Macfarlane or James Crompton among others, and their reminiscences of colourful incidents added to the legend of Billy in Oxford.

He took no part in university administration above Faculty level. He served on the council of two or three learned societies, notably the Royal Historical Society, but he rarely gave papers or examined outside Oxford. He never visited America or took sabbatical leave for study or research abroad. Chairs in medieval history were rare throughout Britain twenty-five years ago compared with today's plethora, and in any case Billy's expertise, to outside observers, seemed narrower than it was in fact. Moreover, his recurrent bouts of indisposition, known to his friends as 'Pantin's disease', which laid him *hors de combat*, debarred his selection for even such a post as chairman of a Faculty Board.

One interest of Billy's, already mentioned in passing, deserves further emphasis, his work for more than twenty years in the Archives. Here his first task was the restoration and improvement of the two Archive Rooms, and his next, to make the archives themselves more accessible by continuing the inventory begun by his predecessor, Strickland Gibson, and to complement this by a subject-index of the Lower Room completed in 1951, and a slip index of names and places, finished by his assistant, Mr. Mitchell, in 1964. He planned a guide and a volume of facsimiles, which were not in fact accomplished, but he achieved a beginning in another scheme, that of publishing in the Oxford Historical Society's series selections from the archives, editing himself the Register of Convocation, 1445-63, and accepting projects from other scholars. He planned an

extension of the archives to take in the acta of university departments in recent times. Finally, he had the happy idea of making the Annual Visitation by the Library Delegacy, already graced by light refreshments, the occasion for a lecture on an aspect of medieval academic life illustrated by the documents under his care. These he published, and the good custom has been continued by his successor, Mr. Trevor Aston. Anthony Wood remarked of Billy's seventeenth-century (1634-49) predecessor, Brian Twyne, that 'He was a living and constant friend to his Mother the University, and to his College'. Of no man could this be said more truly than of Pantin.

In all human and scholarly relations he was a model of sense and sanity, generous, unselfish, courteous to all. He was one of a species, now verging on extinction, of bachelor dons living in college for the whole of their academic life, a class peculiar to Oxbridge, and one not without value and virtue. A friend and colleague writes that 'he was essentially a "good college man"'. Both this friend¹ and the present Provost note that at meetings of the Governing Body, 'when dons delight to bark and fight', Billy was remarkable as a catalyst, pricking pompositives and relieving tensions, defusing any potentially explosive situation by some apposite and entertaining comment. The same two witnesses mention occasions (not in college meetings) when Billy would enter into the spirit of a revel with an 'incomparable rendering of an operatic contralto coping with the flourishes of an ornate Handel aria'.

Very soon after World War II Billy became an Oxford 'character'. He was never an all-round eccentric of the class of Claude Jenkins at Oxford or F. A. Simpson at Trinity, Cambridge, but his personal, material surroundings at Oriel were a legend for twenty years. The floor of the large room in which he worked, taught, and received friends was strewn and piled with books like the screes of Wasdale, and as time went on dining-room and bedroom silted up likewise, with slides and papers cumbering the tables. Yet in the unbelievable chaos Billy could always locate the book he wanted. Naturally anecdotes multiplied. One visitor told how the telephone rang, and he and Billy had to trace the instrument by ear beneath a layer of literature, and there was the occasion when the B.B.C. chose Billy as the *corpus vile* for an exhibition of a typical tutorial hour at Oxford. According to Billy's account technical difficulties

¹ Mr. R. W. B. Burton.

supervened, but the current version of Oxford gossip had it that the chaos of the room was considered too improbable to be convincing to the general run of viewers. They would accuse the B.B.C. of putting on a skit of Oxford educational practice. Another well-known eccentricity was his habit of accumulating large quantities of clothing and toilet requisites. This developed during the War, when his bedroom displayed piles of shoes, toothpaste, common medicaments, and the like, and came gradually to display goods of every kind. His wardrobe at the end included 243 shirts, 160 pairs of trousers, 16 overcoats and other garments in equal profusion. Examination scripts thirty years old were kept (but not used) as scrap-paper, and in a cupboard at the Archives were specimens of the food of yesteryear, provided for the annual entertainment of the Delegates, and dusted ritually by Billy from time to time. There was no doubt a psychological element in this, a lingering sense of anxiety, strange at first sight in one living the materially care-free life of a well-to-do don in college.

This shadow must not obscure the picture of Billy. His was a life-enhancing personality which his friends found stimulating and delightful, never tedious or self-centred, an essential element in any recollection of Oxford. A colleague wrote: 'We will never forget him, and every single memory will be affectionate and delightful',¹ and a friend regarded him as 'one of the most irrepressibly joyful of men Oxford has produced this century'.² He himself would have wished that we should recall the names of a few of these friends, hitherto not mentioned: Fr. Daniel Callus and Fr. Gervase Mathew, O.P., Dr. A. B. Emden, and Dr. Richard Hunt and his wife. But his friends were legion, and he would have deprecated a graded scale of affection. He combined an unusual and very winning innocence and simplicity of mind, and a guileless and affectionate nature, with a brilliant wit and a keen eye for the ridiculous. He shared with others a vivid interest in his own work and in theirs. He was universally beloved and will never fade from the memory of his friends. In his days at Manchester he became a confrater of Ampleforth Abbey, and was to be seen weekly over the years among his brethren, the monks of St. Benet's Hall, at Sunday Mass. He was in many ways an *anima naturaliter Benedictina* in his character, as in his studies and his associations, but his piety was that of a layman, traditional without nostalgia, and unmoved by the

¹ Mr. R. W. B. Burton.

² Dr. L. Macfarlane.

changing currents of the day. He would deflate the contemporary taste for liturgical desacralization with gentle wit. 'Is it still the Purification of the Blessed Virgin?' he asked on 2 February, 'or is it Our Lady the Home Help?' An old pupil, not a Catholic, wrote: 'I was always conscious that beneath the apparently volatile and erratic personality one first met, there was a much deeper sense of serenity and security. It would be impertinent of me to comment on what his faith meant to him. All I need say is that though he never talked about it to me, even the outsider could guess that it was the central theme and thread in his life.'¹

When he retired he lived, as Powicke before him had lived, in a college flat in Oriel Square, where he was fortunate to have the companionship and ultimately the complete domestic management of his friend Walter Mitchell, for long his assistant at the Archives. There he kept in touch with his college and friends, though in frail health. In the late summer of 1973 he had a severe heart attack, followed by others, and though he recovered unexpectedly, he was now an old man in looks, though he retained his social charm to the end. A fatal attack came when he was walking alone in the garden of Corpus Christi College on 10 November. His Requiem was celebrated at St. Benet's Hall by his friend the Master, Fr. James Forbes, with the liturgy in Latin and a monastic choir. To many present it was a last and not unjoyful memory of one who to his nearest friends seemed the last typical figure of the generation of historians who were the associates and the disciples of Sir Maurice Powicke.

M. D. KNOWLES

A bibliography of Dr. Pantin's published work, compiled in Oxford during his lifetime, was augmented after his death by Miss B. Smalley and Fr. Alberic Stacpoole of Ampleforth. This was printed in the *Ampleforth Journal* (Spring 1974, vol. LXXIX, part I) with addenda and corrigenda in the next issue (Summer, LXXIX, part II). As it is intended that a complete bibliography shall appear in a volume of essays, originally designed as a festschrift for Pantin's seventieth birthday (1972) but still (1974) unpublished, it seemed unnecessary to prolong the present memoir with a reprint from the *Ampleforth Journal*.

In the above pages personal recollections of more than forty years have added some details to the autobiographical pages on his early

¹ Dr. Barrie Dobson.

life (1902–33) which Billy sent me in 1969. For other information, reminiscences, criticism of my draft, and permission to use their words I have to thank: The Provost of Oriel (Mr. K. C. Turpin), Mr. Trevor Aston, Mr. R. W. B. Burton, Dr. Barrie Dobson, Mr. T. G. Hassall, Dr. R. W. Hunt, Dr. Leslie Macfarlane, Mr. Walter Mitchell, Professor Colin Morris, Dr. J. N. L. Myres, and Miss Beryl Smalley. I am particularly indebted to the last-named for reading, augmenting, and amending my draft.

The Revd. Professor M. D. Knowles himself died on 25 November 1974, three months after delivering the text of this memoir, and thus never saw this final work of his in proof.