

PLATE XIII



R. R. DARLINGTON

REGINALD RALPH DARLINGTON

1903-1977

‘WHERE is Bohun? Where’s Mowbray? Where’s Mortimer?’ It cannot only be the present writer, or his generation, who felt that with the death of Professor R. R. Darlington (he did not favour Christian-name familiarity) an era in English historical scholarship was coming to an end. Once there were giants in the land: F. M. Powicke, Sir Frank and Lady Stenton, Dom David Knowles, A. L. Poole, Reginald Lennard, Sir Hilary Jenkinson, Goronwy Edwards, V. H. Galbraith . . . It would be invidious to place them in order, but Darlington was of their company, and we can ill afford to lose so great a company as this. Certainly those of us who had the inestimable privilege to be brought up at their feet must feel the change most closely, and be most aware that the old order now gives place to another, new but not better. All of them, it will be noted, were medievalists, for in those days many were, though few were narrow specialists of the more modern kind. In those days also, no one had any doubts of the fundamental importance of the editing of texts and records as both one of the most beneficial contributions a scholar could make to learning and also the finest training for, and proof of, scholarship. Those were the last days, as it has turned out, of the primacy of the Public Record Office and the Public Records, and of charters and cartularies. I can still remember the excitement with which one day as a young Assistant Keeper I walked down to the Round Room, to which I had been summoned by Lady Stenton, in the wild surmise that she would invite me to edit a volume for the Pipe Roll Society, which she did. And as for London University and its History School which Darlington held most dear, no one involved could miss the sad significance of all those changes, including the destruction of the syllabus, which were forced through after his retirement. At the time of that retirement he wrote to his colleague, Professor R. A. Humphreys, ‘No doubt I shall miss fighting for principles which have seemed important to me, but many of the things in which I have been interested have become

lost causes.¹ Above all other things, Darlington was a man of principle, and those many in London who were neither his pupils nor his colleagues will best remember him, outside the printed page, at Boards of Studies, formal, austere, and by then deathly pale, speaking at length and with precision (though he disliked public speaking) in defence of practices proved by the test of time and academic worth, upright and unyielding on the ancient ways.

‘My brother had very strong views on obituaries and felt that they should be a tribute to academic achievement and scholarship rather than an account of early childhood and adolescence’—thus Miss Margaret Darlington, in a letter to me dated 21 September 1978. Nevertheless, it has also been said that Academy memoirs form a chapter in the history of British scholarship in the twentieth century and to that end I am able to go a little beyond the characteristic reticence of Darlington through the kindness of his sister. He was born in 1903 ‘at Ashbury, a village on the Berkshire Downs within easy reach of White Horse Hill and the Ridgeway. He spent his early years with his elder brother and younger sister in an Elizabethan Dower House in the neighbouring village of Idstone. Here they enjoyed all the activities of life in the open country. Their parents had a waggonette and a donkey and trap, the latter being used to reach the nearest railway station. There were ponies which they shared with the children of neighbouring farmers—R.R.D.’s love of riding dates from these days.’ Unfortunately, in a place so remote before mechanized transport, education became a problem, and early in the first World War the family moved to a village near Reading where Darlington, after a short period at Ranelagh School, Bracknell, was able to attend the then University College as a day student to read for the London External BA. He entered the College (which was to become an autonomous University in 1926) in October 1921, took his degree in 1924, and remained there until June 1927.

Nothing, as it happened, could have been more auspicious, and with hindsight we may already see the pattern of his future life. With Darlington as with all true scholars there was no distinction between personal life and work, and the formative factors are, the indissoluble links which bound him to his home and family, and the influence and inspiration of the Stentons. At Reading he found, amongst others, the young professor, Frank Merry Stenton, and his still younger wife, Doris Mary, a former day

¹ Reginald Ralph Darlington: Memorial Address delivered by Professor R. A. Humphreys, at the Church of Christ the King, Gordon Square, London (31 October 1977).

student herself, appointed Assistant Lecturer in 1917, and married to her master in 1919. Lady Stenton, in her own Academy memoir of Sir Frank, was to write of herself and Darlington as 'each in turn cherished pupils of Frank's as day students residing at home reading for an honours degree in History'.¹ With Darlington also the relationship became more than that of mere master and pupil. Miss Darlington writes that her brother and Stenton 'shared many interests including organ music, especially the works of J. S. Bach. The college had two organs in its Great Hall which they used with Sidney Payton the College Librarian. Many happy hours were spent at Lunds Farm, the Stentons' cottage at Woodley, as well as visits to Sir Frank's family home at Southwell in Nottinghamshire.' Academically Darlington in due course became, it is thought, Stenton's first specifically Reading (i.e. University) Ph.D. student, and was awarded his doctorate in 1930 for his work on the *Vita Wulfstani*.

Meanwhile he had been appointed in 1927 to an Assistant Lectureship at Bedford College for Women (as it then and long was) in the University of London. So began his long and happy association with London, as his home association had already begun with Twyford, Berkshire, to which the family had by this time moved, after the early death of their father at the age of fifty-eight. A former pupil of those years speaks of his lectures as being extremely thorough and in consequence invaluable for revision purposes—which is praise enough in circles where these things matter most—and of his devotedly painstaking supervision (at which level of teaching he excelled), 'giving guidance on what to do and how to do it and reading every word of the draft'.² In 1936 he was made Reader in London and in 1939, at the outbreak of war and what was the very early age of thirty-six, he was elected to his first Chair of History, at the then University College of Exeter, where he was to remain throughout the duration of hostilities. It was at Exeter in 1942 that a devastating event occurred which with a lesser man might have had as great a negative effect upon his work as the positive effect of the lasting influence of the Stentons. His flat in the city was burnt and destroyed by a blitz while he himself was firewatching at the college—and characteristically refused to leave his post—and with it went not only most of his cherished books but also his papers, including his transcript of the Worcester Cartulary (in consequence not published until

¹ Doris M. Stenton, 'Frank Merry Stenton 1880-1967', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, liv, 1968, p. 401.

² Barbara Dodwell, undated letter to the writer.

1968) and accumulated work on Florence of Worcester (in consequence still unpublished). In 1945 with the return of peace he gladly returned to London, where he held the Chair of History at Birkbeck College and was an eminently successful Head of Department for just on a quarter of a century until his slightly premature retirement, for reasons of ill-health, in the summer of 1969. He had been elected Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 1928, of the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1946, and of the British Academy in 1954.

The central and main part of this memoir must be, as Darlington would have wished, about his work. One approaches it with some trepidation, for it is difficult not to feel that it will somehow be subject to his exacting standards. At least one can be sure of making the right start if one begins with the name of Stenton, for it was Sir Frank who launched him on his way, and he never dropped the pilot. His first major publication, the *Vita Wulfstani* in 1928, pays tribute to Stenton's help and guidance, and so does his last, *The Cartulary of Worcester Cathedral Priory*, in 1968. Because Darlington was a man who concealed, if he did not suppress, sentiment and emotion, the latter tribute merits quotation in full, though every word should be multiplied by ten to establish its full value. 'I began working on this cartulary many years ago when Sir Frank Stenton, who first interested me in St. Wulfstan and his church, advised me, then in my early twenties, to go to Worcester to study materials there. As a young scholar I received much kindness and encouragement from him, and it was he who later on urged me to start work again on the cartulary after my first transcript had been destroyed.¹ I cannot adequately express my debt to him, and I regret that I was unable to see the book through its final stages while he was still alive.' By then it was said that the members of Darlington's London Special Subject seminar on 'The Age of Bede' ritualistically bowed their heads whenever the name of Stenton was mentioned as it often was, and it was felt that though the professor never commented on this he did not disapprove. Those who experienced at all the magic of Whitley Park Farm (memories of Sunday lunch, Sir Frank carving a joint half as big as himself which, whatever it was, should have been a baron of beef) or those very many more who have merely read *Anglo-Saxon England* and *The First Century of English Feudalism* will understand the sentiment even without the constant help and support which Darlington himself received. By Sir Frank

¹ So much for the blitz and disaster of 1942, to which most of us would surely have devoted a dramatically exculpating paragraph.

Stenton, then, and by St. Wulfstan, the line and scope of his future work was settled. Already in the Introduction to the *Vita Wulfstani* (Camden 3rd Series XL, 1928) he was engaged not only with William of Malmesbury, its author, but also with 'Florence' of Worcester's *Chronicon ex Chronicis*, upon a much-needed modern critical edition of which he was still engaged when he died. He had entered the world of Anglo-Norman chroniclers which he was magisterially to survey in his London Inaugural Lecture, *Anglo-Norman Historians* (London, Birkbeck College, 1947), and amongst his last published work was an edition of the Winchcombe Annals, most appropriately derived from the *Chronicon ex Chronicis* and printed in that volume of the Pipe Roll Society produced in honour of Lady Stenton in 1962.¹ He had also and more broadly entered that compelling world of, let us say, the later tenth to the earlier twelfth century, which has always attracted many of the finest minds and is always likely to do so, because of its fundamental importance in the history of the west. It was a world, of course, so far as English history is concerned, to be increasingly dominated by Sir Frank Stenton whose classic *Anglo-Saxon England* first appeared in 1943, and there can be no doubt that within it Darlington's heart (though he would not have cared for the use of that word in association with scholarship) lay first and foremost with the Anglo-Saxons, as Stenton's increasingly did in the years of his final maturity. They shared also, it must be admitted, a certain insularity of interest which is itself perhaps a precondition of their 'Anglo-Saxon attitudes' with which my generation was brought up. It may be significant that Darlington did not enjoy going abroad and, like Stenton after his early years, seldom went. In any case their historical attitudes may be thought to some extent a matter of generation (though there are always exceptions, and one thinks of D. C. Douglas or Dom David Knowles—and, indeed, of the young Stenton in his *William the Conqueror*, first published in 1908) as though the last days of an Empire which placed Britain and England at the centre of the world produced a unique and exclusive English History to explain it.

Right in the middle of Darlington's preferred period—with Wulfstan, indeed, like Æthelwig abbot of Evesham, spanning the great divide with his career—the even tenor and precocious development (as Darlington, Stenton, and others at that time saw it) of the Old English state were rudely shattered by the Norman Conquest, and the peaceful pursuit of English History disturbed by the equally rude shouts of the long-standing controversy

¹ *A Medieval Miscellany for Doris Mary Stenton*, New Series xxxvi.

surrounding that event. This I take to be the background and the context of that series of articles issued in the 1930s and in Darlington's Bedford days, designed to defend late Anglo-Saxon England against its then prevalent detractors—'Æthelwig, Abbot of Evesham' (less general than the other two), *English Historical Review*, xlviii, 1933; 'Ecclesiastical Reform in the late Old English Period', *ibid.* li, 1936; and 'The Last Phase of Anglo-Saxon History', in *History*, xxii, 1937–8 (but first read to the Anglo-American Conference of Historians in 1936). Like everything Darlington wrote they are fundamental not ephemeral; beyond question, he and they helped to produce and establish a fuller and juster appreciation of Old English achievement. Yet to many they must now seem a little dated, not in their learning or their factual content, but in an attitude and an interpretation of the evidence which may even seem close at times to prejudice—prejudice derived, again, from insularity. Something of this impression is doubtless the result of controversy with its swings of the pendulum, and of that especially vitiating controversy which attends the Norman Conquest and may still divide English-speaking historians into Anglo-Saxons and Normans; yet also it appears undeniable, at least to the present writer, that Darlington with others of his generation, in their enthusiasm for Anglo-Saxon achievement, did less than justice to the Norman. It is said that once in a verbal exchange with the 'Norman' D. C. Douglas on the quality of the Old English state, Darlington, who was undoubtedly in these matters an Anglo-Saxon, referred to the Norman Conquest of England as 'the last of the barbarian invasions'.¹ Obviously too much should not be made of a remark made in an oral exchange, and Darlington was the last person ever to have published such a reckless comment; nevertheless, the same attitudes, the same beliefs, the same (we may almost say) articles of faith, are scarcely less revealed in one of the most extraordinary passages of Stenton's *Anglo-Saxon England*—a passage composed, we are told, on a summer morning in 1939 and which may be good English but is surely not good history.² 'The Normans who entered into the English inheritance were a harsh and violent race. They were the closest of all the western peoples to the barbarian strain in the continental order. They had produced little in art or learning, and nothing in literature, that could be set beside the

¹ I am bound to state that Professor Douglas does not remember the incident which I have from other witnesses.

² Doris M. Stenton, *op. cit.*, p. 400. Cf. *Anglo-Saxon England*, 2nd edn. 1947, p. 678.

work of Englishmen. But politically, they were the masters of their world.' It is appropriate to cite here the observation made in her Cambridge inaugural lecture of 1958 by Dorothy Whitelock,¹ no less appreciative of an Anglo-Saxon achievement which, however, 'will stand in its own right without any belittling of that of the Normans'. It is also very appropriate to cite her further conclusion—'That the Normans are now being commended as much for what they *kept* as for what they *brought* may perhaps be the main result of a generation of Anglo-Saxon studies.'

Darlington summarized his views on the whole matter of the Conquest—or rather, on the central issue of modern debate amongst English historians, 'the question of continuity and the contribution of Anglo-Saxon England to later developments'—in his highly successful Creighton Lecture of 1963,² and it may be thought characteristic of the man (who, as I study his life and work, frequently reminds me of what is reported of Lord Attlee in diction and communication) that he dealt in one lecture or printed pamphlet with a question for which most of us would require a volume and Freeman took six. The very first paragraph pays tribute to Stenton's *Anglo-Saxon England* wherein 'justice was at last done to the Anglo-Saxons', and again I think in this lecture we hear the voice and views of a generation and an era, on a central issue of English medieval history, not now to be heard in quite the same terms again. We also hear something else. The precision of his thought and the terseness of his style enabled Darlington, when, rarely, he thought it necessary, to put down error and heresy with an astringent acerbity beyond compare. (At a rather lower level, cf. his common-form letter to unsatisfactory Birkbeck students at the end of the academic year—'Dear X, If there is one good reason why you should be readmitted next session, please call to see me on Tuesday at 6').³ I know of no more caustic academic criticism, more effective surely than the sustained buffeting of Round's furious pages, then two sentences which Darlington here directs against those who have revived the case for pre-Conquest English feudalism in our day and thus, while attacking Stenton in the process, have sought to deny what is arguably the most profound change (Darlington used the word 'revolutionary') resulting from 1066. 'The most tedious feature of some recent attempts to prove that William I introduced nothing new is the revival of views which have been refuted many times

¹ *Changing Currents in Anglo-Saxon Studies*, CUP, p. 26.

² *The Norman Conquest*, Athlone Press, University of London, 1963.

³ *Ex inform.* Dr Emma Mason.

and the repetition of statements which have been shown to be baseless. Apart from the more extravagant assertions . . . the arguments are the old ones which we had thought dead, and resurrection does not make them any more convincing.¹

Though Darlington was to return to the Anglo-Saxon church with his admirable contribution, 'The Anglo-Saxon Period', to C. R. Dodwell's *English Church and the Continent* (Faith Press, 1959)—still very much alive and well on student reading lists so far as the present writer is concerned—he did not in the course of his career write very much straight history, and there is, rather sadly, no one history book, not even on the Old English Church, to keep his memory fresh with undergraduates. In this he may be thought to part company somewhat from Stenton, whose towering reputation rests ultimately on *Anglo-Saxon England* and *The First Century of English Feudalism*, which must be regarded as his *magna opera*—though the latter especially is a marvellous demonstration of the abundant use of charter material to which he himself made rich contributions with his seminal editions of Danelaw, Gilbertine and Northamptonshire charters.² Darlington's major contributions to English historical scholarship remain the *Vita Wulfstani* and the *Worcester Cartulary* already mentioned, together with his editions of *The Cartulary of Darley Abbey* and *The Glapwell Charters*³ (and early work on the new edition of Wilkins' *Concilia* never published), while his fundamental work on the Wiltshire Domesday for the Victoria County History⁴ belongs to that category of writing necessarily so closely based upon the source or sources which it analyses as scarcely to count as general history. His long-planned new and critical edition of the chronicle attributed to Florence of Worcester would surely have been his *magnum opus* had it not been beaten back by bombs and stopped by terminal illness, and it is very good to know that this will eventually be completed and brought out by one of his younger colleagues at Birkbeck, Dr P. M. McGurk. In choosing thus to devote most of his time to the fundamental work of editing texts, Darlington comes closer perhaps to Lady Stenton than Sir Frank (which is to say, closer to his own particular generation), though

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 24.

² Respectively, British Academy, Records of the Social and Economic History of England and Wales, v, 1920; Lincoln Record Society, xviii, 1922; Northamptonshire Record Society, iv, 1930.

³ Published by the Derbyshire Archaeological and Natural History Society in 1945 and 1957–9 respectively.

⁴ VCH *Wiltshire*, ii, 1955. The volume also contains his chapter on 'Anglo-Saxon Wiltshire'.

no one then or since has ever equalled her amazing output, which came from a dedication to which Darlington's was not inferior though working at a slower pace. (That pace, of course, was inevitably reduced by his dedicated labours as Head of Department and Chairman of the Board of Studies amongst other London offices.) I still have somewhere a letter from Lady Stenton to me when young, dreaming of academe and kicking against the pricks in Chancery Lane, advising me to stay where I was and become 'a record man', than which she could evidently think of no happier fate. It is pertinent at this point to mention also Darlington's near life-long membership of the Pipe Roll Society, important to him and to that society. He was evidently irresistibly persuaded to join, as so many of us were, at an early stage of his career by Lady Stenton—in fact when he landed his first job at Bedford College in 1927, for his name first appears in the list of members in the volume for 1928. In May 1941 he was invited to become a member of Council, and in 1969 to succeed Sir Frank Stenton as Vice-President and Chairman. (Lady Stenton, of course, was Honorary Secretary and General Editor from at least 1925 to 1962.) Soon afterwards ill health often prevented his presiding over Council meetings, and in 1976 he was invited to become an Honorary Vice-President. 'By this time he was finding it difficult to bring himself to write letters, but his reply to this was prompt and in his own hand. He was delighted.'¹

Here, if Professor R. R. Darlington's wishes could be known and obeyed, this memoir ought to end, though one would certainly insist upon ending by saying that he brought to all his work—and, indeed, to all that he did—a meticulous perfectionism that is the mark of the true scholar. Yet in an Academy obituary an attempt must be made to record for those who knew him not, and for posterity, 'what sort of a man he was, or what dignity he had', in so far as this can be done by one who may have 'looked upon him' but never 'lived at his court'. First to be set down is an undeviating dedication to historical scholarship almost monastic in its devotion—and indeed he remained celibate all his life. V. H. Galbraith's advice to his research pupils—'If you want to get on, my boy, don't get married before you are forty'—Darlington extended, and liked to maintain that marriage was a dangerous potential distraction ('I hope it won't interfere with your work'). It is also true, however, that in his later years, as he mellowed, he was aware of his own image, liked to live up to it and even to project it, and had sufficient sense of humour to enjoy self-parody.

¹ *Ex inform.* Barbara Dodwell, Honorary Secretary and joint General Editor.

Be that as it may, the exacting standards he habitually imposed upon himself he naturally and innocently expected of others, so that, by all accounts, to be his graduate pupil could be very demanding. So it was also to be his young colleague. He once 'gave', and at short notice, to such an one some excruciatingly difficult lectures of his own on twelfth-century Ireland, with the best will in the world and intended as something between a compliment and an opportunity to be eagerly and gratefully accepted. Sincerely worried lest the same young colleague was over-working, he had this to say in the course of begging him not to. 'There are two kinds of scholars. There are those who work late into the night and those who get up early in the morning. Myself, I am seldom in bed before one, but then, I never get up before seven.' Also he was very dignified, and all the more so because of his old-fashioned dress and behaviour. In all he did he was very efficient, not only in scholarship but also in administration, not least as head of department and not least at Birkbeck, where he built up and left a flourishing history department 'whose 10 members included no less than two professors and five readers, an unheard of ratio by normal London terms'.¹ In all things, and in a splendid phrase, he had 'an austerity of rectitude'.² But because all this is well known to the point of being legendary among his colleagues and his pupils, and because not all even of them could break through the formidable façade and the cherished reserve, it should be emphasized here above all that he was kind. In all the correspondence and conversation that I have enjoyed with those who knew him this characteristic so fundamental in him as to be concealed from the world at large has constantly recurred. I quote only from Professor Dorothy Whitelock: 'He was a *very*³ kind man . . . When as an examiner his scholarly integrity made it impossible for him to overlook faults, he nevertheless came down on the side of leniency when it came to a final decision. I do not remember his ever saying anything nasty about anyone'. Of how many of us will that be said? There were other characteristics also of a complex man, which do much to qualify in reality the dry, single-minded and aloof formality with which he chose most of the time to face the world. He was devoted not only to his home and family but also to his garden. He collected with pride not only books but also silver and fine china. He was fond of cats and exchanged cat

¹ *The Times*, 6 June 1977.

² Memorial Address, *ut supra*, p. 6.

³ The only underlining in a long and appreciative letter (of 1 February, 1979).

Christmas cards with Professor Rosalind Hill. His rooms at college were book-lined but there were sherry and biscuits in the cupboard. He rode and kept horses, preferring not your placid hack but something with a bit of 'go'. And this he did not only for pleasure but also in the pursuit of historical truth, riding the boundaries of Domesday Wiltshire as so many men must once have done before him. One of his research pupils undertaking the study of Domesday Dorset was advised similarly to get a horse, though alas! she could not ride. (Whether she confessed this inadequacy or not I do not know—though I do know that when she thoughtlessly attended his supervision one day wearing eye-shadow he was much concerned lest she were overworking). For these and other reasons it seems all too probable that we shall not see Darlington's like again. Had he lived in 1066 he would surely have been a paragon of his beloved Old English church, and his integrity, as with Wulfstan, would have preserved him. The final sentence must be Miss Margaret Darlington's, writing of his last days. 'His affairs were in order: he had made provision for his sister to enable her to continue living in the house at Twyford, and he accepted his approaching death with the same fortitude and courage he had shown throughout his adult life.'

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