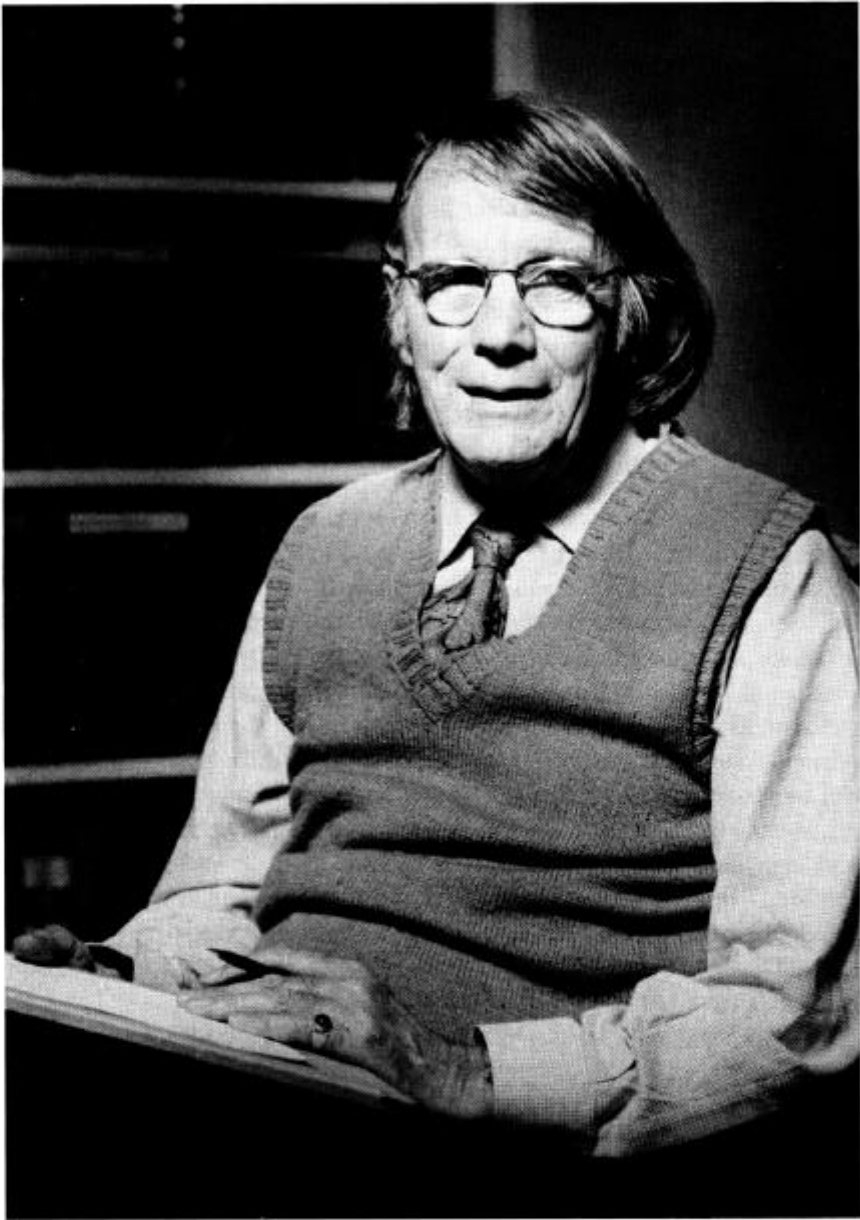


PLATE XXVI



Edward Leigh

P. HUNTER BLAIR

PETER HUNTER BLAIR

1912-1982

PETER HUNTER BLAIR was deeply influenced all his life by his early experience in his native north-east. The mixture of warm affection and reserve, of readiness to learn and caution, of fun and shyness, and the feeling for nature and love of the past that characterized his boyhood and youth distinguished him as a man too. Not just his personal relations but also his teaching and scholarship had their roots in early thoughts and feelings. The toughness he had had to acquire in order to overcome his sensitiveness during his upbringing was too precious a possession to be thrown away on any passing trend that happened to come along. So too was his religious conviction that man is not alone in his struggles. The values he had learned at the beginning continued to direct his private life, the teaching of his pupils and the study of those he admired in history. Truly in his case the child was father to the man.

He was born at Gosforth, in the Newcastle upon Tyne area, on 22 March 1912. He was a rather lonely child, for his father Charles Henry Hunter Blair, a successful businessman, was already 49 when he was born and, because of the death of a sister three years older, Peter was brought up the youngest child by six-and-a-half years. When Peter was 4½ he went to Newcastle Central High School Kindergarten where he was happy in spite of being shy. At 8 he was sent as a boarder to Bow Preparatory School in Durham, because his mother felt he needed younger companionship than the family provided, and thence to Durham School. There he received a traditional, though rather restricted, education: it gave him a good training in the classics and a lifelong enjoyment of sport but no encouragement to develop an aptitude for music or any other aesthetic taste; it was later that he took to playing the recorder and derived increasing pleasure from listening to music. Although strong in appearance when an adult, he was not a straightforwardly robust boy—indeed he once spent a year in a wheelchair after an especially severe bout of whooping cough. Conditions at school were Spartan in winter; he used to recall waking in the dormitory to find snow on his sheet. He stoically hardened himself, however, learning to row and

becoming both captain of boats and, in his last year, captain of rugby. A boy who felt keenly and was easily hurt, he already habitually kept his feelings to himself. He invented a companion to talk to on his walks and wrote a diary; at this stage it consisted of not much more than a catalogue of rowing and rugger dates, but he was to keep a diary (on and off) for the rest of his life and was to see it as 'the only place in which one may legitimately speak of one's own self'. His sister Lesley remembers having a sad feeling for him, though she did not know quite why. Certainly he remained intensely shy and solitary, and a melancholy cast of temperament was to stay with him always. Many years later, watching his own teenage son enjoying a party, he mused, 'At his age an invitation to a dance could cast a gloom over the whole of my Christmas holidays. I wonder why we should be so differently affected by the same thing.' Nevertheless small things easily triggered off bursts of fun in him. (In adult life the gift of a chromed expanding towel-rail would be enough to set off a bout of make-believe trombone playing.) Peter's father was the one relative with whom he had a close bond. Peter and his elder brother did not have much in common, his sister Lesley was a good deal older and when he was 18 his mother died after five years of illness. As a result Peter was all the more attached to his father. It had been a source of some anxiety to his mother that the young Peter did not always find it easy to deal with his father, in his sixties and at once fond, proud, and strict. The two were regular companions in the school holidays. Charles Hunter Blair, a local antiquarian esteemed more than locally, took his son to visit churches and archaeological sites. Peter was to write regular letters to his father for the next thirty-odd years until the old man died at the age of 99.

When his father, ambitious for Peter academically, sent him to the University of Cambridge in October 1930 (to Emmanuel College, where his elder brother had gone before him), the break proved to be more of a watershed in his young life than could have been foreseen at the time; Cambridge was to be his home for the rest of his days. After a term he wanted to go back, abandon Cambridge and enter the family business. He was dissuaded; but he loved to go home in his vacations, to be in the familiar house again, and would walk round picking things up. He still kept himself to himself though, and used to walk alone on the hills for peace and uplift of mind—as he did ever afterwards whenever he visited. He participated in antiquarian society excursions and by now was talking to meetings of the Berwickshire Naturalists'

Club and the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne about churches and castles. Eric Birley and Ian Richmond were among slightly older men living in the Newcastle area who encouraged and directed his interests during his young manhood, especially in the Roman antiquities so plentifully to hand, and under their aegis during four seasons he became practised in the techniques of Romano-British archaeology. In the summer vacation of 1932 he excavated Milecastle 37 on Hadrian's Wall and the report ('Housesteads Milecastle', *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 4th ser. 11 (1934), 103-20) became his first publication.

His undergraduate terms in Cambridge were passed happily and, in fact, contained the seeds of a promising career away from Northumberland. There were two formative influences above all, his College, Emmanuel, and Professor Hector Munro Chadwick's school of Anglo-Saxon studies. The College set him in an environment that was at once personal and of historical depth; Chadwick's school, in which he studied during his third and fourth years after spending his first two reading for Part I of the Historical Tripos, was a small, highly personal circle centred on Chadwick and his wife Nora Kershaw Chadwick and based on Chadwick's conception of liberal, many-sided study of early societies. Here Hunter Blair was introduced to an interdisciplinary programme and methodology which were to enable him later, in maturity, to publish a comprehensive account of Anglo-Saxon England drawing on historical and literary written sources, geography, place-names, architectural and artistic artefacts and material remains generally. The Chadwicks' benevolence is illustrated in a small way by a diary entry Peter wrote when he sat a preliminary examination in June 1933: 'Took paper in Chadders' dining room, plus bowl of cherries'. He was placed in the First Class in this examination and was awarded a Senior Scholarship by Emmanuel College. A year later he was again placed in the First Class when he took Section B of the Archaeological and Anthropological Tripos, the examination in Anglo-Saxon studies at that time. He proceeded to the BA Degree and was awarded the Dame Bertha Phillpotts Scholarship and the Scandinavian Studentship by the University. He was not registered as a Research Student, but post-graduate work on the Norse occupation of Britain, carried out first in Cambridge and then for most of a year in Sweden, led to his election as a Research Fellow of Emmanuel College in 1937. At the instigation of Professor Chadwick he gave some courses of lectures in the Department of Anglo-Saxon Studies and was soon appointed to an Assistant Lectureship. In 1937 he put roots down

in another way too when he married Joyce Hamilton Thompson, whom he had first met five years before while she was an undergraduate at Girton. Only the war was now to interrupt the tenor of his life: from the autumn of 1939 to July 1945 he was away on National Service, until March 1941 in censorship in Liverpool and then in the Scandinavian section of the European News Services of the BBC in London. Not every occasion he had to rise to was uniformly grim. One day King Haakon of Norway was due to be given the sort of red-carpeted reception that befitted such a symbolic figure at the headquarters of the BBC in Portland Place. Peter was quietly working at his desk in Bush House in the Strand when his secretary came in and said, 'There's a man downstairs who says he's King Haakon . . .'.

On his return to Cambridge in 1945 he resumed his Assistant Lectureship and on its expiry was appointed Lecturer. He was also elected to an Official Fellowship at Emmanuel and for the next twenty years was under heavy demand from both College and University for various services in addition to his teaching as University Lecturer. His College offices included those of Tutor, Praelector and, from 1951 to 1965, Senior Tutor. Beyond the College he held office as University Proctor and at various times was on the Syndicate for the development of the Sidgwick Site (an area scheduled for new University arts and social sciences buildings), the Lodging Houses Syndicate, the Board for the Ordinary Degree, the Tutorial Representatives, and the Committee of Management for Entrance Scholarships. He was a member of the Faculty Board of Archaeology and Anthropology and of the Faculty's Degree Committee for no less than twenty years. Needless to say he examined in both University and College. In all, he examined regularly in Tripos over some thirty years.

Emmanuel College harmonized with his sense of the roundness of life. As a student, by then tall and well-built, he had combined scholarship with rowing and had been Boat Captain in 1932-3. Now, in the busy post-war period with much social change in progress, he served his College strenuously and usually willingly, though sometimes he resented the quantity of humdrum routine business that came his way and occasionally felt alarm and even despair at its encroachments, as the entry in his diary for 20 January 1947 shows only too well:

Lectured in the morning at 11. Attended the regular meeting of proctors from 2-3.30. Went to the Governing Body meeting from 4 till 6.30. Attended to tutorial business 6.30-7.15 and presided over a meeting of the May Ball committee from 8 till 10. Such is a day in the life of

an idle don. When, in these conditions, do I write books or prepare lectures? Is it surprising that the standard of scholarship declines if this is what other would-be scholars have to do? Went to bed completely exhausted. And then the alarm said it was time to get up at seven.

On the whole, as the diary that he kept, with considerable gaps, from 1946 to 1960 shows, he maintained a steady interest in the main issues and enjoyed a sense of occasion. The entry for 6 December 1947 serves as an example:

The Regent House today approved recommendations which will make women members of the University next October. So my own 'placet' uttered loud and clear after a suitably dramatic pause was literally the last word in an argument that has been going on for half a century and more. We had made ready for a vote in case there should be any opposition, but there was none. Shall we be arguing about co-educational colleges after another half century?

In College councils he spoke comparatively little, but always to the point and with calm wisdom, standing out sturdily for whatever he believed in. Nor was he the faceless administrator. Any individual involved in a difficult question of College admission or of tutorial arrangements or of discipline commanded his full attention. Any young person in distress or bewilderment brought out in him at once a responsible and fatherly kindness. He took a humane interest in those in his charge and once wrote of undergraduates in the early 1950s that their 'courage, humour and faith (by no means born of blindness) are often an inspiration to their elders'. His boyhood sense of fun never deserted him. Any kind of hat, or pseudo-hat, would be donned immediately, and his wife's shopping lists were apt to acquire humorous additions. I remember well the zest with which one day in the early 1950s he took an affiliated student from Aberdeen (now Director of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland in Edinburgh), a young University Lecturer from Melbourne, and myself (a research student) on a high-spirited excursion in his car to the Anglo-Saxon churches at Brixworth and Earls Barton in Northamptonshire. The day began with his collecting an enormous old-fashioned picnic hamper like a laundry basket from the Emmanuel kitchens and ended with his reciting rhymes such as

There was an old man of St Noots
Who went to bed in his boots . . .

on the way back. He always delighted in limericks. Birley, Richmond, he, and the rest had amused themselves making up light-hearted verse in this and other forms in the evenings of

archaeological digs on the Roman Wall and much later in life he was to grace a College choir dinner with a sample he had newly composed:

A respected and elderly prude
Was determined to sleep in the nude.
As he climbed into bed,
He regretfully said,
'I find it both chilly and rude.'

His lecture courses dealt with the political and military history of Roman Britain and the history and antiquities of Anglo-Saxon England. He liked lecturing but was characteristically diffident. On 10 October 1953 he wrote:

A class of 7 at my lecture. There will never be many for such a subject. I enjoy lecturing and can hold an audience, but have not a sufficiently firm belief in the value of the subject not to feel an occasional doubt about thus employing what is in the end the taxpayer's money. But still my own income tax amounts to more than half of what the University pays me and I think my College pay is truly earned.

Attending his lectures with their diverse material, as I did when a newly arrived research student, was like entering an Aladdin's cave or—more appropriately perhaps—like young Wiglaf's experience on entering the mound stacked with treasure in *Beowulf*. For the individual teaching of College supervision, however, he mistakenly felt he did not have much talent.

Hunter Blair's happiest term-time days were undoubtedly those on which he could find time for some family life and open air activity, such as gardening, along with University and College duties. Weekends and vacations gave welcome scope for family sailing on Fenland rivers. An entry in his diary for 3 June 1956 records:

To the sailing club for tea yesterday and for lunch and tea today on DREDA, our latest extravagance though one which promises to give us much joy: 30 ft. converted ship's boat, 4 berth, gaff rig and 8 h.p. twin cylinder engine: which last has given me blisters and a sore wrist, but I triumphed over it today. Joyce full of enthusiasm and Hatty thrilled with it.

(Andrew, his son, was away at Rugby School at the time.) *Dreda* was to give rise later to publication of a delightful book of fancy for children (Peter Blair, *The Coming of Pout* (London, 1966)). Family holidays—picnicking on the sands, swimming, hill walking, looking at birds and plants in Northern Ireland (where Joyce's forebears came from), and the like—gave him the utmost pleasure

and he was always sad to return. The family circle (not forgetting the family dog) meant a great deal to him as a reserved and private person. Part of the diary entry for 1 January 1952 catches the sentiment:

This New Year's day finds us all at home, four of us now, with Joyce working harder than ever to make our home the wonderful place it always is. Hatty, now into her third year, has become an engaging 'imp', as Andrew calls her. She begins to know some nursery rhymes.

In spite of the *cri de cœur*, 'When do I write books?', his publications, including a facsimile edition of a major text and two books, kept up a steady pace during the twenty post-war years up to 1965. There had been two pre-war papers, published in 1939, in addition to the earlier one on the Housesteads Milecastle. Both proclaimed that close critical analysis of written sources was to be the foundation of his work. In the one he demonstrated that certain statements in the third part of the source known as the Three Fragments of Irish Annals relate not to ninth-century Scandinavian history as had long been thought but to tenth-century Northumbrian history instead. In the other article he provided a first ever critical study of the material important for early Northumbrian history in the compilation ascribed in its only surviving manuscript to Symeon of Durham, known to have been precentor at that place in the twelfth century. Both these articles, together with the seven he published between 1945 and 1965 and three more published subsequently, have been reprinted in Peter Hunter Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Northumbria*, edited by M. Lapidge and Pauline Hunter Blair, published by Variorum Reprints (London, 1984), and supplying full bibliographical information about the original publication of all its contents. (The thoughtful reviews he published from time to time throughout his career were not included in this collection.) Three early post-war papers published in successive years (1947, 1948, and 1949) and a fourth published after another ten years drew critically on the principal available written sources—Gildas's *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, the anonymous *Historia Brittonum* and early entries in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*—to clarify the origins of Northumbria and its territorial extent during the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries. Another article, published in 1963, took his analysis of the Symeon of Durham material much further. The two remaining articles of the 1945–65 period, published in 1950 and 1959 respectively, together with the facsimile edition, *The Moore Bede*, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile 9 (Copenhagen, 1959), were concerned with

the most important source of all for early English history, Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*. The introduction to the facsimile provided an exhaustive palaeographical, codicological, textual and historical study of the manuscript reproduced, one of the two supreme surviving witnesses to Bede's text; the 1950 article was a detailed analysis of the uniquely valuable memoranda relating to early Northumbrian history entered on the last page of the same manuscript; the third item, the Jarrow Lecture for 1959 published in that year, displayed in a general account his intimate knowledge of the nature of Bede's history, its sources and its transmission. In the later of the two pre-1965 books, *Roman Britain and Early England 55 BC-AD 871* (Edinburgh, 1963), Hunter Blair gave a full-length account of his long-standing special interest in the transition from the Roman occupation to the establishment of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The full treatment of Roman Britain, as well as being a valuable synthesis in its own right, served to clarify many problems of the period of the Anglo-Saxon invasions and early rule. In his earlier book, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 1956, dedicated to his father, then aged 93), he provided the survey of all Anglo-Saxon history for which he is best known. Open minded and readable, and exceptional among other general accounts in its attention to linguistic, literary, archaeological, architectural, and artistic evidence, it has been justifiably regarded as a standard book worldwide ever since, being reprinted many times and reissued in a revised second edition in 1977.

A dark period in his life began when his wife Joyce died at Christmas 1963 after prolonged illness. A year later he married Joyce's recently widowed sister-in-law Muriel. But another blow followed within months when she too died. He resigned his Senior Tutorship and withdrew a good deal from College life. Nor, from 1967 when the Department of Anglo-Saxon and Kindred Studies (as it was then called) was transferred from the Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology to that of English, was he much involved in Faculty and University affairs. As a practising Anglican (though he never formulated his beliefs) he was sustained in his troubles by a seeking and not-to-be-undermined religious faith. A deepened, affectionate relationship with his sister Lesley developed and he gained much comfort from the companionship of his daughter Hatty, still a schoolgirl. (His son Andrew was by now married.) But it was only when (through the publication of his *Pout* book) he met Pauline Clarke, a successful children's writer, and married her in 1969 that his life returned to the sunlight. Sharing tastes for music and the arts generally and

for many other aspects of experience, they developed probably the most intimate relationship of his whole life. Together they made into a beautiful home a house and garden they acquired at Bottisham, a village a few miles out of Cambridge, in October 1979. Regular visits to the National Theatre in London and trips to Italy, southern Germany, and Greece were special joys. His life revived in other ways too, though physically he had slowed up; whereas some years earlier he could have been seen charging along the towpath on a gigantic bicycle exhorting College eights as President of the Emmanuel Boat Club, now, rather, he strode with slow and measured pace through the College gardens. In 1969 he held office as Vice-Master of Emmanuel (resigning on an issue of policy) and in 1974 was appointed to an *ad hominem* University Readership in Anglo-Saxon History. At his own desire in 1978 he took early retirement from this Readership. Becoming a Life Fellow of Emmanuel, he found new ways to serve his College: he undertook substantial fresh duties as its Honorary Archivist. In this office, with suitable help, he painstakingly and skilfully transformed a somewhat neglected and partly unassessed quantity of College records into an orderly, classified collection. Meanwhile, both before and after he retired from his Readership, he accepted invitations to lecture or conduct seminars at various universities, scholarly conferences and other occasions; the trip to Italy (in 1969) and the one to southern Germany (in 1971) were brought about in this way. He was an enthusiastic editor of the first eight volumes of the annual publication *Anglo-Saxon England* (1972-9), with chief responsibility for their historical contents, and suggested the effigy of King Alfred on the silver penny issued to celebrate Alfred's occupation and fortification of London in 886 as the series' emblem.

The intellectual life of Northumbria in the seventh and eighth centuries became the main theme of his publications in this period. Only one paper, published in 1971, a close examination of the chronological problems raised by Bede's account of the mission of Paulinus to Northumbria, stood rather to one side. In a lecture published a year earlier he had tackled his current central concerns head-on. It set forth understandingly the concepts that controlled Bede's writing of his *Historia Ecclesiastica* and the derivation of those ideas, and for good measure discussed Bede's knowledge of the Augustinian mission in Kent. Another lecture, published in 1976, asking probing questions about the body of writings available in post-Bedan Northumbria, particularly in the library of which Alcuin had charge in York, was a pioneering

study of eighth-century Northumbrian learning, and in a last, vintage, lecture, delivered in Cambridge late in 1981 and to be published in 1985, Hunter Blair examined Whitby as a centre of learning in the seventh century.

Two books allowed him to deploy his wide and deep knowledge most fully, *The World of Bede* (London, 1970), intended primarily for fellow scholars, and *Northumbria in the Days of Bede* (London, 1976), imaginatively addressed to general readers. He was never interested just in specialists; like Bede, he respected *opinio vulgi*. He was always ready to address general audiences. Years before, in the autumn of 1949, he had contributed a lecture on 'The Foundations of England' to a course in Cambridge which presented a composite picture of the prehistory and early history of the British Isles to large audiences reading a great variety of subjects other than history. A few months later the series was broadcast and in 1952 was published in book form as M. P. Charlesworth *et al.*, *The Heritage of Early Britain* (London). Then again, in 1957, he had taken the major part in preparing a series of programmes about Anglo-Saxon England on the BBC's Third Programme and had contributed to its attendant literature (*Anglo-Saxon England*, a BBC Publication, no. 3637). *Northumbria in the Days of Bede* reads as though its subject was all round its author, and in a real sense it was, for much of the book was written while Pauline and he were living in an old Manse which they bought near Duns, over the border, west of Berwick upon Tweed, and used for long stays during five years. To Peter it was sharing with Pauline, a southerner, his 'childhood's dream, a stone house in Scotland'. Together they roamed the uplands of the north and visited such places as Mull and Iona and Edinburgh. The magic of the north—for Peter the old magic—took possession of them both and the book, dedicated to Pauline and bearing the motto 'Time will run back and fetch the age of gold', is quickened by it.

In *The World of Bede* he produced an outstanding work of mature scholarship. Full of important new information, handling many controversial matters clearly and succinctly and carrying a weight of exact scholarship lightly, it provides the best picture of Bede and his age that is available. Attaching proper significance to the biblical commentaries as the real centre of Bede's work, without in any way diminishing his stature as a chronologist and historian, it deals more effectively with Bede's attitude to the writing of history than any previous attempt by another. As a result we see Bede in the round, the whole man, carrying out over a lifetime an integrated scheme of work. Furthermore it brings to

bear recent studies concerned with ecclesiastical history and learning in western Europe to delineate Bede's background more thoroughly and convincingly than ever before. Its chapters on such topics as the biblical manuscripts available to Bede (based on thorough investigation of surviving manuscripts and of what can be surmised about lost manuscripts), education, secular learning, and chronology are of the highest interest. This is a distinguished piece of work, giving a sound and vivid picture of a great man in his intellectual and spiritual environment.

Hunter Blair took proper pride in the recognition he received—election as a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 1970, award of a Cambridge Litt.D. in 1973, his Readership in 1974, election to a Fellowship of the British Academy in 1980, but his modesty was such that he could not at first believe news of this final honour. From early pre-war days he had had in view a single large work perhaps to be entitled *The History of Northumbria*. Probably it was always an unrealizable goal, but it represented the commitment which steadily inspired his scholarship. Not biased by preconceptions, not striving after originality for its own sake, modest, even self-distrustful, and working scrupulously from primary evidence, he harvested knowledge of the early history of his native region and, with an understanding born of practical living, imparted it to others openly, lucidly and sympathetically as Bede's *verax historicus*. After his health sadly had gone into several months of irreversible decline, looking at the buildings of his College one day, he said to me, 'With four hundred years of history around me it doesn't seem to matter much if I die.' He died on 9 September 1982 greatly loved and respected. His memorial service in Emmanuel College chapel included a reading of the Moore text of Cædmon's Hymn, and an inscription on his tombstone in Fulbourn churchyard, near Cambridge, based on Old English gnomic poetry, recalls his strong sense of oneness with the natural world.

PETER CLEMOES

I am grateful for the help I have received from materials originated by Mrs Pauline Hunter Blair, Miss Lesley Hunter Blair, Dr Michael Lapidge, Dr Frank Stubbings, and the late Professor Dorothy Whitelock.