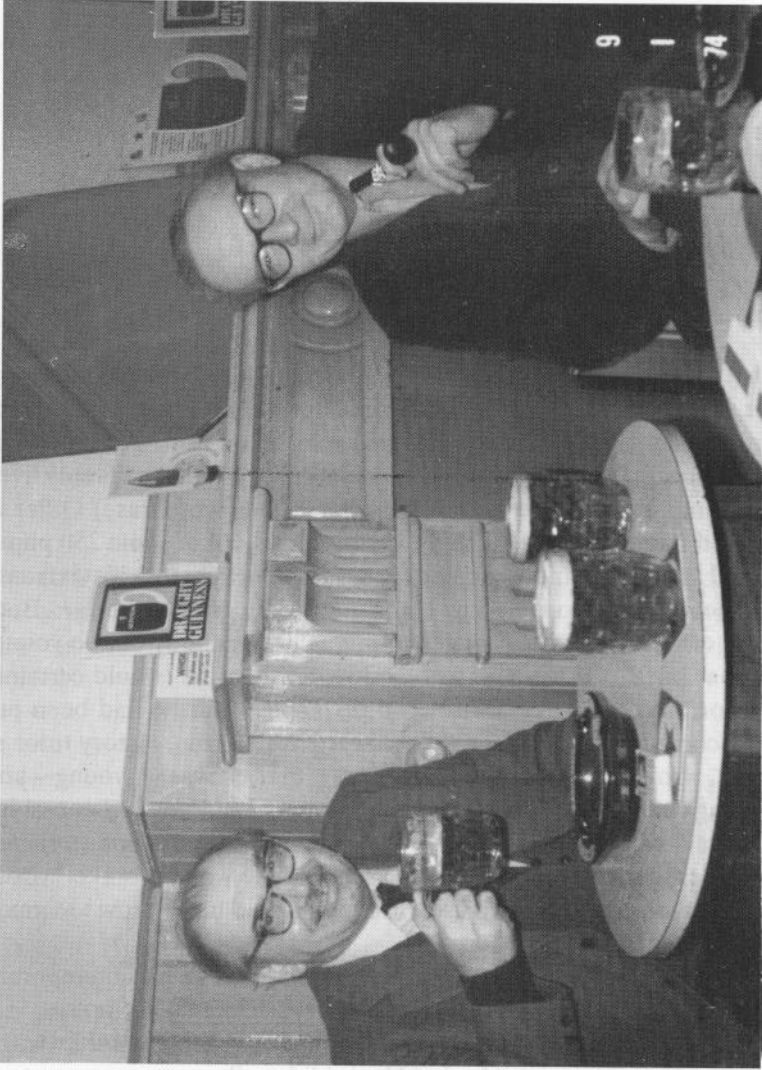


Hilary Seton Offler 1913–1991

H. S. OFFLER was born on 3 February 1913. His father, Horace Offler, was manager, later general manager and secretary, of King's Acre Nurseries at Hereford. This was a long-established and substantial firm, with a shop in the city and from 120 to 200 men and boys on the pay-roll. The family lived in the city and after attending a 'dame school' (his own phrase) Offler in 1923 entered Hereford High School for Boys, a school of some 250 pupils with a small sixth form. In December 1928, two months before his sixteenth birthday, he won a scholarship to Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Both school and college were disconcerted at this achievement by one so young. His headmaster, R. G. Ruscoe, who had written that he 'would certainly be taken for a boy of 17 or 18 at least', explained that he had been put in for the scholarship 'as a trial shot'; Edward Welbourne, history tutor at Emmanuel, wrote that 'none of us knew . . . that he was so young—and though I ought to have noticed it from his papers I did not feel conscious of it in my talk with him'. It was agreed that the rules should be stretched to allow Offler to spend a further year at school; 'the worst mistake,' wrote Welbourne, advising him how to use this time, 'would be to know too much history and too little else'.

His early success was due to sheer native talent. A near-contemporary describes the school at this time as 'certainly no academic hot-house. . . . It was a happy school and . . . not outstanding in really any other way'. However, the history master, 'Araby' Heal, 'did really encourage us . . . ; one always felt one could do a little bit better after that essay had come back'. Offler himself deeply appreciated his school, looking for no more from it than what it could offer. He wrote, long afterwards, that 'it was a pretty rough world; but for the most part it was also tolerant and kindly. . . . there was little attempt to frustrate the common ambition of us all,

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H. S. OFFLER (right) with Professor Thacker

which was to turn into men as quickly as possible'. He had a special word for the woodwork master: 'On the whole the School understood craftsmanship far better than scholarship, and he was indeed a superb craftsman, teaching . . . —so gently, but quite inflexibly—the lesson that the only satisfactory way of doing any job was to do it in a proper fashion'. Among his schoolfellows, Offler

had a reputation of being aloof, a very stern and efficient prefect, more feared by the juniors than Ruscoe himself. He must have had an enormous capacity for work. In the prefects' room . . . there were some large volumes of old history books . . . things like Lecky's *History of England*, and Offler had read them and annotated them from cover to cover.

According to another schoolfellow

He was not just a 'swot', however. I remember a school cricket match at Wyeside when Offler was fielding at forward short-leg. A fast ball . . . was struck savagely in the direction of Offler, who turned to scan the boundary behind him, as did all the spectators. Offler, however, had caught the ball and transferred it to the pocket of his flannels with such speed that almost everyone around had been deceived.

Besides cricket, he played rugger, introduced in the school while he was there, and throughout his life he took keen interest in both games. Indeed, in all this there is much that those who knew him only in later life will recognize: a man who mostly seemed older than his years, stocky and sturdy, a strong personality, self-reliant and ready to accept the world as he found it, with a quick wit and mischievous sense of humour more often concealed than displayed, a prodigious and varied reader of history, a scholar whose work was marked by insistence on a craftsmanship little short of perfectionism. He became, however, sterner with himself than with other people and his aloofness cannot have lasted long, though he remained, in words he occasionally used of others, a very private person.¹

In 1930 he went up to Emmanuel, aged seventeen. His undergraduate days were clouded by his parents' difficulties. The previous year Horace Offler had been ill and had had one leg amputated; during his unavoidably long absence from work the firm was less efficiently run and in May 1930 it collapsed, depriving him of both work and income. Offler's anxieties, long concealed, that he was adding to his father's financial burdens eventually

¹ This account of Offler's schooldays is drawn from the archives of Emmanuel College, Cambridge (henceforth ECA), tutorial file for Offler, letters of Ruscoe (14 Nov., 22 Dec. 1928), Welbourne (two of 18 Dec. 1928), Horace Offler (4 Mar. 1932); recorded recollections by Mr A. G. Gale; *Hereford High School for Boys. An Account of its first Fifty Years*, ed. R. G. Ruscoe (Hereford, 1962), pp.41–5; letter by Mr F. J. Handley in *Hereford Times*, 14 Feb. 1991.

produced short-lived physical symptoms of strain, whereupon Welbourne, now his tutor, went to much trouble to give practical help: he got the College to enhance the scholarship, corresponded with Horace Offler ('a most excellent and very courageous man, who has like Job, been persecuted by fate in a most alarming way'), and arranged for Offler to have a holiday in Paris under the aegis of an Emmanuel man who was in the diplomatic service. This was characteristic of Welbourne, who took a close and kindly interest in all his pupils; as he told Horace Offler, 'We are, as you may perhaps understand, more of a family and less of an institution than in appearance we may seem to be'.² Throughout Offler's Cambridge days, and later, Welbourne appears as his friend and guide. Offler, though very much his own man, seems to have had much in common with Welbourne in his wide reading and in his outlook on the world, and also later in the attention he paid to his pupils.³ Welbourne, on the other hand, had little time for the technical mastery in dealing with historical sources that Offler made his own; whatever Welbourne's influence, Offler did not model himself on him.⁴

Welbourne soon saw Offler as a quite exceptional undergraduate. In June 1933 he wrote that he was 'not only the best historian who has been at this college for at least ten years, but is perhaps, the best I can fairly expect to meet as a pupil'. By then he had been placed in the first class in the first-year intercollegiate examination in history, and in Part I (starred for distinction) and Part II of the Historical Tripos. Early the previous year Welbourne had already envisaged his continuing at Cambridge on graduation, and he himself seems to have had no hesitation; his father wrote of 'his studious nature' and 'his great desire for a scholastic career', remarking that on completing Part II of the Tripos he 'had hardly reached Home ere he resumed his studies'. From his first year it was medieval history that had most attracted him. Welbourne consulted G. T. Lapsley and J. P. Whitney and all were agreed that he should take a fourth undergraduate year to work for Section III of Part II of the Theological Tripos, 'a Section entirely devoted to Church History, where the work is

² ECA, tutorial file for Offler, especially letters of Welbourne (26 Feb., 2, 5 Mar. 1932), Horace Offler (4 Mar., 15 Apr. 1932).

³ They were alike too in typing their own letters, but Offler was much the better typist. In quotations, following editorial conventions of which Offler would approve, Welbourne's typing slips have been silently corrected. The correspondence between Welbourne and Offler from 1928 to 1945 in the ECA tutorial file is of more than simply personal interest in their comments on contemporary Cambridge, on European affairs before and during the war and on other matters.

⁴ There are interesting memoirs of Welbourne in *Emmanuel College Magazine*, xlviii (1965-6), pp.6-12, and by D. Newsome, 'Two Emmanuel Historians', *ibid.*, pp.21-34 (reprinted in *Emmanuel College Magazine: Quatercentenary Issue* [1984], pp.104-14).

so arranged as to facilitate candidature for the Lightfoot Scholarship, a university scholarship of some value and a good deal of distinction'. As Welbourne put it,

so young a man as Mr Offler needs a year of undergraduate work, both to broaden his basis of knowledge, and to prevent the harm which would almost certainly be done to a man of the highest promise, by premature work on original sources.

His scholarship was renewed, and a year later he had not only been placed yet again in the first class but had won the Lightfoot Scholarship with work on the pontificate of Boniface VIII and had been elected to a research studentship at Emmanuel. In 1936 he was awarded a research fellowship, also at Emmanuel, which continued until 1940.⁵

Offler took part in few leisure activities at Cambridge. He walked, in and around Cambridge, he may have played some rugger in his first year and he certainly took a keen interest in the college's fortunes in athletics.⁶ From his first year onwards he was a member of the college's Pocourante Club (named after the Venetian noble in *Candide*), an essay society of twelve members, to which he read papers 'In his inimitable fashion' on medieval and later topics; in one he used Antonio Magliabecchi, Florentine librarian and book-collector of the seventeenth century, 'as a stalking horse behind which to propound his own peculiar ideas about the necessity of a moratorium on the publication of books'.⁷ According to Sir David Pitblado, his college contemporary and friend, 'Offler soon became a central figure in a loosely knit group brought together by mutual liking rather than common studies or political leanings (none of us, if I remember correctly, was a member of a political club, though we were well aware of the time in which we were living)'; though he had already developed the measured style of speech that was so weighty and authoritative when he was older, 'The rest of us were not overawed by his avuncular manner, but enjoyed the quality of his thought and wit'.⁸ In his first long vacation he went with Pitblado on his first visit to Germany, walking in the Harz and the Thüringerwald and staying in youth hostels. On another holiday, in 1936, they stayed at a

⁵ ECA, tutorial file for Offler, letters of Welbourne (10 June 1931, 2 Mar. 1932, 22 June 1933, 16 Jan. 1934), Horace Offler (24 June 1933).

⁶ Memoir of Offler by Sir David Pitblado in *Emmanuel College Magazine*, lxxiii (1990-1), p.137; ECA, tutorial file for Offler, letter of Welbourne (30 Sept. 1943) mentions his playing rugger as an undergraduate but his name does not appear in the College Cup Competition teams listed in *Emmanuel College Magazine*.

⁷ ECA, SOC 24/1,2 (minute books of the Pocourante Club); the quotations are from minutes respectively of 17 Oct. 1932 and 2 Nov. 1938 (the latter was written by Offler himself as secretary).

⁸ Pitblado in *Emmanuel College Magazine*, lxxiii (1990-1), p.137.

country house on the Weser, where a baroness took foreign paying guests to improve their German; then they went to Berlin, full of preparations for the Olympic Games, with the Nazi Party much in evidence. 'My dear Pit,' declared Offler, 'I'm afraid we shall have to fight these people.' His realism and prescience are indisputable.⁹

By 1936, however, work as well as leisure was taking Offler to Germany. In April 1934 Welbourne had introduced him to C. W. Previt -Orton of St John's College, who supervised his research; the topic registered was 'Lewis of Bavaria'. Supervisor and subject were well chosen. After Previt -Orton's death in 1947 Offler referred to him as his 'master and friend', and Previt -Orton early remarked on Offler's 'fresh and original mind . . . following up clues and suggestions with remarkable skill and pertinacity'. This was in February 1936, when he reported that Offler

seems to have produced an original and sound picture of Lewis, his reign, and Germany in his time. Out of a confused welter of events, persons, dynasties, feuds and political moves, he has made a coherent, purposeful history, and has changed an obscure farrago into an articulated and meaning development.

This much was achieved from printed sources. He now sought to revise and expand his work by research on manuscripts, and much of the following year was spent away from Cambridge: at Paris and Berlin in June and September 1936 for practice in palaeography and diplomatic, at the Public Record Office in the winter of 1936-7, at Marseilles, Avignon and Paris in March and April 1937 and at Munich, other places in Bavaria, Vienna and again Paris in the summer. His mastery of codicology and textual criticism is clear from his doctoral thesis, which includes detailed discussion and edited texts of documents he found on these travels; equally clear is his mastery of languages. Apparently he had already by 1934 taught himself German (only French was taught at his school), but by 1940 Welbourne described him as having 'a very intimate knowledge of Germany, good knowledge of German, some knowledge of French, some knowledge also of Italian, Spanish, Dutch and perhaps a little Czech, and an immense capacity for work'.

The products of this work were impressive, the more so as Offler did much tutorial work at Emmanuel throughout these years of research and in 1937-9 lectured for the Historical Faculty first on late-medieval German history, then on medieval European history in general. The dissertation which won him his research fellowship in 1936 dealt with Lewis's reign in general. His thesis, submitted in 1938 and accepted for a doctorate, was confined to 'The Emperor Lewis IV and the Curia from 1330 to 1347: Canon

⁹ Ex inf. Sir David Pitblado.

Law and International Relationship in the first half of the Fourteenth Century'. Its aims were first to elucidate the negotiations between Lewis and the papacy, reinterpreting the procurations, documents of authorisation for the emperor's proctors at Avignon, and second to set these negotiations in the wider picture of European politics. His first article, 'England and Germany at the Beginning of the Hundred Years' War', was published in the *English Historical Review* in October 1939; another, 'Kaiser Ludwig IV and die Prokurationenfrage', was to have appeared at the same time in *Deutsches Archiv für Geschichte des Mittelalters* and proofs were sent back in August, 'but,' he later wrote, 'what became of them I do not know; I imagine the article was suppressed for patriotic reasons'. Meanwhile, however, work on fourteenth-century politics led naturally to an interest in the writings on political theory that either underlay or stemmed from them, and he accepted an invitation to join J. G. Sikes and other Cambridge scholars in editing the complete political works of William of Ockham. He collaborated in searching for relevant manuscripts on the Continent, and in the first volume, published by Manchester University Press in 1940, he edited one tract himself, 'Consultatio de Causa Matrimoniali', and completed the work of R. H. Snape on another, 'An Princeps . . . possit recipere Bona Ecclesiarum'. These later works were in no way by-products of his doctoral thesis, sections of it worked up for publication; rather, the thesis was simply one, not especially important, stage in a longer programme of intellectual exploration, which rapidly moved beyond it to further areas of interest and discovery. In fact he never took the Ph.D. degree to which he was entitled, seeing it perhaps as a mere bauble. 'Now you've got this out of the way,' he long after told a younger colleague who had just achieved a doctorate, 'go away and become a learned man—but it may take some years.'¹⁰

In Offler's case this process, which others might have supposed tolerably complete, was interrupted by war. His research fellowship expired in June 1940 and, perhaps because of what he had seen of Nazi Germany, he felt a strong personal commitment to fight. Welbourne tried to get him a non-combatant post that would put his skills to best use: Offler 'is extremely anxious to get into a combatant unit,' he wrote to the recruiting board, 'but I am anxious that his services should not be wasted'. Offler however, 'calling himself an author when teachers were a reserved occupation', cut the ground from beneath his feet: 'Mr Offler made personal application

¹⁰ These two paragraphs on Offler's work from 1934 to 1940 are drawn from papers in the possession of Mrs B. E. Offler (henceforth Offler papers), application for Durham readership; ECA, tutorial file for Offler, letters of Welbourne (27 Apr., 10 Oct. 1934, 15 July 1940), Previté-Orton (26 Feb. 1936); ECA, personal file for Offler, letter of Offler (10 May 1938).

to this Office,' the secretary of the board replied, 'and requested that his calling up for service be expedited'. He joined up on 15 August. Medically he was below Class I because of poor eyesight—he already wore thick glasses—and this restricted the form of his active service.¹¹ He was placed in the Royal Artillery, in the 111th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment (an attempt to transfer to the RAF was unsuccessful), and spent the following winter more or less uncomfortably in Scotland. In April 1941 he wrote as a Lance-Bombardier to Welbourne from Johnstone, Renfrewshire, where they were under canvas:

We did our stuff reasonably competently in the Clyde blitz—that is to say we diverted the bombers from their industrial targets on to the tenements of Clydebank. There they killed some thousands, but the shipyards go on almost unaffected. But sometimes I wonder how long the men will fail to realise that this is the purpose of AA. gunnery—and how long I shall be able to refrain from telling them.¹²

For a time his battery was posted in Northern Ireland, but by October he was at Royal Artillery OCTU at Shrivenham. When commissioned he was posted to no.268 Battery of the 40th (Highland) Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, in which he spent the rest of the war. It was part of the 51st (Highland) Division, heavily involved in the fighting from Egypt to Sicily and from Normandy to Germany, and much of his service was in the front line. He reached the Western Desert in September 1942, just before the battle of El Alamein. From March to August 1943 he was seconded to serve as liaison officer with a Free French flying column in Tunisia (1er Régiment de Marche de Spahis Marocains), which he described in a letter to Welbourne:

They were Spahis, all ex-horsemen, and some had killed Germans and Italians in this war from horseback with pistol and sabre. Henceforward I shall always walk with my legs a little bowed. But they did teach me for the first time what is really meant by an eye for country and by and large were the most gallant collection of people I have ever met.¹³

What he did not tell Welbourne (or anyone else, perhaps even his own parents) was that he had been awarded the Croix de Guerre—for want of a new one General Leclerc took the cross from his own uniform and pinned it on Offler—and had been cited by Leclerc:

¹¹ ECA, tutorial file for Offler, letters of Welbourne (2 Feb., two of 15 July 1940, 30 Jan. 1941, 30 Sept. 1943), W. G. Brown (20 July 1940); Offler papers include notes, with precise dates, of his principal movements during his war service.

¹² ECA, tutorial file for Offler, letters of Offler (14 Jan. ['1940'], 5, 24 Feb., 18 Apr. 1941), Welbourne (30 Jan., 18 Feb. 1941).

¹³ ECA, tutorial file for Offler, letters of Offler (20 Oct. 1941, 29 Aug. 1943).

A parfaitement assuré son service de liaison dans des conditions difficiles et souvent sous le feu violent de l'ennemi A rendu de réels services au Régiment et a été un bel exemple de courage, de sang-froid et de camaraderie au combat.¹⁴

When he rejoined his battery it was in Sicily; it returned to England in November, then sailed for Normandy immediately after the landings in June 1944. In August he wrote:

There is a most peculiar—and in some ways unhappy—difference between being with an Army which knows final victory is certain, and probably soon, and the old desert and even Sicilian days when we lived so much among uncertainties that they ceased to worry us This has been on the whole a much nastier war than the Mediterranean one—partly because we are always working at much closer quarters, because of the terrain

Whether from events in Normandy or for other reasons, the war affected Offler deeply, and in later life he spoke little of his experiences. By May 1945 his unit was at Bremen. He was released from the army in June 1946.¹⁵

In his absence on war service attempts had been made to get him a post at Cambridge, but unsuccessfully. As Welbourne put it, 'he has left several of his contemporary rivals still adding to their academic accomplishments', and 'he will have gone to the War like so many other people to his cost'.¹⁶ He was, however, appointed to a lectureship at Bristol University which he took up in October 1946; then, a year later, he was appointed Reader in Medieval History in the Durham Colleges of Durham University. In 1956 he was appointed Professor of Medieval History, the post he held until he retired, and he remained at Durham for the rest of his life. He married, in 1951, his colleague Betty Elfreda Jackson, and from 1952 onwards they lived in an attractively situated house in Old Elvet, in the centre of Durham. This patently happy marriage and their family life—they had two sons—were clearly of the greatest importance to Offler. He joined University College and became a prominent member of its Senior Common Room in Durham Castle. He was soon a keen supporter of the university's rugger club, though his own physical recreation was a daily walk in the outskirts of the city. There was a modestly convivial side to his life: he was a founder member of a college dining club and he enjoyed regular meetings with university and other friends in one or another of the city's pubs. For well over forty years his life was centred on Durham, a city that

¹⁴ Ex inf. Mr R. Evans; Offler papers, copy of divisional order of 2 June 1943.

¹⁵ ECA, tutorial file for Offler, letters of Offler (25 June, 29 Aug. 1944), Welbourne (12 May 1945).

¹⁶ ECA, tutorial file for Offler, letters of E. M. W. Tillyard (21 Sept. 1943), Welbourne (30 Sept. 1943, two of 12 May 1945), Previté-Orton (15 May 1945).

strangely blends elements of the two other places most familiar to him, Hereford and Cambridge.

In the army Offler can have had little opportunity for systematic reading, though according to a fellow-officer 'even in the thick of it he had his nose in a book (or books)'.¹⁷ The return to historical work must have been a severe challenge. He met it with an entirely new venture. The Swiss cultural organization Pro Helvetia had initiated the project of publishing, through Oxford University Press, *A Short History of Switzerland*, and Offler joined Edgar Bonjour of Basle and G. R. Potter in writing it. He was working on it at Bristol, when publication was expected in 1948; in the event it appeared in 1952. Offler's contribution, on the period from the Celtic settlement to the end of the fourteenth century, touched only in the last of its five chapters on his earlier work on fourteenth-century politics. Its hundred pages, readable and informative, are the longest piece of his own continuous prose that he ever published. To the end of his days he continued to work steadily on manuscripts and texts, to read, to ponder and to write, but he seems never to have recaptured the pace—or perhaps the intellectual excitement—of those years when at Cambridge and London, Paris and Munich, he was discovering for himself, from first-hand evidence, what was really going on between the imperial and papal courts in the mid-fourteenth century. The interruption and experiences of war may have contributed to this, and of course he was now acquiring new and time-consuming responsibilities, both academic and personal. But rather more it reflects the maturing of his views on the role of publication in historical work. He saw putting work into print as something not to be undertaken lightly, and he would warn younger colleagues against premature publication, in his generation more likely to be damaging to an academic career than it has since become. Publication should rather be the outcome not only of comprehensive research but of long, careful thought that was certain it had found the right answer—or as certain as possible. Already in 1937 he remarked cynically that 'Most historians would admit that to discover "Wie es eigentlich war" is beyond their usual attainment'.¹⁸ He saw no point in writing a second time what had already been written once, or in writing anything at all unless one had something to say that was worth saying, and to publish something that was wrong would be to create error, a disservice to scholarship far worse than keeping silent. The historian should write primarily for other historians: 'historians' history—the only sort that matters', as he put it in 1958.¹⁹ He saw the risk, however: 'If the

¹⁷ Letter from Mr R. Evans to the author, 27 Jan. 1992.

¹⁸ *English Historical Review* (henceforth *EHR*), lii (1937), p.323 (review of E. K. Winter, *Rudolph IV von Österreich*, vol.ii [1936]).

¹⁹ H. S. Offler, *Medieval Historians of Durham* (Durham, 1958), p.5.

professionals are going to concentrate wholly on the puzzles,' he wrote in 1972, 'into what sort of hands will the writing of the narratives fall, and who, save a diminishing band of experts, will soon be interested even in the puzzles?'²⁰ *A Short History of Switzerland*, with no footnote references and the briefest of bibliographies, is the nearest he himself ever came to writing for a wide public, though later, in 1965, he also contributed a substantial and important section to *Europe in the Late Middle Ages*, edited by J. R. Hale, J. R. L. Highfield and Beryl Smalley.

After he left the army Offler never returned to Germany—indeed, after 1950 at the latest his only travel outside Britain, for work or for pleasure, was when he went to Trinity College, Dublin, as an external examiner. His research on manuscripts abroad was done through photocopies and microfilms. However, he soon resumed contact with German scholars and he published articles in the *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* in 1951 and 1954.²¹ The second of these, on the various political views at the court of Lewis the Bavarian in the autumn of 1331, examines the role of certain tracts in reflecting and forming opinion, and henceforward he worked not on the actual politics of the period but exclusively on the political writings these politics produced. 'I shall be most interested to see some up-to-date learning about Lewis the Bavarian and the Curia,' he wrote in 1983; 'It is many years since I have done much serious work on this subject—partly because of the way in which the edition of the *Constitutiones* for Lewis's reign has stuck at 1330; partly because I had little fresh to say about it.'²² His paper to the Royal Historical Society in 1955, a general analysis of the aims and policies of popes and emperors from the 1320s to the 1340s, was the last he wrote simply on political events. In the words of Professor Jürgen Miethke it 'displays, in small compass, complete mastery of an intractable mass of detailed research, clear grasp, and reflection on the fundamental problems of the period and on historically acceptable solutions'.²³

For the rest of Offler's life the core of his work in this field was the editing of William of Ockham's political works, continuing the project

²⁰ *EHR*, lxxxvii (1972), p.577 (review of R. W. Southern, *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies* [1970]).

²¹ 'Über die Prokuratorien Ludwigs des Bayern für die römische Kurie', viii (1951), pp. 461–87; 'Meinungsverschiedenheiten am Hof Ludwigs des Bayern im Herbst 1331', xi (1954), pp. 191–206.

²² Letter to J. Miethke, 29 Dec. 1983.

²³ 'Empire and Papacy: the Last Struggle', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., vi (1956), pp.21–47; 'Sein Aufsatz über "The Last Struggle" zeigt in komprimierter Kürze die volle Beherrschung einer unübersichtlichen Detailforschung, klare Begriffe, Nachdenken über die Grundprobleme des Zeitalters, wie über historisch mögliche Lösungswege' (letter to the author, 7 Nov. 1991).

begun before the war under the leadership of J. G. Sikes. Sikes had died, tragically by suicide, in 1941 and had bequeathed all relevant material to Offler and R. F. Bennett, another of the first volume's editors, as his literary executors. Together they took over responsibility for the project. Offler himself edited volume three, containing the 'Tractatus contra Ioannem' and the 'Tractatus contra Benedictum' as well as the short 'Epistola ad Fratres Minores', and this was published in 1956. Volume two, however, presented a problem. It was to consist of the bulk of the long 'Opus Nonaginta Dierum', of which the first six chapters, edited by Bennett and Sikes, had formed the concluding section of volume one. Sikes had prepared the rest of the tract, and on his death it was at once set up in type; it needed, however, very substantial revision. Bennett began this, but in 1958 passed the work over to Offler: Manchester University Press, now having to pay the printer to keep the type standing, was pressing hard for its completion. It was published in 1963. Offler was conscious that Sikes, who had a 'nervous affliction of his hands, which made holding a pen a difficult and exhausting feat for him', had worked extremely hard to complete the text in the face of great personal and physical difficulties—he must, Offler commented to Bennett, 'have been very far from his proper self when he passed the copy for press (if he did so)'—and in the introduction, characteristically, wrote that

those with experience in handling a work of this length will know that by far the heaviest labour comes at the first stage of establishing the text and verifying the references. That labour Sikes accomplished. If there is any credit to be had from editing a medieval author, let it go to the memory of a good scholar and a brave man. For the volume's deficiencies the responsibility is mine alone.

Those with such experience will in fact be more likely to agree with what C. R. Cheney wrote to him on its publication: 'your first pages of introduction are a model of modesty and generosity, and I hope that they will be widely recognized as such'. In the course of revision Offler had collated anew the three sources of the text and had reassessed their relative importance—in itself a major work. The problems, however, did not end with volume two. Stocks of volume one were exhausted and a reprint was mooted. In 1961 he wrote to Bennett:

Nothing in the nature of a complete revision of the text can be envisaged (or needs to be): but simply the printing of a supplement correcting things (misprints, etc.) which are obviously wrong. What we all underestimated, I suspect, was the sheer mechanical difficulty Sikes found in communicating his intentions to the printers. Using vol. I over the years I have become more and more conscious of this, and so am unwilling that it should be reissued as a photographic reprint *tel quel* without an appendix of corrections.

He must have soon changed his mind; as he wrote to Cheney in 1972, 'Tinkering with that version would have been useless, particularly as there was a good deal of new ms. stuff to incorporate. So I have done the whole thing anew'. Offler's own annotated copy of the 1940 volume shows the scale of revision needed; in random samples of the sections that Sikes edited there are from forty to seventy notes per page. The revised edition of volume one was published in 1974, by which time he was well advanced with volume four. This he finished before his death, though it has yet to be published. With it he completed the work of editing Ockham's shorter political works, leaving for others only the *Dialogus*, 'the final towering massif'.²⁴

Editing Ockham's political writings was unquestionably Offler's greatest work. Miethke describes his editions as 'models of the art of editing', a comment that, from one well versed in the German tradition of fine historical editing, would have given him especial pleasure.²⁵ His strength as an editor lay in his care and thoroughness and in his technical skills; he was a superb Latinist and textual critic, and every page of his editions shows the erudition with which he established correct readings and identified sources and parallels. He was discriminating in his references to other scholars' work and his accolade was never given lightly. Professor G. D. Knysh comments that 'I consider his terse "Knysh, *art. cit.*, pp.77-9" . . . to be one of the finest compliments I have ever received'.²⁶ Offler seems never to have questioned existing editorial conventions, and was in no doubt that an editor's job included standardizing spelling, capital letters and punctuation, to produce not only a text that reproduced the original writer's intention, but also a text easily intelligible to the modern reader. In a letter to Miethke in 1981 he remarked that 'Looking back after 50 years' activity in medieval history, more and more I incline to the view that much of the most genuine progress has occurred in the field of codicology. It would be a pity if it grew too far apart from the art of editing'. He then cited a recent edition, 'the codicology outstandingly good; the editing leaving much to be desired'.²⁷ Here, as in many other matters, he looked for improved performance within the existing framework rather than for reassessment of basic premisses. In working on Ockham at Durham he

²⁴ ECA, tutorial file for Offler, letter of Offler (5 Feb. 1941); *Guillelmi de Ockham Opera Politica*, ed. J. G. Sikes et al. (in progress; Manchester, 1940-), i (2nd edn), p.viii; ii, pp.ix-x; Offler papers, letters of Offler to Bennett (28 Dec. 1957, 2 Dec. 1961), Cheney (14 Nov. 1972), and of Cheney (20 May 1963). Offler's annotated set of the *Opera Politica* is in Durham University Library.

²⁵ 'Kabinettsstücke der Editions-kunst' (letter to the author, 7 Nov. 1991).

²⁶ The reference is in the forthcoming vol. iv of the *Opera Politica* (letter to the author, 7 Nov. 1991).

²⁷ Letter to Miethke, 19 Jan. 1981.

felt somewhat isolated; in 1972 he told Cheney, *à propos* financing the new edition of volume one, that

since Jacob's death you are the only scholar in this country who has shown the slightest interest in this project (and abroad they are busy making their own books out of it—which is fair enough, and pleasing in its way, but not immediately helpful to me).

—a remark made without self-pity, a failing wholly alien to Offler, who once described it as 'perhaps intelligence's worst modern vice'.²⁸ He saw Ockham's political writings simply as a response to particular circumstances, having no significant connection with Ockham's philosophical or theological work; in this he differed from some other scholars. In 1982 he wrote to Professor A. S. McGrade:

If pushed, I might be-willing to admit that it was a loss to western thought that Ockham, by getting caught up in the imbroglio with John XXII and Michael of Cesena and Lewis of Bavaria, was diverted from the school study of theology and philosophy to the polemical activities which so preoccupied (wasted?) the last 25 years of his life.²⁹

He thus viewed the texts he edited as historical documents, simply reflecting the events of their own time, rather than as works of political philosophy with wider application.

The work on Ockham produced not only the edited volumes but articles and notes on particular points arising from these and other contemporary texts. On the other hand, it was not only on Ockham that Offler employed his editorial talents. On moving to Durham, besides continuing the work he had already begun at Cambridge he embarked on an entirely new field of study: north-east England in the Middle Ages. He began with work on William of St Calais, Bishop of Durham 1080–96, writing one article on him for the *Transactions* of the local archaeological society and another, on 'The Tractate De Iniusta Vexacione Willelmi Episcopi Primi', in the *English Historical Review*; this discussed the content and date of this little work, showing that it cannot be safely used as a contemporary source of the events it describes and was probably 'a product of the period of brilliant literary activity at Durham in the second quarter of the twelfth century'.³⁰ Before long he had taken this interest a good

²⁸ Offler papers, letter to Cheney (14 Nov. 1972; 'Jacob' is, of course, E. F. Jacob); *Durham University Journal*, xl (1947–8), p.63 (review of F. M. Powicke, *Three Lectures* [1947]).

²⁹ Letter to McGrade, 7 May 1982.

³⁰ 'William of St. Calais, first Norman Bishop of Durham', *Transactions of the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland*, x, pt iii (1950), pp. 258–79; 'The Tractate De Iniusta Vexacione Willelmi Episcopi Primi', *EHR*, lxvi, pp.321–41 (quotation from p.341).

deal further. His inaugural lecture as professor, in 1958, on 'Medieval Historians of Durham', showed how familiar he had made himself not only with the medieval chronicles of the area but also with the works of later antiquaries; and from then on he published occasional articles on particular problems of the medieval north-east, showing still wider knowledge of local sources. He served as Secretary (and thus general editor) of the Surtees Society from 1950 to 1966 and as President from 1980 to 1987, and in 1971 he took as his subject for Durham's annual Cathedral Lecture 'Ranulf Flambard as Bishop of Durham (1099–1128)'.³¹ All this was no mere *jeu d'esprit*. He had a profound belief in the importance of local history—and a clear sense of the distinction between local history and parochial antiquarianism.³² Here, if anywhere, one might discover 'Wie es eigentlich war', and he once remarked in a review how 'Again and again . . . the ambitions of the synthesist shatter on the recalcitrance of the local facts'.³³ Very soon after Offler came to Durham he wrote, in reviewing Professor Barlow's *Durham Jurisdictional Peculiars*, that 'A prerequisite to progress is a diplomatic study of the whole corpus of Durham's twelfth century charters, based on a detailed comparative examination of all the originals'.³⁴ He may already have envisaged meeting this need. His edition of *Durham Episcopal Charters 1071–1152*, published by the Surtees Society in 1968, is the most important of his contributions to north-eastern history. It is an edition of a very different sort of document from Ockham's works but it is a no less impressive witness of Offler's editorial skills, not least in the way it treats problems of authenticity and in the thoroughness of the historical notes on each charter.

There can be few historians whose reviews are so well worth reading as a collection; Offler regarded reviewing as an important part of his work. It began in 1936, when his first review appeared in the *English Historical Review* (Previté-Orton was then its editor),³⁵ and from then until 1991 he published up to fifteen reviews every year, apart from the gap produced by the war. Besides the *English Historical Review*, where he appeared in nearly every volume, he reviewed particularly for the *Durham University Journal* and, from the 1960s, for *Erasmus* and the *Journal of Theological Studies*. In his reviews he put more of himself than in his other writings and

³¹ Published in *Durham University Journal*, lxiv (1971–2), pp.14–25 (to which, in one copy in Durham University Library, an unknown annotator has appended 'In your usual tradition, Prof, punchy and sound'); also issued separately by the Dean and Chapter.

³² Cf. Offler, *Medieval Historians*, p.13.

³³ *EHR*, xciii (1978), p.610 (review of *Die Burgen im deutschen Sprachraum*, ed. H. Patze [1976]).

³⁴ *Durham University Journal*, xlii (1949–50), p.125.

³⁵ *EHR*, li (1936), pp.520–3 (review of E. K. Winter, *Rudolph IV von Österreich*, vol.i [1934]).

their occasional asides and comments recall the brilliant choice of words, often epigrammatic, that made his conversation so memorable. Some tell us much about Offer the historian:

Essays collected together provide a more concentrated distillation of the author's essence than do the chapters of a book; the reader can find himself in the plight of a thirsty man offered nothing more satisfying than repeated thimblefuls of *crème de menthe*.³⁶

Others tell us more than he often revealed about Offer the man:

But the Middle Ages give little comfort to the optimistic liberal reasoning that because persecution ought not to be successful, it never is. Is it indeed a misconception that belief can be enforced? . . . The horrid truth is that the medieval inquisition was very largely a successful institution.³⁷

We get here a sudden glimpse of the young man who in 1940 asked that his call-up be expedited. But underlying all his reviewing was his belief that what was offered to the learned world in print should be definitive work of the highest standard. He was sometimes disappointed, and he criticized sternly what seemed to him any failing of judgment, accuracy or Latinity. He lost friends in this process—which was a pity: in his private correspondence with other historians he was just as uncompromising over any ideas or conclusions that he considered in the least slipshod, but his comments were always tempered with a wealth of positive advice and help. He put his own learning at the disposal of other scholars—whether well-established or beginners—with ready generosity. Some of his letters—notably, in latter years, his detailed technical correspondence with Knysh, McGrade and Miethke—are little less than learned articles, of what others would consider publishable quality.

This mixture of generous personal kindness and of uncompromising insistence on the highest standards informed all Offer's life in Durham. His teaching, perhaps especially attuned to the most able and to those who had most difficulties, was appreciated by all his pupils. One wrote, after his death, how his

massive learning very imperfectly concealed a rich vein of humour. If we used to hang on his every word in tutorial, we eagerly looked forward to his brilliantly performed lectures and avidly collected fresh examples of the Offerian *mot juste*. His clear and incisive judgements were constantly shot through with a spontaneous and biting wit. He was the first and

³⁶ *EHR*, lxxxvii (1972), p.576 (review of R. W. Southern, *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies* [1970]).

³⁷ *EHR*, lxxxiv (1969), p.575 (review of G. Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages* [1967]).

perhaps the only scholar I have encountered who made everything into an intellectual treat.³⁸

‘You and I,’ he told one pupil, ‘have something in common—we neither of us know how to spell sheriff but I look it up in the dictionary.’³⁹ From a lesser personality such a remark might soon be forgotten; Offler’s magisterial utterance would be remembered for life. In his room was a copy of Lawrence Durrell’s *Esprit de Corps* which he lent, as recommended reading, to those he suspected of overworking before examinations. His interest in those he taught was in no way assumed; he could recall long afterwards every detail of their performance in Finals. The story is told of a colleague driving him (he did not himself drive) to one address after another in the Durham outskirts in search of an errant pupil to whom he considered himself bound to deliver in person a note initiating formal proceedings on her shortcomings. Indeed, to all departmental administration he brought a conscientious thoroughness that secured the best by doing as much as possible himself; he disliked delegating work, even the typing of letters. For many years he and his fellow-professor of modern history personally interviewed all candidates for admission as undergraduates; other colleagues took no part in this chore. Throughout his career he himself always served as representative of history on the boards of studies of other departments. But besides himself shouldering much of his department’s administrative work, he showed his generosity to his colleagues in many ways. They discovered only after many occasions that the annual examiners’ lunch, assumed to be funded from some official source, was actually paid for on his initiative from professorial pockets. On the other hand he exercised strong personal control of the department and always knew what he wanted for it. It is well remembered in Durham how, when he was on research leave in 1966–7, the department in his absence voted to move from the Faculty of Arts to the Faculty of Social Sciences; breaking his leave, Offler insisted on speaking in Senate (of which he was not then a member), and single-handedly secured the reversal of this decision. In Senate, indeed, he was not only a robust defender of his department’s interests, but a strong and effective speaker on many matters. He had an instinct for timing his interventions and developed it to perfection; this, combined with his gift of language—he was a master of the telling phrase—and his weighty delivery, gave him unrivalled influence on its decisions.

He was indeed an awe-inspiring figure—as he must have been even when young. In 1941 when a Lance-Bombardier he wrote to Welbourne

³⁸ Letter from Dr J. C. Thewlis to Mrs Offler, 2 Feb. 1991.

³⁹ Letter from Mrs G. Cole to Mrs Offler, 10 Feb. 1991.

from Scotland 'as the comrade of men who living and working with me for the past 6 months persist in calling me Mr'.⁴⁰ In Durham there were few who addressed him as Seton, the forename he had used from childhood (it was the surname of the owner of King's Acre Nurseries), and he was probably always more at ease with the older masculine form of address by surname alone. This was at one with his rather old-fashioned way of life: neither the motor-car nor the television played any part in it, and he had a telephone at home only after his retirement, when it would not be a channel for the intrusion of business. But if he appeared conservative in his outlook and in his policy for the department this reflected pragmatism, not dogma: he always preferred the devil he knew. Certainly Offler was never dismissive of new approaches or techniques in historical work, though their value had to be proved and he scorned the merely pretentious. 'In its early years,' he wrote to Miethke in 1988, '*Annales* served a valuable function in widening horizons, but during the last few decades the pretensions of its school have become ridiculously exaggerated.'⁴¹ He occasionally commented—whether justly or not—that no one in Durham would discuss history with him; and he seldom left Durham. He went each year to his wartime battery's reunion in Edinburgh, but conferences, seminars and other learned gatherings did not attract him. 'Do your utmost to frustrate any motions towards an Ockhamist "celebration" or "occasion",' he wrote to McGrade in 1983, '. . . I feel more and more doubtful about the value of such jamborees, except perhaps for the careers of the participants.'⁴² However, he served on the Council of the Royal Historical Society from 1969 to 1972 and this, followed by his election to the Fellowship of the British Academy in 1974, brought him into wider fields of learned activity.

Offler retired from the university in 1978; his colleagues presented him with a printed bibliography of his historical writings, including reviews, an invaluable guide to his intellectual career.⁴³ He was given a room a few doors away from the history department in North Bailey, he lunched every week in University College and he continued to be a familiar figure in Durham, often to be seen, with stick and pipe, walking at deliberate pace through the streets or chatting to a colleague or other friend. For me, who now met him for the first time, the difficult task of succeeding Offler in the Chair of Medieval History was made infinitely easier by his extreme courtesy and correctness. In the years that followed there were many changes in the history department that he must have disagreed with, even disapproved of—among them, indeed, the department's transfer to

⁴⁰ ECA, tutorial file for Offler, letter of Offler (14 Jan. 1941 ['1940']).

⁴¹ Letter to Miethke, 18 Feb. 1988.

⁴² Letter to McGrade, 31 Mar. 1983.

⁴³ *A List of the Historical Writings 1936–1978 of Hilary Seton Offler* (Durham, 1978).

the Faculty of Social Sciences that he had so strenuously resisted. Whenever we met he never made the slightest reference to such matters. He continued to work and to publish on Ockham and related topics; a long article appeared in 1986 in the *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* on the complicated question of the authorship of the tract 'Allegaciones de potestate imperiali', written in support of Lewis the Bavarian in 1338, and therewith on Ockham's part in the ferment of political views at this time.⁴⁴ In a note sending me an offprint of the shorter, but still weighty 'Notes on the Text of Marsilius of Padua's "Defensor Minor"', published in 1982, he remarked 'Not, I fear, what one could call a good read, though I am a little proud of the emendation at X.2.11'. He had reason to be:

Et rarius: this interjection into a straightforward quotation of I Tim.1,20 is quite meaningless, though both Vasoli, p.134 and Quillet have managed to translate it. It is to be rejected as the intrusion of a corrupted gloss. Somewhere along the line of tradition to O the name *Alexander* in the scriptural quotation caught a scribe's eye; facetiously he added *et Darius*; after that, downhill all the way.⁴⁵

In 1990 a further article discussed the origin of Ockham's political thought—'Rather sadly one has to admit that valiant efforts to show that Ockham's political and social ideas were determined by his philosophical positions seem to have run into a dead end'—and its effect on other thinkers down to the Council of Basle.⁴⁶ However, work continued too on the medieval north-east. An account of the complex politics behind an incident at Durham in 1318 appeared in *Archaeologia Aeliana* in 1988 as 'Murder on Framwellgate Bridge', the closest he ever came to what he would call a 'catchpenny title'. Work completed but still to be published includes not only the fourth volume of Ockham's political works but also an important article on the text of Boldon Book, the survey of the Bishop of Durham's estates made in 1183 or 1184.

Offler died suddenly on 24 January 1991 after four days' illness from which he was fully expected to recover. In a perceptive obituary Dr Margaret Harvey wrote that 'He was a proud man who would have hated to become helpless in old age'.⁴⁷ This is true; but we may be sure he would have met this with the same fortitude that he brought to all

⁴⁴ 'Zum Verfasser der "Allegaciones de potestate imperiali" (1338)', xlii (1986), pp.555–619.

⁴⁵ *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch*, xvii (1982), p.215.

⁴⁶ 'The "Influence" of Ockham's Political Thinking: The First Century', in *Die Gegenwart Ockhams*, ed. W. Vossenkuhl and R. Schönberger (Weinheim, 1990), pp.338–65; the quotation is from p.345.

⁴⁷ *The Independent*, 31 Jan. 1991, p.29.

life's chances, still permitting himself the occasional flash of mischievous humour.

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