



R. H. C. DAVIS

Ralph Henry Carless Davis 1918–1991

RALPH DAVIS, who died on 12 March 1991, was a foremost exponent of strict documentary analysis and interpretation, a sensitive observer of buildings and art-historical objects and judge of their role in former ages, a successful communicator to the general public of the importance, and the fun, of medieval history, and above all a dedicated and inspired teacher. He was born at 11 Fyfield Road, Oxford, on 7 October 1918, the youngest of three sons of H. W. C. Davis, CBE, Regius Professor of Modern History, and Rosa Jennie Davis, daughter of Walter Lindup of Bampton Grange in west Oxfordshire. His father, a Fellow of the British Academy since 1925, died in 1928 when Ralph was not yet 10. An account of his life and work was written by J. R. H. Weaver and A. L. Poole under the title *H. W. C. Davis 1874–1928: A Memoir* (1933). The Davis family background was firmly located in the Cotswold cloth industry, at Stroud in Gloucestershire. The Lindups, although in Ralph's younger childhood owning an attractive country house at Bampton which the Davis brothers liked to visit, came from Worthing in Sussex. Ralph was given two of his father's baptismal names, Henry and the unusual Carless, also given to his two brothers and derived from their paternal grandmother. Ralph (pronounced to rhyme with 'safe') was the name he always used. The two older Davis boys had proceeded from the Dragon School to Highgate. Ralph also went to the Dragon, to whose magazine, *The Draconian*, he was to contribute interesting newsletters from Egypt and Syria during the Second World War. The sudden death of his father in the summer of 1928 while examining at Edinburgh University subjected the family to some financial constraints, but it may have been a suggestion from a Dragon School master, Gerald Haynes (known as 'Tortoise'), which led Mrs Davis to choose Leighton Park, the Quaker foundation beside the River Thames near Reading, as the best place for her youngest son's secondary education. It was to prove a choice of lasting significance. Ralph's years at Leighton Park, 1932–37, seem to have been happy, and he was able to

pursue a burgeoning interest in medieval architecture, possibly already implanted by 'Tortoise' Haynes.

A former master at the school, Roger Moore, recalls Ralph as secretary of the small archaeology group—and effectively its leader too. 'A natural consequence of this was an exploration on cycles during the school holidays of the Yorkshire Abbeys with about half a dozen others. I was happy to enjoy this tour under Ralph's inspiration'. These schoolboy trips were to be followed by a more ambitious excursion when Ralph was an undergraduate at Balliol, a month's visit to northern Italy taking in Milan, Venice, Ravenna and Florence. He must surely have imbibed something of the Quaker ambience of Leighton Park. Although he never joined the Society of Friends, the school will undoubtedly have helped to shape the combination of Christian convictions and liberal humanitarianism which characterized Ralph Davis's life and outlook.

It was in this period that Ralph became aware of the work of George Coulton, in particular of a paper on masons' marks included in his *Art and the Reformation* (1928). Ralph's brother Godfrey recalls that in 1936 the family drove over to Cambridge so that Ralph could beard the cantankerous medievalist and polemicist in his own den; and this enthusiasm expanded and flourished with many visits to Berkshire and Oxfordshire churches, leading to a precocious paper in the Oxfordshire Archaeological Society's journal for 1938 and eventually culminating in 1954 in a 'Catalogue of Masons' Marks as an aid to Architectural History', published in the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3rd series, xvii, pp. 43–76. We should not overlook or underestimate the influence on Ralph in these years of Vivian Galbraith, who felt himself to be greatly indebted to H. W. C. Davis ever since his undergraduate days, and was a very close friend of the Davis family. What may be regarded as Ralph's first substantial piece of scholarly work, his edition of *The Kalendar of Abbot Samson of Bury St Edmunds and related documents* (Royal Historical Society, Camden Third Series, lxxxiv, 1954) was in fact suggested to him by Professor Galbraith, who tells us in his foreword that he had been steered towards this Bury St Edmunds material by H. W. C. Davis but had not been able to make anything of it. Ralph Davis's acknowledgement of his debt to V. H. Galbraith was generous and just.

Ralph entered Balliol, where he had been preceded by both his brothers, in 1937. His tutor was R. W. (Sir Richard) Southern, newly-elected Fellow, whose undergraduate years in the college had overlapped in 1932 with Ralph's eldest brother Patrick. Sir Richard retains 'a very clear recollection of . . . an absolutely steady and reliable performer'. Professor Denys Hay, who as Bryce Research Fellow was able to undertake some teaching for his old college, remembers Ralph working for

papers in European history, and echoes Southern's impression of an industrious but not very exciting student. Everything in these years was overshadowed by the virtual certainty of war. Ralph won the Kington Oliphant (historical) prize with his essay on masons' marks in Oxford and the Cotswolds, already referred to, but it must be said that the creative and communicating historian of later years had yet to be awakened. He did, however, take one decision at Balliol of great importance: he would, if war came, take a stance of principled pacifism. Those who (like the present writer) knew Ralph only in post-war years can relate the stubborn defence of principle which characterized his attitudes on a number of issues, great and small, to the determination with which he stuck to his conscientious objection to military service. Some may have discussed it with him or argued against his decision; it was not something he chose either to apologize for or to justify in later years; for that matter, he never referred to the Croix de Guerre he received for his service with the Free French.

Ralph Davis's pacifism was not due to ignorance of Nazi Germany. In the summer of 1939 he persuaded Ken Bowen to join him for a hitchhiking holiday in the Rhine Valley, staying at Youth Hostels and even, on one occasion, at a Hitler Youth camp. Characteristically, it was a Quaker-organized trip and involved renovation and landscaping work with a joint British-German team of students. Returning to England only three weeks before the outbreak of war, Ralph either could not, or would not, see the necessity of armed resistance to combat the evil of Nazism. After the required hearing before a tribunal which granted him CO status, he joined the Friends Ambulance Unit and was soon sent to Finland, where a 'real' war contrasted with the 'phoney' war which, at least on land, seemed to characterize the western front. He and his colleagues ferried wounded Finnish soldiers from the Karelian front and also civilian refugees. Eventually the unit became involved in the shortlived Norwegian campaign, and the F. A. U. personnel were extricated by way of Sweden and (improbably) Iceland. Service in London followed in the 'Blitz' winter of 1940-1, and in March, 1941, Ralph was among those despatched to Egypt (by way of the Cape of course) to reinforce the F. A. U. detachment in Greece. This detachment was captured when the Germans overran Greece, and Ralph's unit was sent instead to Syria to form the transport, ward and theatre orderly and general dogsbody element of the Anglo-French Hadfield-Spears Mobile Hospital.

A stay in Cairo of almost a month allowed Ralph to visit many of the city's mosques, often in the company of Michael Rowntree, who recalls the friendly disputes they had as to whether their research objective was to be mosques (Davis) or wild birds (Rowntree). *The Mosques of Cairo*,

with a foreword by K. A. C. Creswell (Middle East Publications, W. J. Eady, Cairo, 1944), with illustrations by the author, proved to be Ralph Davis's first book. It is informative, sympathetic, helpful—and didactic in what can now be recognized as the genuinely Davis vein.

The Hadfield–Spears Unit was a remarkable body even by the standards of a theatre of war given to bizarre and eccentric manifestations of private enterprise. It was attached to the Free French: the medical personnel and some administrative staff formed part of the French army; the nurses and staff-car drivers were British women largely of upper class family and ample means; while the ward and theatre orderlies and heavy transport drivers and mechanics were British Quakers and other conscientious objectors of like mind. Several thousand sick and wounded soldiers passed through the unit's hands over the four years the Hadfield–Spears Mobile Hospital was in existence. Michael Rowntree has pointed out that wartime service often dictated quite lengthy periods of enforced leisure, which he believes 'few people can have put to such good use' as Ralph Davis, who, as the unit moved through Syria and Lebanon and on along the Western Desert to Tunisia and eventually to Italy and southern France, succeeded in visiting (and writing up in his copious notebooks) such evocative sites as Baalbek, Byblos, Damascus, Krak des Chevaliers, Beaufort, Leptis Magna and El Djem. Ralph's particular duty was running the hospital laundry, aided by two or three Senegalese *tirailleurs* with whom he struck up a *rapport* based on pidgin-French. He became aware that his searches for water in desert countries led him on a trail blazed two millennia earlier by Roman empire builders.

It was also fortunate for Ralph that his final tours of duty with the F. A. U. led him into southern Italy and in 1944 to France. Quite apart from the satisfaction of taking part, with Frenchmen, in the enterprise by which France was liberated, this turn of events led him through regions of the western Mediterranean which could hardly fail to stimulate a would-be, perhaps by now already a dedicated, medievalist. He came home for demobilization with the Croix de Guerre—a somewhat quizzical award for a convinced pacifist, but, in terms of what he gave to the Free French war effort, richly deserved.

Altogether, Ralph's experiences of service with the French (with several of whom he maintained a close friendship for years), and in the Near East and Mediterranean regions, helped to sharpen his historical perspective and widen his historical imagination. The studious, earnest, perhaps slightly dull young man of masons' marks and monastic cycle trips grew into the observant, humorous, entirely self-assured scholar and communicator. It was time to bring all this together, to resume a programme of disciplined study in the overcrowded, somewhat chaotic but

very hard-working atmosphere of post-war Oxford. Ralph re-entered Balliol in 1945 (lucky in some ways to be out so speedily) and took a runaway first in Modern History, and also the MA allowed him by his seniority and war service, in 1947. By this time, Ralph's love of organizing events which combined sociability, jolliness and pedagogy without tears was well to the fore. The wives of Balliol fellows were roped in to play hockey against the undergraduates, while on another occasion John Betjeman was recruited to conduct a tour of Blenheim Palace and its gardens for a party which had travelled out to Woodstock by train.

It may seem surprising that the brilliant Balliol first was immediately followed (1947–8) by an assistant history master's post at Christ's Hospital, Horsham, as junior colleague of David Roberts. What is truly surprising is that Ralph, the quintessential schoolmaster all his life, from schoolboy days till retirement, earned his living as such for only one year. That year showed him, and others, that he was a born teacher; but he was glad to accept an offer from J. E. (Sir John) Neale, here surely advised by Galbraith, of an assistant lectureship at University College London. Research, hitherto something of a luxury, now became an essential part of his work, encouraged by a head of department who, whatever his faults, insisted that his younger colleagues spend no fewer than two and a half days a week on private study even in term time.

Ralph took to UCL as totally and enthusiastically as he did to every institution towards which he felt a serious commitment. He found a small flat in Pimlico and characteristically bicycled to work every day across the West End traffic. He soon met and fell in love with Eleanor Megaw, who had been appointed tutor to women students in 1946 after service as an officer in the WRNS. Eleanor came from northern Ireland, where her grandfathers had reflected traditional divisions, one a Unionist, the other a Home Ruler. Ralph and Eleanor were married in 1949 and found a home in a quiet part of Highgate. Eleanor had become known to Amy Buller who presided somewhat formidably over Cumberland Lodge in Windsor Great Park. It was through this acquaintance that Ralph was led to book the Lodge for a Weekend just before the start of UCL's academic year so that all the freshers about to join the history department, together with a selection of senior students and staff, could foregather and get to know one another, listen to speakers dealing with historical topics and university life, and enjoy a little harmless leisure on the croquet lawn and in the beautiful Michaelmas daisy garden created by a well-known royal gardener. This custom of a Cumberland Lodge Freshers' Weekend, still maintained, was one of the most fruitful developments by means of which the UCL History Department won a deserved reputation for excellent teaching and genuine *esprit de corps*. It was during these very happy UCL years that

Ralph and Eleanor's two sons were born, Christopher in 1952, Timothy in 1955.

Ralph was not slow to make a mark for himself as both a medievalist and an architectural historian. For the third volume of the Victoria County History of Oxfordshire, not published till 1954, he had contributed a learned article on the buildings of Balliol College (pp. 90–5), gracefully acknowledging help from R. A. B. (Sir Roger) Mynors. Three years earlier, he caused something of a stir by crossing swords with Geoffrey Barraclough over the latter's Historical Association pamphlet (1950) on *The Medieval Empire* (*History* 36, 1951, p. 171), and in the same year as the VCH Oxford city volume appeared Ralph published *The Kalendar of Abbot Samson*, already noted. In his important introduction to this edition of a twelfth-century terrier and rental of Bury St Edmunds abbey, together with many relevant charters, Ralph challenged the orthodoxies (as they were then) of Sir Frank Stenton's maturer opinion regarding soke and sokemen. Far from being a Danish import of the ninth century, soke (so Ralph believed) could be traced back to an Old English social order which long antedated Scandinavian settlement. West Suffolk was but superficially Scandinavianized, yet soke flourished there as vigorously as in heavily Danish Lincolnshire and the East Midlands. His deductions from the Bury evidence were distilled in a paper read to the Royal Historical Society (*Transactions*, 3rd series, 5, 1955) on 'East Anglia and the Danelaw', in which he approvingly quoted F. W. Maitland's dictum: 'We must be careful how we use our Dane'.

In 1956 Merton College elected Ralph a fellow and tutor in Modern History, an appointment for which he had most strenuous support from Vivian Galbraith, who was anxious to counter any lingering prejudices there might be in Oxford circles with regard to Ralph's conscientious objection. Ralph spent fourteen years at Merton, giving his typically devoted service to the college and university but never quite becoming that most elusive of English academic characters, a dyed-in-the-wool Oxford don. Even his books were too popular and successful for a typical history tutor. While still in London, Ralph had been working for a contract with Longmans to write a history of early medieval Europe which would form part of a series for use in universities and the better-equipped school history forms. *A History of Medieval Europe from Constantine to Saint Louis* appeared in 1957 and is still in print, surely one of the most successful serious academic textbooks in history to have been produced by a British publisher in the second half of the twentieth century. Ten years later Ralph followed this up with *King Stephen, 1135–1154*, also published by Longmans; it has passed into three editions and clearly meets a need, although inevitably occupying a much smaller canvas than the European

volume. The scholarly study of Stephen's reign, for long dominated by J. H. Round's *Geoffrey de Mandeville* (1892), received a tremendous boost with the appearance in 1968 of vol. iii of *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum*, edited by H. A. Cronne (who had collaborated with Charles Johnson on vol. ii, 1956), and Ralph Davis. It was, appropriately, Vivian Galbraith who brought Cronne and Davis together to complete this major work of medieval scholarship.

In some ways Ralph's participation was an act of piety. The whole enterprise had been initially conceived, and its first volume (with the help of R. J. Whitwell and others) had actually been produced, by H. W. C. Davis in 1913. That first volume was treated to a typically—and devastatingly—fault-finding review by Round (*EHR* 29, 1914, 347–56). It is hard not to see in some of the work preparatory to *RRAN*, iii which Ralph Davis put out in the earlier '60s a loyal son's rejoinder to the scholar (so intemperate and irascible in print) who had dealt his father a wounding blow).

In 1960 (*EHR*, 75) he overturned Round's picture of the relations between Ranulf de Gernons, earl of Chester and King Stephen, concluding that the earl was an unsteady supporter of the empress who was nevertheless deterred from openly espousing her cause partly by Stephen's *de facto* possession of power, partly by his resentment at the possession of Cumbria by the king of Scots, a prominent ally of Matilda. The argument depended on fine-tuning the dates of certain crucial charters, and, although Ralph's rebuttal of Round was well-founded, the fact that in a fresh edition (R. H. C. Davis, *From Alfred the Great to Stephen*, 1991, p. 219) he revised his own revision of Round's chronology proves that the dating of undated twelfth-century charters remains an art rather than a science. A more ambitious sally appeared in 1964, also in the *EHR* (79, 299–307). This was a full frontal assault on Round's assessment of the character and policy of Geoffrey de Mandeville, which had viewed the first earl of Essex as the perfect embodiment of the anarchy. Here again, the argument turned on a revision of charter dating, from which it appears that Earl Geoffrey was no more of a turncoat than many of his contemporaries; as in the case of the earl of Chester so also with the earl of Essex it was Stephen's conduct which was treacherous. The upshot of Ralph's detailed re-examination of the charter evidence for Stephen's reign was to lead him to the belief, succinctly stated in an article in *History* (49, 1964, pp. 1–12), that '[Henry II] recognised that it was the right of every heir to inherit his ancestor's land. Just as the crown had become hereditary, so had the nobility. That was what happened in Stephen's reign'. The Davis critique of Round was certainly justified, and invariably good-tempered, but the interpretation of the anarchy was perhaps too simple and clearcut, and has

not satisfied every scholar in this field. In particular, Ralph's statement (*From Alfred the Great to Stephen*, p. 196) that 'thereafter [from 1154] the strict rule of the hereditary system has been applied to the English monarchy, almost without a break, until the present day' is breathtaking in its over-simplification. Ralph himself mentioned 1199, but what of 1399, 1461, 1471, 1483, 1485 and 1688?

In many ways the most fruitful by-product of Ralph's work for *RRAN*, iii was his identification of the author of the *Gesta Stephani* (*EHR* 77, 1962, 209–32, reprinted in the Introduction to the second edition (1976) of K. R. Potter's 1955 edition of *Gesta Stephani*). His arguments to prove that the only person who could have written the *Gesta* was Robert of Lewes, bishop of Bath, are extremely persuasive and remain unrefuted. This displays the Davis detective technique at its best. The authorship of chronicles and analogous sources was one of Ralph's abiding interests, and in particular his work on William of Poitiers' biography of William the Conqueror (see *From Alfred the Great to Stephen*, pp. 101–30) was occupying him at the time of his death. Interest in William of Poitiers went hand in hand with interest in William of Jumièges (see, e.g. *ibid.*, 131–40, first published in *EHR* 95, 1980), and this detailed exploration of two of the principal historical sources for Normandy in its greatest age of expansion had emerged from a more general endeavour to reassess 'the Normans and their myth' (summed up in 1976 in a brisk little book with that title) which had begun at least as early as 1966 (see *From Alfred the Great to Stephen*, pp. 55–62). The falsehood inherent in myth should (so Ralph believed) at least be distinguished from the falsehood involved in sheer imposture. In beating a clearer path through the thicket of sources for the Conquest the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*, though relied on by several eminent scholars, would have to go (*ibid.*, pp. 79–100): 'as a source for the history of the Norman conquest it is simply ridiculous'.

Ralph argued that although the Norman achievement across Europe in the eleventh and early twelfth century was remarkable our estimate of it had been inflated by the undoubted mastery of the Normans in propaganda, of which in some respects they were themselves the victims. One may detect a certain Quaker caution and scepticism in Ralph's approach to propaganda. It was nevertheless, bold on his part to venture in 1971 into the field of Alfred studies, still guarded fiercely by Dorothy Whitelock ('Alfred the Great: Propaganda and Truth', *History* 56, 1971). Perhaps there was an echo here of an earlier foray by V. H. Galbraith on the authenticity of Asser's *Life*.¹ Not a whit deterred by the fate which befell

¹ V. H. Galbraith, 'Who wrote Asser's Life of Alfred?' may be found in his *Introduction to the Study of History* (1964); Professor D. Whitelock's rejoinder came in her Stenton Lecture for 1967, *The Genuine Asser* (Reading, 1968).

Galbraith's slightly mischievous essay, Ralph argued vigorously (as against Stenton, but agreeing with Plummer) for an Alfredian authorship—in the sense of initiating the work and determining its content—of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which he saw as an indisputably national or 'official' history. He went on to demonstrate that Alfred has had an excellent press among later historians precisely because he himself provided the chief historical sources for his own life and reign. He had 'to persuade his subjects of the necessity of accepting new and burdensome institutions' and thus badly needed propaganda in order to indoctrinate the politically and militarily important people of Wessex. As with Geoffrey de Mandeville and the anarchy, so with Alfred's reign, one feels that Ralph's critique of the source material and setting up of the case carry greater weight than his conclusion. It was little short of miraculous that Alfred's Wessex did not succumb to external attack as its larger successor was to succumb twice in the eleventh century, and as Northumbria and Mercia had already succumbed. Had Alfred waited for the effects of his propaganda campaign to sink in before adopting the role of national champion one fancies that Danish ravens would have feasted on his corpse long before the persuasiveness of his prose could have recruited anyone to his cause. It is idle to look for false modesty in an Englishman before the mid-nineteenth century.

The completion of the third volume of *RRAN* in 1968, followed as it was very promptly by volume iv containing facsimiles of original charters and writs (1969), may in some respects be seen as the zenith of Ralph Davis's scholarly output, although a considerable amount of important work was still to appear. *RRAN*, iii, had originally been conceived as the work of Professor H. A. Cronne (who had moved from a readership at King's College, London to the chair of medieval history at Birmingham in 1946). Harry Cronne had collaborated with Charles Johnson on *RRAN*, ii (Henry I) and had assembled substantial notes and editorial apparatus for an edition of the written acts of Stephen and his rival the Empress. But in 1968 Cronne was struck down by a very grave illness, and although he made a heroic recovery (and lived to 1990) it proved impossible for him at the time to fulfil all his editorial commitments to *RRAN*. Although his name appears first on the title-page, Cronne was generous enough to state firmly 'while I did a good deal of preliminary work, the task of finally preparing these texts for the press fell upon my co-editor'. For the volume of facsimiles, however, Cronne was largely responsible. Fortunately for students of twelfth-century history, the decision was taken to publish Stephen's and Matilda's charters in full (along with a handful of comparable acts issued by Henry of Anjou before his accession to the English throne, together with those issued by Geoffrey of Anjou and Queen

Matilda). This immeasurably increased the value of the volume, presenting over a thousand complete texts of royal acts, many already familiar but a large number known little, or not at all. Taken altogether, *RRAN* iii and iv represent a splendid achievement, most of the credit for which must go to Ralph Davis.

The *RRAN* volumes appeared towards the end of Ralph's fourteen years as Fellow and Tutor of Merton College. He brought to Merton all the concern for students, their academic progress and personal welfare, that he had shown at UCL. He was tutor for admissions, and as such characteristically introduced the practice of electing a 'schoolmaster fellow'. He was responsible for the teaching for English 1 (Roman Britain to 1307), Stubbs' charters, and at times for European 2 and 3—some twelve hours a week on average. In addition he lectured on a variety of topics, among them the crusades, the Normans, Stephen's reign and St Martin's le Grand—on whose records for the twelfth century he published a fascinating piece of detective work in *London Topographical Record*, 23 (1974), 9–26. His work as tutor, conscientious and time-consuming as it was—and (as in London days) accompanied by the warm hospitality which Eleanor and he dispensed at their comfortable home in Lathbury Road—did not prevent his taking over, from a sadly ailing Alfred Cobban, the editorship of *History*, with effect from February, 1968. For this he had the able assistance of R. R. Davies and P. F. Clarke (succeeded in 1974 by R. A. H. Robinson and H. M. Scott). While still at Merton, Ralph edited *History* from a small room on Staircase 5—not very far from where Michael Wallace-Hadrill was contemporaneously editing the *English Historical Review*.

Ralph's shrewdness as tutor for admissions led to Merton's rise to the top of the Norrington Table which records achievement in Final Honour Schools. Of the impression he made on those of his students who were not frivolous about history and did not wish to use it for their own ends, R. I. Moore writes 'he always managed to be encouraging, however dreadful the offering, if he thought it was one's own effort. He was never surprised or shocked by ignorance, however gross. I suspect he enjoyed most the people who agreed with him least'. Moore particularly recalls, as indeed must all of us who knew and worked with him, the simplicity and clarity of his utterances. This could have a disconcerting effect, especially when Ralph was prompted to criticism or rebuke. As Moore says, 'he was a man of great moral seriousness, and didn't always bother to hide his contempt for those he thought impelled by self-interest, cowardice or just mental laziness'. There was, it seems, always this rather Quaker brand of stubbornness, moving at times from obstinacy to obtuseness, which did not necessarily persuade or convert the hearer. Yet when Ralph, with the

slightest hint of a chuckle, began an intervention in conversational debate with 'I should have thought . . .' his listeners knew to beware, for the words which followed could be devastating.

In Bob Moore's opinion (shared by the present writer) Ralph Davis 'was not really an Oxford insider, in spite of his family background. He was by no means uncritical of Oxford, or an adherent of the view that from Oxford one goes down to all other places'. Of course, being born and bred in Oxford, the son of a leading figure within the university, Ralph was in many ways a thorough Oxonian. One aspect of this was that he cycled regularly, as he had done in boyhood. (Indeed, he was so inveterate a cyclist that he continued to use his bike even after the move to Harborne.) But he was never unreservedly a 'college man'. Nevertheless, he served Merton well and faithfully, was Sub-Warden (1966–8), and after his retirement from Birmingham was elected Emeritus Fellow in 1984. He felt deeply that he ought to be given appropriate academic recognition, and it was indeed highly appropriate that in 1970 the University of Birmingham made him professor of medieval history in succession to H. A. Cronne.

In many ways the years in which Ralph held the Birmingham chair (1970–84) represented the fulfilment of his most deeply cherished ambition. He believed passionately in the importance of history as an intellectual discipline, indeed his attitude towards it had an undeniably missionary fervour. He was untiring in exposition and advocacy, and the chair gave him, at precisely the right moment in his career, the opportunity to transfer his gifts as a teacher from the sequestered staircases and ill-attended lecture rooms of Oxford to something approaching a public forum.

That the move to Birmingham proved to be a great success was due to Ralph's strength of character and obvious sincerity of purpose. Owing to his predecessor's serious illness and early retirement there was something of an interregnum before the new session began in 1970. Moreover, the university as a whole had experienced a time of troubles since 1968. Firm but considerate handling was required and was forthcoming, but for a time it cannot have been easy for Ralph, as a newcomer. Thanks again to Eleanor as well as to Ralph himself, all the familiar hospitality and friendliness were there from the start, and especially kindness towards newly-appointed or junior members of staff. Ralph took a keen interest in his students and continued for many years his Oxford (formerly London) custom of inviting them to his home.

Ralph never attached any great importance to formal syllabuses or course structures. For him what mattered was the contact between teacher and student. He introduced a system of fortnightly undergraduate essays, as had been the practice at University College London, and this system has successfully stood the test of time ever since. The pattern of fortnightly

tutorials alternated with one of weekly seminars, all supplemented by lectures, with the result that undergraduate teaching in the main courses was greatly strengthened.

Surprisingly, postgraduate research was not among his priorities, even although he gave great encouragement to his younger colleagues in the research field and pursued his own researches with considerable distinction and unflagging vigour. He set up regular meetings of 'Midlands Medievalists'. All the medievalists working at Bristol, Keele, Leicester and Nottingham universities, as well as Birmingham, were invited to an annual lecture by a distinguished scholar which was followed by a dinner. As in so much that Ralph did, this created a sense of community and of shared experience. His achievements at Birmingham may be summed up as follows. He was determined to keep the large and somewhat quarrelsome School of History united and succeeded in steering it through difficult times. He gave inspiring teaching and example to fourteen generations of undergraduates. He made a number of extremely perceptive and fruitful staff appointments. And, finally, he strengthened the links between the School of History and the Birmingham region, when this part of the university might so easily have become detached and aloof.

The focus on locality and region, although never pursued exclusively or parochially, was in tune with Ralph's strong sense of place, and complemented, from a totally different standpoint, the studies of West Midland peasants for which Professor Rodney Hilton had become justly famous long before Ralph became his colleague.

In 1968 appeared, in *Oxoniensia*, xxxiii, an important paper on the beginnings of municipal liberties in Oxford, its central feature being a handsome original charter of 1191, in which 63 burgesses, guildsmen or citizens of Oxford are listed by name, sealed with the oldest surviving municipal seal in Great Britain (whose matrix was sadly destroyed in the early seventeenth century). Three years later, in line with the move to Birmingham, came the article on Coventry in Stephen's reign (*English Historical Review*, lxxxvi, 533–47), in which the famous Coventry forged charters are shown to belong to the period c. 1145–54 and the division of the city into 'prior's half' and 'earl's half' to have come about not earlier than the middle of the twelfth century. The Davises' fourteen years at Birmingham were certainly fruitful, but it was understandable that when Ralph retired in 1984 they took a house in north Oxford within easy reach of the Bodleian and of Merton which elected Ralph an Emeritus Fellow.

In the early years of their marriage Ralph and Eleanor had been able to take advantage of the fact that an uncle of Eleanor's was permanently resident not far from Athens. Greece—especially medieval Greece—was eagerly explored and added to France, Germany, Italy and the Levant as

a part of the ample Davis travel experience. At quite an early stage Ralph managed a sojourn among the monasteries of Mount Athos, travelling on a mule escorted by the Mount Athos policeman. His expertise in the historical geography of the Mediterranean led during the Birmingham years to his being recruited as a lecturer by Swan's Hellenic Tours, that most attractive-seeming of all academic busman's holidays.

He had been an active member of the Historical Association since his early days at UCL. The link with Mr Swan allowed him in 1981 to preside over a tour along the pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostella, jointly organized by Swan's and the Association, which proved a great success. He continued to edit *History* until 1978, and in the following year was elected President of the Historical Association, the journal's ultimate owner. His presidency was an extremely active one, marked by personal visits to branches all over the country. He also became deeply involved in the campaign to defend and indeed promote the study and teaching of history in schools as well as universities, believing that at both levels the subject was under severe threat. In particular, he founded the History at the Universities Defence Group (HUDG) which is still active. In the long-drawn-out debate over 'content' versus 'skills' he came down firmly on the side of 'content'. It mattered to him deeply that pupils should learn about particular periods and areas of British, European and world history. His presidency covered the celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the Association in 1981, when he and Eleanor were hosts at a party honoured by the presence of the Queen. The October 1981 issue of *History* carried the presidential address given by Ralph at the Association's 74th annual conference, on 'The Content of History', which probably epitomizes Ralph's approach to the subject, concrete, descriptive, vivid, not notably cerebral or philosophical.

The Historical Association offered Ralph a platform for his missionary energy and was almost certainly closer to his heart than the Royal Historical Society, of which he became a Fellow in 1954. He published work in both the *Transactions* and the Camden Series, and duly served on council (1964–7) and as vice-president (1974–7), but he never filled any of its major executive offices including the presidency. He was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries surprisingly early, in 1948, but again was not prominent in its administration. It was a different matter with the British Academy. He was elected in 1975, served on council from 1979 to 1982 and as chairman of Section 2 from 1986 to 1989.

Through his wife Ralph had got to know something of Ireland and especially of the six counties. Eleanor herself belonged to the Protestant plantation community of Ulster, originating very largely, though by no means exclusively, from south-western Scotland. But Ralph as an early

medievalist and strongly visual historian was very aware of the riches of Irish history from the sixth century or earlier and knew that the concentration of Protestants in the north, leading to modern unionism, was but one, relatively recent, strand in an immensely subtle, long-drawn-out development. In 1985 he was invited by Sir David Wills to consider the value of a project in historical education—to be financed by the Wills Trust—which might contribute to a better understanding between the south and the north, and presumably between Catholic and Protestant communities in the north. Teachers, school inspectors and academics were recruited by Ralph to serve on a committee whose ambitious purpose was to frame a curriculum of Irish history which would prove acceptable to schools both north and south. The committee met regularly and oversaw the production of a series of history books entitled *Questions in Irish History*. The work of the Teaching of History Trust, with the blessing of Longmans, goes on, and the first volumes of the series are dedicated to Ralph Davis's memory. Just over a month before his death Ralph took the chair at a lecture by Duncan Morrow and Frank Wright, 'Seeking ways to peace in Northern Ireland: the importance of the unimportant', delivered at St Antony's College, Oxford on 23 January 1991.

It would have been quite out of character for retirement to have brought any marked lessening of activity on Ralph's part, although in 1987 he underwent an operation for repair of the aorta, the need for which had fortunately been discovered from a scan carried out for another purpose. As well as busying himself with the Irish history project, he plunged with great enthusiasm into the subject of horses, especially horses bred and trained for war, in the middle ages. The interest began before Ralph left Birmingham, for a paper on 'The Medieval Warhorse' designed for a large conference held in Budapest appeared in 1983 in F. M. L. Thompson (ed.), *Horses in European Economic History: a preliminary canter*. He again chose the topic for a paper read at a Battle Conference in 1987 (*From Alfred the Great to Stephen*, pp. 63–78), and finally his book, *The Medieval Warhorse*, was published by Thames and Hudson in 1989. The horse had in truth been much researched not only in Asian and European history but also in the Americas. Ralph paid tribute in particular to Miklós Jankovich's book *They Rode into Europe* (1971) and Daniel I. Rubenstein of Princeton University who had studied the fertility and breeding patterns of wild and feral horses. Even in book form the Davis warhorse ran to only 144 pages, and one reviewer approvingly quoted Ralph's own belief that deeper study and a wider trawl of sources were required. Although this equestrian excursion added little to Ralph's scholarly reputation, it was certainly in tune with his love of the particular, the concrete and what can best be communicated visually. The sincerest tribute to Ralph as a serious

historian must surely be the *Festschrift* presented to him on 7 October 1985 to mark his 67th birthday. Edited by Henry Mayr-Harting and Robert I. Moore, the volume contains pieces by twenty-two contributors, and was subscribed by 122 friends, some such as Sir Richard Southern and Professor Denys Hay, his old tutors, others former colleagues and students from his earlier years, others comparatively recent pupils. *Studies in Medieval History presented to R. H. C. Davis* reflects the very wide interests of the historian it honours, and also to a very great extent his preference for what may be learned from close and detailed observation.

With Martin Sheppard, of the Hambleton Press, Ralph had planned a volume of collected papers spanning the years from as long ago as 1955, but chiefly belonging to the period 1960–87. *From Alfred the Great to Stephen* did not appear, alas! till after its author's death, and it is clear that he did not have time to insert additions and corrections as smoothly as could have been wished. Since the old material on Geoffrey de Mandeville and the Anarchy, by which Ralph set such store, was reprinted, it was necessary to accommodate the adjustments called for as a result of a curious and erudite debate on de Mandeville initiated by John Prestwich in a paper he contributed to the *English Historical Review* for 1988. The controversy dragged on over six separate articles and notes before running into the sand. Stripped of all superfluities, it boiled down to fixing the unascertainable date of the more comprehensive of the Empress Matilda's two charters for Geoffrey de Mandeville (*RRAN*, iii, no. 275). By putting the charter in late July 1141 Ralph had famously overturned Round's dating to 1142 and had thus trounced Round's view of de Mandeville as archetypal traitor and anarchist. Prestwich in a long and carefully argued piece of revision restored Round's date but not his judgment on de Mandeville. The core of Prestwich's argument lay in the fact that the empress's charter confirmed to de Mandeville property granted by Stephen and his queen. Since in Stephen's second charter for Earl Geoffrey this property was, as it seemed, carefully distinguished from all the holdings which he had at Stephen's capture early in 1141, and was granted *de novo*, in addition, it followed inexorably that the empress's charter was issued later, and thus in 1142. The earl was a traitor and his treason did eventually prosper, though not for him personally. The core of the Davis argument lay in the place-date (Oxford), the ten witnesses and three of the fifteen guarantors. 'Two of them [the witnesses] were very rare, but nonetheless, nine out of the ten attest at least one other charter at Oxford in July 1141, and the tenth was with the empress and de Mandeville at Westminster immediately before the flight to Oxford' (*EHR*, cii, 1988, p. 968). Three guarantors are also known to have been at Oxford in July 1141. If victory went to either contestant it could only be on points, and different judges

would make different awards. In the present writer's opinion the balance of probability seems to lie with Ralph Davis's dating, but more seriously it may be doubted whether the controversy as a whole, though conducted with exemplary courtesy, has notably enlarged our understanding of the English crown and nobility in the mid-twelfth century. In his posthumous volume of collected papers, Ralph was able to reaffirm his belief that he had been right to assign *RRAN*, iii, no. 275 to July 1141, but in some ways the whole debate formed a rather sad epilogue to an impressive sequence of monographs, editions and papers.

Ralph was, characteristically, trying to be of service to others right up to the moment of his death. He was about to set out on a journey to Dorset to fulfil a speaking engagement early in March 1991 when he was taken ill and rushed to hospital. Eleanor, and their two sons Christopher, a chartered civil engineer, and Timothy, a consultant orthopaedic surgeon, were able to appreciate the warmth of affection and admiration in which Ralph was widely held both at the funeral service on 18 March 1991 and also at the memorial service in the chapel of Merton College on 1 June, when a moving address was given by Professor Rees Davies, FBA.

G. W. S. BARROW
Fellow of the Academy

Note. In the preparation of this memoir I have received help from a large number of persons who knew Ralph Davis well, whether over many years or during a particular period of his life. I am deeply grateful for their kindness and especially for their promptness in replying to my enquiries. For any shortcomings I alone am responsible; and if there are any omissions from the following list of those who have so kindly and readily furnished me with information I offer my apologies. Eleanor Davis has helped me most efficiently and hospitably, providing much vital information and greatly facilitating my access to other sources. Ralph's elder brothers Patrick and Godfrey kindly devoted most of a day to valuable reminiscences. For a great deal of further information and memories I owe thanks to Ken Bowen, Nicholas Brooks, James Campbell, Irene Collins, Rees Davies, Chris Dyer, Barbara Harvey, Denys Hay, Roger Highfield, Rodney Hilton, Warren Hollister, Annabel Jones, Robert Knecht, Henry Mayr-Harting, Robert I. Moore, Roger D. L. Moore, Martin Roberts, Richard Robinson, Michael Rowntree, Hamish Scott, Martin Sheppard and Sir Richard Southern.