

DONALD NICOL

# Donald MacGillivray Nicol

## 1923–2003

DONALD MACGILLIVRAY NICOL was born in Portsmouth on 4 February 1923, the son of a Scottish Presbyterian minister. He was always proud of his MacGillivray antecedents (on his mother's side) and of his family's connection with Culloden, the site of the Jacobite defeat in 1745, on whose correct pronunciation he would always insist. Despite attending school first in Sheffield and then in London, he retained a slight Scottish accent throughout his life. By the time he left St Paul's School, already an able classical scholar, it was 1941; the rest of his education would have to wait until after the war.

Donald's letters, which he carefully preserved and ordered with the instinct of an archivist, provide details of the war years.<sup>1</sup> In 1942, at the age of nineteen, he was teaching elementary maths, Latin and French to the junior forms at St-Anne's-on-Sea, Lancashire. He commented to his father that he would be dismissed were it known that he was a conscientious objector. By November of that year he had entered a Friends' Ambulance

<sup>1</sup> The bulk of his letters are to his father (1942–6) and to his future wife (1949–50). Also preserved are the letters of his supervisor, Sir Steven Runciman, over a forty-year period. Other papers are his diaries, for a short period of time in 1944, his notebooks with drawings and plans of churches he studied in Epiros, and his account of his travels on Mount Athos. This material is now in the King's College London Archives, by courtesy of the Nicol family. We are especially grateful to Christopher Nicol who has made available a number of his father's drawings, and photographs both of him and taken by him, which are being reproduced in the online version of this Memoir. We have benefited greatly from the additional help of Averil Cameron and Charlotte Roueché. We also thank the staff at the Library of the Religious Society of Friends for access to the microfilmed personnel record cards of Donald's service in the Friends Ambulance Unit.

Unit (FAU) training camp, having spent time in Salisbury working ten-hour shifts at a hospital. He remarked that he was getting used to, and was glad of, the hard labour—‘manipulating colossal black-out shutters on several hundred windows’. Even in those conditions he managed to write, the ‘beginning of something bigger’, he hoped. A master at St Paul’s School had reported to Donald’s father in 1939 that his son had an ‘uncommon facility in writing English’. Donald’s letters alone, both during the war and throughout his life, are ample witness to his sparkling and witty prose.

The FAU, in which Donald spent four years (1942–6), first sent him to Cairo. There he climbed the Pyramids, attended lectures on the Balkans, and began to learn to drive and to speak Greek. He wrote to his father: of the desert by moonlight, of ‘the long sandy wastes ... an unrestricted paradise’; and he took pleasure in the fact that ‘one does not have the constant fear that it might rain at any moment’. Donald commented on the weather continually in his correspondence, of the effect that sunshine had on him. An identity document issued by Middle East Forces in Cairo, and dated 27 October 1944, shows an intensely staring young man with jet-black hair under a vaguely military-style beret and wearing the uniform of his unit, marked with the initials ‘F.A.U.’ By then Donald was on his way to serve, in a civilian capacity, alongside the British forces that had recently liberated Greece in the wake of the German retreat. It was at the wheel of a lorry transporting medical supplies that he first visited the country whose medieval history he would go on to make the subject of the greater part of his career.

Soon after he arrived in Athens he witnessed at first hand the street fighting of December 1944, in which British troops clashed with left-wing insurgents. In his diary for 3–8 December he described his experiences in the events known as the *Dekemvriana* (‘December events’). He could not have assumed, in the conditions of the time, that his non-combatant role would guarantee his safety—especially after Churchill had issued his notorious order that British troops were to act in Athens as though they were in enemy territory. Donald had been ordered to take a lorry to Piraeus with food and medical supplies to be distributed to hospitals all over Athens. Finding himself in the midst of the enemy line he saw a Greek soldier wounded by a British bullet and rushed across the street, with his colleague, to help. Donald comments that the man who fired the bullet ‘must have had the surprise of his life to see another British soldier rush over to tend [his victim]’. Donald rarely talked about these experiences in later life. But when he did, he had sharp words to say about the behaviour of some of the British soldiers he witnessed at that time. To his

father he wrote that he had crossed into enemy lines once or twice and had spoken to the left-wing insurgents in their own tongue: 'Some of the thrill of being fired at, and the glamour of being reckless is counterbalanced by long spells of crate-opening, lifting, sorting and stacking...'

Between 1944 and 1946 he became acquainted with Greece, the landscape and the people, as a member of the FAU. In a letter to his father he wrote of a journey which, with hindsight, would prove a turning point in his life. In February 1945 he was commissioned to drive a 3-ton lorry to deliver drugs and vaccines to northern Greece, 450 miles of bad roads and hairpin bends that he covered in five days. His enthusiasm for the scenery and the ancient sites is matched by his excitement in finally meeting 'some real people'. Walking down the street he heard music coming from a shop. Upon looking in, he saw 'a wonderful old man with a beard and tremendous face' playing the piano. He turned out to be a classical scholar of some knowledge, an excellent pianist and a fine artist. They conversed, drank wine and agreed to meet on the following night to sketch each other. This journey and acquaintance gave Donald a new attitude to Greece and the Greeks. It was also his first introduction to Epiros, the region to which, more than any other, he would return again and again both in his work and on the ground.

In February 1945, he also visited sites in the Peloponnese while on an FAU mission. He confessed to his father, 'It was, I know, very wrong of me to take a 3-ton lorry sight-seeing on army petrol, but such opportunities are not to be missed.' He did not, however, neglect his duties in the FAU: at Corinth he spent the morning talking to the bishop about the cod-liver oil situation in the isthmus.

At this time Donald expressed some interest in becoming an archaeologist but by the summer of the same year, 1945, the picture of medieval history was forming in his head. In the previous months he had been living at Preveza on the west coast of Greece, setting up Welfare Centres at strategic points, conducting meetings with the mayor, the bishop and other notables. Every night he would translate eighty lines of Homer with the aid of a lexicon, study modern Greek and play his violin. In his spare time he climbed mountains, or visited 'forgotten Byzantine churches' in Arta. He wrote to his father of the beauty of Ioannina, which was to become his favourite town. In an address years later in 1996, upon being awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Ioannina, he would remember Epiros in 1945 as a paradise, poor and devastated but in better condition than Athens from which he had come after the *Dekemvriana*. The mayor of Preveza at the time had dubbed him 'the second Lord

Byron', seeing Donald as a romantic young man in danger of falling in love with Epiros, and perhaps remembering that the original Lord Byron had begun his travels in Greek lands from Preveza. In later life, in addition to the honorary doctorate from the University of Ioannina in 1996, he had also received the freedom of the town of Arta in 1990.

Donald lived and worked in Epiros for eighteen months, first with the FAU and then with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). But in 1945 he had started to think about university and had set his mind on studying at Pembroke College, Cambridge, relaying to his father that he did not think he wanted to follow him into the ministry. In 1946 he returned to England to continue his studies, as an undergraduate in Classics. That would mark the beginning of another lifelong association: with Pembroke College and Cambridge.

After completing his degree, in 1949–50 Donald returned to Greece on a studentship. From a base at the British School at Athens he made several trips back northwards, to Epiros, to study the churches, their architecture, frescoes and inscriptions. He knew already in the autumn of 1949 that his Ph.D. thesis would be dedicated to the Despotate of Epiros, its political, ecclesiastical and art history, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; he wrote to remind his father who seemed to have forgotten. The 'Despotate' was one of the polities that came into existence on Byzantine territory after the Fourth Crusade; the subject was practically untouched. Before Donald left Greece in 1950 he was informed that Steven Runciman had been officially appointed as his supervisor at Cambridge. Donald was pleased as they were on 'the best of terms'. Runciman wrote to him, in his gracious way, stating that it was an honour to be his supervisor and advising him to enjoy Greece; he could read books in England. Their correspondence over forty years attests to their warm relations and Runciman's encouragement and support to Donald in his research, publications and appointments. Donald was Runciman's last pupil in Cambridge, and would later write to a friend that his supervisor had taught him everything he knew.

In 1945 Donald had seen from a distance the monasteries of the Meteora, perched on top of pinnacles of rock. Now, in 1950, he spent a week in and around Meteora, photographing the exteriors of the monasteries and their fourteenth-century frescoes which had never been properly published. At the time of his visit only three of the monasteries were inhabited. He commented that 'the sheer impossibility of their situation remains to impress and even frighten the observer'. He photographed seven monasteries that were accessible to him and took 120 photographs — 'which is as full a record of the place there is'. He would later write the

definitive history of the monasteries (*Meteora: the Rock Monasteries of Thessaly*, London, 1963, revised 1975) and publish some of his photographs in the book.

When he was not travelling and recording his findings he worked in the library of the British School every morning from 9.00–1.00 and again from 5.00–8.30. He read ‘basic works on Byzantine history’ and was encouraged to ‘discover just how little had been written about the Despotate of Epirus’ which he referred to as ‘my despotate’. He planned to introduce himself to two senior Greek Byzantine scholars but felt that he must first ‘make some show of knowing something about [his] subject before enlisting their help’. In the evenings he read Byron’s *Don Juan* in George Finlay’s copy: ‘wonderful stuff’. At Christmas the Director’s little boys had dressed up as crusaders; Donald wore his silk dressing gown and became the Emperor Alexios V (1204), re-enacting the Fourth Crusade. He spent his twenty-seventh birthday at the School in the company of Nikephoros Gregoras, the fourteenth-century historian with whom he was to spend many a subsequent year. On one occasion when the heating broke down in the British School he read Anna Comnena’s *Alexiad* in bed with a hot water bottle. He commented that ‘as the intrigues of Byzantine history crept into me I began to feel as romantic as Byron’. When it was discovered that a number of rare books had been stolen from the Finlay Library at the School, Donald was asked to catalogue Finlay’s papers.

For Easter in 1950 Donald made a journey to Mount Athos, where he kept a diary of his experiences in pencil in a very small notebook. Many years later, towards the end of his life, in 2001, he published an account (‘A sojourn on the Holy Mountain in the year 1949’) in the *Annual Report of the Friends of Mt Athos*.<sup>2</sup> Much like an earlier traveller to Mount Athos, Robert Byron, who had described his visit in *The Station* (London, 1926), a work he almost certainly did not know, Donald compared the courtyards of the monasteries to Cambridge colleges: ‘the main difference is that the church is in the middle of the court and not pushed to one side: i.e. the liturgy and not knowledge, takes pride of place’. Although Mount Athos banned and still bans women and, it is rumoured, female animals from its territory, Donald remarked that he had nevertheless seen hens and a pregnant cat. On the Mountain, Donald made a number of detailed architectural drawings and executed some fine watercolours, somewhat in the tradition of an earlier, sceptical visitor, Edward Lear. In his letters he

<sup>2</sup>It seems that Donald misremembered the year. His letters show that it was Easter 1950 when he visited the monasteries of Mount Athos.

described his experiences there as among the most wonderful of his life. Although he joked that there was ‘very little fear (or hope)’ of his staying on Athos to become a monk, he met monks whose spirituality impressed him and moved him profoundly. He wondered at the devout nonagenarian Arsenios whose ‘blue sunken eyes were still full of wonder and of life’ and whose ‘delicate woodcarved icons would have earned him a fortune in the world but who was content to spend his declining years in that remote spot’. Donald spent two days at the Serbian monastery of Chilandari where he ‘met the sort of people that one only dreams about—men so deeply and quietly and almost unnoticeably religious that it shines from their faces’. He made friends with two of the younger monks who spoke good Greek, Father Pavlos and Father Moses. Donald explained that he had found something in these two people that reminded him of ‘aspirations he once cherished’. They wrote to Donald later. Father Moses hoped that Donald could help him build up his collection of postage stamps. Father Pavlos, perhaps rather daringly, invited him to send a photograph of the bride he had married since his visit, so that he could make her acquaintance in the only way possible to him as a monk on the Mountain.

Donald had met his future wife, Joan Mary Campbell, while studying at Cambridge. From Greece in 1949–50 he conducted a voluminous correspondence with her. Their letters are full of plans for their marriage, which took place after his return in 1950. For a long time Donald had cherished the hope that the wedding would take place in Greece. He wanted to show Joan Mary all the places he loved and found so arrestingly beautiful. Their correspondence in the year before they married also regularly makes reference to the arrangements for a Roman Catholic wedding, for Joan Mary was a Catholic. Donald would have to sign a statement that their children would be brought up as Catholics, something he found difficult to do. His experiences in the war had reinforced strong religious feelings, he explained, but they were ‘divorced from the need for any church’. Had he felt the need to belong to a church he would have joined the Quakers, he indicated. In his subsequent work as a Byzantinist, it was the nature and history of the Christian Church as an institution in the secular world that absorbed him.

The years in Greece were the foundation for Donald’s life as a scholar of Byzantium. In those years he also displayed his talent for drawing and painting; his letters were often accompanied by sketches and his early articles are illustrated with his own drawings and plans.<sup>3</sup> One of his ‘favourite joys’ was to print with a very thin pen in making maps and

<sup>3</sup> ‘The churches of Molyvdoskepastos’, *Annual of the British School at Athens*, 48 (1953), 141–53.



genealogical tables. He might, he remarked, have been an engraver or architect's draughtsman. In the Greek years too Donald developed his distinctive handwriting, which was calligraphic in elegance. In his letters he wrote of the importance for him of the visual aspect of 'beautiful things and beautiful people'. He praised Greek workmanship, remarking how well made clothing was and how well dressed Greek women were. In his twenties too, in the Greek years, he distinguished himself at gatherings and particularly at carnival time, when the Greeks 'went mad', by his solo dance in the middle of the tables of a *taverna* or leading a folk dance in the open air. He was more than once congratulated by local mayors for his dancing ability.

Donald completed his doctoral thesis for the University of Cambridge in 1952. *The Despotate of Epiros* would become his first book (Oxford, 1957) and in 1984 he published its sequel, *The Despotate of Epiros, 1267–1479: a Contribution to the History of Greece in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge). For the rest of his life his intellectual interests would remain in the later Middle Ages, the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. This too had to do with his early attachment to Epiros.

Despite Donald's medieval interests, he had studied Classics at St Paul's and for the first dozen years of his academic career it was as a lecturer in Classics that he would earn his living, at University College, Dublin, where he was appointed in 1952. His lectures ranged widely, from the Roman Republic to Homeric archaeology and vase painting. He was made a member of the Royal Irish Academy in 1960. In 1964 he was awarded a fellowship at Dumbarton Oaks, the Harvard-administered Center for Byzantine Studies in Washington, DC. Donald did the unthinkable; he gave up his lectureship in Dublin, leaving his future open. In the year of his fellowship he wrote an important and pioneering work on the Kantakouzenos family.<sup>4</sup> In 1965 he was appointed Visiting Professor of Byzantine History at Bloomington, Indiana.

After two years in the United States, Donald returned to the UK in 1966 to the University of Edinburgh as Senior Lecturer and then Reader in Byzantine History. His four years there were the only time in his life when he lived in Scotland. At Edinburgh Donald had a strong supporter in Denys Hay, Professor of Medieval History, whom he had met in Indiana. Donald built up the library holdings in Byzantine Studies, ordering Byzantine texts, monographs and journals. His book-buying laid the

<sup>4</sup>*The Byzantine Family of Kantakouzenos (Cantacuzenus) ca. 1100–1460: a Genealogical and Prosopographical Study* (Washington DC, 1968)—as discussed in more detail later in this memoir.



foundation for Byzantine studies at Edinburgh. Likewise Donald's good relations with colleagues both in History and Classics ensured the continuation of a post in Byzantine history at the university. His interests in Byzantine learning had already made him an appropriate assistant to Professor Joan Hussey in producing in 1966 the second edition of *The Cambridge Medieval History*, volume IV, on Byzantium. Donald was an entertaining speaker, a lecturer whom students remember scores of years after studying under him. His 'Byzantium, Islam and the Mongols' was very popular, even though or perhaps because he put the emphasis on Byzantium. He told a good story which was, according to one of his students, 'great for motivating undergraduates being introduced to the dramas of events like the Fourth Crusade and the fall of Constantinople'. Donald and Joan Mary were known for their hospitality. Students were no strangers to their home in Stockbridge.

In October 1970 Donald moved to London to take up the Koraes Chair of Modern Greek and Byzantine History, Language and Literature at King's College London (KCL). With Joan Mary and their three sons, he moved into a family-sized house in Eltham, south-east London. The choice of Eltham may not have been entirely fortuitous, or governed by practical considerations alone (trains run from there to Charing Cross, which is handy for King's). Donald had already put Eltham on the historical map of England. It was at Eltham Palace, as he revealed in an article published in the same year as he moved to live nearby, that the 'Emperor of the Romans' (that is, of the Byzantines) Manuel II had been entertained to Christmas dinner by King Henry IV of England, in the year 1400. Manuel had come to raise support in the west for a new crusade to save Constantinople from the advancing Ottoman Turks; in this he would be disappointed.<sup>5</sup>

The Koraes Chair to which Donald had been appointed at King's already had a history of its own, and under his stewardship would acquire new importance.<sup>6</sup> Principal Ronald Burrows (1867–1920) had been instrumental in its establishment in 1918, with the strong support of the prime minister of Greece, Eleftherios Venizelos. The Principal's personal collec-

<sup>5</sup>D. Nicol, 'A Byzantine Emperor in England: Manuel II's visit to London in 1400–1401', *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, 12.2 (1971), 204–25, reprinted in D. Nicol, *Byzantium: Its Ecclesiastical History and Relations with the Western World* (London, 1972).

<sup>6</sup>Information on Donald's administrative work during his years at KCL, and held in the College archives, has been used in this section of the Memoir. Our thanks go to the archivists at KCL, Strand Building, for their help.

tions were the heart of the Burrows Library, an indispensable resource for teaching and research. The Chair's first tenant had been Arnold Toynbee, succeeded by, *inter alios*, Romilly Jenkins and Cyril Mango. Building on this tradition, established by his predecessors, Donald nurtured the Burrows Library, in whose congenial space he held a weekly research seminar which became a cynosure of Byzantine studies. He quickly began working on several fronts to consolidate and, he hoped, extend the base of Byzantine and Modern Greek History, Language and Literature in London.

In 1972 he succeeded in getting a University of London BA degree in Modern Greek established at King's. That year, too, he chaired a working party on the feasibility of an amalgamation of the University's School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) with King's. The working party's report came down firmly in favour. Donald's interventions in debates in the Faculty of Arts envisaged new possibilities not only in Languages but also in History and disciplines then untaught at King's—economic and social studies, and, making important connections, Combined Studies. It was a visionary plan, supported by, among others, Roy Wisbey, the Professor of German and a founding father of computer studies in Humanities, and Averil Cameron, whose post was held jointly in Classics and History. There was, predictably, opposition from those to whom the vision held no appeal. Negotiations rumbled on through 1973–4. In March 1975, the Faculty expressed its appreciation to Donald for his 'pains and trouble'. The Professorial Board finally voted 'No', and King's reported negatively to the University of London. By the end of the year, the Faculty agreed that 'there is now very little likelihood of SSEES being amalgamated with KC'; it remained independent until joining University College in 1999.

Meanwhile Donald had thrown his energies into work beyond King's, but directly arising from his tenure of the Koraes Chair. In 1973 he played an enthusiastic part in founding *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, whose editor he immediately became, remaining in that role until 1983. In 1974 he was elected to serve as president of the Ecclesiastical History Society for 1975–6. One striking result was the publication by the Society of *Studies in Church History* volume XIII, 'The Orthodox Churches and the West' (Oxford, 1976), which included major contributions by Peter Brown, Nicolas Zernov and Kallistos Ware, as well as papers by Donald's colleagues at King's, Averil Cameron, Richard Clogg and Jinty Nelson, and last but not least Donald's own presidential address, 'The Papal Scandal', a profound and searching study of how the papacy came to be regarded as the impediment to the re-uniting of the eastern and western Churches. The Orthodox Churches had not hitherto featured much on the

Society's agenda; Donald's initiative was to be pursued in later publications of the Society by himself and others.

Though much of Donald's time at King's was always devoted to his academic work, he also played a very important role in College affairs, with a mixture of quiet humour and authority. It is hard to avoid the impression that his defeat over the SSEES merger impelled him to devote more of his energies to administration than he had previously done. Subsequently, he served as Assistant Principal of King's from 1977 to 1980, and then Vice-Principal from 1980 to 1981, the year in which he was elected to the Fellowship of the British Academy.

Donald's career in what today would be called academic leadership roles came down, essentially, to a tale of three Principals and their rather different needs. Although each of unique pedigree, the three Principals with whom he worked shared one single characteristic: none was a career academic, although the first, General Sir John Hackett (Principal from 1968 to 1975), was himself a classicist and, in retirement, increasingly engaged in aspects of Classical civilisation. It was less usual at that time for an academically focused College to appoint non-academics to positions of leadership, and Hackett and others relied significantly on the willingness of senior academic figures such as Donald to take on the post of Vice-Principal. Hackett had recognised Donald's qualities, and on the basis of what was effectively a chat in the Principal's office had offered him the Koraes Chair. Donald took impish pleasure in pointing this out as an appropriate way to fill key posts, in later days, when his retirement triggered what was by then the formal process required by the University of London for filling an established Chair.

Donald was Vice-Principal to Hackett's successor, Sir Richard (Sam) Way (Principal 1975–80), who drew full benefit from asking him to take up this position. A former Permanent Secretary knew many things, not least how to seek experienced academic advice in dealing with the demands of Heads of Department and Faculty Deans. The partnership worked exceptionally well, and on two occasions of Way's ill-health Donald assumed the additional responsibilities of Acting Principal.

With Way's successor, it was somewhat different. Sir Neil (later Lord) Cameron (Principal 1980–5), was former Chief of Defence Staff. He decided that it was time for change and, in the process of positioning King's in the gales of radical restructuring running through the University of London in the Thatcher years, he sought new blood. The year he worked with Donald was very amicable, but the matching of a distinguished academic whose war service had been carried out under the banner of the

Friends' Ambulance Unit to a Chief of Defence Staff who had served as a distinguished pilot supporting Arctic convoys to Murmansk was not obviously a marriage made in heaven. Donald's relinquishing of the role of Vice-Principal did, however, have the advantage of releasing him to dedicate himself wholly to his academic work. But it should be recorded that he showed continuing generosity of spirit and advice to his young and rather greener successor as Vice-Principal.

It was during Donald's tenure of the Koraes Chair that the Department of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, over which he presided as *ex officio* head of department for eighteen years, for the first time became a flourishing, going concern, attracting students, organising top-level conferences, and with a proud record of research publications, that included his own magisterial *The Last Centuries of Byzantium* (London, 1972), as well as work by his colleagues Philip Sherrard in the history of the Orthodox Church, Richard Clogg in modern Greek history, and Peter Mackridge in modern Greek language and literature. (The current Koraes Professor, Roderick Beaton, a contributor to this memoir, joined as a lecturer in 1981; another, Charlotte Roueché, in 1984 as part of the 'new blood' scheme that had recently been introduced in UK universities, filling a new joint post with Classics.) As an academic leader, it was Donald's way to be supportive, rarely to interfere, but always to expect high standards of those around him. Colleagues who worked with him in the 1970s and 1980s remember him as avuncular, severe, never one to 'suffer fools gladly' or to fear to speak his mind, but easy and congenial to work with, even if he was less at ease with female colleagues and students than with men.

Donald retired from King's in 1988, but not before he had been a godfather of the British Academy-supported 'Prosopography of the Byzantine Empire', and indeed been in at its birth in 1987 at King's College London. His study of the Kantakouzenos family helped lay the foundations of what Byzantine prosopography was to become, with kinship and lineage making 'the vital connections'.<sup>7</sup> Donald himself had identified the distinctively hybrid character of this Byzantine aristocrat's identity, with a 'developed sense of genealogy' like that of the ancient Greeks, yet not wholly hereditary like those of the Romans and medieval westerners.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>P. Magdalino, 'Prosopography and Byzantine identity', in A. Cameron (ed.), *Fifty Years of Prosopography: the Later Roman Empire, Byzantium and Beyond* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 41–2.

<sup>8</sup>D. M. Nicol, 'The prosopography of the Byzantine aristocracy', in M. Angold (ed.), *The Byzantine Aristocracy, IX to XIII Centuries* (BAR International Series, 221; Oxford, 1984), pp. 79–91.

At a reception held in his honour when he retired from King's, Donald said that he wished the best for his colleagues who were continuing in harness—but that he did not envy them. He had seen many changes in the way universities were run, and his own in particular, and they were not to his liking. Retirement from King's, of course, did not mean retirement from academic life. A three-year stint as Director of the Gennadius Library (1989–92), in Athens, enabled Donald to indulge his love for old books without the burdens that teaching and running a department had increasingly become over the preceding years. His affinity with books was not only academic but also practical. As a hobby he had perfected the art of bookbinding. He was an enthusiastic collector, and he valued the books in his care for their craftsmanship as objects as well as for their contents. As Director, Donald conducted a seminar each year, as his annual reports reveal. He also wrote a biographical sketch of the bibliophile whose collection forms the core of the library, *Joannes Gennadius—The Man* (1990), an elegant booklet which is available at the Library. As curator of one of the finest such collections in his field, Donald was in his element at the Gennadius. He and Joan Mary were also exceptionally generous with their hospitality to friends, colleagues and former students from the UK. Many comfortable winter evenings were spent by the fire in the oddly cubist little house of pentelic marble that is the Director's residence, before or after convivial dinners at the neighbourhood *taverna*, Stou Philippon, where you can still (even today) get retsina straight from the barrel, in the heart of exclusive Kolonaki.

Not long after his return from Greece, Donald was invited to give one of the first of the now well-established annual lectures at King's College London named in honour of his former supervisor, Steven Runciman. The lecture is always held on the first Thursday of February, and in 1993 that date coincided with Donald's seventieth birthday. To an audience of over two hundred in the Great Hall at King's, he spoke eloquently about events in the year 1364, when the entire population of the island of Tenedos had been deported for what, today, we might call 'security reasons'. Never shy of drawing parallels between remote events in history and the issues of the day, he likened that year to the *annus horribilis*, in the phrase that had been used by Her Majesty the Queen, only weeks before, to refer to recent traumas for the royal family. Typically, what might have been taken for an exercise in local history ended up by reaching out to define the fundamental nature of the insecurity of the tottering Byzantine empire in the mid fourteenth century, almost a century before its eventual extinction in 1453.

That was also the occasion for Donald to be presented with a Festschrift, a volume of essays written by former colleagues and students, entitled *The Making of Byzantine History* (Aldershot, 1993), and edited by his successor in the Koraes Chair, Roderick Beaton, and Charlotte Roueché, who would later become closely involved with the prosopography project. *The Making of Byzantine History* was the inaugural volume in the series of Publications of the Centre for Hellenic Studies, King's College London, published by Ashgate, which reached its fifteenth volume in 2014.

Donald's last years were spent in Cambridge. In letters to friends and colleagues he made no secret of the fact that he did not enjoy his rural retreat. For as long as his health would permit, he continued to lecture and travel the world—he was a favourite as a guest speaker on Swan Hellenic cruises. He also continued to write and publish at a great rate. A steady stream of books followed his retirement, all of them by this time published by Cambridge University Press. In one of these, *The Reluctant Emperor* (Cambridge, 1996), he returned to the Byzantine emperor with whom his interest in prosopography had first begun: John VI Kantakouzenos. Cantacuzene, as Donald called him, had been a controversial figure in his own time and has remained one ever since—remembered as the usurper who ended up by abdicating in favour of the ruler he had ousted, and as the author both of a bitter civil war, that first allowed the Ottoman Turks a foothold in Europe, and of an elegantly written history of his own reign, couched in the archaic language of Thucydides. This was the emperor that the poet C. P. Cavafy remembered had been crowned with fake crown jewels, because his treasury was so depleted and the real ones had been pawned. On the other hand, as Donald understood him, Kantakouzenos had been one of the few leading men of his time to perceive the reality of how far the empire had declined since its heyday. Once he had become convinced that the task of restoring its fortunes was an impossible one, the emperor, according to Donald, did the only decent thing, and gave up his throne to become a historian and monk instead. A famous miniature reproduced in the book shows a double portrait of Kantakouzenos as both emperor and monk. Donald would describe Kantakouzenos 'as it were beside himself with spirituality'.<sup>9</sup>

When, in the last few years of his life Donald was no longer able to work, he took heart from the fact that he had written sixteen books, many

<sup>9</sup>Donald's remark was delivered orally, but see *The Reluctant Emperor*, p. 180. The image that evoked it is in Paris BN cod. gr. 1242, folio 123r.

of which had been translated into other languages—Greek, Italian, Serbian and Turkish. (His *Last Centuries of Byzantium* is read at Turkish universities today.) Up to 1992, he had also published 110 articles, book chapters and public lectures, and 132 book reviews.<sup>10</sup> He wrote to his friends in Ioannina that he felt he had not lived in vain. That last statement was not without a hint of self-deprecating humour, a characteristic of Donald's utterances. Once, having read out his paper at a seminar held in the Burrows Library, after he had retired as Koraes Professor, he turned to his audience and said, 'Now, tell me what's wrong with that.' As a younger colleague characterised him, 'Donald had a depth and fundamental decency he did not choose to flaunt.'

The overall impression is of a distinctive and lasting achievement. He stood on a historiographical cusp between generations: his smooth, lucid yet gripping narrative provided a framework within which new analyses of this complex society could then be undertaken. He had little time for source criticism of the old-fashioned philological and positivist kind, and even less for the postmodern reading of ancient and medieval texts. He was not remotely influenced, even at second hand, by modern theory—indeed, in conversation, he was often robustly resistant to it. He belonged to a generation that was irritated by rhetoric and ceremonial, which a more recent scholarly generation has come to regard as key to understanding the Byzantine mentality; and he was intellectually more at home in the provinces—in Epiros, say, rather than in the capital, Constantinople. He nevertheless took the Byzantines seriously, at their own evaluation of themselves, and he shared their view that history was basically about the moral decisions and political performances of powerful men. It is a paradox that he worked so hard to put the last centuries of Byzantium on the map, without altering the conventional perception of this period as one of decline.

Yet, ten years after Donald's passing, his narrative of late Byzantine history, though much enriched by recent scholarship, has not been replaced. His books are still the first port of call for the history of the empire of the Palaiologoi, the Despotate of Epiros, the Meteora monasteries, the biographies of the 'reluctant emperor' John VI and the 'immortal emperor' Constantine XI, the imperial family of Kantakouzenos, the troubled relationship between Byzantium and Venice, and church and society in the last centuries of Byzantium. Only his book on *The Byzantine*

<sup>10</sup>The Festschrift for Donald is prefaced by a bibliography, compiled by Ian Martin, of his published works from 1953 to 1992 (pp. xiii–xxvii).



*Lady* (Cambridge, 1994), a graceful work on late Byzantine scholarship and intellectual patronage, found itself in stiff competition with literature on gender and Byzantine women. Otherwise, his oeuvre stands the test of time because it was not driven by dated issues and theories, but represents the timeless scholarship, and sophisticated craftsmanship, of an empirical humanist who did not leave a source unturned, read his sources correctly, got his facts right and wore his considerable learning with lightness and humour. Rooted in his discovery of Greece at a time of suffering and endurance, his sympathy for the Byzantines—their love of tradition, their preoccupations with theology, Atticism and monasticism—gave a poignancy to his portrayal of their world-weary and factious, but resourceful and courageous struggle for survival. And in two respects Donald was a pioneer. First, as Paul Magdalino FBA, a former student of Donald's and a contributor to this memoir, comments, Donald was one of the first Byzantinists, and the first in the English-speaking world, to apply the methodology of prosopography to the period after 641. Second, he made use of the concept of 'church and society' in examining the interaction between religion and secular culture. This was a characteristically insightful approach to 'the nature of a society which had at the same time such a tragic propensity for collapse and such a remarkable talent for cultural and spiritual regeneration'. That paradox continues to exercise Byzantinists and many others.

At the time of his death on 25 September 2003, Donald was survived by his wife of more than fifty years, Joan Mary, his sons Christopher, Stephen and Theodore, and five granddaughters, Rebecca, Victoria, Sarah, Charlotte and Kate.

RODERICK BEATON

*Fellow of the Academy*

RUTH MACRIDES

*University of Birmingham*

PAUL MAGDALINO

*Fellow of the Academy*

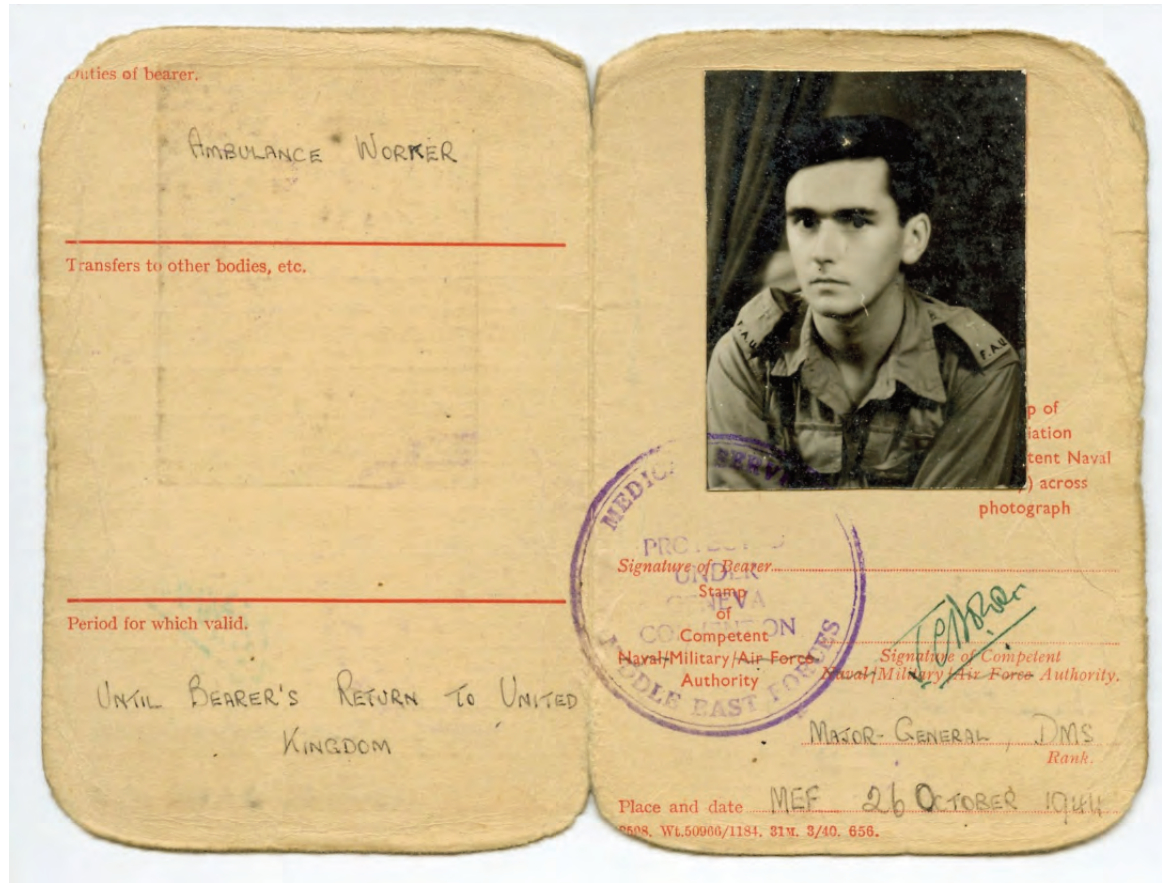
JINTY NELSON

*Fellow of the Academy*

STEWART SUTHERLAND

*Fellow of the Academy*

PLATE 1



Friends' Ambulance Service (FAU) passport for Donald Nicol, October 1944. Nicol spent four years (1942-6) in the FAU, serving in Egypt and Greece. Reproduced by kind permission of Christopher Nicol

PLATE 2



Entrance to the Church and Monastery of St Nicholas on the Island of Ioannina before restoration (photograph by Donald Nicol, late 1940s). Reproduced by kind permission of Christopher Nicol.

PLATE 3

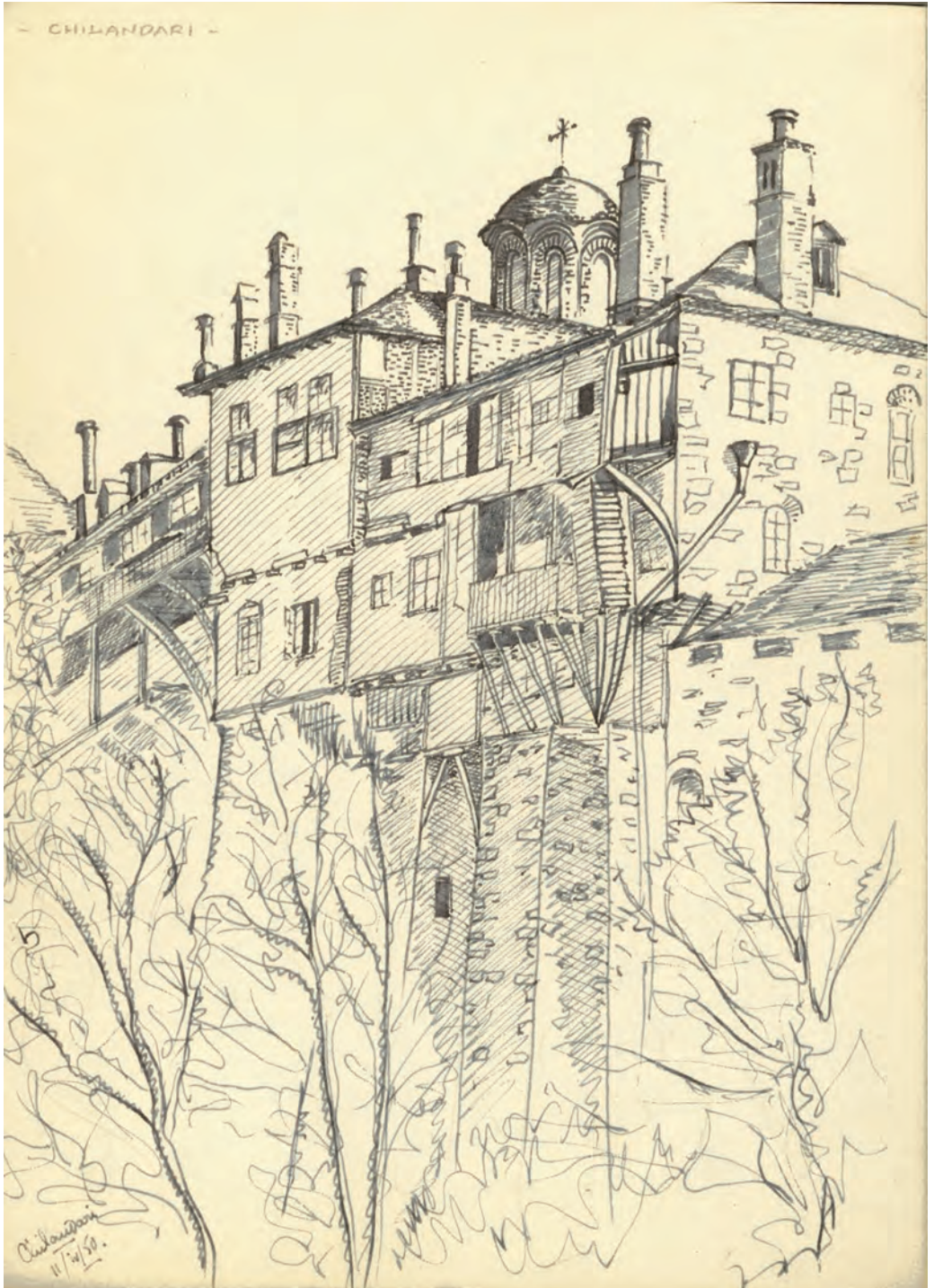


Donald Nicol in the garden of the British School of Archaeology at Athens, 1949/50. After completing his degree at Cambridge, Nicol returned to Greece on a studentship and was based at the BSAA, from where he made several trips to Epiros. Reproduced by kind permission of the British School in Athens.

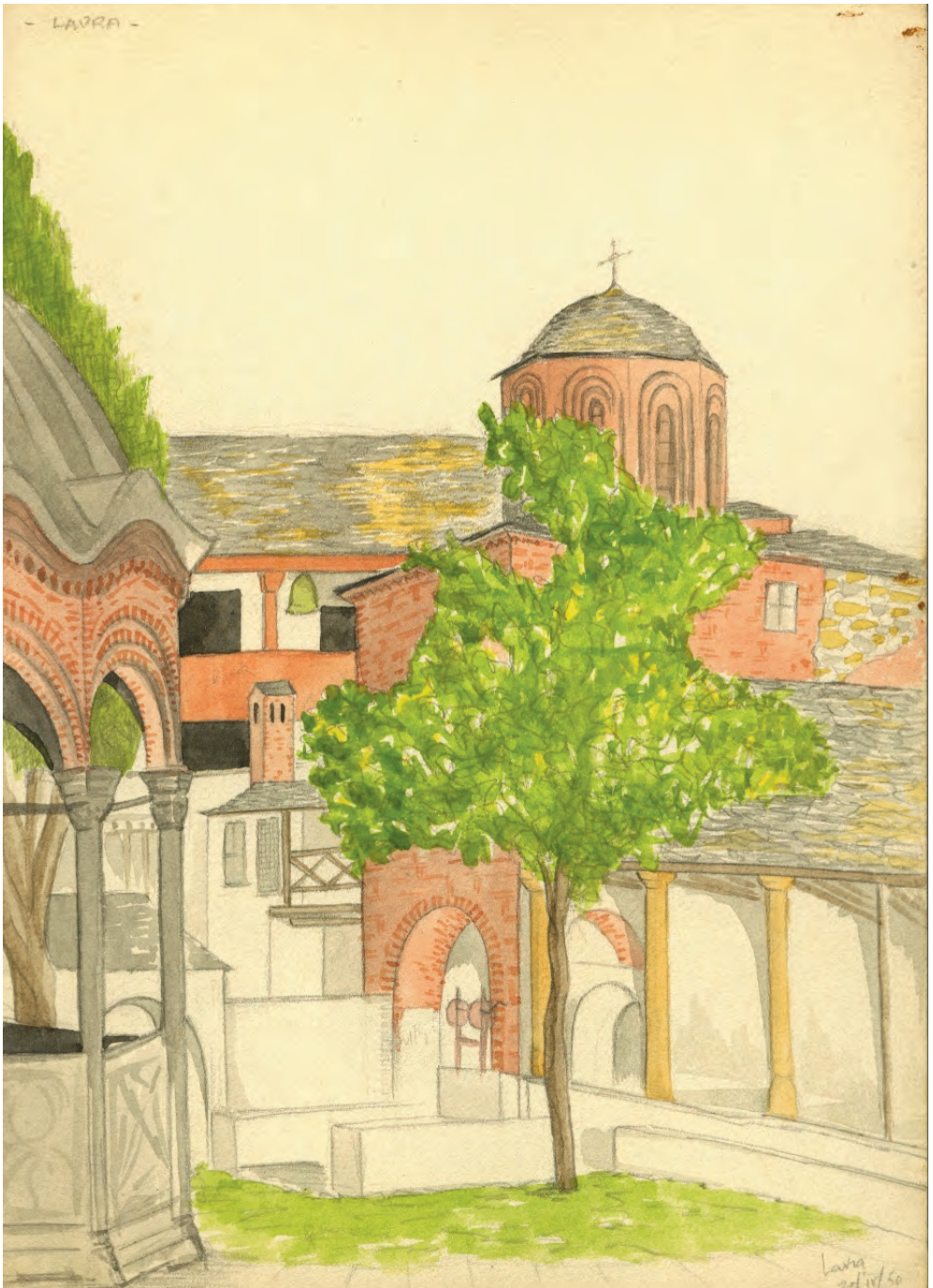
Donald Nicol with the Abbot of the Monastery of Agios Stephanos, Meteora (1950). Reproduced by kind permission of Christopher Nicol.







The Monastery of Chilandari, Mount Athos (pen and ink drawing by Donald Nicol, 1950).  
Reproduced by kind permission of Christopher Nicol.



Monastery of the Great Lavra, Mount Athos (watercolour by Donald Nicol, 1950).  
Reproduced by kind permission of Christopher Nicol.



PLATE 6



Donald Nicol in his study at the University of Edinburgh, 1966/70. Reproduced by kind permission of Christopher Nicol.