



JOHN COWDREY

Herbert Edward John Cowdrey

1926–2009

HERBERT EDWARD JOHN COWDREY (always known as John) was born in Basingstoke on 29 November 1926. His father, Herbert Cowdrey, was head gardener at Moundsmere, a stately home in Hampshire, and from him John learned a love of gardening that stayed with him for the rest of his life. In his own statement written for the British Academy, John drew attention to the fact that both his parents came from North Hampshire workers' families. Towards the end of his life, he was clearly proud of his roots in the English countryside. But it cannot have been particularly easy for him, in the class-bound society of England in the 1940s, to move from home into the environment into which his talents took him.

John's primary education was at Church Oakley Church of England School near Basingstoke, where he must have impressed his teachers. In 1937 he won a scholarship to Queen Mary's School, Basingstoke. It is unfortunate that few records of his education at this ancient grammar school in the town remain. But it was surely at Queen Mary's that John's remarkable abilities not only as an historian but also as a linguist were given their opportunity to develop. He excelled in all subjects except, ironically, divinity (at this stage in his life he professed himself an atheist). At the end of Michaelmas Term 1943, when he was only just seventeen, he won an open scholarship in Modern History at Trinity College, Oxford. Of this he later remarked that it marked him out 'as one of the last generation of old-style scholarship boys'. In 1944, having chosen the navy as his national service destination, he experienced Oxford in wartime at a Services Short Course, that strange blend of academic endeavour and preparation for war that was offered to

young men who could not be spared from call-up for more than a few months. Here he began his historical studies.

John then spent most of his national service, 1945–7, on *HMS Mauritius*, a cruiser tasked with preserving British interests in the eastern Mediterranean. In the last months of the Second World War, the German threat in this area had almost died out. But there was a need to contain any possible Russian thrust into the region and to assist anti-Communist forces in Greece and the Southern Balkans. There were moments of real danger, most notably on 22 October 1946 in the Straits of Corfu. John was on *HMS Mauritius* when, accompanied by the cruiser *HMS Leander* and the destroyers *HMS Saumarez* and *HMS Volage*, they found themselves completely unexpectedly in a minefield off the Albanian coast. Both destroyers were seriously damaged, and forty-four men were killed. Much later, in conversation with Graham Loud, John recalled that he had at the time of the explosions been in one of *HMS Mauritius*' magazines, so might well not have survived had the cruiser hit a mine. Less dramatically, he also was conscious of living dangerously when he made his first visit to Palestine in 1947, because all Britons there were under threat of assassination in that last year of the Mandate. Despite these short periods of tension, John enjoyed the navy and credited his time in the Eastern Mediterranean with kindling in him a lasting interest in the history, peoples and places he had first encountered then.

In 1947 John returned to Trinity College, Oxford, to finish off his historical studies, concentrating at this time on the modern period, post-1760. He later recalled with gratitude the contrasting styles and interests of his three tutors, Michael MacLagan, Bruce Wernham, and Philip Williams. Together they gave him the confidence to take a First Class degree in 1949. At this point, John made one of the most important decisions of his life, to read for a second degree in Theology instead of continuing with historical research. His tutor in this subject was the distinguished philosophical theologian, Austin Farrer, then chaplain of Trinity. Farrer was famous for his preaching, and may well have had a significant influence on John's decision to devote himself to theological studies. It was important for the development of John's later interests that the Theology curriculum allowed him to do a Special Subject on the medieval papacy, for which he was able to choose his own set texts. This constituted his real entrée into medieval studies and especially into the world of Gregory VII and eleventh-century reforms. John valued his second degree not just for this but also for the breadth of insight into history across the centuries and the windows into other civilisations and states than Western European ones that it gave him.

He also benefited from adding to his already extensive list of languages Biblical Hebrew and Greek. Long afterwards, at John's funeral, Gerald Hegarty, chaplain of St Edmund Hall, attested to his lifelong habit of reading a part of the Old Testament in Hebrew every other day until failing eyesight prevented it.

While he was still studying for his second degree, John began to work towards taking Anglican orders at St Stephen's House, Oxford. St Stephen's House was founded to provide training for clergy of the High Anglican persuasion, in which community John found himself at ease for the rest of his life. He felt gratitude to the then Principal, A. H. Couratin, for the thorough training provided, and for the good grounding in biblical, doctrinal and liturgical studies he acquired there. He was ordained in 1953, when he took up the position of chaplain and teacher of Old Testament and Christian doctrine at St Stephen's House. Although he moved from there in 1956, he remained a firm supporter of that institution, later serving on its governing body and towards the end of his life receiving its Fellowship

In November 1956 John was elected chaplain of St Edmund Hall, a job to be combined with teaching in the Modern History school for the medieval part of the syllabus. He remained at St Edmund Hall for the rest of his life, resigning the chaplaincy in 1976 but continuing to teach medieval history until his retirement and election as an emeritus fellow in 1994. The point at which John joined the Hall was an exciting one because in February 1957 it acquired its new Statutes, under which it became a proper college, its government vested in the hands of its Principal and Fellows. John was distinctly proud to have been one of the foundation fellows and keen to nurture a sense of collegiality in the changed institution. In the brief history of the college he wrote (which still appears on the college website), he said of it: 'Unique among the Colleges by reason of its history, it combines the maturity and confidence of long, rich and resilient experience as a Hall with the modernity and adaptability of its new way of life as a college.' When college archivist, he said of the archives: 'The whole story of the Hall's gradual deliverance from tutelage and its growth into the great and glorious college that it now is, is richly documented.'¹ The acute awareness of how institutions evolve over time, with particular moments of rapid development, was to be a notable feature of John's historical scholarship. Perhaps his later portraits of Cluny and Montecassino were shaped in part by his own experience at the Hall in 1957.

¹ *St Edmund Hall Magazine*, 1981–2, p. 11.

John preserved a marked reverence for and knowledge of the 1957 Statutes, and later also for the by-laws, in the framing of which he had played a considerable role. Occasionally in later times when modifications of the original Statutes were mooted, he struck his colleagues as rather over-zealous in protecting what he saw as their essence. Indeed, he described the by-laws as intended to lock the collegial management of the Hall's business into an unchanging template. This attitude could irritate those who favoured even small changes. But by then few of the fellows could themselves remember the major revolution that had been achieved in 1957.

The Hall that John joined was small, both in terms of physical space (the Emden and Kelly buildings that transformed it were the work of the 1960s) and as a community—he was the eleventh fellow to be elected. In that number were two other clerical fellows. One of these was John Kelly, Principal of the college, who encouraged and supported John in his early years. It was in token of this that John wore Kelly's robes when he took his Doctor of Divinity degree in 2000. He also formed a long-lasting alliance with the other history fellow, George Ramsay, whose geniality combined with high academic standards made him an excellent colleague. It was from this time forward that John began to see himself as a college, rather than a faculty or university, man. Nevertheless, he scrupulously fulfilled all his obligations to the History faculty, as a lecturer, as a dedicated examiner of both undergraduate and graduate students, as a supervisor (on which more will be said below), and as a member of the History board. The faculty board responded to this and to his growing reputation as a researcher by appointing him to a Special Lectureship for five years in 1979, an appointment that led him to give up the office of chaplain in the Hall (though not of course his tutorship in medieval history).

When John was originally appointed chaplain, a programme of restoration was already on-going in the late seventeenth-century chapel. He was in office when it reached its climax in 1957–8, with the installation of a new altar-piece, the Supper at Emmaus, painted by Ceri Richards and commissioned by the undergraduates at the time. Although there were those who preferred the old altar-piece (now kept in the Old Library), John was probably in the majority in thinking the Richards painting entirely appropriate to the building, both in colour and in form. He was impressed that the artist had spent several hours sitting in the chapel before sketching out the picture, time which he thought well spent.² Since

²I am indebted to the late Revd Gerald Hegarty for this information.

its installation the altar-piece has attracted much admiration. Richard Harries, then Bishop of Oxford, in 2005 regarded it as the equal of Graham Sutherland's famous *Noli me tangere* for Chichester Cathedral, and praised it for the way in which Richards had avoided excessive literalism in the depiction of the risen Christ. In the restored chapel, John fulfilled his duties towards the collegiate community, including regular invitations to other clergy to come and preach at the Sunday evening services. The 1950s and 1960s were relatively calm decades for chaplains of Oxford colleges. More challenging times began with the increasingly secular mood of the 1970s.

The other part of John's original job was the teaching. The move from St Stephen's House to St Edmund Hall meant the abandonment of any teaching of Theology. From now on, he confined himself to History. But in what he most enjoyed he drew rather more on what he had learned under Austin Farrer and A. H. Couratin than on his History degree. In those days—and indeed for long afterwards—fellows of poor colleges were obliged to give tutorials for at least twelve hours a week. Although John as chaplain did not initially have to fulfill this obligation, after the end of his Special Lectureship he had to take on what external teaching he could find in order to make up his hours. Like all Oxford tutors, he sometimes felt burdened. But he enjoyed a reputation among his pupils both for punctiliousness in the performance of his duty and for real kindness. At the retirement dinner the college gave for him in 1994 when he became an emeritus fellow, his old pupils 'united in their appreciation of Mr. Cowdrey as not only an excellent history tutor but also an exceptionally kind man'.³ One of them recorded that, overcome with nerves before taking his final examinations, he turned to John, who took him away from Oxford for a day or two on a walking holiday, which made all the difference both to his feelings and, he was sure, to his performance. John's kindness was also remarked by his surprisingly small number of research students, in particular by Graham Loud, who praised John as an exemplary supervisor. Not only did he read carefully and quickly all that was submitted to him, providing excellent analysis, but he was generosity itself in writing references and offering support in any way he could. Among his colleagues in college he was remembered as the person who was always willing to lend his room in vacations to those ejected from their own by building work.

³ *St Edmund Hall Magazine*, 1993–4.

In 1959 there came another major change in John's life: he married a musician, Judith Watson Davis, with whom he subsequently had two daughters and a son. Not long after the marriage the pair moved to Old Marston, to a house with a fairly large garden where John put his skills to good use. From then on, he could be seen regularly cycling in across the Marston Ferry Road, through North Oxford and down to St Edmund Hall. This move also marked the beginning of his close involvement in the church of St Nicholas, Old Marston, where he was to act as deputy to the vicar for many years. For as long as he was able, he presided over the 8 a.m. communion on Sunday mornings in the church, and was well known to all the congregation. It seems appropriate that a man of strong traditionalist views should have served in a church where worship is known to have taken place at least from the early years of the twelfth century, and probably occurred further back than that. It is extraordinary that, with so much already on his plate, John still had the energy to spend part of every summer vacation, at least into the mid 1980s, as an A-level examiner and delegate for the Oxford Local Examinations Board, and also to participate actively in the Henry Bradshaw Society, devoted to the study of medieval liturgy, of which he became Chairman of Council in 1985–6. Perhaps the huge demands he placed on himself went some way to explain the reticence he always preserved. John was an intensely private person. Everyone held him in great respect; very few of the university community, if any, felt they knew him well.

Once installed in St Edmund Hall, John began to turn his mind to the kinds of research for which his combination of historical and theological training best fitted him. The first problem to which he was attracted was essentially theological, although it had clear historical implications: that of the doctrine and discipline behind reordinations in the western church, 400–1300. In 1963, supported by John Kelly, he received a British Academy grant to enable him to follow through the major sources for this huge project. His work gave him the opportunity to study intensively the authors of the early middle ages, particularly those of the Carolingian age. If the original intention had been to produce a book on the subject, this was abandoned. What John achieved saw the light of day in two articles, one on the dissemination of St Augustine's teaching on reordinations,⁴ and the other on Pope Anastasius II's use of St Augustine's doctrine of holy orders.⁵

⁴ *Journal of Theological Studies*, 20 (1969), 448–81; repr. in *Popes, Monks, and Crusaders* (London, 1984).

⁵ *Studia Patristica*, 11 (1972), 311–15; repr. in *Popes, Monks, and Crusaders*.

These articles demonstrated the breadth of John's knowledge, his familiarity with all the sources, and his ability to pick out changes in emphasis in later readers' use of St Augustine's teaching.

In the meantime, and probably under the influence of his undergraduate teaching, John's interests had turned back to the eleventh century and the work he had done for his Special Subject in the Theology school. This century was to remain his overwhelming preoccupation for the rest of his scholarly career. It fascinated him because he could detect in it major developments in thought among the clergy, both regular and secular. It was also a period which he knew had left some evidence not fully exploited by previous generations of historians. Besides, he had an instinctive sympathy for the form of Benedictine monasticism that reached its apogee in that century. He was drawn to the ritual, the penitential discipline, the sense of solidarity that characterised the inward lives of these stable, aspirational communities, and yet permitted them to spread their influence well beyond their walls. He wanted to understand them better and to pass on his new knowledge to others. He saw much to do, and much reason to feel excitement about what might be discovered there. In 1966 and 1968 he published three articles, all apparently concerned with a narrow geographical focus, the city of Milan, but all vital to the broader problem that was to occupy him for many years, that of what was known then as the Gregorian reform movement in the church. Without a knowledge of the local politics in Milan, it was impossible to comprehend the appearance of the Patarnes or the part they played in the rift between Pope Gregory VII and King Henry IV. These articles were the first building bricks of John's later book on Gregory VII, interesting in themselves and more significant for later developments

It was in 1970 that John's publications first brought him to the attention of all medieval historians. It was a great year for him. The first of the three notable pieces to appear was entitled 'The Peace and the Truce of God in the Eleventh Century'. This article treated—admittedly more obliquely than in later work—a theme that is instantly recognisable as a major Cowdrey preoccupation—the impact of Benedictine monasticism on the wider world. The article remains forty years later the most reliable and most persuasive discussion of the Peace and Truce in English. The argument developed is well nuanced, dependent on the drawing of careful distinctions; despite its complexity it is expressed with crystal clarity; it covers the whole of western Europe in its scope; it is scrupulous in its use of sources. The footnotes attest to John's wide reading in French, German and Italian secondary literature. In the first footnote summarising the

existing work on the subject, John included Bernard Töpfer's remarkable *Volk und Kirche zur Zeit der beginnenden Gottesfriedensbewegung im Frankreich*,⁶ recording of it that it is 'a particularly stimulating and valuable Marxist interpretation'. In the course of the article, he paid homage to Töpfer's conclusions on the coherence of the peace movement and its appeal to all classes. John was certainly not narrow-minded in his approach to what he read. But much of the article went well beyond the secondary literature. John's understanding of the church's ritual brought to the subject the kind of insight often aspired to by those trained in anthropology, as witnessed in his words: 'The concluding of peace under episcopal sanctions was . . . part of a pattern of events which began with the sign of God's wrath, continued with healing by the intervention of the saints, and ended with men's answering contract of peace and justice.'⁷ Altogether, the article was and remains a *tour de force*. Later, he added a brief article entitled 'From the Peace of God to the First Crusade', as a response to Marcus Bull's contention, in *Knightly Piety and the Lay Response to the First Crusade* (Oxford, 1993), that there was no connection between the Peace and the Crusade. John's conclusion was typical: he agreed with Bull's arguments, but thought there was more to be said: 'If the Aquitanian assemblies lapsed, the underlying aspirations of which they were temporary expressions continued.'⁸ There was, therefore, a connection, though not at the obvious level. The 'underlying aspirations' of which John speaks here constituted a longing for *iustitia*, righteousness, which he came to regard as the hallmark of eleventh-century intellectuals.

The second major work to be published in that year was John's first book: *The Cluniacs and the Gregorian Reform* (Oxford, 1970). The theme was the effects of eleventh-century monasticism on the outside world. The book was a contribution to an on-going debate, largely conducted by German scholars, on the question of whether the great Benedictine monastery of Cluny played a central or at best a peripheral role in the ecclesiastical reform that characterised the second half of the eleventh century, normally associated particularly with Pope Gregory VII. In the introduction to the book, John summarised the debate for his readers. The first thing that strikes the eye was his easy familiarity with German scholar-

⁶ Berlin, 1957.

⁷ *Past and Present*, 46 (1970), 42–67, at 50; repr. in *Popes, Monks, and Crusaders*.

⁸ 'From the Peace of God to the First Crusade', in L. García-Guijarro Ramos (ed.), *La Primera Cruzada, novecientos años después: el concilio de Clermont y los orígenes del movimiento cruzado* (Castello d'Impresseo, 1997), pp. 51–61, at 53; repr. in *The Crusades and Latin Monasticism in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Aldershot, 1999).

ship. It is perhaps not surprising that a young man with linguistic gifts being educated during the Second World War should have regarded it as essential to read German fluently. But John had not had the opportunity of long—or even short—residence in that country; it was all done by innate flair and determination. The introduction to *The Cluniacs* provided for many English-speaking readers their first appreciation of the importance of the school of Tellenbach in European historiography.

The Cluniacs and the Gregorian Reform is remarkable for drawing on an unusually wide range of sources and for its broad geographical scope. On sources, the book provides the first glimpse of what was to be one of John's most noted characteristics, his willingness to edit for the use of others documents he had found, which were now difficult of access but valuable for the insights they provided. So in an appendix to *The Cluniacs* he provided editions of three papal letters found in Pierre Simon's *Bullarium sacri ordinis Cluniacensis* of 1680, an exceedingly rare work. Two of these letters had played a considerable role in John's reassessment of the relationship between Cluny and the papacy; they were there as *pièces justificatives*. But they also marked the start of what was to be an important part of John's *oeuvre*, editing medieval Latin letters. On geographical scope, the book is unusual in searching for Cluny's influence far beyond the bounds of southern and eastern France. This breadth did arouse criticism; could Hirsau and its dependencies really be called Cluniac? If so, what exactly made a house Cluniac? Was a debt to Cluny's foundation charter, its customs, its guidance and its prestige enough? Or did the adjective demand subjection to Cluny? These remain points of dispute, as John himself acknowledged. But John's incisive arguments on the influence of Cluny in Spain have had a lasting influence on later writers. So, too, has his acute awareness of change and development within the mother house itself. Few would now argue with his careful statement:

By its origin the Cluniac Reform was much older than the Gregorian; but, so far as its coming to maturity is concerned, it was much more nearly contemporary with it.⁹

This insight was crucial to his argument for the growing interdependence of Cluny and the papacy, which has generally found favour among historians. The occasional critic thought that the Gregorian Reform was perhaps more precisely defined in the author's mind than it had been in that of any contemporary. But any uneasiness felt on this score was soothed by

⁹ *The Cluniacs*, p. xxiv.

the promise made in a footnote that John intended in the future to produce a full-scale study of Gregory VII (which he did in 1998). All reviewers agreed in praising the clarity with which John stated his subtle arguments in modification of the Tellenbach school's views on Cluny. His first was a well-received book.

The third and final piece of John's work to see light of day in 1970 was probably the most widely read of anything he wrote. It was 'Pope Urban's preaching of the First Crusade'.¹⁰ In it, he carefully subjected to scrutiny Carl Erdmann's well-known view that Urban's main aim in launching the crusade was to free the eastern churches from the Turkish yoke. After examining a vast array of sources—chronicles, charters, contemporary letters, Urban's own letters, and evidence for preaching of the crusade—John concluded that Erdmann was wrong. The liberation of Jerusalem by military force was the goal of the crusade, and from the outset Urban offered to those who were willing to attempt this liberation the spiritual benefits of pilgrimage. John's conclusions have hardly been questioned since then; his article has found its way on to reading lists in universities across the world. On a personal level, the article paved the way for John's participation in a large number of conferences dedicated to the crusades, at which he met and became friendly with all the great names in the field. In the summer of 1977 he went to Israel to lecture at various universities there and to see crusader sites. It was a small-scale beginning of the travels so conspicuous in his later years. His involvement in crusader scholarship and with those who studied the crusades resulted in a series of articles originating in conference papers devoted to the themes of holy war and crusade, which appeared at regular intervals for the next thirty years. Perhaps the most influential of the early articles were 'The genesis of the Crusades: the springs of western ideas of the Holy War';¹¹ 'Pope Gregory VII's "Crusading" plans of 1074';¹² and 'Martyrdom and the first Crusade'.¹³ Several other articles were reprinted in *The Crusades and Latin Monasticism in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*. In the Preface to this collection, John said: 'The Crusade articles are particularly concerned with the trans-

¹⁰ *History*, 55 (1970), 177–88; repr. in *Popes, Monks, and Crusaders*.

¹¹ In T. P. Murphy (ed.), *The Holy War* (Columbus, OH, 1974), pp. 9–32; repr. in *Popes, Monks and Crusaders*.

¹² In B. Z. Kedar, H. E. Mayer and R. C. Smail (eds.), *Outremer: Studies in the History of the Crusading Kingdom of Jerusalem presented to Joshua Prawer* (Jerusalem, 1982), pp. 27–42; repr. in *Popes, Monks and Crusaders*.

¹³ In P. Edbury (ed.), *Crusade and Settlement* (Cardiff, 1988), pp. 45–56; repr. in *The Crusades and Latin Monasticism*.

formation in western attitudes to the bearing of arms and in the quest for internal and external peace and security.' In other words, much of John's work in the crusading field was inspired by, and developed or modified, ideas culled from Carl Erdmann's great *Die Entstehung des Kreuzzugsgedankens*,¹⁴ a book he much admired if he did not always concur with everything in it—he was later to speak of Erdmann's 'fine intelligence and immaculate scholarship'.¹⁵ The excitement of the later eleventh century lay, for both of these historians, in its transformation of underlying thought patterns, its new way of configuring religious ideals. For both of them, the run up to and the aftermath of the First Crusade were fascinating illustrations of just this transformative power.

John's next published book, *The Epistolae vagantes of Pope Gregory VII*,¹⁶ was another homage to Erdmann, who had intended to edit these letters but had died before achieving this. For John, it was also a preparatory task for his own eventual study of Gregory VII. In a footnote on page 168 of the *Chuniacs*, he had called attention to the fact that many of Gregory VII's letters had escaped registration, and that some of these were not included in Jaffé's *Epistolae collectae*. Here he added to Jaffé's work a number of letters found by other historians in the intervening hundred years, but excluded from it letters that had recently appeared in Santifaller's edition of Gregory's privileges.¹⁷ The intention was that *The Epistolae vagantes*, along with the edition by Caspar of Gregory's *Register*,¹⁸ and Santifaller's volume, should provide historians with all the Latin letters of Gregory that survive. The amount of scholarship that lay behind this edition was enormous. In 1970, supported to some extent by the British Academy, John made his first scholarly visit to Rome, carrying an introduction to the Prefect of the Vatican Library written for him by John Kelly. This visit allowed him, among many other things, to study the manuscript Caspar used for his edition of Gregory's *Register*, Reg. Vat. Lat. 2. The scholarly apparatus to *The Epistolae vagantes* demonstrates the skill with which John was able to order the 'stray' letters by reference to those in the Register, which he seems almost to have known off by heart. Other footnotes show his easy familiarity with the chronicles and

¹⁴ Stuttgart, 1935.

¹⁵ *Epistolae vagantes*, Preface, p. vi.

¹⁶ Oxford, 1972.

¹⁷ Leo Santifaller, *Quellen und Forschungen zum Urkunden- und Kanzleiwesen Papst Gregors VII. Teil 1, Quellen: Urkunden, Regesta. Facsimilia* (Vatican City: Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 1957).

¹⁸ *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Epistolae selectae*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1920–3).

letters written by other contemporaries which modern scholars must have in mind in order to understand the content of Gregory's letters. Others again highlight his exemplary listings of the manuscripts and printed sources in which each of these letters had made earlier appearances.

The footnotes are intended for scrutiny by well-informed readers. But because *The Epistolae vagantes* was published in the Oxford Medieval Texts series, John was required to provide an English translation for each letter. These translations were clear, precise and unambiguous. Yet from what he said in the Introduction, John at this time had in mind assisting only those who found the Latin difficult; he did not intend to translate for those who were incapable of reading the original. But the decline of Latinity among undergraduates in the following decades slowly convinced him that there was a need for a translation of Gregory's work for those whose interest in the subject was quite unmatched by their linguistic skills. Therefore in 2002 John produced an English translation of Gregory's *Register*,¹⁹ relying on Caspar's edition. His long familiarity with the contents of the *Register* will have made this a relatively easy task for him. Again, the clarity and precision of the English rendering attracted praise from reviewers. This time the introduction and footnotes were clearly intended both for students and for scholars. In the Introduction, readers were brought to face the difficulties posed by the text, warned that there was apparently no logic about which letters were registered and which not, brought to realise that sometimes the most important part of a message might be conveyed verbally by the messenger, not by the script, and told to trust their own judgement on which letters brought them closest to Gregory's own mind, personality and purposes. At no point was John intent on ramming his own interpretation down his readers' throats. But whereas the English translation of *The Epistolae vagantes* was alone in the field, John's translation of the *Register* had been preceded by Ephraim Emerton's *The Correspondence of Pope Gregory VII: Selected Letters from the registrum*.²⁰ With forty years of thinking about Gregory VII behind him, the advantage of having much recent scholarship to draw on, and most obviously the value of covering the whole register, there was little doubt that John's was, from the scholarly point of view, a substantial improvement on Emerton's work. On the other hand, it did not put a huge amount of new material into the orbit of students who could not read Latin.

¹⁹Oxford, 2002.

²⁰New York, 1932.

Having tried his hand at it with *The Epistolae vagantes*, John found he wanted to edit yet more little-used texts, and to go further now by pointing out their historical value. He fixed on material illustrative of the activities of two consecutive abbots of Cluny, Hugh and Pontius. In 1978 he produced the texts of two lives of Abbot Hugh, along with various of his letters; and also an analysis of the sources relating to Pontius.²¹ Two of Abbot Hugh's letters were of particular interest to John, in that they set out guidance for the activities of monks-bishop, a group which always intrigued John.²² The sources he made accessible for Hugh provided amplifications rather than serious modifications of that great man's career. The material relating to Pontius was of greater value. It permitted John to reassess the early years of his abbacy, showing him as a mediating figure between the pope and the emperor Henry V. There was, however, no getting away from the disasters at the end of his career, which John attributed to his autocratic temperament, given too free rein by the customs of Cluny. Pontius's failures reinforced John's belief that Cluny and its dependencies had grown too fast in the reign of Hugh for it to be ruled effectively by one man, however able. The deposition of Pontius was simply one sign among many that by the second decade of the twelfth century the great age of Cluny was over.

If editing texts was an occasional pleasure, writing articles was a daily activity. There can be few scholars who have produced as many as John. The majority of these were reprinted in three collections, *Popes, Monks and Crusaders*; *The Crusades and Latin Monasticism in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*; and *Popes and Church Reform in the Eleventh Century. Essays around Gregory VII*. Admittedly some articles, particularly perhaps in the last volume, were either earlier or more extended treatments of questions discussed elsewhere in his books. But some were major contributions to knowledge in their own right. For example, 'The Anglo-Norman *Laudes Regiae*' drew on liturgical texts (which he also edited) to give form to political concepts current in the Anglo-Norman realm.²³ Of the 1068 *Laudes Regiae*, John pointed out that they 'expressed to perfection the "political theory" of the Norman Conquest'. They showed William, confident of his place on earth and in heaven, ruling over one people, both Norman and English, in harmony with his bishops. But their triumphant and propagandist aspect was appropriate only to the immediate aftermath

²¹ *Studi Gregoriani*, 11 (1978), 13–298.

²² Epp. 4, 6, pp. 145–9, 151–2.

²³ *Viator*, 12 (1981), 37–78; repr. in *Popes, Monks, and Crusaders*.

of his military victory. The *Laudes Regiae* used for feasts and coronations in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries appear to have been more low-key, more adaptable to rather less dramatic times. Here John's characteristically careful reading of unusual sources was combined with an imaginative approach derived from his own participation in the rituals of the Church, to offer an insight more secular historians could only envy.²⁴ Imagination of a different kind was evident in his 'Towards an Interpretation of the Bayeux Tapestry'²⁵ of which one of the more remarkable features is John's reading of the marginal figures in the Tapestry, along with his ability to detect elements in the scenes designed to appeal to Englishmen as much as Normans. Both of these articles—and indeed several more—seem originally to have been inspired by the teaching of English history John was obliged to do in conformity with the then Oxford undergraduate syllabus. The question of what constituted Englishness in the eleventh century, an important theme in his last book on Lanfranc, was one that he had clearly pondered on for years before.

Nevertheless, his main preoccupation in these years was with his projected study on Gregory VII. In 1983 there was published his *The Age of Abbot Desiderius. Montecassino, the Papacy, and the Normans in the Eleventh and Early Twelfth Centuries*.²⁶ As John explained in the Preface, this was deliberately designed as a preliminary to the major work on Gregory VII he was projecting. Its aim was to reflect on the papacy of the reform era, especially in the 1080s, from the perspective of the south: 'Did Montecassino and the reform papacy have compatible—though not perhaps identical—aims, interests and policies?'²⁷ The book's secondary aim was to produce a portrait of the interactions between the great southern monastery of Montecassino and the outside world as a parallel to the study on Cluny he had already achieved. In this secondary aim, John was somewhat inhibited by the fact that the American historian Howard Bloch had already written some seminal articles on the subject and had for a long time been projecting a book. John therefore concentrated much more on the first and more political aim, focusing particularly on Abbot Desiderius who became Pope Victor III on the death of Gregory VII. But the preservation of at least a modicum of material about Montecassino as a cultural power-

²⁴ As he said in 'Urban II and the idea of Crusade' (*Studi medievali*, 36 (1995), 721–42; repr. in *The Crusades and Latin Monasticism*), 'Nothing embeds religious imagery more deeply in the mind than regular liturgical recitation', p. 730.

²⁵ *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 10 (1988), 49–65.

²⁶ Oxford, 1983.

²⁷ p. xxvii.

house and centre for South Italian religious sentiment, while the main focus was clearly on the South Italian politics of its abbots, proved a difficult balance to hold. The book perhaps lacks the inner logic and superb organisation of material that characterised *The Cluniacs*, and which was to be so conspicuous a feature of *Gregory VII*.

Its virtues are, however, evident. It is based on careful analysis of the available literary and legal sources; it weighs their importance in the light of the fact that artists, canon lawyers, and chroniclers all had their own axes to grind; it goes out of its way to identify what contemporaries would have judged to be 'sound conservative principles' at any point; it takes for granted that the objectives of the reform popes varied over time; it examines the pressures, in particular those exercised by Norman princes, that caused both popes and abbots to react defensively; it therefore finds no problem with the occasional sharp fluctuations in relationship between the abbots of Montecassino and the popes (especially when there was also an antipope); and it gives due weight to the importance of Montecassino to Gregory VII at the end of his life. The last chapter of the book is concerned with the election of Victor III and his very brief pontificate. On this, contemporary opinions were so divided that the task of steering a path through the thicket was almost impossible. But John's conclusion that Victor was by then an active and convinced Gregorian seems persuasive. And there can be no doubt that *The Age of Abbot Desiderius* allowed John to incorporate a more southern perspective into *Gregory VII*.

The books, the articles, and the editions thus far described brought about John's election to the British Academy in 1991, an event which gave him great pleasure. The speech he gave at the dinner in his honour in St Edmund Hall following his election was remembered for its wit and good humour. To a man so withdrawn, so inclined normally to preserve silence, the public recognition of his abilities was doubly sweet. It is said that he was particularly delighted to have attained the same distinction as the two earlier St Edmund Hall medievalists, John Kelly and A. B. Emden.

It was not until 1998 that *Pope Gregory VII, 1073–1085* first saw the light of day.²⁸ The first full-length study of that pope for more than fifty years, it was at once recognised as a masterpiece. Because it had been known to be in preparation for nearly thirty years, it was eagerly anticipated; and it certainly did not disappoint. Henry Mayr-Harting said of it: 'As a meticulous exposition of a complex story, done with vast learning, control and lucidity, it is a tour de force.' He went on to comment that

²⁸ Oxford, 1998.

John's picture of Gregory's personal devotion 'comes from the heart as well as from the head'.²⁹ Nevertheless, the Gregory that emerged from these pages was rather far from the conventional autocrat with revolutionary tendencies that many medievalists automatically summoned up when hearing his name. As John saw him, Gregory VII, occasionally rash in his support for his allies, only completely lost his sense of proportion when sorely provoked. He was a man of whom it could be said that he normally harboured 'concern to temper justice with mercy and to seek peace and agreement wherever they could be found' (p. 330). In Central Italy, 'his exercise of authority . . . was firm, moderate and statesmanlike' (p. 279). In France, Gregory's 'studied moderation . . . won him willing hearers' (p. 422); 'Gregory had an exceptional capacity to inspire personal loyalty and devotion even in those who, in important respects, differed from him' (p. 690).

Those acquainted with John's preliminary articles cannot have been surprised at the emergence of this relatively conciliatory figure. Two essays in particular pointed to such a portrait. The first was 'The spirituality of Gregory VII', which stressed the emphasis the pope continued to lay on monastic obedience, his concern with pastoral matters in his high position, his devotion to the Virgin, and his personal asceticism.³⁰ The second was 'The Papacy and the Berengarian controversy' (a subject that Erdmann had also tackled). After looking at all the evidence, John was struck by Gregory's 'enquiring and conciliatory approach to liturgical and sacramental matters'.³¹ As he said, 'this is not the usual modern perception of Gregory'. Jonathan Riley-Smith, in his review of the book, described John's Gregory as having 'the air of an old-fashioned Anglican clergyman, conservative in many ways, moderate and sensible for most of the time . . . on the high side but with initial doubts about the real presence in the eucharist'.³² John himself summed him up thus: 'The deepest springs of Gregory's thought and action are not to be found in any politician's urge to wield power and to humble his adversaries . . . Before all else, his motives were religious.'³³

Hardly surprisingly, so radical a representation evoked a measure of dissent. This was understandable, since John himself produced much evi-

²⁹ *English Historical Review*, 116 (2001) at 139.

³⁰ *Analecta Carthusiana*, 130 (1995), 1–22; repr. in *The Popes and Church Reform*.

³¹ In P. Ganz, R. B. C. Huygens, and F. Niewöhner (eds.), *Auctoritas et Ratio. Studien zu Berengar von Tours* (Wiesbaden, 1990), pp. 109–38, at 132; repr. in *The Popes and Church Reform*, p. 132.

³² *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 May 1999, 30.

³³ *Gregory VII*, p. 695.

dence on which his opponents could build their case. No one could maintain that Gregory was consistent throughout his career, either in rhetoric or in action. Circumstances sometimes ruled out calm reaction as, for example, after the council of Brixen in 1080. But John struck the balance on the side of moderation. Perhaps he was thinking of what some of his critics had said when he remarked, in his Introduction to the English translation of Gregory's *Register*, that in the last resort the judgement over which of the letters get closest to Gregory's own mind, and which were written by clerks without close personal supervision, has to be subjective.³⁴ Nevertheless, the question of why a man of moderate temperament should employ an intransigent legate like Hugh of Die does need answering and is not answered in the book. On the other hand, there is much more evidence for moderation, for monastic caution, than the conventional portrait would allow and, perhaps more unexpectedly, also for Gregory's capacity to excite loyalty. As a result of John's work it is very unlikely that historians of the future will content themselves with a purely political approach to Gregory's leadership of the church.

For very few figures in the eleventh century is it possible to create a full context. It was John's extraordinary achievement to reveal the whole background against which Gregory lived his turbulent life and to explain so complex a picture in crystal-clear terms. From the first chapter of *Gregory VII*, in which Rome is set before the reader in all its material desolation but nurturing its image of past grandeur and present holiness, to the twelfth chapter describing his exile and death among the Normans, the book has a coherent internal dynamic. Themes touched upon at various times in the narrative are brought together at the end. Personal relationships, for example that with Peter Damiani, are revealed in all their complexities. Even Henry IV and the German princes are seen as caught in uncomfortable dilemmas from which they sometimes sought to escape by negotiation rather than force. Guibert of Ravenna, later the antipope Clement III, had what appeared to be a legitimate grievance against Gregory in 1078.³⁵ John neither over-simplified nor drew his characters only in black and white. The great strength of the book lies, as with all John's work but especially with this, his masterpiece, in the amazing range of sources with which he was familiar, in the extended geographical scope of his discussion, and in his inherent sympathy with those caught up in events which they could not control.

³⁴ p. xvi.

³⁵ p. 310.

John's last book, *Lanfranc. Scholar, Monk, and Archbishop*,³⁶ was an interesting choice of subject. Although Lanfranc was a monk before his elevation to Canterbury, a circumstance which automatically aroused John's interest, he had been the determined opponent of Berengar of Tours, for whom John had exhibited a certain sympathy, and he was firmly neutral between Gregory VII and Clement III from the latter's papal coronation in 1084, a time when Gregory needed all the allies he could get. Whereas there had been no biography of Gregory VII for more than fifty years before he wrote, Margaret Gibson had produced her *Lanfranc of Bec* in 1978.³⁷ John thought that, although Lanfranc's scholarship had received justice, his deeds as archbishop had been rather underestimated. He wanted to rescue him from the shadow that had been cast by Sir Richard Southern's towering *Saint Anselm*,³⁸ to argue that Lanfranc, at least as much as Anselm, understood the English people over whom he was called to be primate. For John, Lanfranc's knowledge of canon law, Old English law, and ecclesiastical history made him an admirable leader to guide the English church firmly into the wider church of western Christendom. He laid foundations on which others could build. He was to be praised above all for 'the enduring character and benefit of his government of the English church, both in itself and as an aspect of national life'.³⁹

During all the time John was writing solidly, he was also travelling. The *St Edmund Hall Gazette* listed the various places he had lectured each year in the 1990s. For example, in 1991–2, he gave papers in Moscow, Berlin, Serra San Bruno in Calabria, and Palermo. In 1992–3 he was lecturing in Austria, Italy and New South Wales. But perhaps the most interesting journey was in 1983, when, as a guest of the East German Academy of Sciences, he visited history departments in East Berlin, Halle, Jena and Leipzig. This was presumably in some way connected with the Martin Luther celebrations, a time when the Evangelical Church in the German Democratic Republic cooperated with the state in holding up for admiration a progressive revolutionary, and when the Church of England extended a hand of friendship to the Evangelical Church.

³⁶ Oxford, 2003.

³⁷ Oxford, 1978.

³⁸ R. W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: a Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge, 1990).

³⁹ p. 231.

In his later years, John fell victim to Parkinson's Disease, which slowly robbed him of his powers to research and travel. The last five years of his life were a time of growing disability. He died on 4 December 2009.

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