GEOFFREY DICKENS *James Murphy*

Arthur Geoffrey Dickens
1910–2001

FOR MANY STUDENTS OF HISTORY in the later twentieth century, the name of A. G. Dickens was synonymous with the English Reformation. He was, however, a scholar of diverse and cultured interests, with a desire to disseminate his learning to the widest possible audience. There is a clear progression in his academic career from its pioneering beginnings in the use of local archives, through national history, to the European studies that occupied his later years.

Arthur Geoffrey Dickens was born in Hull on 6 July 1910, just too late, as he whimsically commented in later years, to count as an Edwardian. Like most Yorkshiremen he had a great affection for his native county and city, speaking of Hull's street market and arcade, and the old dockland, as a child's paradise. His *East Riding* (1954) is a paean of praise to the landscape and architecture of his homeland, the city sadly damaged by the dimly remembered Zeppelin raids of his childhood, and the serious bombardment of World War II. From the two sides of his family came two distinct styles. His paternal grandfather was the chief inspector of the Alexandra Docks, an Anglican churchwarden, and a Conservative in politics. His maternal grandfather, one of the tenants of Sir Tatton Sykes, had roots in the Northamptonshire farming community, was a Primitive Methodist local preacher, and a Liberal. Between the two hung perhaps his staunch Protestantism, and yet a strong sense of religious balance. He considered his roots to be in Methodism; indeed, his first ever public lecture was at a Primitive Methodist Chapel Anniversary, on the subject of 'Gardens of the Bible'. In his teens he became a convert to

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Anglicanism, attracted by a lively local church. His family mattered greatly to him. He was to speak of his grandparents as those whom at that time he loved best in the world. In adult life he found deep happiness in his marriage to Molly, whose death from cancer in 1978 was a severe loss. To his sons he was an excellent and caring father, sharing and encouraging their interests; to his grandchildren, simply 'great fun'. In old age he spoke of his brother John, a dozen years his junior, as his best friend, and the deaths of this beloved brother and of his sister, within a few months of each other and both from cancer, did much to precipitate his own decline into ill-health in the 1990s.

If his grandparents were a great Victorian influence on him, so too was Oxford. After education at Hymer's College, Hull, where he first learned German, Dickens went up to Magdalen on a scholarship in 1929. Here he benefited from two outstanding tutors: the legendary K. B. McFarlane in History, and the no less legendary, albeit in a different sphere, C. S. Lewis, in Political Thought. McFarlane's aegis was to cover Magdalen long after Dickens's undergraduate days, though his profound researches never issued, as did his pupil's, into intensely readable digests of his work. Dickens claimed to have been more influenced by Maurice Powicke's love of the Middle Ages, and thought that mixing with such medievalists had proved invaluable to his own development. McFarlane it was though who suggested the catholic recusants of Tudor Yorkshire as a suitable postgraduate research topic: a line of inquiry which was to bear unexpected fruit. From Lewis, Dickens must have learned something of his clarity of philosophical approach and felicity of style. There must also have been a congenial affinity in the Christianity of which both, in their different milieu, were such staunch defenders.

Surprisingly perhaps, Dickens's special subject in the History School was far removed from the English Reformation: he chose the Italian Renaissance. For a man greatly interested in the visual arts, this was less unlikely than first appears, and when in old age he made his unofficial office the room entitled 'Italy II' in the Institute of Historical Research, a wheel had turned full circle. A brilliant First in 1932 led to his election as a Fellow of Keble, a position he held, with an interruption for war service, until his return to Hull in 1949. At the age of twenty-two he found himself teaching sixteenth-century English history and mixing with older scholars, Victorians indeed, who addressed each other with extreme formality, like Watson and Holmes, and whose social code he found oppressive.

Life as a young don however allowed him plenty of time to travel widely on the Continent. His last pre-war visit to Berlin was in 1934,

when, as he later said, 'Hindenberg's death broke the last connections with political decency'. Those were the days when the Kaiser's piano was on display in the Berliner Schloss, jacked up at an unlikely angle to cater for his withered arm, and to sit out in a street café on Unter den Linden was to be conscious of change for the worse. Accompanied on his foreign travels by Molly, also from Hull, whom he met at Oxford and married in 1936, he was aware of the storm clouds gathering: war he expected to come. During the few remaining pre-war years he teamed up with London doctors, including Haldane, to produce a propaganda warning about British under-preparedness for air raids. The war interrupted home life and scholarship; it allowed him, he said, some time to think, but not much to read books. Commissioned into the Royal Artillery, he found much of his time, as an academic, now devoted either to recruitment or to press censorship. Most significantly, as a German speaker, already conversant with German ideas and attitudes, he found himself in 1945 posted into Lübeck and tasked with producing a German-language newspaper on behalf of the Allied military government. As other young officers were to do, he culled most of his material from the BBC news. From this experience came his first published book, *Lübeck Diary* (1947). It was intended to help bring about a reconciliation with the Germans through a greater understanding of the ordinary people, and found in a hostile England a publisher in Victor Gollancz. The book did indeed aid Anglo-German relations—a German obituarist was to quote from it half a century later—and made him a sympathetic figure in Germany. His later contribution to establishing the German Historical Institute in London, and his honouring by the Federal Republic, can all be linked to that spell in the town-major's office.

Released unexpectedly promptly from war service, he returned to Oxford at the start of the Michaelmas term of 1945, but found it impossible to settle back into the old routine. The Victorians at Keble were dead or retired, and after the *Diary*'s publication he sought and found employment elsewhere. Even so, his lectures, already based on his York researches, were thought 'a goldmine'. 'I returned to my homeland (which I love) from 1949 to 1962, but I'm jolly glad I didn't stay longer', he wrote later. Thus, at the age of thirty-nine, he became G. F. Grant Professor of History at the University of Hull, later adding to his portfolio Dean of the Arts Faculty, Deputy Principal and Pro-Vice-Chancellor (1959). Colleagues and pupils from that period remember him with warmth and affection. His students were inspired by his lucid and amusing lectures, 'talking to us as if we were intelligent, listening to us as if we were

interesting'. One recalled his bringing to a lecture the proofs of what must have been *Lollards and Protestants:* 'How thrilling! This was a man who wrote books!' After 'relishing the style and urbanity of his lectures', said another, 'no-one could have had a more caring supervisor . . . he was an enormous encourager'. This was not only a matter of personality, but of his seeking to broaden their experience: students were directed to classes where they could acquire an additional language, and taken on trips to churches and battlefields. Dickens had always a great interest in the visual arts, and a small gallery at his home in Cottingham, where he was then collecting seventeenth-century Flemish and Dutch paintings. This collection was later replaced by one of the early twentieth century, influenced by Hull's founding of its own art collection of this era, in which he and Molly became enthusiasts. He was indeed a competent draughtsman himself as well as an art collector. A gifted and generous man, his students were well aware of his generosity of time and spirit. So were his colleagues; even a tendency to return to his house and his research as soon as possible after 9 a.m. was forgiven: 'Such was his charm and generosity when one met him that the frustration that this practice sometimes evoked was soon dispelled.' He disarmingly gave even junior colleagues the impression of being the centre of his attention, and the warmth of his hospitality and many kindnesses were the abiding impressions. A brilliant raconteur with a fund of anecdotes, he enhanced the understanding of colleagues and students alike, yet carried his learning lightly with 'mischievous humour and engaging charm'.

Adapting to civilian life and to a northern university had actually taken some time. Perhaps it was the draining workload of Oxford and the style of his senior colleagues there which made him seem a little starchy at first, back in the North. Even at Oxford, where his teaching had been just as enthusiastically received, he had been noted as particularly point-device and formal, in dress at least, and notoriously attached to his army greatcoat. The change resulted, as it seemed, from his exchange year in America as Visiting Professor at Rochester University. Molly and their two sons Peter and Paul, by now aged twelve and seven, were received by Rochester with the same generous hospitality for which the family was already noted at home. Their presence was seen as fostering just the kind of cross-cultural understanding in which Dickens took such an interest in Europe. His time at Rochester gave him the opportunity to work in the Folger Library, producing several published articles, and resulted in his adding a course in American history to his repertoire on his return to Hull.

By the time *Lollards and Protestants* appeared in 1959, Dickens had been working on Yorkshire records for over twenty years, producing numerous articles and rescuing from oblivion a series of minor characters, including the Yorkshire priest of the Reformation era whom he was always to refer to as 'my friend Robert Parkyn'. Archival discoveries and his own natural inclination were directing him towards the study of the ordinary man, encouraging his unshakeable conviction that the Reformation was a grassroots movement, a view which bore its mature fruit in *The English Reformation* (1964). The deft use of original sources and the illumination of a general trend by an individual case study is already well in evidence in *Lollards and Protestants*.

In 1962 Dickens took what then seemed the momentous step of leaving Hull to take up a post at King's College, London. At Hull he had been surrounded by mediaevalists; now he had to work with an eminent group of Tudor historians: Bindoff, Collinson, Dugmore, Hurstfield, and Scarisbrick. He was only to spend five years at King's, but he remained in London for the rest of his life. Like other Northerners he was to find the intellectual stimulus of the capital too important to be forgone: 'In most walks of life—and most civilised pleasures—the stimulus here in London is tremendous, once one settles down', he later wrote. Once more a friend and mentor to younger colleagues, he was remembered as a wonderful lecturer, but less attuned to the seminar. Here barely a paragraph would have been read before his wealth of interest and knowledge led to a discourse on one thread of the argument, to be followed a paragraph later by a further interruption: the kindly fault of enthusiastic polymathy.

As an administrator, his natural charm and the management skills he had developed at Hull were brought to London and used to good effect. Avowedly preferring the rapier to the bludgeon, he could also deflect much with a sense of humour. Extremely courteous and quietly efficient, he was as willing to chat with secretaries as students about his times in Germany, or to discuss the art so readily available in London galleries but so little visited by his students. Here as at Hull he made friendships to endure.

London saw an end to his work in local archives. When he bought a house in Essex it was believed that he intended to work on the county archives, but was forestalled by the publication of another work on the Reformation in Essex. 'The failure', mourned a colleague, 'of the felicitous marriage between the Essex Record Office and Geoff Dickens is something we all have to regret.'

This was however the era of the publication of his best known work, *The English Reformation.* It is now difficult to recall with what acclaim and relief this classic was first received. Tutors who had deplored the confessionally partisan nature of the specialist works available to students suddenly found to hand an accessible and balanced analysis, based on wide research and presenting a period of political and social upheaval with accuracy and insight. It provoked a whole industry of Reformation scholarship which may in part have modified Dickens's thesis, but has not superseded it. 'He changed the landscape', said one former pupil; the book was 'quite simply regarded as the latest version of the Bible', according to another.

In fact, Dickens's interests seem to have been turning ever more certainly away from local history towards the Continental Reformation. He was certainly encouraged to do so by his appointment in 1967 as Director of the Institute of Historical Research, a post he held until his retirement in 1974, and his simultaneous responsibilities at the British Academy. The Director found himself in a new kind of prominence, with a pastoral role and a requirement for academic hospitality which could restrict academic output. He has been criticised for some of the textbooks and popular works of this period, but the demands on his time were formidable. There were the Institute's annual Anglo-American conference, and the editing of its *Bulletin,* a major task alone. At periodic Director's Conferences selected speakers would address an invited audience on a variety of topics. He gave one of Ford's Lectures at Oxford, and was Birkbeck Lecturer at Cambridge 1969–70, when his chosen topic of 'The Reformation and Martin Luther' showed plainly the developing direction of his thought. His work at the Institute would have been impossible without the support of his PPS, Cynthia Hawker, whose ability and efficiency made the huge administrative task feasible.

As if this were not enough, the British Academy, to whose fellowship he had been elected in 1966, appointed him in 1969 its Foreign Secretary. To the Anglo-American emphases of the Institute were thus added the European academic links in which he had long rejoiced. The roles tended to become homogeneous; he was inclined to spend time at committee meetings of the Institute in enthusiastic description of his latest European trip. He considered it a vital part of Western aid to the Eastern bloc nations to ensure that their academics were not left isolated, and took a prominent part in ensuring their continuing contact with Western thought. In 1968 he organised a boycott of an international conference in Moscow, so hurt was he by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia which

had abruptly put paid to the Prague Spring. He managed to visit nearly all the Eastern European states during his ten-year tenure of the foreign secretaryship: a level of activity on a par with royalty or the Pope.

Throughout this extremely busy time Dickens benefited inexpressibly from the support of his wife Molly, a constant companion at the compulsory social occasions which demand attendance from the eminent, and whose shrewd Northern sense and humour were a bulwark against the social pressures. Sadly, she did not long survive his formal retirement in 1977. Dickens referred to her death, from cancer, in 1978, as being 'like an amputation', which in the eyes of many friends curtailed the potential academic achievements of a now emptied retirement.

Dickens remained an active historian into his eighties, but became increasingly sidelined in the popular view by two major academic developments. One was his own ever-developing interest in the German Reformation; the other the rise of Reformation revisionism which will be discussed at length later in the memoir. The first made him increasingly popular on the Continent, where his definition of reformation as an 'urban event' struck a chord with a historical school ideologically delighted to reject the leadership of the princes. His deepening interest in Martin Luther and the personal and social aspects of Protestantism—themes which struck a chord with his own faith—led him ever deeper into European waters. Few English scholars had the linguistic skills to follow him, and most were inclined to ignore his work on *The Reformation and Historical Thought* (1985), with John Tonkin, and his later interest in *Erasmus the Reformer* (1994), with Whitney Jones.

Honours continued to pour in upon Dickens, even though his magisterial work was past. Unusually for a historian, he was made CMG in 1974, and honorary doctorates became a commonplace. He valued greatly the medal conferred in 1980 by the then Federal Republic of Germany for his work in establishing the German Historical Institute in London, back in 1968. Honorary vice-president of both the Royal Historical Society and the Historical Association, whose Medlicott medal he was awarded in 1985, he was for many years President of the Association's Central London branch, continuing as long as any intellectual activity was permitted him.

Before ill-health set in the mid-1990s, Dickens maintained a cultured home in London NW. Described as 'an unexpected combination of sumptuous display and asceticism', the sitting room painted a deep burgundy to highlight the gilt picture frames of his still considerable art collection (many paintings having been given to the University of Hull in

memory of Molly), it was yet the home of a man who loved ice-cream and had only a couple of pots of Greek yoghurt in the fridge. He was puritanical about drink but loved food, and enjoyed the mild social life of Sunday lunch with good friends, his regular game of chess, and his love of music. He had his London club, the Athenaeum, at times entertaining guests there, in preference to large and amorphous social gatherings. He was a regular member of his local church, preaching occasionally but never becoming churchwarden. He was a member of their panel of visitors of the elderly, many of whom were considerably younger than himself. Still a great talker, his last few, semi-official, students remember with affection conversations, usually somewhat one-sided, in which they listened and learned about the wide range of Dickens's interests and experience.

In the mid 1990s his health declined rapidly. There began to be talk of a heart attack, of a possible hip operation. A series of bereavements affected him deeply. One by one, correspondents found their letters unanswered as he no longer remembered who they were. From his wine coloured flat he moved first to sheltered accommodation, which delighted him, as someone else would do the cooking, and finally to a nursing home. The Historical Association had to be abandoned as Dickens could no long grasp topics which had once been at his fingertips. His death on 31 July 2001, soon after his ninety-first birthday, was a merciful release for a spirit which a failing body had kept in chains.

There have been varied assessments of what he achieved, and sought to achieve, as a historian. He fitted no convenient pigeonhole, one writer on Reformation historiography being inclined to put him in a class of his own. It has proved easier to identify what he was not, and point out his methodological weaknesses. He has been criticised for being enamoured of his own thesis and therefore unable to accept any strength of Catholic feeling in England; for being too dismissive of the work of researchers into local Reformation history; for abandoning his real métier to dabble in the Continental Reformation; for producing no research students of his own calibre. Finally, his preference for writing accessible books has led to complaints of his having no real research plan, but being publisher-led.

There was a research plan and progression in Dickens's work, but dominated as it is for an English-speaking audience by the twin towers of *Lollards and Protestants* and *The English Reformation,* the progression is easily overlooked. His origins in local history are clear enough. When he was recommended by McFarlane to look at Elizabethan recusancy in

Yorkshire, use of diocesan records was in its infancy, the records having long been mouldering undisturbed in the diocesan registry. Today this kind of research is commonplace, and the records well catalogued. Then the only other interest shown in the registry archive was by Canon Purvis, first official archivist of the diocesan holdings, whose reorganising of the records and establishment of the Borthwick Institute during Dickens's absence on war service made his post-war task significantly easier. Dickens found the evidence in the Court Books about ordinary men and women invaluable.

It was a novelty, when history was largely a matter of politics, to consider the views of the common man or woman at all. Dickens became interested in the Pilgrimage of Grace because of the light its records also shed on the views of ordinary people, on both religion and politics. Working further backwards, he found that the Lollards examined by the church courts had their own story to tell. A series of articles came out of these Yorkshire researches, and the year at Rochester, permitting use of the Folger library, widened the range of his sixteenth-century papers. Always he sought to hold to his dictum that 'our business is getting at the common man or woman', in tension with another tenet, 'we must not get parochial in outlook as a result of our regional studies'—a comment with which he would temper the enthusiasm of later students for their own dark corner of the realm.

When it came to writing books rather than articles, there was always the advice given him by Sir Arthur Bryant: 'above all, when you take up the pen, resolve to be read by a lot of people'. As a result, he claimed, he had sought often to write 'teaching books', current textbooks in the post-war era being highly political and lacking in cultural or religious content. His involvement in adult education during his time at Hull probably contributed to this view. *Lübeck Diary* was certainly 'read by a lot of people', on the Continent as much as in the UK; *East Riding* was more of a tourist guide than a history. His essay on Thomas Cromwell in the *Teach Yourself* series probably issued from this reputation for readability, coming as it did when Elton's *Tudor revolution in government* was the academic rage. Undoubtedly however the two books which have stood the test of time as widely-read teaching books are *Lollards and Protestants* and *The English Reformation.*

Lollards and Protestants offered a fresh approach to English Reformation studies. Essentially the theme was the survival of a Wyclifite dissenting minority as a seedbed for popular Protestantism, ready to progress beyond the political changes instituted in the 1530s by the king

in parliament. It expounded the interplay of forces in the Henrician reformation by making full use of his knowledge of local regional history. It is hard to remember, forty years later, the freshness then of his ideas of a 'diffuse but inveterate Lollardy revivified by contact with Continental Protestantism',[1] a claim now treated with some scepticism in the light of evident irreligion rather than vernacular bible reading. The Northern reputation for reactionary conservatism was one to which his own writing on Elizabethan recusancy had contributed. Using the material he had discovered in the diocesan court books, he now sought to explode that myth. In seeking to observe 'how the Reformation made its initial impacts upon a regional society',[2] he had found sources adequate to 'allow us to grasp the complex character of contemporary religion and trace some of the channels through which the new opinions were flowing'.[3] Lollardy, Lutheranism, and straightforward scepticism had all left their mark on the record. Gentlemen and merchants, as well as working class radicals, all played their part and were brought to life by Dickens, who had discovered afresh that 'the middle and lower orders of society had mental and even cultural lives, which included personal responses to religion'.[4] They ranged from the eccentric radicalism of Sir Francis Bigod and his circle to the deep conservative Catholicism of the priest Robert Parkyn. The pioneering use of will formulae to distinguish strands of belief has been honed, refined, rejected, and redefined since, but in 1959 it provided a novel insight into the reported views of ordinary will-makers, rather than the political orthodoxy of the traditional political textbook. It was groundbreaking work which, as his original introduction and subsequent preface to the second edition of 1982 made clear, needed the checks and balances of a similar depth of research into other local records. The clarion call was responded to enthusiastically in many and various ways, but has yet to produce a volume magisterially equal to *Lollards and Protestants*.

Lollards and Protestants, the culmination of twenty years' research in local archives, can be taken as marking the end of a first phase of Dickens's work. Perhaps those who expected him, once removed from Hull to London, to repeat the achievement in the Essex records, missed the shift in emphasis of his attention from the local to the national stage.

[1] A. G. Dickens, *Lollards and Protestants in the Diocese of York* (2nd edn., London, 1982), p. 243.
[2] Ibid., p. 1.
[3] Ibid., p. 7. `
[4] Ibid., preface to 2nd edn., p. v.

The prime achievement in this phase was his *English Reformation* of 1964. Any sixth-form student of Tudor history who has 'done' Dickens means this book, and it is some measure of his greatness that they will be expected to have 'done' it, and should be well capable of tackling his erudite but immensely readable prose, even in their teens. Its alternation of compelling narrative and detailed analysis contributes both to the general overview and the detailed evidence required to answer an examination question. Dickens possessed that attribute of great writers, the ability to write simply enough for the non-specialist reader, without being simplistic. 'One may still turn to him for the best concise account of many particular incidents in the tangled story of the English Reformation,'[5] not a tribute many forty-year-old books could still earn.

Dickens had three stated aims in this book: to give a fuller description of the background to familiar political events; to highlight the role played by the spread of Protestantism; and to depict the movement as it affected ordinary people, not just princes and prelates. He was therefore far more concerned to examine the character of Christian belief, both popular and sophisticated, than had been the previous norm. He did not expect the book to provide a definitive statement, but looked ahead to a more complete understanding, achievable after perhaps another twenty years of research by himself and others in Tudor diocesan records. Assessing his book twenty years later, he called it 'a book which should be regarded as an agenda, not a summa'.[6]

Other scholars indeed took up the challenge, in ways he had not anticipated. Dickens had painted a picture of degenerate late medieval religion, relieved by mysticism and irritated by Lollardy. He emphasised strongly a popular anticlericalism exacerbated by worldly prelates, decayed monasteries, and incompetent parish clergy. Thus a seedbed was prepared for the mission of the Continental reformers 'to steer Christianity back in line with biblical sources after many centuries of hierarchical manipulation'.[7] These ideas were adopted with enthusiasm by English reformers to whom he does full justice, who were anxious to press for fuller reform than the legislation of the 1530s had achieved, and only too ready to take the lead under Edward. Mary was unable to stem the change, because of its popular basis, and the Elizabethan

[5] R. Houlbrooke, 'Obituary, Professor A. G. Dickens', *Historical Research*, 75, no. 188 (2002), pp. 238–47.
[6] A. G. Dickens and J. Tonkin, *The Reformation in Historical Thought* (Oxford, 1985), p. 295.
[7] Ibid., p. 327.

church was essentially a Puritan one. Such a précis risks over-simplification of his nuanced handling of what he sought to display as a complex movement, in causes, progress, and consequences; where worldly and spiritual forces, let alone confessional distinctions, make dogmatic summary impossible.

What now seem to be the weaknesses of Dickens's thesis are precisely those which his anticipated twenty years research in local archives have identified: an exaggeration of the late medieval decline, the insistence on the causal nature of anticlericalism, and a probable over-estimation of the spread of Protestantism before 1559, although this of all aspects remains the most difficult to assess. The challenge to his view came from what is now known as revisionism. In its early form it was essentially a question of whether reform came from above or below. Most researchers of the 1980s found official changes in religion, far from falling on eager radicals anxious to progress further and faster, came unexpectedly on a people quite unprepared for them. Late medieval religion had suited them well. The revisionist contention that anticlericalism seemed a result, not a cause, of change was confirmed by those who found political change reducing the status of the priest in society. Catholic historians portrayed a people traumatised by the stripping of the altars, tending to lapse into apathetic acquiescence rather than hailing with joy a brave new world. There were very few Protestants to hail it anyway.

Revisionism quickly became the new orthodoxy, and it was all too easy to dismiss Dickens's version as old-fashioned wishful thinking. The attacks occurred after his own retirement and before any other Protestant champions seemed to have entered the field. They probably drove him to adopt a more hard-line approach than the evidence entirely warranted. Anticlericalism was a French term not wholly appropriate to the English phenomenon, but Dickens was driven perilously close to defending its existence as one of the must-have-beens of history. For the last two decades of the twentieth century he appeared a lonely Don Quixote, tilting in vain at amused and effective windmills. If the nadir of his defence of Protestantism was his article on Northamptonshire, with its thinly supported argument, its apogee was his *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* article, 'Early expansion of Protestantism in England'. Here his nuanced gradation of the depth of influence of Protestantism in different areas had benefited from the honing of his thought by his opponents, and provided in 1987 a worthy codicil to his earlier work. Elijah's mantle was finally assumed at the rediscovery of the Tudor church militant, putting active Protestantism back on the agenda, and at the turn of the

twenty-first century a post-revisionist synthesis of the controversy seems generally agreed to be within reach.

Dickens toyed for a while with the idea of a collaborative expansion of his *Archiv* article, making use of the many published articles both on local and topical studies which had then been published. A quantity of annotated offprints was passed to his collaborator for guidance, and they shed light on his views and methodology. Dating back as far as 1938 and including his own early Borthwick papers, the majority were from the mid-sixties to the mid-eighties. Most had been annotated on receipt, and then again as a guide to this later project. Some marginalia were mere aide-memoires, of a name or major point made. Some were thorough summaries of the purport of the article, in his meticulously neat hand and redolent of his own, usually far wider, knowledge of the topic. Many were useful headlines such as 'very good on Bilney', 'see summary which sets out trend very well', 'wills as indicating Protestant areas of the diocese', 'or important for anticlericalism'. Others were notes and queries: 'how many of them *did* sign it?' Of greater usefulness were the criticisms showing his own views: 'this however suggests a unanimity of principled support [for Mary] which did not exist . . .', 'wills are always likely to overestimate the conservative elements of the population'. He showed great interest in anything on the use of will formulae, and was well aware of those who slipped through the nets of the will trawlers by age or social status. He was charitably moderate in comment on revisionism: 'this lament is not entirely accurate', and much more forceful on the Pilgrimage of Grace: 'I disagree. They could not help but have won on the Don. What happened later is anybody's guess.' A later comment for guidance of his collaborator added: 'I was perhaps too devoted to putting the religious rising in its place, and [x] too devoted to restoring it.' He could sum up in a telling phrase: 'curiously complacent', or treat an article as if he were its examiner: 'the main criticism of this article is that it sticks too closely to the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI'. For guidance he would add remarks like 'this article is an important commentary on the content of the pamphlets. Join with [x] on the ineffectiveness of the Marian government's use of the press.'

His own pet foibles peeped out in his enthusiasm for Protestants anywhere, and the delight with which he fastened on any sign of anticlericalism, but he could be very fair in agreeing with someone's 'cautious multi-causation' of reform in their own area of research. On an old typescript of his own he noted, disarmingly, 'I believe I wrote this. AGD 1992'—he had long since abandoned the topic—and on another, which

rashly quoted Old Testament references to the wickedness of youth, he added, 'but "your young men shall dream dreams" '. It was never wise to seek to cross theological swords. A final note, following many ranging through Erasmus and the influence of the continental reformers, concluded: 'but a historian can only use credible and proximate sources i.e. Bible—not Tradition, always corruptible'. It summarised his historical methodology and his own Christian faith.

It was to Erasmus and the continental reformers that his last, and often overlooked, phase of work was to turn. Dickens had become aware, he said, of the international dimension of Protestantism while writing *The English Reformation,* and of how he needed to know much more about Lutheranism. Colleagues were inclined to deplore his abandonment of the field in which he was an acknowledged master, merely to become one of many in a foreign field. This shift of emphasis however marked the transition into his third field of active work, when by writing on German history he sought to counteract the ignorance of too many of those who wrote insular English history. His researches were thus complementary to his roles at the Institute and the Academy. Again, he chose to write for a wider audience by producing textbooks. Generations of students were grateful for his *Reformation and Society in Sixteenth Century Europe* (1966) with its partner, *The Counter Reformation* (1968), and his masterly little introduction to Martin Luther in the *Teach Yourself* series filled a lacuna in accessible writing on the German Reformation. In its focus on the man and his religion it again fulfilled his aim of bringing the common man and his non-political ideas to the fore, while the Thames and Hudson companion pieces revealed Dickens as the cultured Renaissance man himself in his wide artistic and religious knowledge.

The German Nation and Martin Luther, which had originated in the Birkbeck lectures, was the high point of this third phase of activity, to his readers if not to himself. His work made available to an English speaking readership the researches of German scholars, especially Bernd Moeller, and continued to operate on the principle of identifying and analysing intellectual and social forces behind the Reformation. As in England, this was a departure from the traditional approach, which, whilst retaining Luther as the hero, laid emphasis on the urban dynamic, with printing and preaching disseminating a true 'Reformation from below', not merely a political option of particularist princes. The German situation, with its multiplicity of petty princedoms and quasi-autonomous cities within the loose entity of the Empire, was indeed a much better exemplar of his thesis than was homogeneous England, with only London of a size and

influence to warrant achieving an 'urban event'. To his understanding of the continental urban reformation Dickens's outstanding research student, the late Robert Scribner, then focusing on Erfurt, added significantly. Scribner's interest in the means of communication of the reformed faith to 'simple folk' complemented and developed Dickens's work. Equipped intellectually and linguistically to further such research, his potential development of such themes was cut short by his untimely death. In Scribner Dickens had at last owned a worthy successor.

Dickens's thesis remains valid for Germanic Reformation historians in its consideration of nationhood, and in his willingness to analyse complex elements rather than reduce them to convenient packages. His handling of Luther's theology was, as always, informed and balanced. He wrote about Protestantism from his own basis of faith, while remaining aware of the dangers of so doing: 'scholars of Christian persuasion . . . are no less likely to be hindered by youthful experiences and present loyalties from apprehending the peculiar qualities of Reformation religion',[8] he wrote later. His ability to empathise, and yet to view with detached judgement, contributed in no small part to the enduring quality of his work.

Criticised for not writing enough in retirement, Dickens was working for the rest of his productive life on two mammoth topics: the historiography of the Reformation, and the political and religious thought which precipitated it, as exemplified by Erasmus. From German history to (largely) German historiographers seemed an obvious and valuable progression. *The Reformation in Historical Thought* should have been a landmark in Reformation studies, charting the historiography of the reformation since the sixteenth century and providing dispassionate and balanced evaluations of a multiplicity of scholars. That was perhaps its disadvantage. In the search for evenness of tone in a collaborated volume, there was a tendency to the monotone. A far greater disadvantage was a species of sales resistance. The attempt to bring continental authors to the notice of an English speaking historical readership was dogged by lack of interest. Those who had barely heard of, and certainly never read, a German historian, were unlikely to read about him. Intended as a foil to Ferguson's *Renaissance in Historical Thought*, it failed to achieve that eminence.

[8] Dickens and Tonkin, *The Reformation in Historical Thought*, p. 328.

The book is perhaps more interesting for the light it shed on Dickens himself. He professed himself to be a great admirer of Ranke, praising him as 'the best equipped and most productive historian of the nineteenth century, much influenced but not engulfed by his conservative Prussian-Lutheran context'.[9] He was an outstanding scholar, covering social and economic, as well as local, themes, with outstanding moral force and dedication to his work. The carefulness of his methodology was second to none; his determination to show the past as it really was, the setting of the highest standards. Ranke, Dickens wrote, 'regarded the discovery of historical truth as a species of religious obligation'.[10] He placed culture next to church and state as the third great force in human affairs. Two of the volumes of his Reformation history contain elaborate analyses of the causes and early progress of reform, missing few of the factors prominent in modern debate. Dickens praises him for his handling of the cities, the proto-reformers, and the influences on Luther himself; for his discussion of Thomas Müntzer and the 1524–5 revolt; for his use of the popular pamphlets produced by the Reformation: all topics interesting to Dickens himself.

Interviewed by Scribner in 1990, Dickens was flattered to be compared with Ranke himself. The comparison, on Dickens's own showing, could scarcely have been more accurate. The aspects Dickens identified in Ranke as being of greatest worth are surely the outstanding aspects of his own methodology and style.

To that sense of style he owes much of his enduring readableness. 'We should be writing for an Anglo-American of *c.*2080 A.D.', he once advised a junior historian. 'I do wish I could persuade [x] to write deathless prose', he said of another. Interviewed, he expressed a strong dislike for the conversational style of writing for which he detected a vogue. Prose should be analytical. In his bigger books he had consciously sought a constant interchange between narrative and analysis. This was not the same as imposing a philosophy of history on one's writings. Each step should suggest the next, without losing touch with one's own earlier work. It was the job of a historian to tackle all aspects of the development of a country or region, a task which was being better done in his lifetime than before. Pressed for a definition, he saw himself as a kind of social historian, but thought that perhaps there should be a new name for his type of work.

[9] Dickens and Tonkin, *The Reformation in Historical Thought*, p. 150.
[10] Ibid., p. 168.

If one is to move on step by step, not losing touch with previous work, such a procession in Dickens's writing becomes plain. From local archives he moved to the national Reformation, and thence to the continental influences on it. After a closer analysis of the thought of Luther, he paused to overview the scene in company with other great historians. Finally, he became immersed in the thought which had paved the way for, and contributed to the impact of, the Protestant Reformation in the Germanic countries: that of Erasmus.

Dickens was aware of paddling at the edges of a pool where a massive scholarly edition of Erasmus's works was in progress. Once more he was seeking to be 'read by a lot of people', to make Erasmus accessible to an English literary public. *Erasmus the Reformer,* like *The Reformation in Historical Thought,* was a collaborative production: 'at the age of eighty-one, one *has* to think in terms of collaboration', he said. In some ways a better book than its predecessor in terms of its usefulness to British scholars, it applies again Dickens's twin principles of narrative and analysis to the various stages of Erasmus's life and works. The collaborative approach again leads to some unevenness of treatment and style, but *Erasmus* does succeed in making clear those areas in which Dickens's writings are usually strong: the roots of his thought, his Christian theology, its application to the ordinary person. The bible-based humanism expounded by Erasmus, like most calls for reform, was a godly back-to-basics. Disenchanted with scholastic theology, insisting on the concept of adiaphora in an increasingly polarised confessional world, deeply influencing Luther but later dissociating himself from Protestant reform, Erasmus is presented as a reformer but not a revolutionary. He deprecated Luther's approach to the faults of the sixteenth-century church, and his views won respect from other lines of thought. Zwingli was arguably the apostle of Erasmian evangelicalism, and some of his formulae for Christian living were adopted by Anabaptists. The complexities of his Christian humanism are manifest, and Methodism might stand for his fullest heir.

This last foray into religious thought showed Dickens following a dictum of his old tutor: 'higher up and further in'. Few specialists in English Reformation local studies felt called to the same heights, but leaving Moses on Pisgah were more likely to go further in to the promised land, engaging closely with the common man. On the Continent, Scribner must stand for his Joshua. At home, he lacked a true successor. Disciples of his own calibre were unlikely to be common, and he has been criticised for their scarcity. He was of course an impossible act to follow. There was

little new to be said about Protestantism in Tudor England for another thirty years, while his work was tested against the findings of scholars of a different persuasion. Nor should such a Renaissance polymath be expected to have directed all his students into the same channel. If one went on to architecture and another into the church, are they not also heirs to Dickens's multi-faceted brilliance?

Dickens was above all a Christian, whose job was to use his God-given scholarly talents to the best of his ability. His strong faith comes through repeatedly in his work, not in a narrow confessionalism, but in a conservative Protestant faith not entirely removed from Erasmus himself. His *Lübeck Diary* concluded with a passionate call for reconciliation between erstwhile enemies as human beings, rather than indulging in indiscriminate group hatred. He thought this impossible to achieve 'without a sense of brotherhood in God, without that belief in the holiness of human personality expressed in the words, "Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto Me . . ." '.[11] Similarly, his epilogue to *The English Reformation* called for credal formularies to be clear, short, and simple, 'to bring men nearer in love to the real person of the Founder':

> As the best of [the reformers] sought in humility to recover the ever-living Word made Flesh, so we and our successors can continue the search in still greater humility . . . When they talk of God, or of the Son of God, fallen creatures and visible churches should at least be tentative.[12]

Not the most likely conclusion to a history book, but a mission statement from one whose moderate Protestantism, and deep and genuine faith, made a lasting impression on his friends. 'He strove to be the servant of the truth', concluded one, 'and hence the wide respect his writings always commanded.'

MARGARET CLARK

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[11] A. G. Dickens, *Lübeck Diary* (London, 1947), p. 347.
[12] A. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (paperback edn., London, 1967), p. 463.

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