



ROBIN DU BOULAY

## Francis Robin Houssemayne Du Boulay 1920–2008

FRANCIS ROBIN HOUSSEMAYNE DU BOULAY, always known to his friends and colleagues as Robin, historian of England and Germany in the later Middle Ages, was born on 19 December 1920 at Sidcup, Kent, as first son of Philip Houssemayne Du Boulay and his wife, Mercy Tyrrell Friend. His father was descended from a French Huguenot family, one of whom, named Houssemayne Du Boulay, was an eighteenth-century divine, a theology graduate of Leiden University, who migrated to England to serve as pastor to the French protestant church in Threadneedle Street, London. Having settled in England, in 1751 he had himself ordained as a priest in the Church of England by the Bishop of London and his thoroughly anglicised descendants were to include a number of Anglican clergy, as well as some outstanding servants of the British Empire.

Robin's grandfather, the Reverend James Thomas Du Boulay, was an Anglican priest and a fellow of Exeter College, Oxford, until marriage obliged him to resign his fellowship and take a teaching post at Winchester College. There he became a housemaster and his seven sons, including Robin's father, were all educated at Winchester. Grandfather James was an assiduous writer of letters, by means of which in after-years he kept in touch with all his thirteen children scattered in various parts of the Commonwealth. The collected mass of his correspondence eventually came into Robin's possession, and provided him in retirement with the basis for a family history entitled *Servants of Empire*, which he had completed at the time of his death and was published in 2010.

Philip, Robin's father, who was the twelfth child of James's marriage, was without substantial means and took employment with the Egyptian

Salt and Soda Company, which he served as manager until 1927, saving for an interval during the Great War, in which he distinguished himself as an officer of the Egyptian Labour Corps. Consequently, until the age of seven Robin was brought up, with his brother George, in Egypt. His earliest memories were of the Pharos of Alexandria, seen from the windows of the family's commodious flat on the outskirts of the city. He was taught at home by his mother and an English governess. From the servants he learned to speak Arabic with sufficient ease to be able to interpret for his governess in dealing with cabbies and shopping in the bazaars. Although he never used the language after childhood, the untapped residue stayed in recesses of his mind, so that seventy years later he was able, to his wife's astonishment, to converse in the language with an Egyptian visitor from Alexandria they chanced to meet in an Italian hotel.

Serious education began in 1927 when Philip left his Egyptian appointment and the two boys were brought home. They were sent first to a Mrs White's day-school at Sidcup, where surprisingly the curriculum included French and Latin, and then to a residential prep school at Burnham-on-Sea in Somerset, the fees of which were paid by Robin's aunts. It was a usual type of preparatory school of that period in which the curriculum was organised to prepare boys for Common Entrance to the public schools. It gave Robin a grounding in Latin and French; but he felt abandoned there and homesick for his Kentish family home. This affection for Kent, kindled by childhood memories of holiday home-visits from Egypt, was later to give direction to some of his early historical work. At the age of eleven he was transferred to Christ's Hospital School, on being awarded a place under the statutory qualification of his father's 'distinguished war service'.

Because of his age, he was placed for his first year at Christ's Hospital in the preparatory house at Horsham, where he spent what he remembered as a carefree year working at ancient history, English poetry and the topography of London, following an enlightened policy of allowing each pupil to study what he liked. The disadvantage of this liberal regime was that he was allowed to forget the basics of Latin he had already acquired, although he was to learn German thoroughly, but his subsequent performance in Latin dashed the hopes of his Headmaster that he was a potential Classicist and, as such, university material. This was a setback from which he was rescued by an inspiring History master named the Honourable David Roberts, the younger son of the first Lord Clywd. A Cambridge graduate, with a singular gift for spotting and eliciting young talent, Roberts taught his pupils in the style of a Cambridge supervisor,

having them research in the library and write essays, which were then subjected to discussion. He inculcated in them a belief that intellectual life was both important and fun. He appeared not to care what his pupils read so long as they followed their interests and read a great deal. Work was not just the drudgery of preparing for the Higher Schools Certificate, but was regarded as a process of exciting discovery. He gave full rein to Robin's precocious gift for creative writing.

Despite the encouragement he gained from teaching of this kind, Robin was increasingly absorbed with reading and writing poetry. As he recalled himself, 'In my last years at school poetry, rather than history, was my passionate interest, and I saw all my mental life in poetic terms. The long and detailed essays I might have written on Barbarossa were in fact written on Gerard Manley Hopkins and the use of Sprung Rhythm.' It was in these years that he acquired a lifelong devotion to Hopkins and T. S. Eliot; and this early enthusiasm gained encouragement from the attention he received from Keith Douglas, the poet, who was then a pupil a year ahead of him at the school. But, fortunately for medieval studies, Roberts diverted his hero-worshipping pupil from notions of reading English Literature for a degree, and urged him instead to try for an award to read History at Oxford, listing Balliol College as his first choice. In the 1930s boys from families without substantial means—which was the normal condition of pupils at Christ's Hospital—could only get to Oxford by winning an open scholarship. In December 1938 Robin sat the scholarship examination, in the course of which he was summoned to a viva by Kenneth Bell, the senior history tutor at Balliol. Many years later he recalled the course of the interview with amused irony: 'I see Mr Du Boulay that you speak of "the simple souls of the middle ages". Were they simple? He got the adolescent answer about the Church doing their thinking for them. But Bell let that, and me, go.' The future professor would write with much perception and sympathy about the mental furniture and religious experience of medieval people. In the event, Roberts's judgement was vindicated: Robin was awarded a Williams Exhibition to read History at Balliol.

To occupy the time before he was due to go up to Oxford, his headmaster arranged for him a guest studentship at Phillips Academy at Andover, Massachusetts. He enjoyed the adventure of travelling to the USA, but at the school he was disappointed by the style of the class teaching, so different from the liberal regime of David Roberts: 'Americans,' he wrote, 'do not study subjects; they take courses; no browsing through books or essays; grubbing in text books, not reflection.' He derived most

intellectual stimulus at Andover from two émigré German teachers, who introduced him to German literature and the history of philosophy.

Robin went up to Balliol in October 1939. He was assigned for tutorials in the first place to the great medieval scholar Richard Southern. In the course of his undergraduate career he was also tutored by Christopher Hill and A. B. Roger. In those days the Oxford History curriculum required a student to 'cover' the whole of English History, but to choose a limited period for the study of European History and a Special Subject. The process by which Robin's interest was drawn to the middle ages evidently began with Roberts's genial regime at Christ's Hospital, in the course of which he read, among other things, the colourful biography of Frederick II by Kantorowicz, and Boas's study of Pope Boniface VIII. He also seems while at school to have read Helen Waddell's *The Wandering Scholars* (London, 1927), a study of the medieval lyric, which brilliantly evokes the personalities of clerical society and the scholastic world of the middle ages. In later years he told his children of the impact this book had had on his imagination. But there can be no doubt that the decisive influence upon his choice came from his association with Southern, who came to be his benevolent genius and friend. Southern had already written to him after the announcement of his exhibition, with some suggestions for preliminary reading. These, surprisingly, included Hastings Rashdall's *Medieval Universities* (Cambridge, 1929). This three-volume work, newly edited by Powicke and Emden (1936), with extensive footnotes, was a rather crushing primer to drop into the lap of an uninitiated schoolboy. At any rate it was a warning that his supervisor's history would be pre-eminently a history of thought and culture.

Robin belonged to the generation whose education was interrupted by the war. His undergraduate career began in the year 1939–40, and was completed after the war in the years 1945–7. The horrors and miseries of the Great War, so movingly communicated by the poetry of Wilfred Owen, deeply affected the minds of those brought up in the 1930s, and in Robin's last years at school pacifism was widespread in England among young people. The conviction that war was an unmitigated evil to be avoided at whatever cost gave birth to organisations like the Peace Pledge Union, whose members promised that they would in no circumstances bear arms. It was at this period that students of the Oxford Union passed the famous resolution that 'this house will in no circumstances fight for king and country'. Robin was predisposed to pacifist sentiment by his Christian idealism. His Anglican schooling had inculcated religious convictions from which he did not waver when he went up to Oxford. In his freshman

year he joined the university Labour Club, but abandoned it when the leadership was taken over by Communists, because he could not stomach atheism. But he found a number of friends who shared both his religion and his pacifist outlook. Among them was a group who had formed a University Ambulance Unit, which he joined in the summer of 1940. They occupied a camp of huts at Great Bardfield in Essex, where they drilled, went on route marches, and swotted First Aid with the help of friendly nurses and doctors. Two of them, Ian Crombie and Denis Munby, drove him over from Bardfield to an Anglican eucharist at nearby Thaxted, which was then served by the famous left-wing parson and preacher Conrad Noel. Thus he was introduced to the rituals and doctrines of high-church Anglicanism combined with radical social theory.

Faithful to his convictions, Robin decided that when called up for military service he would register as a Conscientious Objector. But the little group of Oxford friends melted away under the impact of war, and late in 1940 he secured instead acceptance by the Friends' Ambulance Unit, an organisation of voluntary workers founded and funded by Quakers. With them he received some medical training and patrolled the air-raid shelters in Whitechapel during the blitz. He was then sent to hospitals to work as a ward orderly or male nurse, first at Selly Oak hospital in Birmingham, and after at Chatham hospital in Kent. His ward duties left him enough time for reading, and while at Chatham he embarked on a course of theological exploration which included Newman's *Apologia* and the treatise of Aquinas on law extracted from the *Summa Theologica*. These studies had a twofold outcome; the first, on which he promptly acted, was a decision that he ought to seek admission to the Roman Catholic Church; the second was a conclusion, drawn from the doctrine of the just war expounded by Aquinas, that a conscientious objection to military service was in the present case untenable. Accordingly he tendered his resignation to the Friends Ambulance Unit, and wrote to the War Office with a request to be called up.

As he had expressed a preference to join the artillery, he was sent to Larkhill for training in gunnery. There he was soon selected as a potential officer, and after surviving the harsh trials of a War Office Selection Board, he was posted to the OCTU (Officer Cadet Training Unit) for artillery officers at Alton Towers in Staffordshire. The training of an artillery officer took eight months. Robin revelled in the exercises of the course, battle camp in the hills, 'mock attacks, always with live ammunition and playing with explosives, sheer delight'. He was commissioned as a second lieutenant RA in September 1943, and posted to 186 Field Regiment,



which was then at Inverurie, Aberdeenshire. As a subaltern he found himself in charge of four field guns—twenty-five pounders—and their attendant NCOs and men.

The fifty-second Lowland Division, of which his regiment formed a part, soon moved to the south of England, but to the disappointment of its members it was not called to take part in the D-Day landings of June 1944. It was not until October that they were ferried across to Ostend, in the wake of the allied disaster at Arnhem, and they joined the assault on the German armies in West Holland. Robin's battery took part in the fierce fighting between the Maas and the Rhine. Much of the time he acted as forward observation officer with the task of scanning the enemy positions and sending back firing instructions to his guns. It was while he was in this hazardous position that the explosion of a German shell close by damaged his left eardrum, leaving him with a partially impaired hearing that proved permanent: 'I was really frightened', he wrote, 'not so much of being shot, as of being too inexperienced to call down accurate fire when the infantry asked.' His battery crossed the Rhine early in March on a Bailey bridge put up by the Sappers, and was on the outskirts of Bremen when the German high-command surrendered. After the armistice, the unit was sent for a time to the Harz area on garrison duties, and while there Robin was able to exercise his German on prisoners of war. He was then posted home to Catterick with the rank of Captain, to give instruction to learners on gunnery signals.

While at Catterick he found time to resume reading in preparation for his return to Oxford, and set about studying the volume of *Stubbs Select Charters* which he had bought as an undergraduate. This collection of documents, intended to illustrate the growth of the 'English constitution' from Tacitus to the year 1307, first appeared in 1870 and for many decades occupied an extraordinary place in the Oxford History curriculum. For those specialising on the medieval side it was a compulsory text, examined by a separate paper, and lectures on it were always made available. Its extraordinary influence upon the minds of medievalists-in-training was attested by Du Boulay. He attended the lectures on it given by May McKisack at Somerville College and, in his own words, 'for an undergraduate almost lost for a conceptual map it was a text from heaven'. The exposition of the texts by a skilful scholar led the novice stage by stage through the whole tradition of medieval scholarship and the controversies that formed much of its lifeblood. For Robin, as for many others before and after, *Stubbs Charters* not only provided a map of historical scholarship; it initiated him to the skills of textual exegesis.

With the war over, his stay at Catterick was not long. Like others whose education had been interrupted by military service, he obtained a Class B (i.e. early) release, and early in October 1945 he returned to Balliol. He often recalled the unforgettable moment of his return, when on a sunny evening he walked through the library into the garden quad and met the familiar figure of Dick Southern: 'After a moment of silence, we both said almost together "isn't it wonderful!"' It was the beginning of a happy period of work and renewed friendships, in which his intellectual interests were brought into sharper focus and his imagination was more deeply involved under the influence of two outstanding teachers. One of these was his tutor, Southern, for whom he wrote essays. The other was Sir Maurice Powicke who, although at that time approaching the end of his career as Regius Professor, was still conducting an undergraduate seminar on the Special Subject he had devised under the title of 'The period of Edward I with special reference to the relations of Church and State'. Robin chose this Special, and the documentation that formed its base, including chancery enrolments and bishops' registers, later suggested to him a pathway to his own research. It was not that either of these men consciously taught. In fact, Robin subsequently remarked, less than fairly, that 'both of them were equally useless to me as tutors; they were in a sense too good for me'. Both in fact became an inspiration, Southern through the depth and originality of his historical thoughts and the artistry of his writings, and also through a deep personal empathy; Powicke through the breadth, and humanity, of his vision of the lives of thirteenth-century men and women: 'He spoke of them almost as if they had been his own relations.' Both of these eminent scholars displayed a breadth of vision which, in contrast to the insular and political preoccupations of the former Oxford History school, saw medieval England as a cultural part of the European Continent.

Robin Du Boulay was awarded the expected First in History in June 1947. He was now 27 and needed to earn his livelihood. He was attracted by the possibility of a don's life devoted to teaching, research and writing. So he answered an advertisement, and with Powicke's support he secured an appointment as Assistant Lecturer in History at Bedford College of London University, commencing in October 1947. It was still possible at that time to pass immediately from a first degree to teaching undergraduates in History. Until then doctorates, now regarded as virtually essential qualifications for such a post, were rarely possessed by lecturers in the humanities. Thus, like many before him, Robin was an autodidact as a professional historian. He had heard at Oxford the lectures of K. B. Macfarlane



on the fifteenth century and, now in search of a field of research, his thoughts turned to the possibilities of England in the later middle ages, then a less frequented area of research than it subsequently became. He found what he wanted in the register of the fifteenth-century Archbishop Thomas Bourghier in the archives of Lambeth Palace Library. An edition of this seemed an attractive project because it looked manageable for a beginner and also because it involved the study of a period as yet little regarded by historians. It was while working on the Register that he acquired the technical tools of a medievalist under the guidance of two remarkable women, whose help he later gratefully acknowledged. The first of these was Irene Churchill who, in those days, as Deputy Librarian, presided loquaciously over the chaos of the old palace library. She helped his early steps in palaeography as he toiled to transcribe the manuscript, and her two volumes on *Canterbury Administration* (London, 1933) offered him a valuable *vade mecum* in his exploration of archiepiscopal government. His second mentor was Rose Graham, a lady scholar of independent means who, as General Editor of the publications of the Canterbury and York Society, befriended him, asked him to tea, and provided him with a fund of apt learning when he was preparing his edition of the Register for publication.

Like most new university teachers of History, Robin had to work extremely hard during his first years at Bedford College. Besides tutoring, he was expected to give courses of lectures and conduct classes on some areas of medieval history with which he had only slight acquaintance. At the same time he was embarking on research and discovering the rich archives of Lambeth Palace and the chapter library of Canterbury Cathedral. It was at this time that he met Celia Matthews, who was a ward sister at the RAF hospital near Ely. The meeting came about through his brother George, who was serving at the hospital as a newly qualified doctor. Robin and Celia married on 28 December 1948, and their first child, Clare, was born a year later. Initially they lived with his parents in the family house in Sidcup, later moving to a house of their own at Wimbledon, which was their home for the next twenty years, and where their two sons, Mark and Thomas, were born.

Robin's work on the first volume of Bourghier was nearly finished when in 1952 he was struck down by illness. An X-ray revealed an area of infection at the top of his left lung, which proved to be tubercular. His brother, now a specialist in radiology, had him transferred from a local hospital to St Bartholomew's where, in view of the limited area affected, it was decided to operate. The operation was completely successful, and he

was able to return home to convalesce, where Celia, as an experienced nurse, was able to give him the special post-operative medical care that was needed. He made a complete recovery, but his need for prolonged rest and medication meant that he had to miss the whole academic year of 1952–3. To compensate for his absence, the History Department engaged the part-time services of Margaret Deanesly, the lately retired professor of Medieval History from Royal Holloway College; some of his teaching was reallocated to Hugh Lawrence, a recently appointed colleague, who was to become a lifelong friend.

By the start of the Michaelmas term of 1953 Robin had sufficiently recovered his strength to resume his full range of college duties. Besides tutoring, these involved giving lecture courses on English History in the later middle ages, and a period of European History, and also conducting classes on one of the Optional Subjects offered in the university curriculum. The Optional he chose to teach was entitled 'Ecclesiastical Institutions of the Middle Ages' which had already been available for some years. It was a course extending over two years, one of which was devoted to the study of the administration and law of the secular Church, and the other to monasticism. It chimed with Robin's research interests and he taught it with enthusiasm. His class attracted a number of students from other colleges as well as from the Bedford department. It proved to be a forcing-ground for several who went on to postgraduate studies, who were subsequently allocated to his supervision. Alongside all this there were the various committees and faculty boards at both college and university level, in which he played an active part.

As a tutor he had a charisma that made him much sought-after for supervisions. His grounding in poetry, an enthusiasm that never left him, gave him a gift for lucid and subtle language, the source of a ready wit and nice aphorisms with which he amused his colleagues as well as startling his pupils: 'You're a word merchant, like me,' Keith Douglas had told him. Added to this fascination with words was his deep conviction that imagination was a primary and indispensable part of a historian's equipment. These were the qualities he sought to elicit and nourish in his pupils. As he wrote himself of the historian's task, 'the ambition to resurrect the past as well as to analyse it, requires as well as a competence with texts and figures, a continuous series of imaginative acts in response to detailed and precise self-questioning'.<sup>1</sup> To the efforts of his weaker pupils he listened with gentle courtesy and appreciation and encouraged them. To the

<sup>1</sup> This quotation is taken from p. 2 of his book *The Lordship of Canterbury*.

stronger ones he was an inspiring teacher. Lyn Smith, who subsequently had a distinguished academic career, recalled the experience of being supervised by him;

As an eighteen-year old from Llanelli Girls Grammar School, I was startled to be told that what my essay needed was less Henry James and more du Maupassant ... a tutorial was never a simple discussion of the essay topic in hand, although his detailed critique was meticulous and his expectations, both of historical imagination and one's use of precise and subtle language, set standards which one rarely ever attained. I remember his essay titles, designed often to lead into broader and, at the time, largely uncharted avenues of exploration.

Most university teachers are attracted into the profession by love of their subject and the opportunities to do research and write books, but not all are willing to make sacrifices of time necessary to help their pupils. Robin Du Boulay demonstrated the importance he attached to his teaching by assisting in a departmental revolution in which he joined with Hugh Lawrence to double the time allocated by them and their colleagues to tutoring. A crop of mediocre Finals results had convinced both of them that their students were not doing enough reading under direction nor writing enough, and they proposed to introduce a tutorial regime on the Oxford model, under which every student would write a weekly essay for his or her tutor. Surprisingly they succeeded in convincing their colleagues to accept this plan, and from 1962 onwards it brought a transformation in the department's Finals results, raising it to a leading position among the London colleges.

The two volumes of Bourghier's Register appeared from Oxford University Press in 1952 and 1953. Robin's work on it had involved an initial study of the great landed estate with which the archbishopric was endowed, consisting of scattered properties in the southern counties with a concentration in areas of Kent which he had known since childhood. A minor offshoot of this work was a booklet on *Medieval Bexley*, which he published in 1961. In one sense it was a work of *pietas*: he remembered boyhood picnics in the woods round Bexley, where larks sang above the fields. But this was no tourist's handbook; it was a picture of the past society of the manor and of the people who lived and worked on it, their rents, duties, marriages and court appearances, reconstructed from the surviving court rolls of the manor and wills. It was a gem of local history as it should be written, and a precursor of the major work to come. The same phase of his research on manorial history was represented by his edition of a collective volume of *Documents Illustrative of Medieval Kentish Society* (Ashford, 1964) to which six others contributed, his own

being an edition of the *sede vacante* accounts of the archbishop's estate for the years 1292–5.

The process by which he was converted from the archival work of editing texts to the essentially creative work of writing social history is described in the preface to *The Lordship of Canterbury*, which came out in 1966. 'This book,' he wrote, 'grew originally out of dissatisfaction with "ecclesiastical history" which seemed absorbed in the formalities of church administration. Not far behind the *acta* and registers of the archbishop could be discerned a multitude of documents insisting that the chancellors, registrars, and so forth, did not stand by themselves in giving an account of their master's work.' The most influential work, which he came to regard as a model of excellence, was that of Marc Bloch, the great twentieth-century historian of feudal France, 'who always tried to vivify institutions'. *The Lordship of Canterbury* synthesised a series of detailed studies of manorial history he had published in articles over several years. It provided a definitive account of the great estate that supported the archbishopric, its piecemeal accumulation from the eleventh century until its diminution in the time of Archbishop Cranmer, its composition and management, its knightly tenants and lesser people who lived and worked on it and supplied their lord with services and money. To a great extent it succeeds in the aim implied by its subtitle: *An Essay on Medieval Society*. It is an account of the rural society of Kent and Sussex, where a large part of the archbishop's lands lay. We are shown a richly peopled landscape, in which a free market in land blurred the social distinction between knightly tenure and the free 'peasant' tenure of gavelkind and thus affected the *mores* of a society hitherto thought to be conditioned by the military obligations of knighthood. Kentish gavelkind was a form of customary tenure which never became servile, and we are here introduced to numbers of peasant families who took advantage of the market to build up sizeable estates over several generations, and in so doing aspired to the status of 'gentry'.

Recognition of Robin's work brought both distinctions and burdens. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, which he served as Honorary Secretary for the years 1961–5. The University of London made him a Reader in 1955, and in 1960 he was appointed to a personal chair of Medieval History. From 1976 to 1980 he served as head of the Bedford College History Department and in 1980 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy.

The supervision of postgraduate students was a growing commitment. Alongside this was a seminar he conducted at the Institute of Historical

Research. Through the Institute the University offered postgraduates help in a variety of seminars, ranging from instructional classes in subjects like palaeography and diplomatic to seminars in particular fields or periods of history. Robin instituted a seminar for those working on English History in the later middle ages. It met on Mondays in term time, in the early evening, and continued under his chairmanship for upwards of two decades. It attracted a steady flock of postgraduates from all the colleges, and the participants included one or two younger faculty members and occasionally visitors from the United States. One of the latter, Joel Rosenthal, who later became a professor at the State University of New York, described the style in which Robin conducted the proceedings:

It was very much tilted toward letting us—as Ph.D candidates—do our own thing it was a case of peers talking to peers over research problems, the sources, interpretations of events (as we were mostly fifteenth-century historians), progress reports from most of us and even group reports ... But, of course, peers to peers were under the judicious eye of the professor; he asked more questions than he was inclined to answer. As I look back, it seems he was rather shy about being expected to exercise oversight or control but he always did so, firmly but quietly.

This description of how to conduct a colloquium of postgraduates is reminiscent of V. H. Galbraith's advice to Southern in a similar role: 'You have to let them crawl over you.' On the other hand, Caroline Barron, a colleague of Robin's, who later became a professor, recalls him presiding in a more directive mood: 'We were all put through our paces and given assignments.'

As time went on, Robin found himself increasingly in demand to deliver papers to historians in other universities and members of the Historical Association. Several universities invited him to serve as their External Examiner in History, which involved working visits to other universities, which he greatly enjoyed. He occasionally regaled his Bedford colleagues with lively anecdotes of his visitation of the three constituent colleges of the University of Ireland, where he received memorably generous entertainment from F. X. Martin and others.

Teaching and research interact. For many years Robin delivered a college lecture course on England in the later middle ages. In 1967 the retirement of May McKisack from her chair at Westfield College offered him the opportunity to further extend his teaching commitments by taking over the Special Subject she had taught on the reign of Richard II. It also gave him the chance to express his affection and gratitude to her for those seminal lectures of hers he had heard at Oxford long ago; this he did by collaborating with Caroline Barron in editing a *Festschrift* for her, which

appeared in 1971. The product of these years was *The Age of Ambition*, which was published in 1970, a book that more than any other communicated his idea of history and his historical vision.

*The Age of Ambition* is at once a piece of persuasive advocacy and a beautiful piece of descriptive writing about the society of England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It is not about politics. The politics are well understood, but relegated to the background. The book's concern is with the mobile class structure of late medieval England, with men's attitudes towards the established authorities of state and church, with family life, and the worldly and other-worldly preoccupations of medieval people. The author even seeks, with a temerity too rare among professional historians, to penetrate the elusive world of sentiment, to peer a little, if it may be, into the secrets of medieval hearts: did men and women experience happiness in their marriages that were always arranged for them, or did they seek refuge from marriage without love in sex without marriage? Were they fond of children? Although he acknowledges that England was then still 'an aristocratic society in which the nobility set the tone', his argument focuses upon those 'middle classes' who are seen to be upwardly mobile, the free peasants, skilled artisans, merchants and shopkeepers, and among them a richer bourgeoisie who were infiltrating the ranks of the 'gentry' through intermarriage and the acquisition of land. Here Robin used his immense knowledge of sources, especially of wills, to recreate the real world of flesh and blood. He contended that the huge mortality of the Black Death had afforded the survivors greater opportunities for enrichment. The social tensions produced by this period of economic transition was a theme he returned to in a fine article on 'The historical Chaucer' that he published in 1974 (in the volume edited by Derek Brewer on *Geoffrey Chaucer* in the *Writers and their Background* series). In the *Age of Ambition* his target was the myth—now largely discarded through the efforts of himself and others—that depicted the later middle ages as a dismal period of economic decline, intellectual sterility and religious corruption, as a prelude to a new age of enlightenment and prosperity under the Tudors. The book ends with chapters on the vitality of fifteenth-century religious observance and scholastic debate.

Shortly before the book's appearance, the need to accommodate his widowed mother had made it desirable for Robin and Celia to look for a more spacious house, and in 1969 they moved to a large rambling house at Sevenoaks, in his beloved Kent. Besides its age, size and rural location, it had the additional charm of an acre of garden. He was now able to fulfil his long cherished desire to plant a bed of asparagus.



For some time his research had been moving in another direction, signalled by a magisterial article on German town chronicles in the later middle ages, which he published in 1981 in the Festschrift offered to Richard Southern.<sup>2</sup> His interest in German history dated from his school-boy reading of Kantorowicz; his curiosity about the political experience of the German people had been intensified by his war experience; but his desire to write a book about medieval Germany was sharpened by the predicament of the undergraduates he was teaching, who complained that there was little worth reading on the subject in their own language. In hoping to meet their needs as much as to satisfy his own curiosity, in the late 1960s he embarked on a course of reading the literary sources for medieval German history in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* and the studies of modern scholars in the German periodicals. Responding to the demands of his imagination, he took his family on holiday to north Germany, a trip that included a visit to Goslar, an ancient demesne of the Saxon and Salian kings. As part of this enterprise, to improve his spoken German he co-opted the assistance of the departmental secretary, Charlotte Grabner, herself a childhood refugee from Austria, and met her and Hugh Lawrence for a series of snack lunches with German conversation. All this effort was to bear fruit in his widely acclaimed book on *Germany in the Later Middle Ages* which appeared in 1983.

Aside from Barraclough's eccentric *Origins of Modern Germany* (1946), Du Boulay's book was the first full-scale scholarly work in English to attempt a history of Germany in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The well-known difficulty of the subject stemmed from the weakness of an impoverished monarchy and the fragmentation of the state that followed the fall of the Hohenstaufen dynasty in the thirteenth century. One of the most original and characteristic features of Robin's approach to this problem is in his account of language and communication—the role of a common vernacular, old High German, used in town chronicles and the administrative records of towns and principalities and even those of the imperial chancery, in fostering a gradual consciousness of a national identity. We are shown a deeply religious society created through a common language, transcending the lines of political fragmentation, ruled and misruled by episcopal princes, innumerable counts and rich city oligarchies.

It was unfortunate that this book, which was manna in the desert for English students of Germany and has already acquired the status of a

<sup>2</sup>R. H. C. Davis and J. M. Wallace-Hadrill (eds.), *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to R. W. Southern* (Oxford, 1981). Robin's essay is on pp. 445–69.

classic, only became available after its author had retired from teaching. Robin's decision to take early retirement in 1982 was prompted by his reaction to upheavals in college life. Bedford College was one of a number of institutions that became victims of the cuts in university finance imposed by the Thatcher government in the 1980s. In face of this reduction of its income, the University of London decided to reduce the expense and complexity of its empire by concentrating its operation on five major sites, a change which involved amalgamating a number of existing colleges. Bedford was vulnerable in this financial climate because it was not the owner of its site in Regent's Park; it was a crown tenant, unable to extend its buildings to accommodate increasing demand, and now faced with a hugely increased payment to renew its lease. After much heart-searching and prolonged negotiation, it was decided to unite Bedford with Royal Holloway College at Egham. The process of transition was unavoidably disruptive and extremely distressing for both faculty members and students. Robin, who had relinquished headship of the history department to Hugh Lawrence, was deeply affected by the proposed removal of the college he had served all his working life and the loss of the department's identity, and so opted for early retirement, leaving Lawrence to organise the merger of the history department with that of RHC. His colleagues and friends took the opportunity to signify their admiration of his scholarship and teaching by offering him a Festschrift entitled *The Church in Pre-Reformation Society* that appeared in 1985.

Released from the burdens of teaching and administration and the incidental travelling, Robin was now able to devote himself to a project that had been formulating in his mind for many years. On taking over the teaching of the Richard II Special Subject, he had revised May McKisack's choice of set texts, so as to include passages from Langland's *Piers Plowman*. This enabled him to communicate to his students the immediacy of Langland as a priceless source for social relationships and attitudes in fourteenth-century England, so that they should not confine their view to high politics and war. Ann Wroe, who attended those classes, recalled the impact of his exposition: 'He enjoyed greatly, probably more than we did, our stumbling attempts to read *Piers Plowman* aloud, relishing how the everyday scenes lived again in the sounding of the words . . . he wanted us to hear that voice and live those scenes, in the pubs and the fields, rather than luxuriate at court or among the barons. To him ordinary men and women, with all their faults and pleasures and hopes and preoccupations, were presences as vivid as the passers-by in the park. And most of them were to be treated tenderly.'

His prolonged meditation on Langland's world view eventually matured in his slim volume entitled *The England of Piers Plowman*, which was published in 1991. In this he draws upon his wide knowledge of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century records to provide the historical context to Langland's vivid pen portraits of the many people the poet-dreamer encounters on his lifelong pilgrimage. Under the historian's guidance we see medieval society through the eyes of Piers Plowman. But there is more. Langland's poem, which underwent several revisions by the author, represents the inner spiritual growth of the poet in his search for the Christian life. Robin's exegesis of the allegorical figures encountered by the poet in his quest, called Do Well, Do Better and Do Best, displays a profound insight into the interior struggles of the writer, an empathy that suggests a parallel with Robin's own search for inner peace. The impact of the book was best summarised by Maurice Keen who reviewed it for the *English Historical Review* (1994: 702–3): 'rich rewards are to be found in it, not only in its fine scholarship but also in its humane perception of the spiritual dilemmas of a past age, and of the ways in which these can relate to our own wrestlings with the human dilemma in a later time'.

Robin's own spiritual life, which had been hardened in the fire of continual questioning, had by now settled into a phase of calm acceptance and resignation. Among his papers was found a sheaf of typed sheets under the heading of 'Why there is anything and similar mysteries', on which he had recorded his thoughts and self-interrogations at various times in the 1990s on questions of faith, authority, Scriptural exegesis and tradition. It is evident from these that he retained his belief in the spiritual authority of the Catholic Church, which he had discovered in his twenties. 'My faith is Petrine', he wrote; but also 'my own faith is a matter of love rather than of precise intellectual formulations;' and again, 'Faith is a deliberate commitment to a Lord who asks for it.' His faith was based in history. He had little sympathy with the progressive ecclesiology that had gained ascendancy at the Second Vatican Council. But he quietly accepted the revised vernacular liturgy, and seemed to derive spiritual nourishment from it.

Robin suffered injury from a fall in 1990 and this, with the increasing fragility of Celia's health, persuaded them that the colourful rambling property at Sevenoaks was no longer manageable. After a search they found and moved to a commodious modern house close to the centre of Beverley in Yorkshire. A major factor in their choice of this location was its proximity to their son Tom, who worked in local government in Hull, and to his young family. There they settled down to a quiet life of writing

and rambling and gained great enjoyment from the visits of their grandchildren at weekends. During these years he continued the work on his family history that he had begun in the 1980s and also continued reviewing for the historical journals. In response to an overture from the University of Hull, Robin delivered a short course of lectures on historiography. This peaceful period of semi-retirement was brought to an end by Celia's death in October 2000. Under the strain of caring for her, Robin's health had deteriorated. The following Easter, while he was staying in Hampshire with his daughter Clare and her husband, Mark Sawle-Thomas, he fell ill and was taken to hospital suffering from pleurisy. A scan revealed a defective aortic valve, but a proposal of open heart surgery was not pursued. It was now obvious to his family that his return to a solitary life in Beverley was not feasible, so Clare and Mark offered him a home with them, which he gratefully accepted. A significant item in the disposal of the Beverley house and its goods was his large library of historical books, which he donated to Ampleforth Abbey, a symbolic act signalling that the historian had hung up his boots.

This was not, however, quite the end of the story. While in Hampshire he renewed acquaintance with an old Bedford College pupil, Margaret Darby, a retired headmistress and now herself a widow, and this encounter led to a deep friendship, which culminated in their marriage in July 2004. They lived in Margaret's house in the Hertfordshire village of Weston. Both found great happiness in this marriage, which they generously shared with the many friends and old pupils whom they invited to Weston; others they searched out in many places, including Germany. Robin, who was increasingly immobilised by arthritis, was driven everywhere by Margaret, who packed a collapsible wheelchair in the car to enable him to tour medieval antiquities in comfort. It was during these years that he revised the history of his family which was published in 2010 under the title of *Servants of Empire*. He had completed this when he went down with a bronchial infection, which after a few days placed an excessive strain on his heart and he died at home on 2 January 2008. He was 87.

Robin Du Boulay is remembered with admiration and affection by his colleagues as a fine scholar and a witty, charitable, and sometimes mercurial companion. Many professors of history and writers in Britain and the USA can testify to his inspiring gifts as a teacher. His unique historical vision, which is most powerfully communicated in his books on England in the later middle ages and *Piers Plowman*, offers his readers a richly documented understanding of the lives and mentalities of medieval people,

informed by sympathy and a deep charity. This is a valuable gift from a historian to a society in danger of losing its identity through forgetfulness of its past.

C. H. LAWRENCE

*University of London*

*Note.* In writing this memoir I have incurred many debts, the greatest of which has been to Mrs Margaret Du Boulay, who has generously given me free access to all her husband's surviving papers, including Robin's own summary of his family's history and his memoir of his boyhood. I should like here to record my gratitude to her for her continual help, and also my thanks to his daughter, Mrs Clare Sawle-Thomas, and to his son, Mr Thomas Du Boulay, for their recollections and advice. I am also indebted to numerous friends, colleagues and former pupils, who have supplied me with documents or recollections in writing, in particular to Professor F. Donald Logan, Professor Caroline Barron, Dr Llinos Smith, Professor Joel Rosenthal, and Dr Ann Wroe, the last four of whom have allowed me to quote from their letters.

## Bibliography

A full list of the published writings of F. R. H. Du Boulay will be found in his Festschrift, C. Barron and C. Harper-Bill (eds.), *The Church in Pre-Reformation Society* (Woodbridge, 1985).

To these should be added:

'Was there a German "gentry"?', in M. Jones (ed.), *Gentry and Lower Nobility in Late Medieval Europe* (Gloucester, 1986), pp. 119–32.

'The forming of German identity', *History Today*, 40 (December, 1990), 13–21.

*The England of Piers Plowman* (Cambridge, 1990).

*Medieval Bexley*, second edition (Bexley, 1993).

*Servants of Empire* (London, 2010).