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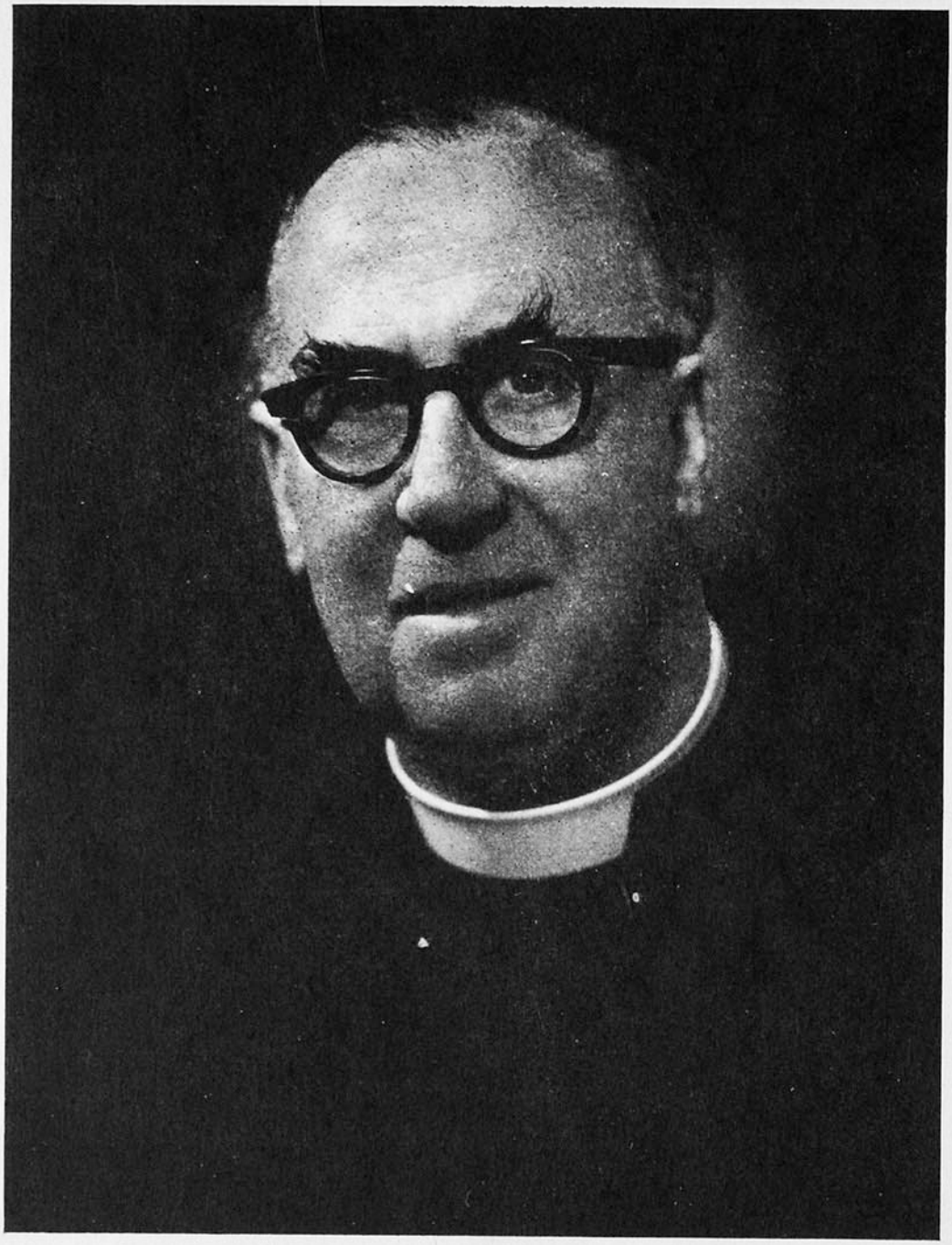

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THE VERY REVEREND NORMAN SYKES

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1897–1961

THE Church of England has had very distinguished ecclesiastical historians but in the universities no long line of them. It was only towards the middle of the nineteenth century that the subject was accorded professorial dignity in England. In this respect Scotland was a century and a half ahead in opportunity though hardly in achievement, for a regius professor in the subject appointed to Edinburgh in 1831 could complain that 'the way in which the duties of the chair . . . had been discharged in the different universities for a century past (from mistaken views of the nature of the subject) was such that in many instances the subject had proved an evil to the church'. Another critic could say with pardonable if unfair exaggeration that Gibbon was the first to write of the history of Christianity as distinct from uncritical panegyric about it. At an early age Norman Sykes established himself as one who could write ecclesiastical history with due recognition of Gibbon's secondary operative factors though without that sceptic's sarcastic estimate of their weight in accounting for the successes of the church or minimizing their influence in its failures. His death on 20 March 1961, near the end of his sixty-fourth year, closed a career of eminence as a church historian which fully realized his early promise and also cut short, in its third year, already well-grounded anticipation of distinction as Dean of Winchester. His unexpected passing is a tragical loss. The Church, which he constantly served with great ability and unvarying honesty, is faced with issues in which alike his learning, straightness, forthrightness but never offensive speech and writing are needed, and would have been influential, and possibly determinative because, had he lived, his contributions would have been far less easily ignored than they may be now by many whose policies seem to be based on dogmatic theology without much regard to the wisdom of attention to the lessons of history.

Norman Sykes was born at Liversidge in the west riding of Yorkshire, the only son of Percy and Eliza Sykes, whose forbears had lived in that moorland village for many generations; and he himself remained an obvious and loyal Yorkshireman to the end, not least in his interest in its county cricket. His father was a builder with a lively concern in the architecture and craft

of working in Yorkshire stone. He grew up in his family's strongly Anglican religious tradition which, so far as a friendship of over thirty years ever disclosed, nothing in his later vast knowledge of history and a keen perceptiveness of historical and modern theological movements ever led him to abandon or seriously to change. The parish church had a good organist through whom he found his enduring love of Anglican church music. While Dixie Professor at Cambridge, devoted to Emmanuel College, he would often attend King's College chapel where (as he said to me) he found the music and singing 'cleansing of the flesh and spirit'; and on one rare occasion of self-revelation he remarked, after a service in that chapel to which I accompanied him, 'If anything witnesses to what is less transitory than all earthly things, *that* is it.'

From Heckmondwike Grammar School, Sykes went to Leeds University where, under the influence and inspiration of Professor A. J. Grant, his interest in historical studies was stimulated and inspired. He also then met Dr. J. Neville Figgis who turned his thoughts to seeking Holy Orders, whose works in later life he often quoted and to whom, he said, he owed the foundation of his conception of the essentially necessary unity between religion and sound learning, which was to become the controlling principle of his studies and writing. He was awarded a First Class in History and, like other promising north-country scholars, was elected to a Lady Hastings Scholarship at Queen's College, Oxford. It was there, at Ripon Hall, where we resided, that I first met him, late in 1920. The longish oval (and at that date thin) face with a high forehead distinguished him, as did his abundant and amusing table-talk, usually and with manifest good humour directed against those of us whom he regarded as taking theology as our guiding star without knowledge of its historical orbit. It was some time before I was aware that I had made a firm and good friend, a delayed realization which others have experienced who, like myself, thereafter proved its undemonstrative constancy. For Sykes to express anything approaching personal regard was always an embarrassment and only on the rarest occasions was it not clothed in an almost facetious humour, a disguise which it was natural for him to adopt when in fact he was most serious and which occasionally led to misunderstanding. Social snobbery, like other pretences, he seldom appeared to recognize or, if he did, he took and sometimes mistook it for unconscious stupidity; and the many and varied contacts and friendships which his achievements brought him

made no difference to the friendships of his youth or of theirs to him. Consulted by any friend, he could be relied upon with confidence to say precisely what he thought on the matter submitted to him with a frankness which if occasionally felt to be excessive was never unkindly. But his discomfort increased with anyone who obtruded his own religious or moral principles, whereon he would either change the conversation or become silent.

In his first year's residence at Ripon Hall the late Dr. H. D. A. Major suggested to Sykes that he should undertake study of Edmund Gibson (1669–1748), translated from the bishopric of Lincoln to that of London in 1723. This he did while reading for the School of Theology in which he was placed in the First Class in the same year as he was awarded the D.Phil. for his dissertation on Gibson (1923)—a noteworthy achievement. But for one to whom accuracy, care, and thoroughness were as natural as his abilities, he had found in his study of Gibson that he 'became aware of the magnitude of the task and the difficulty of the subject', wherefore he expanded his dissertation into a large and definitive book of 420 pages which was published by the Oxford Press in 1926.

This first work reveals the characteristics from which he never departed, for he gave it the sub-title: 'A Study of Politics and Religion in the Eighteenth Century'. Gibson appears as by no means a wholly attractive personage, though shown to be an energetic and reforming prelate, not neglectful of his episcopal pastoral duties; but Sykes hoped the work would 'demonstrate that the long line of ecclesiastical statesmen in England, which stretches from the time of St. Dunstan, was not broken by the execution of Laud, but continued into the days of the Hanoverians'; the biography insisted that Gibson's importance 'was not primarily that of a bishop of the church, but rather in his efforts to bind the clergy by ties of material interest to the cause of the Hanoverian dynasty, and to create a Church–Whig alliance to replace the tradition of loyalty to the Stuart line which had involved the Church in difficulties when James II was expelled from England'. The evidence illustrating Gibson's policy threw new light on the administration of Walpole. It was largely Gibson's antipathy to Latitudinarian clergy which prevented that party from attaining a position of influence upon the bench of bishops, which it would otherwise have secured through the Queen's favour. Such a book, both in its contents and proportions, established Sykes's reputation as a rising ecclesiastical historian of first rank.

His academic post on taking Holy Orders was a lecturership in Church History in King's College, London. The preface to *Edmund Gibson* includes an acknowledgement 'to my friend and colleague, Miss B. Farrow, M.A.', of that college 'for her kind assistance in proof reading and in compiling the index'. They first met in the autumn of 1923, a year of great significance, in this respect as in others, in his life; for in 1927 Miss Farrow became Mrs. Norman Sykes. She hailed from Rochdale and had studied history under Professor Tout, and had taught at Broughton High School and at Whitelands College. After marriage she continued to lecture at King's College until 1931 when they moved to Exeter on Sykes's appointment as Professor of History in the University of the South-West.

Whether or not Beth Farrow and Norman were 'made for each other' and their meeting and marriage contrived by a beneficent Providence, matters could not have been better ordered. To be with them in their homes or on a month's holiday abroad in their daily company or in England going around with them looking for furnishings for the huge deanery at Winchester, would have convinced anyone that their marriage had added the most intimate and deepest meaning to the former 'friend and colleague'. As a close friend said of them, they seemed to have found the perfect art of marriage, and a harmony in which they shared their minds, their pursuits, and their happiness. Very occasionally one was told of something (not concerning their relations) with an injunction not to mention it to the other. A difficult position for a friend of both? Not in the least. If opportunity offered it was almost certain that, without any breach of confidence, the friend would discover that 'the other' already knew and understood much more about the matter than he did!

In the academical years 1931–2 and 1932–3 Sykes was Birkbeck Lecturer in Ecclesiastical History at Trinity College, Cambridge. The lectures when published in 1934 made another large book of 430 pages entitled *Church and State in England in the Eighteenth Century*. Even so, he had to say that the publishers (Cambridge University Press) were unable to entertain a book of such proportions as the full text of the twelve lectures would have made, so three were omitted. Seven of the nine chapters of the book give an account of the eighteenth century's episcopate in its ecclesiastical character, of the higher and inferior clergy in their several states and conditions, and estimate the significance of the careers of Bishops Hoadly and Watson.

Discussion of the theological controversies of the age was included only in so far as was necessary to illustrate its religious temper and practical churchmanship because this aspect of the century had been already frequently studied. Sykes's firm opinion was that an adequate history of the English Church in the eighteenth century was still unwritten, and he hoped that his book would be a contribution towards doing this and also to a more just and equitable verdict upon the English State and Church in that century. The study of that period, as he remarked, is not commonly recommended as an exercise 'for example of life and instruction of manners', much less 'to establish any doctrine'. 'It has suffered indeed the singular misfortune to incur the censure of almost all schools of ecclesiastical historians.' He was not at all concerned to defend the prevailing attitude of mind in the eighteenth century or to whitewash its ecclesiastics; and he agreed that few centuries have been possessed of so high a degree of self-confidence, of assurance of their own superior wisdom, and of profound neglect of the accumulated experience of humanity as the age of common sense; but his studies led him to the conviction that the heaping of opprobrium upon it, its churchmen, and statesmen, owed far too much to the theological and often dogmatic presuppositions of the succeeding age than to historical evidence, and abundantly supported his conviction by producing evidence of its factual basis. A competent and by no means uncritical judgement later made on his *Edmund Gibson* and his Birkbeck Lectures was that he had 'caused us all to reconsider some traditional and superficial views of eighteenth century Anglicanism'. This he had accomplished while discharging heavy teaching duties, when thirty-seven years of age.

The three of his Birkbeck Lectures omitted from or briefly summarized in their published form gave a full account of the methods of episcopal appointment employed during the reigns of Anne and the three Georges, including the Duke of Newcastle's activities as church minister. This he regarded as then being of far greater importance than it has since become; but its present exercise had a peculiar fascination for him and one which, whenever there were impending or actual episcopal vacancies, was certain to be a topic of his conversation with his friends, though he himself had even less desire than expectation of ecclesiastical preferment. His predictions were so often fulfilled (since bishops are formally said to be such 'by Divine permission')—he would sometimes have preferred 'oversight' as being

the more explanatory noun—as to suggest inspiration; but if his forecasts had more mundane sources he never revealed them.

In 1933 Sykes returned to London as Professor of History in Westfield College, moving to Oxford with its war-time evacuation. In 1943 he was elected Fellow of Queen's College and Praelector in Theology and Modern History, but remained there only two years as in 1945 he was chosen as Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Cambridge, being the fourth to hold that chair in succession to Creighton, Gwatkin, and J. P. Whitney.

In his inaugural lecture, delivered sixty-one years to the day since Creighton's election, he spoke of his good fortune 'in that provident kindness of Emmanuel College' which ensured the Dixie Professors from the outset a home in its society, and rejoiced 'to be delivered from the perilous position of a *professor vagans*' by the *stabilitas* thus given him. His anticipation was most happily fulfilled in membership of that college in whose life he took a full part and speedily attracted enduring affection, manifested by his election to an Honorary Fellowship on his becoming Dean of Winchester thirteen years later and by the journey undertaken by its Master and several Fellows in vacation to be present at his interment in 1961. In the college terminal concerts he had displayed an unsuspected ability in humorous excerpts from Gilbert and Sullivan. Only his closer friends were aware of his keen interest in and knowledge of the arts, as his sensitiveness inhibited expression of his opinions on matters in which he did not feel himself to be expert. He had no great interest in contemporary or indeed in historical politics except in so far as they were important in the history of the Church. He did think that politicians paid insufficient attention to the factors which made it possible for such a man as Hitler to come to unlimited power in Germany and impossible for those who hated his policy and methods effectively to oppose him.

In his inaugural lecture, which in every paragraph bears the marks of a practical craftsman, Sykes expressed as his aspiration for the future what in fact had always been his practice. He was sure that ecclesiastical history could be confined in no narrow range of interests if it was to be history worth the name, and that the would-be ecclesiastical historian must first be trained in general historical studies; and that just as the medieval historian, if his work is to have value, must have knowledge of medieval philosophy and theology and of both Roman and

Canon law, so the history of the Reformation and later periods cannot be understood or fairly presented if the ecclesiastical is divorced from the contemporary political and social history. He had already, in 1938, published his small book on *The Crisis of the Reformation*, lectures given in his capacity of Canon-Theologian of Liverpool Cathedral. He shared the opinion of his predecessor in the Dixie chair that the most obvious characteristic of modern church history—the expansion and vogue of research—had encouraged premature specialization, to the neglect of printed authorities and thus to a decline in familiarity with the classics of more modern historical scholarship.

Throughout his tenure of his Cambridge chair he regularly gave a full quota of lectures, mainly on the Reformation period and on the working out of its diverse issues in the succeeding centuries, but also included medieval history and that of the early church with special attention to the origins and growth of the ministry; took great interest in the work of the faculty boards of Divinity and History and frequently gave much time to reading work submitted for the higher degrees of several universities, was proctor in Convocation for the Cambridge Divinity faculty from 1945 to 1958, and did much reviewing for learned and other journals, while a large number of younger researchers could testify to the great pains and time he gave in assisting them. He was not eager to preach sermons and practised none of the arts of oratory, but they were always carefully prepared and clearly delivered, often historical in their approach to his main theme and (as in his reviews in the one journal whose anonymity he accepted and which were thereby to those who knew him often identifiable) a quotation from Dr. Johnson was almost inevitable. Books continued to be written—*The Church of England and Non-Episcopal Churches in the XVI and XVII Centuries* (1947), *Daniel Ernst Jablonski* (1950), *The English Religious Tradition* (1953)—a series of thirty broadcast talks on the influence of that tradition on Church, State, and society which, though necessarily brief and selective, have a freshness and a style which show how ably he could write with wide yet not obtrusive learning—and *Old Priest and New Presbyter* (1956). This embodied the Gunning Lectures given in the University of Edinburgh and the Edward Cadbury Lectures in that of Birmingham. It is a study of Episcopacy and Presbyterianism since the Reformation in relation to the Churches of England and Scotland.

His warning against too early and excessive specialization notwithstanding, Sykes knew well that the duties and traditions of

his professorship required detailed research in a particular subject. For nearly a generation he had been engaged in investigating in massive detail the life and times of William Wake, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1716 to 1737. The result appeared in 1957, two large volumes which are one of the printed authorities for the period it covers and mainly intended for the specialist in ecclesiastical history, though its subject-matter, style, and cautious judgements should make it a pleasure for any intelligent reader interested, if not discouraged by its length. Sykes had carefully worked through thirty-one volumes of the archbishop's correspondence preserved at Christ Church, Oxford, and he was 'pardonably uncertain whether a *Te Deum* or a *Nunc Dimittis* was the more appropriate thanksgiving to offer'. He briefly describes the expanding ramifications he discovered of Wake's outgoing correspondence as represented among his manuscripts which were 'foul, rough drafts, with many Latin abbreviations and corrections' of which he gives a photographic illustration and which would certainly have daunted anyone who was not by nature and training an undefeatable researcher. Sykes is content to say that 'the task of deciphering these letters taxed the utmost powers of eye and temper'. As always, and at length, he acknowledges the help he received; but the tracking down of the finished copies of these letters in Geneva, other Swiss cities, and foreign archives is a story of almost incredible care, persistence, and expenditure of time; but he had the satisfaction of confirming from them his use of the foul drafts where the finished copies could not be traced.

With all his remarkable industry Sykes never appeared hurried or flurried, nor did he work late at night; he took reasonable holidays, generally abroad, and was seldom if ever hampered by illness; also he had great natural energy and speed in working, and was a prompt correspondent by letters which, to the end, were both full and amusing, while the pen of a ready writer was matched with great fluency in speech and an astonishing memory. Hence his regular Cambridge lectures were always well attended and were enlivened by humorous but not irrelevant asides, often quotations from the Bible of the text of which he had an immense knowledge, sometimes repeated by pupils who thought them Sykesian aphorisms.

Shortly before the publication of *William Wake*, which he believed would be 'my *magnum ac ultimum opus*', an invitation to give the Ford Lectures at Oxford in the Hilary Term 1958

'found the cupboard indeed completely bare, with my notebooks empty of facts and my head of ideas'; but he accepted; and a few days before the date of the last lecture was offered the Deanery of Winchester. Though never a place-hunter—not long before he had declined another deanery—this offer, like his Fellowship of the British Academy (1951) and his membership of Queen's College, Oxford, and of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, was a great addition to the pleasures of his life. It was accepted for a combination of reasons: it would continue his place among distinguished predecessors, give him close association with the recently retired Bishop of Winchester for whom he had deep respect and regard and who he knew had long thought highly of his own work and, I am sure, partly because he never liked the anticipation of retirement from an important official position at the age of sixty-seven, though I am equally sure that he would not have retained any office the duties of which he might have become unable fully and competently to discharge. He had had no experience of responsibility in an ecclesiastical office and was very conscious that he had much to learn. Nevertheless his acceptance gave satisfaction at Winchester and in the Church at large; and his powers of adaptiveness to a new life, speedy grasp of its difficulties, a firmness in no degree self-assertive, and the simple friendliness and the generous hospitality afforded both by Mrs. Sykes and himself quickly won a more than formal respect and kindly response at Winchester.

During the upheaval of moving his abode and immersion in new duties Sykes found time to expand his Ford Lectures before the end of 1958 and *From Sheldon to Secker* appeared in the following year. This book attempts to answer questions of English Church History which had long perplexed him and in what way the faults of the Hanoverian Church were due to the failure to effect necessary reforms in the ecclesiastical constitution in 1660 and 1688. The period from 1660 to 1678 he held to be 'the most influential epoch of English Church History between the Reformation and the Victorian age'. One more book of four chapters, the Wiles Lectures which he gave in the Queen's University, Belfast, in 1959 was published only shortly before his death, *Man as Churchman.* The trust requires the lecturer to relate his specialized researches to wider themes of general interest. Sykes followed the historical method in showing that the church historian must be a student of dogma which he did by examining the relations between history, church history, and

theology; the Councils of Trent and the Vatican; the place of Scripture and tradition in the Reformation and subsequently; and Church, State, and education since 1815. The notes appended to this short volume again reveal the range of his interests and reading.

Though well informed about modern and contemporary as well as historical developments in theology, Sykes was always reticent in speaking of his personal religious convictions, a characteristic which may have concealed, from some who did not know him well, the truth that he was a sincerely religious man. But wide differences in theological belief never limited his respect for other scholars or his friendships. For few if any among contemporaries had he greater admiration and affection than for Dom David Knowles, former Professor of Medieval History and now Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, and he highly prized the reciprocation. He did not seek or enjoy controversy, though when criticized by persons of any form of eminence which did not include ecclesiastical history he could be annihilating.

He thought the influence of the Oxford Movement on the Church as a whole could hardly be exaggerated and that much of it was good; he was certainly not opposed to it, except in so far as certain of its claims, particularly in its later developments, are commonly supported by argument which his studies had convinced him could not be justified by history. He thought the dominant claims in the modern Church of England proceeded from an aggressive dogmatic theological system and was apt to show impatience with both the slow process and the modest results of historical method. Without wishing to change the form and order of ministry in the Anglican Church, he was sure that the Tractarian and later emphasis upon the necessity of the continuous imposition of episcopal hands could not stand up to the Vincentian canon; and that the temerarious procedure of going beyond the historical evidence while claiming its support and imposing dogmatic premisses upon insecure foundations could as easily and logically lead to the papal claims as to those of an episcopal apostolic succession; and he had far too keen a sense of the humorously ridiculous not to perceive it, and also its frustrating consequences, in a party in the Church of England trying to maintain a position rejected by the overwhelming majority of non-Roman Catholic Church historians and theologians throughout the world, while its own claim to possess the true episcopate and valid Holy Orders is rejected by the Roman Catholic

Church. Sykes was also convinced that it is no longer possible without manifest unreality to contend for the exclusive competence of the episcopate to determine matters of doctrine and that such a claim places the Church in the strait of seeking to repudiate nearly four centuries of its history as 'the times of ignorance God winked at'.

In his Montefiore Memorial lecture in 1960 as indeed in his inaugural lecture as Dixie Professor fifteen years earlier, he fully accepted the modern view that the aim of history is to present 'not mere events . . . but actions', and that 'the object to be discovered is not the mere event but the thought expressed in it', which for him meant that history is concerned with concrete, unique, and non-recurrent events, to the understanding of which the category of the particular and even the unique is appropriate. It inevitably follows that to subordinate personality to impersonal forces affords no clue to its record. Thus he could hold that the canons of historical study enabled the ecclesiastical historian to claim that the sources of the life of Christ 'bear the authentic character of historical documents, not despite but by reason of their combination of fact and interpretation'. Nevertheless the historian must be able to establish facts or events as having actually happened because alleged facts and events which had no historical existence could demonstrably, as facts and events, have no value. 'Christianity', he wrote, 'cannot succeed in maintaining its traditional claim to be a historical religion unless a sufficient knowledge of the life and teaching of its Founder can be established.' Common sense—unless it has succumbed to a course of perverted sophistication in which a deception more or less no longer intellectually or morally signifies—will agree.

Sykes's knowledge and judgement were valued by one who carried supreme responsibility in the Anglican Church. Archbishop Lord Fisher of Lambeth wrote to me, 'I join with you in bewailing the loss of Norman Sykes. He was quite invaluable to me in Convocation: his judgment was so wise and his power of putting it over to the confusion of partizans immense. I felt very bereft after he had gone.'

On becoming Dean of Winchester he took the Oxford D.Litt., preferring it to the D.D. because he thought the latter too easily granted in some cases as compared with his knowledge of its refusal in others. His honorary degrees included the D.D. of Glasgow and of Edinburgh and the D.Litt. of Leeds, and he would have received the same degree of Exeter had he not died two

months before the arranged date for its conferment. And by no means the least of the tributes to him is that, after so short a time as Dean, the Winchester Chapter has accepted, as a fitting memorial to him, the restoration of the fine frescoes in the Holy Sepulchre chapel of the cathedral, which he desired to see accomplished.

J. S. BEZZANT