

# DAVID LUSCOMBE

David Edward Luscombe

22 July 1938 – 30 August 2021

elected Fellow of the British Academy 1986

by

CHARLES BURNETT

*Fellow of the Academy*

David Luscombe was a foremost historian of medieval thought and general history, whose largest contribution was making the philosophical, theological and personal writings of Peter Abelard both accessible and attractive. He played important roles within the University of Sheffield, the British Academy, and the Société internationale pour l'Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale, and promoted the study of the intellectual aspects of medieval history in his teaching, his books, and his editing of general histories.



David Linscombe

David Edward Luscombe was born in Highbury, North London on 22 July 1938, to Edward Dominic Luscombe (born in Dublin 4 August 1899) and Norah Cowell. Edward Luscombe was the only surviving child of five children and his father John Luscombe, who had all died of tuberculosis in a Liverpool workhouse in 1909. His mother, Lucy (née Lane) remarried and so Edward had two step siblings. Edward had been a Marist brother. He made his first annual vows on 15 August 1916 in Grugliasco (Turin), and had taught in several Marist schools, from Aden and Bussolino to Dumfries and Islington, before leaving the Marist order soon after 1930. He was also a musician; he eventually became organist and choirmaster at St Alban's Catholic Church in North Finchley. So Catholicism, as it were, ran in David's family. On the occasion of his confirmation at the age of eleven David chose the confirmation name of Thomas Aquinas, and he remained a practising and committed Catholic for the whole of his life. David had a brother, Kevin Alban, who was two years his junior; he settled on the Island of Mull, and was a pioneer in rediscovering and preserving the past in Mull's island communities.

David attended St Michael's Convent School in North Finchley, until he passed the 11+ and entered Finchley Catholic Grammar School (founded in 1926), a Catholic Foundation still under the formidable headship of the founder, Father Clement Parsons. Amongst his teachers here was Father Ward who, according to David, 'impressed upon nearly all sixth formers that Catholicism provides substantial intellectual enrichment', and introduced David to Helen Waddell's novel about Peter Abelard. David became a prefect and then Head Boy, twice. According to his brother Kevin he was always practising for greatness: 'Whilst I was scratching around for a piece of wood to work on, he (David) was practicing speeches in the front room.'

David was also a keen and competitive sportsman; he excelled at high jump and sprinting, played cricket for the school XI, cycled around Europe, and enjoyed tennis as a pastime. For his sporting activities he was presented with a Victor Ludorum Medal. He also rowed during the family holidays in Southport, a pastime he continued at Cambridge (along with cricket and tennis) where he gained an oar which found a permanent place on the walls of his later homes. He would become a stalwart member of the Sheffield University Staff Cricket Club, opening the batting with a Boycott-like tenacity.

He was still using notebooks from Finchley Catholic Grammar School (he was always careful never to waste anything), when he came up to King's College, Cambridge in October 1956, with an Entrance Exhibition (later changed to a College Scholarship). He was admitted to read Law, but only after taking Part 1 in another Tripos; so he initially enrolled in English. Two notebooks survive, adorned with the Finchley school motto (*Da nobis recta sapere*, 'Grant that we may know what is right'), containing his summaries of lectures on 'Early English Literature (1300-1500)' given by C.S. Lewis, and 'Medieval English History' given by (Christopher) Hibbert. Each notebook is headed in his own hand 'A.D.M.G. (*ad maiorem Dei gloriam*)' and written in his characteristic

tiny handwriting, with very few corrections. These notes include what may be his first comments on Abelard (taken from Henry Adams, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, 1936, p. 284 et seq.): ‘Abélard is the portal of approach to the Gothic thought and philosophy within ... In c. 1100 Abélard came up to Paris with as much faith in logic as Bernard had in prayer’.

After his first term at King’s College David changed to history, which he found much more congenial than the English being taught at Cambridge at that time. Under the guidance of Noel Annan, the then Provost of King’s, John Saltmarsh, Christopher Morris, Moses Finley (of Jesus College) and Marjorie Chibnall (of Girton College), David started on his lifelong serious pursuit of the subject. Later he admitted that, if he had not become a historian, he would have taken up law, and there are elements in his attitude to history and the conduct of his affairs and those of the institutions he worked for that indicate a lawyer’s mind. But history was what fascinated him, especially the history of ideas (among his favourite courses were History of Political Ideas and History of Historical Thought).

David met his future wife, Megan Phillips, at Cambridge. Their courtship was largely carried on between Cambridge and London (where she was at a teacher-training college), until they married on 20 August 1960, on the feast day of St Bernard of Clairvaux. They had four children: Nicholas Dominic Richard, Mark David, Philip John and Amanda Mary, all of whom excelled in different professions.

David gained a double first in the History Tripos at Cambridge and decided to stay on at King’s College to pursue doctoral studies. At that time Dom David Knowles was Regius Professor of Modern History; he had become the leading scholar in English monasticism and was introducing medieval philosophy to a wider academic public.<sup>1</sup> In his third year David took as his special subject David Knowles’ course on the ‘Origins of the Cistercian Order’. This naturally led him to choosing as his PhD topic Peter Abelard and his school, with David Knowles as his supervisor. He remained at King’s College where he became an Unofficial Fellow in 1962. Having been persuaded by Richard Southern to drop the study of the logical works of Abelard, of which he had made provisional editions in his fellowship dissertation, in favour of the theological aspects of the influence of Abelard’s teaching, he completed his thesis in 1964 and prepared it for publication. In 1969 it was published by Cambridge University Press as *The School of Peter Abelard: The Influence of Abelard’s Thought in the Early Scholastic Period*. The last person to be acknowledged in the preface is David Knowles who, David wrote, ‘perceived the need for this study and has been its constant guide: *exemplum proposuit* (Abelard, *Theologica Christiana*, IV, PL 178, 1279A)’. Another great Catholic scholar, however, received the dedication of the book: Father Daniel Callus, the

<sup>1</sup> He was to publish *The Evolution of Medieval Thought* in 1962 (London: Longmans).

Dominican scholar of medieval philosophy, who was a pioneer in writing on the philosophy of Peter Abelard, and had died in 1965.

In 1964 David was invited to become a Fellow at the recently (1960) founded Churchill College. He became college lecturer and Director of Studies in History – posts which he held until 1972. In terms of architecture, formality and atmosphere, Churchill College could not have been more different from King's. It was founded as a science-focused college but, probably in reaction to this emphasis, an Arts Subcommittee was founded; not surprisingly, it also became a centre for the history of science. In his own words David was 'excited by the modernity', 'fell in love with the architecture' and thought it was 'thrilling'. In the face of considerable opposition,<sup>2</sup> David supported the building of a chapel in 1967. The chapel was allowed to be 'at' the college rather than 'in' the college, and occupied a space on the boundary of the college lands. Roman Catholic mass was regularly held in the chapel, and David ensured that the university's Roman Catholic chaplain had dining rights at Churchill. David was at the centre of the discussion of whether the college should accept women, and in the course of the debate, he was led round eventually to accepting them, and then deciding on the particulars (e.g., as to whether they should have ground floor rooms in the college). He was partly persuaded by the quality he had experienced when he taught for the women's colleges. His comment on the women that Churchill eventually accepted was: 'By golly they were brilliant'. The fact that the college was Winston Churchill's memorial affected many of the decisions that were made there, and David doubtless exercised his natural legalistic arguments in these matters. It may have been no coincidence that many of his students in Churchill went into law. David remembers that the students of Churchill were remarkably quiet and undemonstrative during the turbulent period of the later '60s. In his preface to the edition of the *Ethics* of Peter Abelard, he wrote: 'As the College is now just ten years old, it is perhaps permissible here to celebrate the generous, friendly, and enlightened way in which it fosters the *artes*.'

In 1972 David was appointed Professor of Medieval History at the University of Sheffield, at the remarkably young age of 34.<sup>3</sup> He became one of the two professors in the History Department (the other being in Modern History). This marked a great change in his life. The city of Sheffield was firmly in the North of England, nestling into the foothills of the Pennines that divide Yorkshire from Lancashire. Hardly any street was flat, and many of them had names indicating their gradient: the University was on Western Bank in Broomhill, David's family house was first on Totley Rise, and finally

<sup>2</sup>Francis Crick resigned his fellowship when a chapel was approved, on the grounds that an institution of higher education, dedicated to science and technology, had no business supporting superstition (<https://c20society.org.uk/building-of-the-month/the-chapel-at-churchill-college-cambridge>: article by Mark Goldie).

<sup>3</sup> In fact he was still only 32 when he was interviewed for and was offered the post in 1971. He had earned a sabbatical from Churchill and was allowed to take it (Sandy Grant took his place as a temporary lecturer).

on Endcliffe Hall Avenue. The city was notorious for its wet weather, but also for the Northern pluck of its inhabitants. Here David settled for the rest of his life. His family remembers fondly the home he created in Sheffield which was full of noise and life, where David enjoyed teaching his children French cricket on the lawn, swatting wasps at every meal he insisted they ate outdoors in summer, and spending bonfire night on the top lawn watching everyone else's fireworks whilst writing their names in the air with sparklers. His wife taught sciences at the local Catholic Secondary School, Notre Dame. They spent their family holidays in France, but also visited David's brother, Kevin, on Mull. His children in turn married and had children, and were much loved by David. As his family states, 'David was proud of his children's achievements and took a lot of interest in all that we did, whilst trying not to show it'. They also tell us of his Advent Parties and Christmas Day, when he presided at the head of the table. His best-loved Christmas cracker joke was: 'What is a historian's favourite fruit ... Dates'.

The University History department, when David arrived, was located on Floor 9 of the Arts Tower, famous for its revolving Paternoster Lift. He took over from Edward Miller, who had returned to Cambridge as Master of Fitzwilliam College. He joined three other medievalists, Robin Jeffs, R.I. (Bob) Moore, and Edmund King, and he would later be party to the appointments of Simon Loseby, Sarah Foot, Daniel Power, and Simon Walker, along with numerous research fellows and temporary lecturers. For many generations of history students, David would be the first lecturer whom they met, for he taught the survey course on medieval Europe, which was then compulsory. There was much discussion – some of it heated – about the syllabus in his early years. He stayed above the battle, in part because of his concern to preserve a united front with the Professor of Modern History, Kenneth Haley (as he would with his successors, Patrick Collinson and Sir Ian Kershaw). He made it a priority to foster postgraduate and postdoctoral work in the Department.

In the 1980s he was appointed Deputy Dean, and then Dean, of the Faculty of Arts; he was Pro-Vice-Chancellor from 1990 to 1994, Chairman of the Humanities Research Institute (HRI) from 1992 and Research Director for Arts and Humanities from 1994 until his retirement in 2003. David was the first Chairman of HRI, which was awarded the first of the University's Queen's Anniversary Prizes during his tenureship in 1998. The citation noted that 'the HRI is making major landmarks in literary and cultural heritage directly available to both the academic community and to a much wider public audience'. On two occasions he served as President of the Sheffield branch of the Association of University Teachers (AUT – now University and College Union). In all that he did he was known for his kindness, his loyalty, his reliability, his honesty, his support, and his dry wit.

Alongside his administrative responsibilities David was able to pursue his academic interests throughout his life. His PhD had already focused on Peter Abelard (c. 1079 – 21

April 1142), who must have intrigued him as much for his views on clarity of argumentation, theology and truth, as for his character and the vicissitudes of his personal life. A series of articles ('Towards a new edition of Peter Abelard's *Ethica...*', 'Berengar, defender of Peter Abelard', 'Nature in the thought of Peter Abelard', 'The authorship of the *Ysagoge in theologia*') already paved the way for his first two books: the already-mentioned *The School of Peter Abelard: The Influence of Abelard's Thought in the Early Scholastic Period* (1969),<sup>4</sup> and his edition with English translation of Peter Abelard's *Ethics* (1971).<sup>5</sup>

David liked to think of *The School of Peter Abelard* as providing 'a new starting point' for the 'study of Abelard written in English', which coincided with new developments in continental scholarship (especially Jean Jolivet's *Arts du langage et théologie chez Abélard*, also of 1969<sup>6</sup> and the editorial work of Eligius Buytaert; see below). John Marenbon has described *The School of Peter Abelard* as a 'classic of medieval scholarship' (p. xiii) and a masterpiece of 'laconic eloquence'. Like a lawyer, David resolved the arguments of previous scholars about so many points of Peter Abelard's life and firmly established him as the innovator of logical arguments leading to an understanding of God. Abelard appears to have been the first to use some new translations of Aristotle's logical works from the Greek, and was largely responsible for making both *theologia* and *anthropologia* (his own terms) subjects of their own.<sup>7</sup>

David's edition (with English translation) of Peter Abelard's *Ethics* followed two years later (1971).<sup>8</sup> David was attracted by the unsettled, chaotic life of Peter Abelard (compared with that of his 12th-century contemporaries – and his own!) and obviously enjoyed the text of the *Ethics*, which (as he states in his introduction) was 'bracing and exciting in its argumentation. It is also somewhat spicy, for Abelard had a vivid sexual imagination'; it leads us 'to the reappraisal of the real world of practical and social endeavour'.

Already during his period of Abelard studies David was broadening his scope, as can be seen from the large number of perceptive and substantial reviews he wrote, which ranged from monasticism, through theology, and medieval scholars, medicine, to history, although always concentrating on the 12th century. The number and regularity of his reviews shows how committed he was to furthering the scholarship of his peers.

A major development in Abelardian scholarship was David's commitment to con-

<sup>4</sup> *Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought*, 2: 14 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

<sup>5</sup> Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>6</sup> *Etudes de philosophie médiévale*, 57 (Librairie philosophique; J. Vrin).

<sup>7</sup> Thirty years later he wrote 'The School of Peter Abelard Revisited', *Vivarium*, 30 (1992), 127–38.

<sup>8</sup> This book was, in turn, followed three years later by David's 'The Ethics of Abelard: Some Further Considerations', in E.M. Buytaert (ed.), *Peter Abelard (Mediaevalia Lovaniensia*, 1: 2; Leuven, 1974), pp. 65–.

tinuing the task of editing the *Opera theologica* of Peter Abelard, which had occupied a succession of highly-gifted scholars from François d'Amboise and André Duchesne (1616), to Victor Cousin (1836), and, most recently, the Franciscan Eligius M. Buytaert (1969 and 1974), who died in 1975 and whose papers on Abelard's theological works were handed over to David. In 1981 David was offered a generous Leverhulme grant specifically to make these editions, and employed four research assistants, Julia Barrow, Charles Burnett and (later) Constant Mews and Katherine Keats-Rohan, who set about the task under his wise and thoroughly practical supervision. This resulted in the definitive list of Abelard's writings, and the manuscripts containing them, published as 'A Checklist of the Manuscripts Containing Writings of Peter Abelard and Heloise and Other Works Closely Associated with Abelard and his School' (Burnett, Luscombe and Barrow), in *Revue d'histoire des textes*, 14-15 (1984-85), pp. 183-302, and a series of editions (Burnett: *Soliloquium*, *Expositio Orationis Dominicae* "Multorum legimus orationes", *Confessio fidei* "Universis", *Confessio fidei ad Heloisam*, *Abbreviatio expositionis in Hexameron*; Barrow: 'Tractatus Magistri Petri Abaelardi De sacramento altaris' (part of *Sic et Non*); Mews: *Theologia Summi boni* and *Theologia* 'Scholarium' (both completions of Buytaert's work), *Liber sententiarum magistri Petri* (extracted from the works condemning Abelard's doctrine, in connection with the Council of Sens (1141)), together with his own edition of the *Sententie magistri Petri Abaelardi*, and his revision of Mary Romig's *Expositio in Hexameron*.<sup>9</sup>

During his tenure of the Sheffield professorship his research extended to other subjects too: especially the writings of John of Salisbury (Abelard's pupil) and Denis the Pseudo-Areopagite. He also wrote authoritative articles for *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (eds Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, Jan Pinborg, Cambridge University Press, 1982: 'Natural morality and natural law'), *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought, c.350-c.1450* (ed. J. Burns, Cambridge University Press, 1988: 'The Formation of Political Thought in the West' and 'The Twelfth-Century Renaissance' (with G.R. Evans)); and *A History of Twelfth-Century Western Philosophy* (ed. Peter Dronke, Cambridge University Press, 1988: 'Peter Abelard'). He produced with Christopher Brooke a new edition of David Knowles's *The Evolution of Medieval Thought* (1988), and with Jonathan Riley-Smith *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, 4, c. 1024 – c. 1198 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; his own chapter was on 'Thought and Learning'), and wrote his own summary in 1997: *Medieval Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), which was translated into Portuguese and Greek.

Distinctions and responsibilities nationally and internationally followed his professorship. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1986, where he was

<sup>9</sup>Most of these texts were published with corrections in *Petrus Abaelardus, Opera theologica*, 3 vols. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 2301 pp.

Publications Secretary from 1990 to 1997 and a member of the Council.<sup>10</sup> For many years he was the chair of the British Academy's Medieval Text Committee, and oversaw the publication in the *Auctores Britannici Medii Aevi* series of many texts by British Authors, mainly of philosophical or theological content (William of Ockham, Richard Rufus of Cornwall, Adam of Bockenfield, Roger Bacon, John Wyclif, Robert Grosseteste, Robert Kilwardby, Henry of Harclay and others). He led a subcommittee whose task was to catalogue all the manuscripts of Aristotle's works in British Libraries, to complement catalogues of such manuscripts in other countries. This eventually led to the publication of the three volumes of the *Catalogue of Medieval Manuscripts of Latin Commentaries on Aristotle in British Libraries*, 2011-2020 (by Rodney M. Thomson and Pamela Robinson, under his editorship; Turnhout: Brepols).

In 1995 David won a five-year Leverhulme Personal Research Professorship at Sheffield, which lessened his teaching load. In 2003 he was obliged to take retirement and became an emeritus professor in Sheffield University. But he continued to play an active role in the history department. His service and the excellence of his scholarship was acknowledged in the conferral of the degree of DLitt, *honoris causa*, by the university in 2013, and an annual prize in history was set up in his name. In 2011 a *Festschrift* was published in his honour, *Knowledge, Discipline and Power in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honour of David Luscombe*, edited by Joseph Canning, Edmund King and Martial Staub (Leiden: Brill). It was fitting that it was presented to him by one of his former students, Dr Sylvia Dunkley, who was at the time the Lord Mayor of Sheffield.

On an international level David was actively involved in the Société internationale pour l'Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale (SIEPM), of which he was made a Vice-President and became its President from 1997 to 2002. He won the American Historical Association's Franklin Jameson Award in 2015. He was a frequent attendee of international conferences, partly in his role as Vice-President and then President of the SIEPM, but also as a distinguished visitor or invitee to Chartres, Paris, Boston, Japan and other places.<sup>11</sup>

David bucked the trend in English scholarship in writing about medieval philosophy, which was not regarded as a separate discipline, and was more developed as a subject in its own right on the Continent and in North America. But David would insist that his

<sup>10</sup> As Publications Secretary, David oversaw two significant innovations in the British Academy's publications programme. The Academy first started holding academic symposia that could then be published as volumes within the *Proceedings of the British Academy* series. And the Publications Committee made the decision that the Academy should publish career-establishing monographs by British Academy Postdoctoral Fellows (with the first two volumes appearing in 1998).

<sup>11</sup> A lecture course in Japan in 1996 resulted in the publication of a book in Japanese on the subject of *The Twelfth-Century Renaissance: Monks, Scholars and the Shaping of the European Mind* (12 セイキルネサンス : シュウドウシ ガクシャ ソシテ ヨーロッパ セイシン ノ ケイセイ Jūnī seiki renesensu: shūdōshi gakusha yūroppa seishin no keisei, Tokyo: Keio University Press, 2000).

interest should be described as ‘medieval thought’ rather than ‘medieval philosophy’. In his history of British scholarship Luscombe explains, ‘medieval thought is a loose but convenient term indicating ... a range of intellectual endeavour that embraces the arts of the trivium ... and the quadrivium ..., as well as other branches of philosophy such as psychology, metaphysics, ethics, the natural and medical sciences, and also law and theology’.<sup>12</sup>

David was active in scholarship to the end of his life. He edited, with Lisa Liddy and David Hey, the cartulary of Beauchief Abbey, an important Premonstratensian house, now in the Sheffield suburbs. But, above all, he culminated his work on Abelard with his edition of *The Letter Collection of Peter Abelard and Heloise*, accompanied by a revised translation after the translation by Betty Radice. This was published by *Oxford Medieval Texts* in 2013 and consisted of 790 pages, which reflects on the meticulousness in which he described all the manuscripts of the collection, and the notes in which he related the contents of the letters to the events in the lives of the couple, and Peter Abelard’s other works. The publication was described in the *Times Literary Supplement* as ‘a veritable Abelardian encyclopedia’, and as a result he was awarded the British Academy Medal for outstanding academic achievement in 2014. One of his last works was the re-publication of the most important of his articles on Peter Abelard and Heloise in the *Variorum Collected Studies* series (Farnham, 2018).<sup>13</sup> According to his family, David often said that he had never worked a day in his life as he loved his work, and he never really retired.

All of those who have worked with David have expressed their gratitude for his ‘paintstaking attention’. Whether he was reading Latin manuscripts, or the works of students and colleagues, he was extraordinarily attentive to the details, and rarely made mistakes. Many people have experienced his marginalia to their drafts in tiny, but always clear, handwriting. He was always encouraging, and keen to foster other people’s work rather than his own. His colleagues in Sheffield described him as ‘a man of great personal charm, a committed and scrupulous teacher, and a scholar of great distinction; he played a formative role in our work for fifty years’. He will be remembered as a guiding light in medieval thought, not just in the UK but worldwide.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Medieval Thought’, in Alan Deyermond (ed.), *A Century of British Medieval Studies (British Academy Centenary Monographs)* (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 611–630, at 611.

<sup>13</sup> This collection includes ‘From Paris to the Paraclete: The correspondence of Abelard and Heloise’, the British Academy Raleigh Lecture on History given by David in 1988 (originally published in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 74).

*Acknowledgements*

I am grateful to the following sources:

- ‘David Edward Luscombe, FBA: A note on early life and scholarly formation’, dated 1 January 2014 (autobiographical note deposited in British Academy Archives).  
 David Luscombe in conversation with Mark Goldie, Churchill College, 5 December 2017 (Churchill College, Oral History Archive).  
 The notice by the Department of History, Sheffield University announcing David’s death. Newsletter, 16 September 2021.  
 Christopher Brooke, ‘David Luscombe: an Appreciation’, in Joseph Canning, Edmund King and Martial Staub (eds), *Knowledge, Discipline and Power in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honour of David Luscombe* (*Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters*, 106; Brill, 2011), pp. 1–5.  
 John Marenbon, ‘David Luscombe, 1938–2021’, *Bulletin de Philosophie Médiévale*, 63 (2021), pp. vii–xvi.

I am grateful to Nick Luscombe and Amanda Luscombe for providing a copy of the eulogy given by David’s family at the time of the funeral, and Edmund King for various documents, advice and additions.

*Note on the author:* Charles Burnett is Emeritus Professor, Warburg Institute, University of London. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1998.

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