

PLATE XXXI



DOROTHY WHITELOCK

Elliott & Fry

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1901–1982

DOROTHY WHITELOCK was born in Leeds on 11 November 1901, the feast of St Martin, a date in which she later delighted. 'I am so glad', she wrote in 1980 in one of the last letters to her publishers, 'to have St. Martin as a patron; St. Dorothy was only one of those virgin saints, whereas Martin did things.' The comment is a key to the character of this industrious, thoughtful Yorkshirewoman who did so much to mould Old English Studies in the mid-twentieth century. She was brought up in Yorkshire in a family deeply rooted in the shire and all its traditions. Her father died when she was only 2, leaving the family with considerable financial struggle. Dorothy who was the youngest of his six children always spoke warmly of the way her mother coped with the situation, so that if there was not plenty there was not want and the children as far as was possible were given the education that would open up their proper chances in life. For Dorothy that meant the academic life and she remembered later in life saying at a very early age, to the surprise of her family, that she wished one day to go to university. She was an excellent pupil at a very good school, Leeds High School, where she was given her essential grounding in language and literature. At the age of 18 she was awarded a place at Newnham, but sensibly spent a year at Leeds University before going up to Cambridge in October 1921, where she elected to read the relatively new Section B of the English Tripos under the direction of Professor H. M. Chadwick. It is not now easy to reconstruct the Cambridge of those days. The gulf between ex-servicemen and those straight from school was wider than after 1945 and the womens' colleges were small and regarded with suspicion by some and with open hostility by others. The majority, however, recognized their worth and welcomed the presence of able women undergraduates and of distinguished women scholars among the senior academics. Dorothy was one of only four students of her year to be reading English B, which involved much Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse and a certain amount of archaeology and wider historical study. Mrs Kathleen Ede (née Bond) who was a contemporary and who remained a firm friend throughout her life writes 'from the

beginning it was clear that she was a real scholar, far in advance of the rest of us. I believe she had a year at Leeds University before coming to Cambridge and she was certainly a more mature student. She had no use for research or teaching that was not genuine and honest; she was always appreciative of real scholarship.' The Dorothy Whitelock that we came to know later emerges full grown from this comment. She was small, elegant, frail-looking and to some extent frail, subject from time to time to attacks of migraine, but capable of long hours of work. She was no games player, not even a cyclist, but was a great walker who came to know Cambridge well from her secure base at Newnham with its gardens and opportunity for intellectual discussion. For she had and maintained a great capacity for friendship, though cautious in judgement and shrewd in her assessment of people. In proper Yorkshire fashion she did not suffer fools gladly, but willingly gave many the benefit of the doubt to a quite astonishing degree. The greatest intellectual influence on her at this stage was undoubtedly Professor Chadwick who was her principal teacher for English B. Amused by his eccentricities Dorothy revered him and, together with others of her generation, advanced knowledge along lines of thought and investigation that had been opened by him, notably in his early studies on Anglo-Saxon institutions. If in later years she sometimes felt that both Nora and Henry Chadwick had strayed too far along Celtic paths (among others), she never lost her respect and affection for them as scholars and friends. Cyril Fox, new to Cambridge, and full of the excitement of recent archaeological discovery, was another powerful influence and so, too, was Anna Paues, a fine and to all account formidable teacher of philology and phonetics. No one was surprised when Dorothy achieved a first class in this difficult Section of the Tripos. She was not as much at home in English A which she took as her Part II but even so enjoyed much of it and especially the lectures of G. C. Coulton, Stanley Bennett, and I. A. Richards. Among her tutors she remembered best Mrs Joan Bennett. Encouraged by Chadwick she moved into full-time research, holding the Marion Kennedy studentship at Newnham, 1924-6, the Cambridge University Studentship at the University of Uppsala, 1927-9, and the Allen Studentship of Cambridge in 1929-30. Anna Paues was instrumental in persuading her to take the Uppsala Fellowship, a considerable achievement, for Dorothy always travelled as little as possible, partly because she found travel a physical strain and partly because she hated to be away too long from her books and good libraries. The grant of the Allen

Studentship was particularly meritorious and she appears to have been the first woman to hold that prestigious award. The fruits of all this labour, six years exceedingly hard work, were twofold. She acquired a mastery of the technical side of one of the disciplines she was to make her own, a refined control of the Old Norse she had studied as an undergraduate, good modern Swedish, and basic skills in diplomatic. She also discovered, although this was not immediately apparent to all, a gift for social history of the most advanced type. In 1930 she published her first book, *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, a work which provides in method and content one of the best guides to the study of late Anglo-Saxon society. Accuracy and precision in the language disciplines is matched by an acute awareness of what the evidence can tell us of the realities of social life, the transmission of land and property, rules of inheritance, the tenacity of kindred ties and obligations. The observant eye of Marc Bloch in an early number of the *Annales d'Histoire Économique et Sociale* noted the value of her contribution and lamented the absence on the French side of the Channel of a comparable edition of these important *donations à cause de mort*.

There was, however, no immediate follow-up. Whether things would have been different if at this stage she had been appointed to a Cambridge rather than to an Oxford post is hard to say. Probably not, as the pressing need at both universities in the 1930s was for conscientious teaching in the language discipline, and it is possible that Cambridge would have been even more difficult than Oxford for a teacher of Dorothy Whitelock's temperament and interests. As it was she was appointed to a post at St Hilda's, where she made her home for more than a quarter of a century.

It is clear from what her friends say and from what she herself did not say that her early years at Oxford were hard. English was a popular school and this meant an immense weight of tutorial work, particularly in a college as small as St Hilda's with its 100 or so students and only six tutorial Fellows. Dorothy herself was a lecturer without rights or tenure for her first six years and was not appointed Tutor until 1936 and Fellow in 1937. There were natural compensations. During these years she acquired full confidence in her subject and in her ability to teach it. She made many permanent friends among her pupils who came increasingly to appreciate the young scholar, at first sight somewhat austere, who would recognize their problems in what to most was an extremely difficult element in the English syllabus, all the more terrifying because it was compulsory. She was good with the high-fliers who came her way but won a solid reputation for her sympathetic

handling of those to whom the language of *Beowulf* threatened to be the monster that destroyed all hopes of success and pleasure in the English School. She did not, however, fit easily herself into a School where, though the language interest was strong, there rested an uneasy suspicion of the Chadwickian historical and archaeological approach. Dr Kenneth Sisam became and remained a good friend and so did Professor and Mrs Stenton (as they then were) at Reading. Among the historians Sir Maurice Powicke provided kind support. She delighted in the companionship of Dr Kathleen Major whom she later served as Vice-Principal, and of Dame Helen Gardner with whom she worked closely from 1941–56. As Mrs Wallace-Hadrill writes in a personal letter which recalls the teaching in the English School, ‘there were indeed giants in those days’. Dame Helen herself reminds us in a memoir of Dorothy written for St Hilda’s of the comic side to what was essentially a very balanced academic existence, never quite at home with cigarette smoking, never quite at home as a dog-lover: yet dutifully conforming to both addictions. She also tells a revealing story of Dorothy the disciplinarian as Vice-Principal for once (and she was the kindest of persons) refusing mediation on behalf of one defaulter: ‘She has told lie after lie’, said Dorothy, ‘and they were not even good lies!’ Involvement in teaching and college affairs was intense. She was awarded a Leverhulme Fellowship in 1939 but war made leave impossible, so that for the first fifteen years of her career she taught full-time and at full stretch. In such circumstances it is no surprise that her productive work ceased in the early years, though markers to future progress appeared in a note on Wulfstan in 1937 and then in 1939 in her splendid edition of the *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, which established her reputation firmly as one of the leading authorities on the later Anglo-Saxon period. The war years proved busy both in teaching and administration. She became president of the Viking Society for Northern Research (1940–1) and editor of the *Saga-Book*. Her essay in that journal in 1941 on the conversion of the Danelaw deepened knowledge not only of the conversion itself but of the whole process of Scandinavian settlement in England. In a paper on ‘Wulfstan and the so-called Laws of Edward and Guthrum’ (*EHR*, 1941) she made a significant correction to the work of Felix Liebermann, a scholar whom she held in the greatest respect. An article in the *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (1942) on Wulfstan as homilist and statesman rounded off one aspect of her Wulfstan studies and prepared the ground for her analysis of Wulfstan’s contribution to the Laws of Cnut which

was published in *EHR* (1948), with a confirmatory note added in 1955 in which she argued against some of Karl Jost's ideas. Publication in *EHR* brought her into close touch with the editor, Professor Goronwy Edwards, who remained a firm friend; and her reputation grew in the historical field as much if not more than in the literary. She had been a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society from as far back as 1930 and was elected to its Council (1945–8). She became a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1945. She was well poised to emerge as one of the leading figures in the post-war scholarly world. When the key post in Anglo-Saxon studies at Oxford fell vacant in 1945 on Tolkien's translation to the Merton chair she was a powerful candidate. Stenton and Sisam both supported her, but the election fell in fact on C. L. Wrenn. The admitted disappointment left no enduring mark and the first decade after the war proved one of the most productive periods in a very productive career. Her literary expertise, sharpened by intense tutoring over many years, was shown in a paper on 'Anglo-Saxon Poetry and the Historian', and an acute and penetrating analysis of the 'Seafarer', in which she placed the poem fairly and squarely in the context of Christian attitudes to penitential exile. She made permanent contributions to *Beowulf* studies in a set of three lectures given at London University and published under the title *The Audience of Beowulf* in 1951. Her cautious but firm statement of case for an eighth-century origin to the poem still wins wide acceptance. It was now, too, that her full stature as a historian became apparent. Penguin publishers had the good sense to ask her to contribute a volume on the Anglo-Saxon period to their very influential *Social History of England*. The result was a book not only good in its own right but also important as an example of how very intractable and scrappy basic material could be used fairly to recreate the sense of a living society in the past. Complementary to Stenton's *Anglo-Saxon England* (regarded by Dorothy Whitelock as one of the great books of the century), it probes the social structures of early England with a series of original observations relating to family life, kindred organization and the realities of human life, marriage, wills, and disposition of property, always based on evidence. 'I like facts', she wrote in one of her later letters, and the reader of her social history always has the comforting feeling that no general statement is made without serious factual support. Two years later in 1954 the full weight of her scholarship was experienced with the production of the facsimile volume of the Peterborough Chronicle in an early fascicule of the series *Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile* (Copenhagen,

1954), and in the following year appeared her masterly collection of documents in the first volume of *English Historical Documents*, over a thousand pages of ripe scholarship, including not only a mass of reliable translation from Latin and Anglo-Saxon but also shrewd comments on diplomatic connected with the manuscript sources, and excellent bibliographical information. For many, particularly for those with little command of Anglo-Saxon, the book opened up the whole period to serious investigation. Recognition now came thick and fast. She had already proceeded to the degree of Litt.D. at Cambridge in 1950. In 1956 she was elected a Fellow of the British Academy and in the following year she became, on the retirement of Professor Bruce Dickins, Elrington and Bosworth Professor at her home university of Cambridge, coupled with a professorial fellowship at her old college at Newnham. St Hilda's in deep appreciation of her services as a teacher and as Vice-Principal (1950-6) elected her to an honorary fellowship, a distinction which gave her great pleasure.

Inaugural lectures are sometimes revealing and so it proved to be with Dorothy Whitelock who chose as her theme 'Changing Currents in Anglo-Saxon Studies'. Her correspondence shows that she worried a great deal over the framing of her arguments in this lecture, though the main message is clear enough. She aimed at something approaching a totality of approach with her personal emphasis now heavily on the historical side. It is significant that when she talked to the local press at Cambridge about her appointment she described herself as an 'Anglo-Saxon historian', and welcomed her election for the prospect it gave her of more time for work in that field. Indeed the first paper she published after her succession to the chair, appropriately in a volume produced as a tribute to her predecessor, is one of the most historical of all her writings, an analysis of the way in which the late Old English kings intruded southerners into high office in Northumbria in their attempts to create a true kingdom of England. Historical interests remained strong throughout her tenure of the chair. She brought up to date Stevenson's edition of *Asser's Life of Alfred* in 1959 and then spent much time and energy defending the authenticity of Asser against attack. Some of her weakness as well as her strength came out in the course of this controversy. Scholarship was serious business and she could not understand (condone is almost the right word) the lightness of touch with which Professor Galbraith, for example, whose work she respected greatly in other fields, could launch an onslaught against Asser on grounds that she saw as inadequate and indeed

which she ultimately demonstrated were inadequate. She hated the waste of time involved in controversy, though she was formidable in argument, particularly if she sensed what she took to be ill-considered attacks on the views of people she trusted and respected, such as Sir Frank Stenton, Florence Harmer, or— one should perhaps add— Bede, Asser, or King Alfred! To grapple with the evidence and to try to make sense of it was time-consuming enough. This sometimes made her too wary of those who acted almost by instinct against so-called ‘received opinion’ and too sceptical of the intuitive. Her work on the Chronicle reached its culmination in her revised translation based on the sections in the first two volumes of *English Historical Documents* (by Dorothy herself and by Miss Susie Tucker), which appeared in 1961 and which remains a standard reliable version. She continued her studies of the tenth- and eleventh-century reformation with an important introduction to E. O. Blake’s edition of the *Liber Eliensis* for the Camden Society (1962), a revised edition of her *Sermo Lupi* (1963), and a series of essays in *Festschriften* to F. P. Magoun (1965), Stefan Einarsson (1968), and—after her retirement—to H. D. Meritt (1970). Her contribution, the major contribution, to the splendid edition of *The Will of Aethelgifu* for the Roxburghe Club (1968) brings out at its best her mature perception as a social historian of the realities of tenth-century rural life on the great estates of an Anglo-Saxon princess. She delighted in her discovery of an unfree priest in the Home Counties and rejoiced at the humanity of Aethelgifu with her attitude to manumission and strong preference for freeing the young. Her remarkable scholarly energies were not directed exclusively to her historical studies. She published in 1967 a revised version of Sweet’s *Anglo-Saxon Reader*, providing it with an up-to-date glossary, modifying the selections and making it a much more humane introduction to the language and civilization than its somewhat austere forerunners. She continued her active support of numismatic studies (a paper in the tribute to Sir Frank Stenton in 1961 and membership of the Sylloge committee of the British Academy), of the Viking Society, of the English Place-Name Society, and of the new Society for Medieval Archaeology, of which she was Vice-President for its first six years (1957–63). Underlying all this activity, cognate with the Asser controversy, there developed one main line of investigation, a deep and abiding interest in the work of King Alfred. Her brilliant Gollancz Memorial lecture for the Academy on the ‘Old English Bede’ (published in 1962) showed that there could be no certainty that the work was King Alfred’s, though there

remained a probability that it was undertaken at his instigation by West Mercian scholars and that its popular impact should be considered in traditional fashion as part of the king's educational programme. An important general statement in *Continuations and Beginnings* (ed. E. G. Stanley, 1966) on the prose of Alfred's reign laid down the canon of orthodoxy for modern views of Alfred's achievements in that field. Her essay on 'William of Malmesbury and the Works of King Alfred' in the Festschrift to G. N. Garmonsway (1968) probed deep into later medieval sources for genuine information about the West Saxon king. In a multitude of other ways, occasional lecturing (never popular lecturing in the ordinary sense: 'there is no point in lecturing unless you have something new to say' was her somewhat austere comment), in maintaining a tremendous flow of learned correspondence, in encouraging the young, and in placing a brake on the enthusiasms of some who had the good sense to consult her, she provided leadership in Anglo-Saxon studies for a host of scholars throughout the world. The slightest serious query would often provoke an answer many pages long, not always in the most decipherable of handwriting, full of exact references, a labour which must have involved many hours of patient toil. She would attempt to disarm attacks of conscience which would then regularly overtake her questioners by saying that she had been meaning for some time to look at the evidence again or that she was glad of an opportunity to look at this or that text, but we all knew that the help she gave was the product of a truly generous nature. National recognition came in 1964 with the award of a CBE in the birthday honours. She also took very seriously indeed the more mundane tasks associated with the headship of department, and the Anglo-Saxon Tripos developed under her firm guidance into a most attractive and vigorous school, which drew to it students whose initial degrees had been taken elsewhere, as well as purely Cambridge students. She was helped in this greatly by the colleagues grouped around her, by the fine scholar Peter Hunter Blair at the height of his powers as an interpreter of Bede and of Northumbrian history, and by the two younger men who succeeded to her chair in turn, Dr Peter Clemons in Anglo-Saxon and Dr Raymond Page in Scandinavian studies. Mrs Chadwick gave support on the Celtic side initially until she was succeeded by Kathleen Hughes. Kathleen became one of Dorothy's closest and dearest friends, whose academic achievements and teaching skill she greatly admired. Her illness and ultimate early death (in 1977) proved a lasting grief. In the mid-sixties this formidable team of creative

scholars provided as fine a training ground for young undergraduates or graduates as was to be found anywhere in the world: and Dorothy was the acknowledged leader, advising, steering through difficulties, anxious about standards but also about people, playing a full and active part in the inevitable round of college and university politics, rejoicing greatly when she could achieve her ends by what she called 'small administrative changes'. Towards the end of her tenure she realized increasingly that the rightful place for the *Tripod* was in its ancient home under the general protection of the English School; and her achievement of that end proved painless, a masterpiece in the art of the possible in university politics.

She retired in 1969, received the general accolade of friends and fellow-scholars in a *Festschrift* edited by her successor, Peter Clemons and by Kathleen Hughes, and then entered into a further decade of fruitful scholarship. Faced with the task of moving out of college after close on fifty years as a resident student and scholar she sensibly joined forces with her widowed sister, Mrs Phyllis Priestley, and set up house in what became a real home in Cambridge; and 30 Thornton Close became an address to which scholars from all over the world came to enjoy hospitality and discussion and friendship. Her last years in the chair had been clouded by the death of good friends, notably her brother-in-law George Priestley and, in October 1967, Sir Frank Stenton. Sir Frank had been a constant source of encouragement and support from her earliest days and she felt the loss deeply. She wrote a memoir of him for the *English Historical Review*, though in a revealing comment in a private letter to Mr Christopher Blunt she told of her feelings of inadequacy: 'I am after all', she wrote, 'not a real historian and it requires someone with a better range than mine to describe the greatest historian since Maitland.' She admired Sir Frank not only for his scholarship but for his behaviour and relied heavily on his good judgement on anything she had written. Working closely with Lady Stenton she helped to publish his surviving papers and also to complete a revision of his great standard book on *Anglo-Saxon England* in 1971. She also succeeded to two of his key offices, the chairmanship of the *Sylloge* Committee which she held from 1967 to 1978 and the presidency of the English Place-Name Society which she held from 1967 to 1979. In both these offices she proved an energetic and constructive guide. Her own output continued to be significant, adding greatly to general knowledge of the East Anglian situation, and of Bury St Edmunds; and building up a realistic picture of the society that

grew up in the Danelaw. Of the honours that came to her in her later years she rejoiced especially in the honorary fellowship granted to her by her own college at Newnham, and at the honorary doctorate awarded to her by Leeds University. She continued to act as a supporter and adviser of many learned societies, and was greatly respected in the British Academy itself. For Anglo-Saxon studies generally, as her successor, Professor Clemoes, has testified, she remained a great source of strength at Cambridge, never interfering but always available for consultation whether on points of detail or of policy. In what were to prove sadly the last years of her life she still had three major academic projects in mind. She brought out in 1979 an impressive revision of her volume of *English Historical Documents*, unaltered in main structure but full of important minor emendments and extra bibliographical guides that brought it fully up to date. Working with Professor Christopher Brooke and Martin Brett she played a vital part in producing the important *Councils and Synods*, for which she had responsibility for the whole period before 1066. Professor Brooke comments that she was 'a marvellous collaborator: steady and punctual and totally uncomplaining' and adds that the example she gave, though the useful if partly mechanical labour inevitably diverted her from more creative work, still rests in his mind as 'an example of scholarship freely given out of pure conscience' with indeed a heroic quality to it. She read the proofs, but only just, and was too ill to appreciate the book when it was finally published in 1980. The third of her projects, the *Life of Alfred*, remains in manuscript but is being prepared for publication by her friends and fellow scholars, Janet Bately and Simon Keynes. Her last years were afflicted by illness. A stroke in late 1980 was followed by a more severe attack in June 1981, from which she never really recovered. She was greatly supported by her friends, and above all by her sister Phyllis, but the illness inevitably gained ground and she died on 14 August 1982 at the age of 80.

Dorothy Whitelock's academic and literary achievements were great but she should also be remembered as a person who exemplified in her attitudes to scholarship her own personal tenets. She was open about her own likes and dislikes. Professor Clemoes reminded us that St Augustine of Hippo and Lord Beeching, responsible for closing the branch line to her beloved Robin Hood's Bay, were not among her favourite people. She had strong views about the Normans and was known to bridle at the suggestion that William the Conqueror had any *right* to the throne of England. Respect for evidence was the main key to her attitudes

and to her integrity. Her personal letters to fellow-scholars are full of phrases such as 'It does not quite say that.' Humility in the face of the evidence was also constantly present: 'I may be stupid [she never was!] but I cannot quite see . . .' She tempered her use of the historical imagination of which she had plenty with a good down-to-earth realism. Bede, Alfred, Edgar, Dunstan, and Wulfstan were great men but they must not be made to act as no man would have acted. She asked the right questions. Could Bede have written this note about men who were still remembered in his native Northumbria? Was it reasonable to suppose that Alfred would have made his agreement with Guthrum without some thought for the future of the Christians in East Anglia? Her fury was roused at any attempt to distort, even worse to conceal, evidence which did not square with facile preconceived general ideas. A deep distrust of anything that smacked of the irrational sometimes caused her to miss the wheat in the chaff as more romantic scholars tried to tease meaning out of records, particularly poetic records relating to the Anglo-Saxon or the Viking past. Good Yorkshire common sense was tempered by a delicious sense of humour that could be directed against herself as well as against others. She explained part of her fondness for St Martin by the fact that he gave half his only cloak to a beggar: but it is not too fanciful to recognize the nice reserve in the implication that at least he had the good sense to keep the other half himself. The quizzical look on her face as she reflected on the absurdities of some interpretations of the past or on some misreading of the evidence was the perfect reflection of her sense of proportion, as she balanced the importance of the scholarly effort with the frailty of the human scholar. Unostentatiously religious, a loyal member of the Church of England, she had friends attached to many different communions or to none. Teaching meant much to her. She expressed irritation when people, knowing the weight of her teaching load, asked her how she found time for her own work. She considered teaching her students as much her own work as her research or her writing. From all generations, from St Hilda's and from Newnham, her students paint a steady and consistent picture. They chuckle at her absorption in her work, her apparent imperviousness to the cold of the hard winter of 1947, her splendid and in the right context devastating assumption that they were as learned as she. They also recognize their good fortune in having as a tutor one who took their work seriously yet humanely and who was herself one of the leading scholars of the age.

HENRY LOYN

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