



MARJORIE REEVES

*Ramsey & Muspratt*

## Marjorie Ethel Reeves 1905–2003

MARJORIE REEVES WAS BORN on 17 July 1905 in the village of Bratton, under the Wiltshire Downs, the second daughter of Robert Reeves and Edith Whitaker. Both families were prominent in the local Baptist congregation. Her father's family owned and ran a successful iron works in the village, making agricultural and other machinery and providing steady employment for local men throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her mother's family, the Whitakers, could trace its continuous presence in Bratton from 1576. For more than two hundred years, this family showed a recognisable and recurring concern with the things of the mind. It produced a succession of vigorous long-lived women, who hoarded and preserved family papers, diaries, verses, children's books and games. In three sharply perceptive and historically detached books *Sheep-bell & Ploughshare: the story of two village families* (1978), *The Diaries of Jeffery Whitaker, schoolmaster of Bratton, 1739–1741* (1989) and *Pursuing the Muses: female education and Nonconformist culture, 1700–1900* (1997), Marjorie Reeves made effective and sympathetic use of this material, and of the living memories of her own and earlier generations to construct a remarkable picture of aspects of Wiltshire life. The village of Bratton was important in the formation of Marjorie's historical perception. She used to recall how, as a child, 'I could climb to the top of the hill above my village, and, sitting there, say "Now I can see what I belong to. I can see all its parts. I can see it all at once."' <sup>1</sup> One of her earliest memories was of the mass departure from

<sup>1</sup> 'Persons and Individuals', *Illuminatio*, 2:1 (Feb. 1948) 9.

Bratton of those local men, many of them her father's employees, who had enlisted in the army at the beginning of the Great War.

For her secondary education Marjorie was sent to the Girls' High School at Trowbridge. In those days of quiet roads, she regularly cycled to school 'with a book propped up on the handle-bars'. These were years of extensive reading, and of early engagement with historical issues. Learning about Oliver Cromwell, she used to recall, had convinced her that she herself was 'a natural Roundhead'.

In 1923 she went up to St Hugh's College, Oxford, where one of her tutors was Cecilia M. Ady, through whose teaching she had her first introduction to the history of Italy. The Oxford School of Modern History was at that time still in the Stubbesian mould, in which all undergraduates studied 'the continuous history of England' and in which constitutional law and political institutions took a central place. There was, however, a celebrated Special Subject on Dante. In Marjorie Reeves the study of Dante sparked an interest, which was to last throughout her life, in the poetic expression of visionary ideas, and the historical implications of their power.

She took a First in 1926 and, having decided upon a career in teaching, followed this immediately with the newly introduced Diploma in Education. Her first post was as a schoolteacher at the Roan School for Girls, Greenwich. Her second, between 1932 and 1938, was a lectureship in History at St Gabriel's Teachers' Training College, Camberwell. She remembered the Camberwell experience as highly stimulating, because of the way in which an able Principal recruited 'wild and unconventional colleagues, who between them succeeded in training excellent teachers for the desperately poorly equipped schools of South East London'. During the 1930s, worried by alarming developments in the Third Reich, she had already begun to speak and to write publicly about the danger of totalitarian ideologies, and about the responsibility of teachers at all levels to define and to defend Christian liberal values. She had also worked out a plan for a series of new-style historical books for schoolchildren, attractive, accessible, and strictly based on documentary material. The plan had to be shelved on the outbreak of war, but it surfaced in the post-war years as the celebrated *Then and There* series published by Longmans, for which she was to remain for many years managing editor. For this, and for her many other activities in promoting a serious approach to historical questions among the general public, she was later awarded the Medlicott Medal of the Historical Association.

When she embarked on her teaching career, her mind was still turning again and again to questions provoked by her study of Dante. She

determined to find for herself a research topic in medieval Italian history, and in 1929 registered at Westfield College. Within a few weeks she had chanced upon Émile Gebhart's *L'Italie Mystique. Histoire de la Renaissance Religieuse au Moyen Age* and found there an essay on the subject which (as it turned out) was to engage her intellectual attention for the rest of her long life, namely the Abbot Joachim of Fiore. As she recognised at the time, this was an unfashionable subject to pick in 1929. She recalled that one of her contemporaries commented 'That outlandish subject won't assist your career. You should have chosen something like "The Wardrobe under Edward II"'.<sup>2</sup> She was intrigued by what she had read about Joachim himself, and—above all—by the fact that his main works had all been printed in Venice in the early sixteenth century. Why, she asked herself, should the visionary out-pourings of a remote twelfth-century Biblical exegete have been of such interest over three hundred years later to sober Augustinian divines? She soon discovered that these Augustinians were not alone in their interest in Joachim, and that long before and long after the episode of the Venetian editions of the 1520s 'tracks led off in all directions', towards controversies central to the theology and spirituality of the entire later Middle Ages, and the period of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations: St Bonaventure had been impelled to take a view on the merits and dangers of Joachim's teachings. Joachim's ideas had also possessed a powerful attraction for some Lutherans, and for some members of the Society of Jesus. Marjorie Reeves came to focus her enquiries less upon the twelfth century than upon the wider question of Joachim's lasting influence. Her thesis, examined in 1932 by Sir Maurice Powicke and Canon Claude Jenkins, was entitled 'Studies in the reputation and influence of the Abbot Joachim of Fiore, chiefly in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries'. 'They were polite in their comments', she was to recall, 'but later I realised that they thought the whole subject rather marginal.' In 1932, she herself had some qualms, although not on the same score. She wondered whether she would convince the reader of the central historical importance of ideas as unfamiliar and strange as the ones she had been dealing with. In the preface to the thesis she wrote: 'To treat the fantastic as history may well require explanation. Most of the prophetic material upon which these studies are based . . . is bizarre, fantastic; it seems, in itself, to be quite

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all the quotations from Marjorie Reeves are taken from her autobiographical article 'A Sixty-Year Pilgrimage with the Abbot Joachim', *Florentia. Bollettino del Centro Internazinale di Studi Gioachimitti*, anno VI (1992), pp. 7–32.

worthless . . . But . . . one must recognize beneath the groundwork of normal political life, a far more general subsoil of prophetic belief, long since crumbled into superstition, than the rationalist is wont to admit.'

The thesis remained unpublished. During the 1930s Marjorie Reeves turned her attention, as we have seen, to politics and to the education of the young. In 1938 she returned to Oxford as Tutor in History to the Society of Oxford Home Students. She was one of the small band of scholars who kept alive the Oxford Faculty of Modern History during the Second World War, and at the same time she was actively involved in the transformation of the Society of Home Students, first into a permanent Private Hall of the University, and eventually into full collegiate status as St Anne's College. From 1951 to 1967 she was the college's Vice-Principal, giving sterling service to the college throughout its first great building phase, and coming up with a succession of good ideas for its welfare. One of these, widely copied since, and almost certainly no longer remembered as her innovation, was the establishment of the very first 'Middle Common Room' for postgraduate students.

Marjorie Reeves remained Senior History Tutor at St Anne's until her retirement in 1974. Her invigorating and challenging tutorials, her direct kindness, her integrity, and her often sharply radical concern with the live issues of the day inspired affection and respect in generations of undergraduates, not only members of St Anne's but those men and women from other colleges whom she taught, or who attended the fresh and combative seminars she ran under the aegis of the Student Christian Movement, then in its liberal-modernist heyday. On her retirement from her university post and college tutorship she was made an Honorary Fellow of St Anne's College. A similar honour was extended to her by her old college, St Hugh's. In 1979 she brought out *St Anne's College Oxford. An Informal History 1879–1979*. Characteristically, this elegant and entertaining essay is meticulously documented and fair-minded, as well as being refreshingly independent. It was written to coincide with a centenary appeal, just before the debate which resulted in the College being one of the first two women's colleges to open its doors to men as well as to women, as Fellows, as postgraduates and as undergraduates. This was a development which Marjorie Reeves wholeheartedly supported.

In the post-war years (1947–65) she made a valuable contribution to public policy-making. She was early a member of the Schools' Broadcasting Council, and from 1947 to 1961 of the Central Advisory Council of the Ministry of Education. She sat on the 1961–4 Robbins Committee on Higher Education which resulted in the establishment of

the first post-war wave of new universities including York, Lancaster, Sussex, Essex, Warwick, East Anglia and Kent. She published in 1965 *Eighteen Plus: Unity and Diversity in Higher Education*, and in 1988 *The Crisis in Higher Education: Competence, Delight and the Common Good*. She continued to follow with keen interest the further expansion of university education in the eighties and nineties. She had independent and progressive views on the ethical and social value of widening of opportunity, as well as some shrewd ideas on how best to cope with the financial difficulties involved in translating this aspiration into practice.

To give so much space to the public achievements of Marjorie Reeves would have fitted well with her own estimate of the short-term usefulness of her activities. It is time to return, however to the long and productive decades of her scholarly work, suspended during the years 1932–42, but resumed thereafter with unremitting vigour and success until the early years of the twenty-first century. It was in her scholarly work that she produced her most deeply considered insights, informed always by rigorous textual interpretation and by awareness of the powerful historical effects of institutions of authority. Marjorie Reeves was jolted back into the mainstream of scholarly enquiry by a chance event: Nicolai Rubinstein, knowing of her interest in Joachim, drew to her attention an article by Fritz Saxl, published in 1942. Here Saxl mentioned that Otto Pächt believed that a hitherto unstudied Oxford manuscript full of elaborate apocalyptic figures almost certainly had a Joachimist reference and probably a Joachimist provenance. The very day she received Rubinstein's letter, Marjorie Reeves went to the Bodleian full of curiosity and anticipation, and ordered up the manuscript, Corpus Christi College MS 255A. She later recalled that 'The idea of a lost set of *figurae* by Joachim had been buzzing in my mind for some time, partly because of strange figures in the Venetian editions, partly because the Franciscan Salimbene referred to a *Liber Figurarum*.' She set about making a careful step-by-step comparison of the pictures in the Corpus manuscript with the text of Salimbene's *Cronica*. 'The correspondences, both in concepts and in details, were extraordinary. The figures fitted the Abbot's idea like a glove.' She was now convinced that the Corpus manuscript was undoubtedly the 'lost' work which Salimbene had entitled the *Liber Figurarum*. Without delay she resolved to produce an edition, with the collaboration of Beatrice Hirsch-Reich. The project was still in its early stages, when, as Marjorie Reeves recalled, 'international barriers were lifted at the end of the war, and European scholarship breathed again. We then learnt that Monsignor Leone Tondelli had discovered another finely illuminated

copy of the *Liber Figurarum* in Reggio Emilia and had published an edition of it in 1939.' 'Comparison showed close correspondence between the two manuscripts, but also significant variations. The Oxford manuscript appeared to be the earlier by half-a-century or more, and it had four important *figurae* missing from the Reggio copy.' Learning of this, Monsignor Tondelli encouraged Marjorie Reeves and Beatrice Hirsch-Reich to proceed, in cooperation with himself, on a new critical edition of the *Liber Figurarum*. It was eventually published in 1972.

In 1950, for the first time ever, Marjorie Reeves was able to get away from her teaching duties and to enjoy a term's sabbatical leave in Italy. The experience of visiting Europe, so soon after the end of the war, was a liberating one, and proved to be a catalyst, a second turning point, in the progress of her studies. It enabled her to meet European scholars, including Tondelli, and it furnished her with a rich store of fresh documentary evidence, which amplified and transformed the questions she had first raised in the thesis of 1932. Treasures turned up in every library she visited—the Vatican, the Biblioteca Nazionale in Naples, Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella in Florence, the Marciana in Venice, the Antoniana in Padua, and University Library in Pavia. Many years later she could still vividly recall the sense of excitement and the feeling of 'standing at a point where half a dozen promising paths led off in different directions'.

Soon after her return from Italy she published a long article on the Corpus manuscript<sup>3</sup> followed by a succession of articles in which she sought to identify and to explore the Joachimist element in the preoccupation with prophetic spirituality shown by a wide variety of religious writers between 1300 and 1700.<sup>4</sup> This work was summed up decisively in her book: *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages*, published in 1969.

Certain problems about prophetic writing in general, and about the Joachimist component in particular, engaged her attention at this time. Were those late medieval commentators who had condemned Joachim's ideas as dangerous to the authority of the Catholic Church right? How

<sup>3</sup> 'The *Liber Figurarum* of Joachim of Fiore', *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 2 (1950), 57–81.

<sup>4</sup> 'Joachimist Expectations in the Order of Augustinian Hermits', *Recherches de Théologie ancienne et médiévale*, 22 (1958), 111–41, 'The Originality and Influence of Joachim of Fiore', *Traditio*, 36 (1980), 302–4, and 'The Abbot Joachim and the Society of Jesus', *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 5 (1961), 163–81.

radical was Joachim's *transitus* to the Third Age to be? she enquired. Did the logic of his coming new age lead inevitably to the conclusion that the institutions and authorities of the second *status* had to be abrogated? This she regarded as 'The crucial question underlying all Joachimist studies' and her answer to it was uncompromising. She found herself in disagreement with those scholars who regarded Joachim's teachings as intentionally destructive of established ecclesiastical authority. She argued that for Joachim, and for those of his followers who had understood his message, 'the Church of St Peter would endure to the end of time, although the *vita activa* of Peter had to be superseded by the *vita contemplativa* of John'. This interpretation allowed one to account for the lasting appeal of the so-called 'Pope Prophecies' (*Vaticinia de summis pontificibus*). She concluded that their appeal lay in their intrinsically paradoxical form: 'the hermit of the rocks is to become the instrument of profound spiritual reform but only when the papal electors have raised him to the highest office in the institutional Church'.

Was Joachim a millenarian? She argued that he was not. 'Joachim's Age of the Spirit was not a sudden supernatural state of blessedness imposed from above, such as many millenarians dreamed of, but the fulfilment of an internal logic in history, the cue to which lay in the divine activity which operated throughout the whole time-process.'

Why were Joachim's ideas so influential for so long? She claimed that 'his belief that the agents of divinely orchestrated change were to be human institutions and individuals' gave his teachings a kind of political attraction in all kinds of different circumstances. 'The particular agencies could become outmoded but the concept was infinitely adaptable and continued to grip the imagination of succeeding generations.'

A question she confessed herself unable to resolve was the debt of Dante to Joachim. In the case of the *Three Eagles*, and the *Trinitarian Circles* Dante's borrowing of Joachim's figurative imagery seemed certain—'but this evidence supplies no clear proof that Dante saw the future in Joachimist terms'.

In one important respect—the future role he assigns to the Roman Emperor—he clearly differed radically from Joachim. Yet the affinities between the two, in their interpretation of history as God's providential design and their search for figural signs of this purpose haunted my mind. In the use both made of the biblical figure Zorobabel at the end of the first *status*, I believed I had found evidence that Dante had actually been reading Joachim's *Liber de Concordia*. However this conjecture has so far not met with support: The relationship between these two medieval Italians remains problematical.



By 1980, the whole international landscape of Joachimist studies had changed; the Abbot and his disciples had finally ‘come in out of the cold’. As she tells us: ‘It was becoming fashionable to find the Abbot’s mark in all kinds of places.’ A two-volume work of enormous sweep published in 1978 and 1980 was that of Cardinal de Lubac, *La postérité spirituelle de Joachim de Fiore* which brought the story right up to the present day. ‘In this work he surveyed in a magnificent sweep all possible inheritors of Joachim’s perspective.’ In an important article<sup>5</sup> Marjorie Reeves expressed her scepticism about a good many of these claims. Works were not to be described as ‘Joachimist’ unless there was ‘direct evidence that their writers had direct knowledge of the Abbot or had read his works’. They had to show a precise debt to his trinitarian ideas, to use his special number-symbolism (five+seven=twelve), and to utilise Biblical figural symbols in his particular way. Simply to believe that history had three stages was, in her view, not sufficient at all. She strove hard to keep her feet on the ground, and insisted that Joachim should not be given credit—or blame—for any old prophetic visionary stuff.

In this new climate of receptivity to the idea that prophecy had been a pervasive mode of looking at the past and future of the human race, she drew on her own early work to demonstrate—with stern rigour—that among a whole host of attitudes not directly attributable to Joachimist texts, and indeed inconsistent with his teachings, there were authentic examples of the transmission of specifically Joachimist ideas. The routes of transmission of spurious and genuine Joachimist writings were many. For example, ‘Collections of pre-Reformation writings made by Protestant apologists for polemical attacks on Catholicism often contained Joachimist material.’ Prominent participants in the Catholic Reformation, such as the Jesuit Daniel Papebroch, also used for their own purposes the Joachimist idea of the *viri intellectuales* who would appear in the third age.

Marjorie Reeves was awarded a D.Litt. by Oxford University and became a Fellow of the British Academy in 1974. In 1980 a Festschrift was published in her honour, edited by Ann Williams, under the title *Prophecy and Millenarianism*. This volume included an evaluation by Sir Richard Southern of her work as an historian, and a tribute by William Lamont to her talents as a teacher. It also brought together essays by fourteen others, among them several of her collaborators and pupils. The extraordinarily broad ramifications of the study of prophetic his-

<sup>5</sup> ‘The Originality and Influence of Joachim of Fiore’, *Traditio*, 36 (1980), 307–8, 310–15.

tory can clearly be seen in this volume, and the outline of her particular scholarly role in the field shows through with diamond sharpness.

In the 1980s Marjorie Reeves collaborated with a Yeats specialist, Warwick Gould, to produce *Joachim of Fiore and the Myth of the Eternal Evangel in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1987). 'It was exciting', she wrote, 'because the nineteenth-century perspective on the twelfth-century seer was so utterly different from the medieval and renaissance images of him. Here were thinkers, in the main radicals, who had broken with the established church, yet still sought for a religious basis for their visionary society of the future.' Nineteenth-century figures fascinated by Joachim—and surprisingly well-acquainted with some of his ideas—included Mazzini, Renan, Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, George Sand. Janacek wrote a cantata based upon an 1891 poem by the Czech poet Vrchlicky, on Joachim's *Eternal Evangel*. A revised and enlarged edition entitled *Joachim of Fiore and the Myth of the Eternal Evangel in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* appeared in 2001. It took the story up to Yeats, Joyce and D. H. Lawrence.

It was in 1992 also, that her final work in the field appeared, in a collaborative volume of essays, which she conceived, planned and edited, and to which she contributed an introduction and two new essays, *Prophetic Rome in the High Renaissance Period* (1992). The volume seeks to show how in the early sixteenth century Joachimist visions of the future had a powerful appeal in the world of high international politics: would the world see a Golden Age heralded by an Angelic Pope and a Last World Emperor, or with the coming of Antichrist, would it all end in fire and blood? She alluded to the establishment of the *Centro Internazionale di Studi Gioachimiti* at S. Giovanni in Fiore, and to the congresses and publications it sponsors. 'A major task [before the scholars involved] is the promotion of modern editions of Joachim's works.' 'The Abbot may be in the process of becoming a new modern myth but this does not lessen the obligation laid on scholars to get as close to the original figure as can be achieved by meticulous work on the texts.'

Between 1992 and her death in 2003 Marjorie Reeves continued, despite increasing physical infirmity, to show her all her old alertness and intellectual vigour. She continued to take great pleasure in music, taking her friends regularly to concerts in the Sheldonian, even if it became increasingly difficult for her to get to Glyndebourne. She was often present at College guest nights, and visitors to her house in Norham Road were grilled, as always, on their own current scholarly activities, and on their reactions to topical issues of the day. She died on 27 November

2003, aged 98. In his address at her memorial service, Canon Brian Mountford, Vicar of the Oxford University Church of St Mary the Virgin, recalled that she had been for more than fifty years a regular member of that congregation and only a few weeks before her death ‘she presided at the launch in Oxford of a collection of essays and memoirs by various hands, in which she had had an editorial role. It is entitled *St Mary the Virgin University Church Oxford: the dynamics of a congregation in a century of change 1900–2000*.’ The present writer has a vivid recollection of that occasion, in which Marjorie, in the nave, discoursed to the assembled company, battling on despite considerable distraction from the sound of choir practice in the chancel. It was an entirely characteristic performance, lively, vigorous and undeterred.

Marjorie Reeves was a fluent public speaker, much in demand as a participator in conferences in Europe and the United States. Especially after her retirement, she travelled all over the world. In 1975 she spent a semester at Columbia University, New York; in 1977 she was Distinguished Professor in Medieval Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. One of her most cherished honours, because of its West Country associations, was the honorary degree awarded her by the University of Bath. Another was the award of honorary citizenship of Joachim’s native town in Calabria, in recognition of the fame she had brought to that city by securing scholarly acceptance for the importance of Joachim’s historical role. In 1996 she was made CBE for services to history. She belonged to a generation the like of which we will not see again.

GILLIAN LEWIS  
*St Anne’s College, Oxford*