

Malcolm Beckwith Parkes

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MALCOLM PARKES

Malcolm Parkes, DLitt, FBA, died on 10 May 2013 at the age of eighty-two, after a long illness.

It is a cold, foggy day in December 1971. I am sitting in Stephen Wall's room in Keble College, Oxford, immediately after lunch. The gas fire is hissing, Stephen is making small talk and we are waiting for the arrival of the other admissions interviewer. All of a sudden the door flies open and in sweeps a middle-aged man of medium height and portly build, surrounded by a miasma of damp tweed and pipe smoke. 'Sorry', he says to Stephen, 'telephone'—as if that explained everything. (Later in life I would come to realise it did, given the usual duration of his phone calls; the phrases 'make it quick' or 'to cut a long story short' were an infallible sign that you were in for the long haul, requiring cancellation of the newspapers and sending out for emergency rations.) Positioning himself in front of the gas fire, and fixing me with an intense look he recites:

Puffs, powders, patches, bibles, billet-doux.

'What effect does the word "bibles" have in that line?' he asks. By sheer luck (and good teaching at secondary school) I recognise it as being from Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, and burble on about p sounds and b sounds, and about incongruity. But he wants more, keeps pushing me to say something about the punctuation, about the progression and juxtaposition of the ideas, about the metre of the line. With great kindness but dogged persistence, he refuses to accept the first answer: 'Go on', he says after each comment, encouraging me to challenge and develop the initial formulaic response. After what feels like a lifetime of flailing, we move on to other things, and my first intellectual encounter with Malcolm Parkes (hereafter MBP) is over. But I have often thought of it since as indicative of all that was great about him both as teacher and scholar—the intense interest in the sounds the words make; in the way they are deployed on the page; in their punctuation and their meaning in the wider context of the text itself. All these were part of what made MBP not just a great and innovative palaeographer but also a superb cultural historian: he always wanted to look beyond *how* the scribe was copying the text to ask *why* he was doing so. He read and thought about the copied texts as well as assessing and classifying the hands used to copy them. This skill as a highly attentive close reader was a formidable reinforcement of MBP's visual acuity, the meticulous and remarkably retentive memory for hands that allowed him to engage with the palaeography and codicology of manuscript books written from the seventh through to the seventeenth centuries. And it made him an inspiring undergraduate tutor, a challenging but supportive graduate supervisor and a hugely entertaining, bracing and occasionally exasperating colleague.

MBP used often to refer with approval to G. W. Prothero's *A Memoir of Henry Bradshaw* (London, 1888) as an affectionate account of one of the greatest English palaeographers, codicologists and book historians of the nineteenth century.¹ What Prothero says of Bradshaw in his preface could equally well be applied to Parkes himself, and I have often wondered if it served as some sort of inspiration for his own work and teaching, or if he recognised something of himself in the portrait:

Over those with whom he came in much contact ... his intense individuality, with its strange blending of strength and tenderness, of frankness and sensibility, of human affection and scientific enthusiasm, exercised an irresistible fascination. The width and exactitude of his knowledge, the thoroughness of his research, his elevation of science above all thought of self, his respect for genuine study in all branches however remote from his own, gave to many students a new ideal and a stimulus all the more potent because it was suggested rather than enforced.

What is certain is that one can apply Prothero's praise of Bradshaw's influence on and guidance of colleagues and students precisely to MBP's impact on his field:

The help which he so ungrudgingly gave is acknowledged in many grateful prefaces and recorded in many learned notes, but such indications attract little attention and the original worker is easily forgotten or ignored.

That should not be the fate of MBP's indirect contributions to scholarship, as his many friends and admirers continue to value his wisdom, cite his datings and rely on his opinions. Meanwhile, his direct contributions to scholarship through publication are embedded in the core bibliography of the many areas on which he wrote.

Born in Charlton, south London, on 26 June 1930 and educated at Colfe's Grammar School, Lewisham, MBP always thought of himself as a Kentish man, and retained something of an accent throughout his life. In a foreshadowing of his future scholarly interests in Chaucer, the pilgrim route to Canterbury passed the top of the road on which his primary school was found, and the *Canterbury Tales* were read to the children. During the war, the family were evacuated to Bath, where they were 'bombed out' and returned to London. As a schoolboy, MBP had been strafed on the high street in Eltham and forced to shelter for his life in a shop doorway. In 1944, the family were bombed out again, and evacuated briefly to Petersfield (Hampshire), then Worthing. As a consequence of these wartime experiences, MBP was ever after an ardent pacifist. In 1941, he had won a scholarship to Colfe's, but during hostilities attended the South East London Emergency Grammar School (which moved around

¹ Better known as the historian Sir George Prothero FBA.

as it was also bombed out). As a result, his schooling was severely interrupted. MBP reported that he had been taught Latin nouns and adjectives, but did not learn conjugation of verbs until he finally joined Colfe's for the first time in 1945 when it returned to London after the war. He commented, with typical self-deprecation and modesty, that he had coped with being behind in Latin by memorising the set text (then Virgil's *Aeneid* IV, as it very frequently was), and was amazed at how often it had come in useful thereafter. His post-retirement stint as Professor of Latin at Harvard (1998) suggests that this autodidacticism had indeed served him well.

MBP's tertiary education started with a brief stint at Strasbourg University in 1949, where the distinguished French medievalist Ernst Hoepffner helped to stimulate an interest in medieval literature that had first been aroused in him as a sixth-former by reading H. O. Taylor's book *The Medieval Mind* (first published 1911). This was followed by a spell as a supply teacher in the South East (Greenwich) Division of the old London County Council Education Service, and then undergraduate study at Hertford College, Oxford, where he read for the Honour School of English Language and Literature, graduating with a BA in 1953. Reading the main school of English, rather than the more focused course in medieval philology, gave MBP a broad and sympathetic engagement with the study of literature that suffused his later palaeographical and codicological research, and which laid the foundations for his eminence as a cultural historian. In some autobiographical notes written in the 1990s, and transcribed by Pamela Robinson, he describes his own undergraduate career as the seedbed for his later interests and for the formidably idiolectal set of scholarly tools that he accumulated and wielded with such deftness:

At Oxford against the advice of my language tutor, I read the modern literature course from Beowulf to 1832. NRK[er] also maintained that this was a mistake but as time went on I ceased to regret it because it made *Pause and Effect* possible. Taught by Dennis Horgan—a clear thinker. My literature tutor F. W. Bateson liked essay on text of RIII—set because we had disagreed over whether a quotation in my essay was accurate or not.

In this account, his two undergraduate tutors represent almost the two hemispheres of MBP's brain: the analytical clarity of Dennis Horgan's thought, and the imaginative range and cultural curiosity of F. W. Bateson melded together. His close Oxford colleague Stephen Wall, who later inherited the editorship of *Essays in Criticism* from Bateson, always praised and valued MBP's literary sensitivity as well as his lexical nimbleness. Wall and he made a formidable, if at first glance unlikely, alliance of tutorial approaches, and taught together with great success for well over forty years, initially at Mansfield College, Oxford, and then as tutorial fellows at Keble.

Bateson obviously saw something in the young Parkes, as the autobiographical notes about his early research career suggest:

In my third year FWB[aterson] suggested that I do research on something that would bore anybody else, and decided he would talk to NR Ker with whom he recommended I should pursue a BLitt. This brought me into a new world centred on Duke Humfrey inhabited by Neil [Ker], Richard Hunt, Roger Mynors, AB Emden and others: the world of the professional scholar in which research was a craft which embraced both learning and skills (not least of which was writing and thinking both in local as well as broader arguments). It was a world of humanist tolerance as well and I was treated not as a brash young ‘candidate’, but as an equal (even if I had to be taught, gently, that tact should be employed when criticizing the work of those who were not fortunate enough to have daily access to the facilities of one of the world’s finest research libraries) ... 1959 finished my thesis and RAB Mynors urged me to enter for Gordon Duff prize which to my surprise I won (managed to mollify my wife by proposing to spend prize money on chairs on principle of having won my laurels I then proposed to rest on them).

‘[W]riting and thinking both in local as well as broader arguments’ and ‘A world of humanist tolerance’: the phrases both sound like MBP and also sum up perfectly his pedagogic principles and scholarly methodology. But so does the joke at the end. However seriously he took his work, and however relentlessly he worried away at textual problems and sweated over what he always called his ‘deathless prose’, there was always a good, if rather donnish, joke to be found somewhere in the process. In the preface to his 1992 monograph *Pause and Effect: an Introduction to the History of Punctuation*, he was childishly delighted that he had come up with the wheeze of thanking John Lennard for his help by adding, in parenthesis ‘(whose study of parentheses in English printed verse is now available in print)’.² The detail was entirely superfluous, but it allowed MBP to stage a cheeky in-joke. During the production of the 1978 Ker Festschrift, which MBP edited with Andrew Watson, I remember his watery-eyed, side-hugging delight when the very erudite essay on the transmission of some Ciceronian texts by Richard and Mary Rouse (whom MBP always referred to as ‘Rouse and Spouse’) came back from Scolar Press with the working title of ‘Rouse and Rouse: the posterior academics’. It did not get changed.

Still only in his early twenties, MBP had married Ann Dodman in 1954 (she predeceased him in 2009), and their two sons Neil and Martin were born in 1955 and 1956 respectively. Perhaps because of his new family responsibilities, after the publication of his 1955 essay for *Medium Aevum* (on manuscript fragments of Wycliffite sermons), he worked for the family export business, gaining ‘experience in

²A full bibliography of MBP’s publications up to that date, including all of those mentioned here, is included in the Festschrift prepared for his retirement: P. R. Robinson and R. Zim (eds.), *Of the Making of Books: Medieval Manuscripts, their Scribes and Readers: Essays Presented to M. B. Parkes* (Aldershot, 1997). Some of his later essays are collected in P. R. Robinson and R. Zim (eds.), *Pages from the Past: Medieval Writing Skills and Manuscript Books by M. B. Parkes* (Farnham, 2012).

the commercial world (mainly involving the administration of accounts)’ as he put it in his CV. In 1957–8, MBP was asked by C. R. Dodwell (then about to leave Lambeth Palace Library for Cambridge) to look after the Lambeth Archives, which consisted principally of identifying and shelving groups of documents relating to the Faculty Office and Vicar General’s Office. He was also an unpaid consultant in the Kent County Archives Office, under the guidance of Felix Hull. During these years, he published short handlists to the records of the Vicar General’s Office and Faculty Office at Lambeth, and to the fragments of medieval manuscripts in Maidstone. His BLitt (with a title of distinctly unParkesian verbosity: ‘A study of certain kinds of scripts used in England in the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries, and the origins of the “Tudor Secretary” hand’) was awarded in 1959. The autobiographical notes remark on the humane tolerance of his own graduate training, and are a striking insight both into his own style as a supervisor and into his sense of the hard work of writing up for publication:

Whilst a first year graduate student Neil Ker made me write on fragments and insisted I publish a piece on Wyclif fragments in *Medium Aevum*. This taught me how to write—met the formidable editor at the time (88 year old C. T. Onions), was relieved that after Neil’s stringent comments on my piece Onions made only one alteration. Thoroughly professional training by NRK[er], RWH[unt], FW [Bateson]. With both NRK and RWH [I was] exposed to their formidable learning, but more important I learnt the value of the ‘haggle’ to refine ideas and achieve a greater insight and precision. It is fun to find out, [but the] work starts when you have it write it up.

Haggling, brooding, gutting: the Parkesian vocabulary of scholarly meditation was full of monastic rumination and reflection, as well of scholastic argument and disputation. He strove for the perfect balance between *scientia* and *sapientia*, even when listening to undergraduate essays. (He never took them in for marking, saying that he would only lose them if he did, but was an astonishingly acute and attentive listener, even if you only ever got to the end of your second paragraph.) As a graduate student, being trained by MBP in the handling and analysis of manuscript books was an enthralling if sometimes rather scary process. His way with books was, in a word currently popular among university administrators, ‘robust’. There was a legend that he had once been shown a red card at the British Museum for ‘over vigorous collation’ of a manuscript. And to watch him open a manuscript to examine the stitching for purposes of collation was to remember that passage in the Gawain poet’s *Clanness* where the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is likened to the explosion of a manuscript binding:

þe grete barrez of þe abyme he barst vp at onez,
þat alle þe regioun torof in riftes ful grete,

& clouen alle in lyttel cloutes þe clyffez aywhere,
As lauce leuez of þe boke þat lepes in twynne. (963–6)

‘as leaves fall away from a book that splits in two’

The early 1960s saw MBP as a busy Oxford college tutor at Mansfield and, from 1965, at Keble. His first university-level post, as a lecturer in English, began in 1964, and it was not until 1971 that he became the *ad hominem* Lecturer in Palaeography in the Faculty of English. Having been awarded a DLitt in 1985 (becoming the first serving member of the English faculty since Dame Helen Gardner to achieve this distinction), he was promoted to Reader in 1993 and became the first full Professor of Palaeography in the history of the university in 1996. Throughout these years, he was tirelessly teaching palaeography, codicology and transcription to generations of graduate students not just in English but in most of the major humanities faculties. He further refined the categories to be used in describing a manuscript book that had been developed by his mentor, Neil Ker FBA, and his checklist became a benchmark for many generations of manuscript scholars in their own work and teaching. He kept attendance registers for these lectures from the mid-1960s until his retirement, and they are an international roll call of the subject and of medieval studies more widely. Turning their pages one sees names that have become the standard-bearers for modern book history and codicological scholarship. For not only did MBP instruct and train Oxford graduates, but visiting faculty from all over the world would sit in and audit his classes.

Rising in time for his graduate lectures at noon, he would then lunch in college and teach undergraduates until dinner on high table at Keble (to which he invariably arrived late, his silk BLitt gown increasingly tattered and green with age). Only then would he settle to his own work until the small hours, unless disturbed, as he often was, by students seeking a sociable pipe and glass of single malt whisky late in the evening. (His generosity of spirit was as remarkable as his generosity with spirits was legendary.) Tutorials often ran hours late, interspersed by the arrival of anonymous dinner guests who would be revealed later as, for example, the prefect of the Vatican Library (Leonard Boyle) or a major scholar on the poem about which the students had just been talking. MBP was an exceptional teacher and a brilliant supervisor, endlessly patient—even if some comment or question might elicit an exasperated cry of ‘Oh Gaawd’ on an outward breath, as he reached for his tin of tobacco to buy himself time while he worked out the best way to untie the intellectual knot with which he had been presented. He had a genuinely inspired capacity to get to the nub of the point, no matter how muddled its articulation, and to give the student or a colleague a reference or nudge in the right direction that would precipitate productive further thought. In the autobiographical notes, MBP comments:

I enjoyed teaching. I am proud to say that I have learned something from every pupil I have taught even from one or two who never made it to the first degree. (The need to comprehend their difficulties in order to explain sharpened my own mind.) I rejoiced in their discoveries and their results. The interesting number of those interested in manuscript studies broadened my own interests, and as they developed their own individual responses to source materials taught me new ways of responding to problems.

It was that essential intellectual humility, that eagerness to explore new ways of seeing an issue, that made him such an effective teacher. He never tried to create ventriloquial simulacra of himself. Rather, he had an iron determination to allow the distinctive critical voice of the student to come through, to act as an intellectual midwife to the processes of thought with which they were grappling. Working over a draft or discussing the outline of a chapter, one always felt that he was treating you as an equal, that you were part of a shared quest for the truth, that you were both listening for the audible click when an argument finally moved into its definitive shape. To see his eyes light up when he saw the thread of an argument leading off into the unknown was always exhilarating. He inspired trust and confidence in his many pupils, encouraging them to strive for the best and to tap into and develop their potential, which he had an uncanny ability to divine. His kindness to generations of graduate students, male and female, is reflected not only in the countless acknowledgements of him in published work, but also in the way that so many of them kept in contact with him by phone, or on visits to Oxford, and by the deep affection and concern that many of them showed for him in his declining years.

Through all these years as a college tutor, MBP researched tirelessly and published steadily, and his international reputation grew. For medievalists of many disciplines, and from many countries, no visit to Oxford in these years was complete without an audience with MBP; his gatehouse room over the lodge in Keble buzzed with gossip and serious scholarship, laughter and liquor. Among many international honours and distinctions, he was elected Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1971, a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 1977, a member of the *Comité Internationale de Paléographie Latine* in 1986, a member of the *Wolfenbütteler Mediävistischer Arbeitskreis* (also in 1986), a Corresponding Fellow of the Medieval Academy of America in 1992, a member of Council of the Early English Text Society in 1995 and finally—many felt rather belatedly—a Fellow of the British Academy in 1993, at the age of sixty-three. Much in demand internationally, he was a Visiting Professor at Konstanz (1974 and 1980) and Minnesota (1991), a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton (1996) and Professor of Latin at Harvard (1998), and he guest lectured all over the USA, including at Summer Institutes of Palaeography at the Medieval Academy of America, UCLA (1978), University of Pennsylvania (1976)

and Harvard (1988). MBP loved to travel, packing up his trusty bright yellow Volvo estate for trips to Konstanz or wherever. A much retold (and no doubt lovingly burnished) story recorded that on one of these trips, having locked himself out of the car somewhere in rural France, he attempted to break in using a wire coat hanger, all the while reassuring the gathering crowd in his Kentish-accented French ‘Je suis cambrioleur spécialiste’ (I am a master burglar). In the UK, he supported the teaching of palaeography nationally by serving on various subcommittees of the Standing Conference of National and University Libraries, the University of London’s Board of Studies in Palaeography (1978–88) and as a Special Lecturer in Palaeography in Durham (1972), London (1976) and Queen’s University Belfast (1966–9). At a time when the discipline was under pressure and its survival as a component in research training in question, MBP was a restless advocate for its pedagogic centrality, almost as a reflex of his own growing understanding of the ways in which it made possible a detailed and incisive cultural history of medieval reading founded on secure and rigorous technical roots.

Although his list of publications had been gently accumulating for some time, it was the appearance of *English Cursive Book Hands 1250–1500* (Oxford, 1969; reprinted Scholar Press, 1979) in the Oxford Palaeographical Handbooks series that signalled the arrival of MBP as a leading taxonomist of English hands. Its opening essay is a brilliantly lapidary account of medieval English book history. Perhaps more pragmatic than many of the continental codicologists and palaeographers, MBP’s descriptive taxonomy of hands is still the gold standard for describing the scripts found in books produced in later medieval England. I have a theory that you can tell somebody trained in Parkesian methodology if you show them a plate of a mid-fifteenth-century mixed hand: the Parkesians will always describe it as *anglicana* with secretary features, while others will see secretary with *anglicana* features. MBP felt that the compression and concision necessary to fit the text of *English Cursive Book Hands* into the available space had had a bad effect on his own written style: ‘the necessary process of compressing my thesis into few pages and trying to get the balance of the other scripts right caused a lot of agony, ruined my prose style, took 8 years, and I never fully recovered’, he writes in the autobiographical notes.

There are, indeed, few wasted words in MBP writing. He never used a word processor or a computer, and only rarely ventured onto a typewriter. He used to write each paragraph longhand onto a separate sheet of blank white file paper, leaving space at head and foot for any conjunctions, disjunctions or prepositions that might prove to be necessary. Then the sheets could be rearranged into the desired order and, when he had got the sequence of ideas right, he would number the pages/paragraphs and send them off to his near neighbour, the formidable and indefatigable Mrs Templeton, for typing. In fact, there are very few conjunctions and connectives in his published

works: the limpid clarity of his writing usually did not need them. The prose is crisp, brisk and possessed of an arrow-straight logic. ('Logic, simplicity and clarity, and the greatest of these is clarity', was a favourite aphorism.) Sentences are short, sinewy and often pithy. In *Pause and Effect*, for instance, the bald statement that 'The forms of worship are the chief memorials and declarations of Christian doctrine', has a grandeur that Cranmer might have envied for the *Book of Common Prayer*, as well as being simultaneously insightful and provocative about the nature of the liturgical branches of Christianity. While the statement that 'rhetorical analysis is concerned with the rhythm and shape of a discourse' is the sort of observation that Quintilian would have been proud of, and encapsulates *in parvo* MBP's interest in the movement of literary language and the microcosmic and macrocosmic shape of texts as imaginative entities and as words on the page.

Social scientists tell us that the horizon of scholarly visibility, that period of time in which a publication stays in view and is used by the scholarly community, has dropped from about fifteen years or more a generation ago to about seven or eight years now. But MBP's publications remain part of the bedrock of the discipline, widely cited and read with profit and delight. Throughout the 1970s, he published a series of hugely influential essays and book chapters, marked by notably economic expression which masked huge depths of research and scholarship and guided by an increasingly well-calibrated gut instinct about how books were made and used. Indeed, his publications amply demonstrate how within medieval studies the field can still be changed or redirected by a seminal article or book chapter rather than by a full-blown monograph. His 1973 essay 'The literacy of the laity', for example, changed the way that pragmatic literacy was talked about in connection with later medieval English lay readers, and probably made possible—and certainly gave power and plausibility to—much of the work on lay readers of religious books that has flourished in the last thirty years. And it did so with remarkable economy: MBP shared with Stephen Wall the ability to let a well-chosen example do the work of a lot of argumentation. In *Pause and Effect*, described by one historian of punctuation as 'probably the single most useful work on the origins of modern punctuation', he wryly observes of manuscript circulation: 'Before the advent of printing, a text left its author and fell among scribes.' His chapter on the layout of verse was a foundational study of the changing *theoria* and *praxis*, and is particularly magisterial in its command of the subject across many languages and centuries. But the whole book resonated and was admired far outside of medieval English studies.

The famous 1976 essay 'The influence of the concepts of *ordinatio* and *compilatio* on the development of the book', published in the outstanding and still invaluable Festschrift for Bodley's long-serving Keeper of Western Manuscripts Richard Hunt FBA, taught several generations of scholars how to look at paratext and *mise en page*

and to make meaningful and precise comments about how they contribute to the transmission and reception of texts. His 1978 collaboration with Ian Doyle FBA, on the production of copies of the *Canterbury Tales* and *Confessio Amantis*, published in another superb Festschrift, this time edited by MBP with Andrew G. Watson for his friend and mentor Neil Ker, is a foundational essay for the modern study of both poets, and underpins the recent identification of many of their busy scribes as officers of the London Guildhall and serial copyists of Middle English literature, with Doyle and Parkes's Scribe D now revealed as John Marchaunt, Common Clerk of the City of London in the early fifteenth century. Born of a deep and lifelong mutual respect and affection, their collaborations produced work that regularly squared the intellectual circles, their intellectual and professional strengths and reflexes, instincts and cautions admirably complementing each other. How two such distinguished scholars, whose prose styles could not be more different, came to create such a milestone of modern scholarship in Middle English is probably itself worthy of in-depth study of their working drafts. How many subordinate clauses died on that battlefield will never be told. But we are all much the richer for the battle having been fought, and the outcome remains a classic. Doyle and Parkes's symbiotic working relationship was long lasting: for decades, they regularly consulted on datings and hands, combining their astonishing visual archives to challenge, nuance and fine-tune each other's arguments.

MBP's fascination with the copying and circulation of Chaucer also manifested itself in a series of important printed facsimiles of key manuscripts. He was a central player in the popularity of such facsimiles, from the development of new methods of high-quality photographic reproduction in the late 1970s until widely available digital surrogacy rendered them largely redundant. His analytical work in these volumes made the facsimiles not only invaluable teaching aids, allowing students to learn palaeography and codicology remotely, but also, through regular, detailed and systematic collaboration with other scholars, integrated the discipline into the wider critical activity that was encouraged by the availability of such books. His 1978 palaeographical description and commentary for the facsimile of Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 61, which has the famous frontispiece allegedly showing Chaucer reading *Troilus and Criseyde* to the royal court, set new standards for the genre. In 1979, MBP again collaborated with Doyle, this time on the introductory and ancillary materials for a facsimile of the Hengwrt manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales*, and in 1980 with Richard Beadle on a facsimile of Cambridge, University Library MS Gg. 4. 27, another important copy of Chaucer. In 1988, he moved his focus earlier to provide the palaeographical commentary for a facsimile of *The Épinal, Erfurt, Werden and Corpus Glossaries* for the Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile series. Finally, in 1996 he produced with Judith Tschann a facsimile of

Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Digby 86 for the Early English Text Society Supplementary Series.

One of MBP's most noteworthy attributes, certainly when viewed from an age of ever increasing nano-specialisation, was his ability to write authoritatively across many centuries of book production. From his work on the Leiden riddle in the very first number of *Anglo-Saxon England* (1972), through Boethius (1981) and his still highly regarded 1982 Jarrow Lecture 'The Scriptorium of Wearmouth-Jarrow', and on to the Oxford manuscript of *The Chanson de Roland* (1985), as well as the production and dating of the *Ormulum* (1983), MBP ranged widely across languages and centuries. The diastolic and systolic pulse of his scholarship alternated intense and highly professional scrutiny of specific cases with increasingly confident cultural generalisations built upon those minute particulars.

That oscillation was both conscious and deliberate. In an unpublished talk delivered to the Association for Manuscripts and Archives in Research Collections in 1995, MBP commented:

What is nowadays referred to fashionably (if not always meaningfully) as 'the sociology of the text', whether handwritten or printed, has for many years been regarded at Oxford as the most important element in the intellectual formation of research students. The study of primary sources in their proper contexts introduces a nexus of disciplines, new to many students, each with its own procedures and principles and its own conceptual framework ...

Palaeography is not an objective science, but as with all humanities subjects and subjective study with its own terminology, still in the process of development.

I suspect that the echo of A. E. Housman ('Textual criticism is a science, and since it comprises recension and emendation, it is also an art') is entirely deliberate, as MBP cherished Housman's acerbic comments on the need for judgement: 'the worst of having no judgment is that one never misses it ... Because a man is not a born textual critic, he need not therefore act like a born fool.' But MBP made a signal contribution to the terminology of English palaeography, the persistence of which is witness to his wisdom and judgement in the development of his taxonomy.

In the mid-1990s, MBP became fascinated with the history of reading, engaging enthusiastically with its continental origins, and writing powerfully and well in Italian and in English on it and on the lexical range of terms for reading in medieval languages (including Old English) before this became embedded as a ubiquitous feature of the newly defined field of the History of the Book in anglophone scholarship. Very few UK book historians wrote as well on the subject as Parkes did, because few of them had the deep and wide archival resources garnered from the first-hand examination of paratexts and hypertexts that decades of palaeography and codicology had given him, and few had thought as hard about issues of *ordinatio* and *mise en page*.

MBP's interest in the history of reading was no doubt also sustained by the fact that throughout his career he had a fascination with the book provisions of the medieval University of Oxford. Perhaps it was also fuelled by the fact that Hertford, his undergraduate and graduate college, stands in Catte Street, epicentre of the medieval book trade in the city. From his 1961 publication on the itinerant scribe Henry Mere, to work on the aids to scholarship developed by Oxford friars for the 1980 Bodleian exhibition in memory of Richard Hunt FBA, he had been exploring Oxford's book trade. In 1987, he gave the Robert F. Metzdorf Memorial Lecture at the University of Rochester, New York, 'Book Provisions and Libraries at the Medieval University of Oxford', and this fed directly into the magisterially understated chapter 'The Provision of Books' in the volume of *The History of the University of Oxford* (Oxford, 1992) covering the late medieval period. Like many of the contributions to that remarkable volume edited by Jeremy Catto and Ralph Evans, the modesty of the argument's articulation belied the huge erudition and range of scholarship and primary research that it contained. One of his secondary school teachers wrote in a 1949 reference that the young MBP 'has been my chief assistant librarian at Colfe's during the past two years and has shown in this office, as indeed he has shown in other school activities, a marked capacity for organizing the work and for controlling those who were serving under him'. The boy who had been school librarian retained a fascination with the institutional provision and care of books throughout his life.

No surprise then that MBP served as Fellow Librarian of Keble for nine years (1965–74). This was at a time when an extension to the library was built in order to make it more accessible to students. In the notes, he comments that 'I shall probably go down in history as the last librarian of the College to move every book with my own hands. In the process I discovered that we had some ninety MSS (instead of the sixteen listed) and realized that a catalogue was needed.' In 1979, therefore, he published *The Medieval Manuscripts of Keble College Oxford*. One of the great monuments of the modern cataloguer's art, this book set new standards in the detail and format of manuscript description and analysis. Since his arrival in Keble in 1965, MBP had been exploring and examining the college's manuscript collection, which was, he discovered, unusually rich and varied for such a young foundation. Over his years as Fellow Librarian he had painstakingly sifted the books (often in his college study, occasionally propping open the door to let out the pipe smoke) and evolved a matrix for his descriptions that was elegant as well as exhaustive. Of course MBP had his favourites, notably the Regensburg Lectionary (Oxford, Keble College MS 49) made in around 1267–76 for a convent of Dominican nuns, and which Keble has recently digitised in his memory. At his funeral, one of the college's Books of Hours was laid open on his coffin by the Warden, in recognition of his outstanding service to

the collection. The balance between economy and detail that he struck in the Keble catalogue entries makes the book an absolute pleasure to use, and, as with all great catalogues, a mine of arcane and pertinent information on all sorts of topics. It is a reflection of and a tribute to an extraordinary ability to see the big picture while being in total command of small details.

Like many of MBP's projects, from the Ker Festschrift through to *Pause and Effect*, the Keble catalogue was published by Scolar Press and supervised by Sean Magee. Magee produced a spoof appendix for what was universally known as the Kerschrift, with the running head 'SONNENSCHHEIN The "Anterior" Academics', playing on the Rouses' contribution and MBP's invariable telephone greeting of 'ello sunshine'. It is full of in-jokes about a wayward pair of scribes, P (MBP, of course) and W (Andrew Watson). Describing P, the note says 'His hand is a bastard, partially cursive *anglicana deformata*'—the joke very appropriately coming in part through the punctuation, parodying MBP's fastidious use of commas. Scribe P is said to be identified in one book as 'scriptor in tunicae rubissimae qui loquitur per diem et noctem', referring to MBP's penchant for brightly coloured shirts and lengthy conversations. The playful and highly effective partnership between Magee and Parkes resulted in books that were unusually pleasing to use as well as exceptionally scholarly in their content, and Magee reflected on this relationship in his contribution to the affectionate portmanteau introduction to the Festschrift for MBP edited by Pamela Robinson and Rivkah Zim for his retirement in 1997 under the title *Of the Making of Books: Medieval Manuscripts, their Scribes and Readers*, and published of course by Scolar Press. This book stands alongside the Festschriften for Richard Hunt FBA and Neil Ker FBA as an essential volume for those interested in medieval book history, and gave MBP's many pupils and friends a chance to pay concrete tribute to his support, leadership and scholarly example.

Pause and Effect's interest in the palaeographical 'grammar of legibility', explored further in essays and lectures in those years, flows into MBP's last book, *Their Hands before our Eyes: a Closer Look at Scribes* (Aldershot, 2008), where it is augmented by an advanced fascination with distinctive (and he felt inimitable) scribal spacings between letters. Based on the J. P. R. Lyell Lectures he had delivered in the University of Oxford in 1999, it was much augmented, enhanced and worried over before its appearance. In retrospect, it is possible to see the beginnings of the vascular dementia that eventually took his life in the travails he underwent to finish this book, and when it came to proofing and indexing it he needed help from Zim and Robinson. But it is full of observations that deserve and reward Parkesian brooding over, a store of forensic wisdom and synthesised first-hand experience of thousands of medieval books, deployed using precise terminology and progressing rigorously through *catenae* of carefully differentiated concepts:

A scribe's interpretation is most evident in the equilibrium of his or her handwriting that contributes substantially to its aspect (the impression made by the handwriting at first sight). Aspect is difficult to analyse, but is created by a scribe's own way of combining different features of the handwriting to achieve a balance between style and function. The extent to which a scribe achieves this equilibrium depends on his own particular talent: on the competence of his penmanship to express graphic ideas in his own way, and on his capacity to respond to the demands of a prevailing sense of decorum.³

Late Parkes is like late Beethoven: a thing of spare and austere, almost ethereal beauty. The style is even more pared back, the discussion even more abstract, with its near mystical emphasis on ducts and aspects, its fascination with a scribe's ability to create chiaroscuro effects on the page. Yet the range of examples, the lifetime's expertise in choosing the perfect plate, the eye for the telling palaeographical detail are all still on full and peerless display. This was the work of a man who had long since ceased to have anything to prove, but was looking back at a long career of working with books ('never refuse the opportunity to look at a manuscript', he used to say), and was able to draw a line of gossamer thinness and silken elegance between the particular instance and the general circumstance. It is not an easy book, but it is the late and last work of a master. In a letter to Tessa Webber FBA in 2000, MBP described the Lyell Lectures given the previous year as

in one sense my 'palaeographical testament'... In particular I want to put a coherent terminology into place. My elders and betters Alan Bishop, Richard Hunt and Neil Ker all thought that my contribution to the subject would be a terminology which encouraged close analysis.... I feel these friendly ghosts looking over my shoulder, but they can be inhibiting sometimes.

A couple of articles on the Oxford book trade and the work of Thomas Hunt were found among his papers and were published posthumously in *The Library* in 2016, but this was his last major publication. The later collection of essays put together by Robinson and Zim has the peculiarly plangent title of *Pages from the Past*, for by the time it appeared in 2012 MBP was already beyond new work. Yet, like the work of the great nineteenth- and twentieth-century medievalists whom he so much revered and respected, MBP's body of writing will stand scrutiny for generations to come.

In a sermon preached in Keble College Chapel on St Mark's Day 1879 to mark the first anniversary of opening of the College Library, Edward King, at the time Regius Professor of Pastoral Theology at Oxford, Canon of Christ Church and later Bishop of Lincoln, had said:

³ Malcolm Parkes, *Their Hands before our Eyes: a Closer Look at Scribes* (Aldershot, 2008), p. 87.

We need now men who can read and copy MSS ... to carry out any research-work, in the way of criticism and amended texts, we need the help of those who have time and skill to examine unprinted matter ... in the interests of literature, and at the disposal of the society. That such a student should have been found in Keble College, and in connection with this Keble Library, would, I venture to think, add another ground of hope for this hopeful society.

MBP quoted this sermon in the introduction to his Keble catalogue. In an unpublished note on the history of palaeography teaching at Oxford, he had observed that King's hope had been fulfilled in the 1930s by the Keble men Noel Denholm-Young and T. A. M. Bishop, who had taught palaeography and diplomatic studies at Oxford and Cambridge respectively. But Malcom Parkes, mindful and protective of Keble's long tradition of medieval scholarship, was himself the truest embodiment of King's aspiration, able to bridge and synthesise the disciplines and skills of literature, textual criticism, language and palaeography into a single hermeneutic tool of unusual power and grace. He is much missed, as an outstanding scholar, teacher and friend. Each chapter of *Their Hands before our Eyes* concludes with a medieval Latin manuscript colophon. At the end of the last chapter, he offered a sort of palaeographical epitaph, rounding off a career of energetic service to his college and university, and his striking scholarly contribution to medieval studies:

Iste libellus scriptus est per fidelem scriptorem in universitate Oxoniensis.

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Note on the author: Vincent Gillespie is J. R. R. Tolkien Professor of English at the University of Oxford. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2013.

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