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1903–1966

THERE are a few historians, not more than a handful, to whom it is given not only to arrive at new insights upon a hitherto obscure period and misunderstood society but also to pioneer the methods and collect the neglected sources by which these insights are gained and the foundations of further research securely laid. Bruce McFarlane was such a historian. Yet for all the joy this process gave him—and in his later years he did not altogether frown on the view that history should be studied for fun—his own story is a tragic one: an immense body of work held together firmly and lucidly by its leading ideas only reached the larger audience of scholars and students posthumously thanks to the labours of a band of his disciples. Towards the end of his life he worked with increasing urgency and perhaps even a sense of foreboding towards the full presentation of his *vue d'ensemble* of English political society in the later Middle Ages, the subject which had first come to interest him forty years ago, perhaps when turning the pages of C. L. Kingsford's *Prejudice and Promise in Fifteenth-Century England*. What his editors were able to do with his manuscripts might not have found favour with him and there hovers inevitably something provisional, here and there conjectural, about the last of the three volumes published by the Oxford University Press: *Hans Memling* (1971), *Lancastrian Kings and Lollard Knights* (1972), and *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (1973). He has often been blamed for not accomplishing the definitive book and altogether for not publishing more. He suffered under the reproach although he tried to make light of it in the Ford Lectures.¹ It is an unjust one for besides his *John Wycliffe* the list of his articles and studies is by no means short. They contain most of his cardinal ideas and rightly earned him his authoritative reputation but they also whetted expectations for something larger and for more and so, paradoxically, contributed to his misfortune. It was not understood that the very quality of McFarlane's handling of sources, the reassuring certainty of most of what he had to say, were achieved at a crushing cost of labour in the face of ill health and a teaching load which

¹ K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England, The Ford Lectures, for 1953 and Related Studies* (Oxford, 1973), p. 2.

he could not bear to neglect. He believed all too strongly that he must master the entire evidence. The attempt at the completest possible analysis of the English governing classes during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the institutions within which they moved, the legal system that served them, and the intricate accountancy which masked their affairs was not made in vain but it probably surpassed the strength and capacity of an individual scholar working alone.

Kenneth Bruce McFarlane was born on 18 October 1903, an only child. His mother never quite recovered from a frightful confinement. Years later her nervous constitution failed. Her death after a harrowing illness haunted her by now adult son. His father, A. McFarlane, O.B.E., was a civil servant in the Admiralty. On the Civil Service List of 1925 he appears as an Armaments Supply Officer in the Department of the Director of Naval Ordnance. He served in the gunnery branch and some of Bruce's earliest memories were of ports, sailors, and naval reviews. The family settled in Dulwich and he grew up in a well-regulated household with nannies, maids, and formalities and did not recall it gladly. Between him and his father an early and growing rift eventually led to total estrangement. After the death of his wife A. McFarlane remarried. For the stepmother who survived her husband by many years and inherited all his estate K.B. had an amused and detached tolerance and she visited him now and again. He rarely talked about his home, his closer family, or any other relations. It always seemed as if there were none, or rather, that he had severed his links with them as soon as he could.

It was unlikely that Dulwich College, the school to which they sent him as a day-boy, should prove particularly congenial. He remained a stranger and outsider to the more philistine conventions of the Public School system as it then was but it does not seem to have upset him. 'I don't think ill of public schools', he wrote in 1930, 'they are exceedingly comfortable places and if you accept the tradition it is, I believe, quite possible to be happy in them.' He reserved pleasing memories chiefly for the Picture Gallery and the musical life of the school. Later one of his best-liked novelists was E. M. Forster and he ranged himself with the ideas and mishaps of Forster's subdued and shy heroes, not least of all their refusal to be heroic. The terse, ironical portrait of a public school, 'Sawston' (it was in fact Tonbridge), in *The Longest Journey* made that novel an enduring favourite with him. Although he did not feel deeply indebted to his history master,

A. W. P. Gayford, he held him in affectionate respect. A book full of early essays reveals why the sixth form did not compensate for the years of humdrum routine leading up to it. Whatever the promise and shortcomings of these papers—and they have both—the correcting master's comments, glued to externals, gave little guidance and opened no new horizons. These school essays, nearly all of them on medieval subjects, were for the most part sustained narrative pieces aglow with feeling, occasionally indignation (e.g. the Fifth Crusade), sometimes florid, at others plain. It seems that the master did not quite know what to make of him.

Oxford in 1922 brought escape from paternal and school authority. McFarlane won a scholarship and read history at Exeter College where C. T. Atkinson became his tutor. By this time already K.B.'s own experience may have prompted him to question history for what it could teach him about the relations between governors and governed, exploiters and exploited rather than the ups and downs of political struggles, the *Machtgeschichte* of run-of-the-mill textbooks and biographies. Unfortunately it was precisely political and military history in their most orthodox casing at which C. T. Atkinson excelled and they were his exclusive offering. A forceful, downright, and unsophisticated teacher, 'Atters' had all the same a shrewd knowledge of his undergraduates' strengths and weaknesses but once again McFarlane was disappointed. Besides the College tutors there were the professional coaches who filled in. McFarlane once gave a sardonic account of his encounters with one of these, by no means negligible, figures. The essay had to be read at six o'clock in the coach's flat through the door of his dressing room for he was by now busy with his wardrobe for dinner. When the reading stopped the pupil was instructed to open a notebook which lay on the table at a certain place and read a few pages. That was all. It did not thwart his coming of age as a historian but it forced him, for what is still the most important part of an undergraduate's weekly work, to live and grow up by his own resources of perception and self-criticism. He learned, however, to value Atkinson's judgement and later he gladly enlisted his teaching help during the crowded post-war years at Magdalen.

Owing so little to masters and mentors explains much about the scholar McFarlane became: touchy, proud, a trifle aloof but imbued with the habit of building always on foundations he had laid and tested for himself. It stamps all his work and spurred his

searches for certainty, or at least as much of it as the carefully sifted evidence would allow and it fuelled also his occasional pugnacity. The fullness, clarity, and power of exposition which appealed so much to his pupils, but also the self-imposed limitations, the refusal to go an inch beyond what he felt he knew and mastered, all sprang from this combative self-reliance. An inclination to look inwards rather than outwards for the solution of problems belonged to his make-up but it was reinforced also by the state of his subject. It turned him into a penetrating critic of his own and other scholars' work. Later his reviews could be severe, not without flickers of irony, though they were also just and he spared himself least of all. The Stanhope Essay Prize which he won in 1924 was at that time usually published. Cardinal Pole had been the subject and a slim volume duly appeared but later he hunted down every copy he could find because he could not forgive himself its patches of cocksureness, grandiloquence, and rush of judgement.

Were there then no influences, no debts due to the reigning academic forces of Oxford during the mid twenties? During his last year McFarlane was sent to be taught, perhaps for his Special Subject, Richard II, by E. F. Jacob, then at Christ Church, and it was he, to quote Dr. W. A. Pantin, 'who really made him feel that it was after all worth while going on with medieval history'.¹ A decisive turn had been taken. Gaining a first in the History Schools of 1925, McFarlane became an advanced student. The choice of another prince of the church, Cardinal Beaufort, as his subject for research was a characteristically deliberate journey into the unknown. At this time the Colleges and the University could muster about sixteen medievalists in a History Faculty of eighty-three. They included, besides Ernst Jacob, now his supervisor, Sir Goronwy Edwards whom McFarlane always greatly respected, Dr. A. B. Emden, J. E. A. Jolliffe, R. V. Lennard, Dr. R. L. Poole and his son A. L. Poole, the Regius Professor H. W. C. Davies, Sir Paul Vinogradoff, R. H. Hodgkin, Maude Violet Clarke, Evelyn Jamison, and Cecilia Ady, a band of scholars with whom Oxford could hold its own against any academy, albeit of widely diverging interests. It will be seen at once that the later Middle Ages in England, especially the fifteenth century, were somewhat under-represented for Ernst Jacob too was only just beginning to move in that direction: the Conciliar Movement and Archbishop Chichele. Most of the existing work on the political

¹ W. A. Pantin, 'Ernst Fraser Jacob', *Ante*, lviii (1972), p. 453.

history of late medieval England had aged. The history of how its government worked and was financed during Henry VI's minority and long years of adult nonage had not yet been written. The prospect of uncharted seas appealed to him.

The biographical study of Beaufort, however, remained unfinished, partly, perhaps, because he was to be immersed in full-time teaching all too soon. It served, however, as the quarry for two fine articles, one reconstructing a crisis in the bishop's relations with Henry V (*E.H.R.*, 1945), the other, in the *Studies in Medieval History presented to F. M. Powicke*, surveying the cardinal's loans to Henry VI's government and his profits at the end of his life with the help of his conscience-stricken will. He gave it the teasing title 'At the Deathbed of Cardinal Beaufort'. The early work on these topics had immersed him in the records of the central government and the church. Over both of them he was to gain an almost unrivalled mastery. During these years Oxford also gave him the first of the friendships by which his life which could so easily verge on melancholy, unhappiness, and deep pessimism, gained its balance of contentment and exhilaration. Among the early friends Dr. A. L. Rowse was the most influential. Academic success came to the young scholar fairly quickly even though he did not win the All Souls Fellowship for which he had competed. In 1926 he was awarded the Bryce Research Studentship and a Senior Demyship at Magdalen College. A year later he entered for the College's Fellowship by Examination and was elected on 11 October. The news reached him just after an operation for a burst appendix and this was only a warning of the ill health to come. A year later again, in 1928, the College elected him to a tutorial Fellowship in succession to Murray Wrong.

The Oxford of the nineteen-twenties was a sociable place as readers of Sir Maurice Bowra's *Memories* will know. There were countless dinner parties for which men donned white ties and spent hours in the afternoon preparing their conversation to amuse or overawe the female company their hostess had arranged for them at her table. Later McFarlane on the whole disliked parties—though there were exceptions—and pitied those who depended on them for entertainment but as a young don he was not so difficult to invite and perhaps he enjoyed his reputation for faroucheness a little. Emancipation and autonomy, however, had in the meantime fashioned his views of the society and the world in which he had spent his first twenty-five, none too happy, years. They hardened and became outspoken.

At this time his conception of the study of history and his feelings about the present formed a coherent whole. The aim of historical studies must be 'a search for the underlying principles upon which a society at a given time was built', the main topic social relations, and the key to it the historical philosophy of Karl Marx. Political, military, and, more important for an Oxford medievalist then, constitutional history were unsatisfying and stunted disciplines unless they gained new insights from the study of the economic make-up of the societies to which they applied. Many of McFarlane's views during the late twenties and the early thirties are summarized in a paper he read to a History Society at Stowe School in June 1930. Its very title, 'Class; some thoughts on our present discontents', expresses a mood. It is worth dwelling on it in some detail.

He shared the move to the Left of many English intellectuals of his generation, even to the far Left, but his beliefs filtered his own experience, they did not blanket or replace close observation and analysis. This in itself modified his stance. 'The problem of accommodating Oxford and Cambridge to social conditions not contemplated by their founders and benefactors is one that none of us can afford to ignore', he began on an undeniably practical note. The very issue of the English governing class is posed for him by the phenomenon of the Public Schools which produce the ablest and best but in the service of their own less gifted fellows whose assumptions they (the best) to some extent shared. His dislike was reserved for the rank and file of the governing class who assume authority by prescription. As a tutor he had no doubt to deal with some of the lower average products of the schools and he found their presence hard to justify. What matters, however, is the influence of these views on his own orientation as a historian. He now saw the evolution of the English governing class as a towering historical problem of which he made one segment, the centuries from the reign of Edward I to the Reformation, his own. In the paper read to the boys of Stowe School the whole subject is brilliantly surveyed. The analysis begins with feudalism, not without a look back at what was thought to have been a rival principle of social organization in Germanic societies, the guild-brethren and sworn association for protection and law enforcement. A strong whiff of Stubbs's *Select Charters* hovers over these preliminaries. In 1930 he had already formulated his own special interest quite clearly: the moment when money began to threaten the status and assumptions of those holding power, the baronial

class, and their skilful response to this challenge. 'Since money was needed he (the baron) turned to make it with all the advantages that his position gave him.' The most important themes of his expanding historical enterprise already lay embedded in this little polemic. 'Nothing but the expectation of plunder, the capture of prisoners valuable to ransom can explain the change of attitude from that of those barons who refused to save John's French possessions to that of those who cheerfully embarked on a hundred years war.' Familiarity with nineteenth-century English history which he had to teach during his early years at Magdalen, enabled him to complete the sketch and reach the present. If the Industrial Revolution brought about a split between the landed and the commercial interest, the movement of the propertied classes back into the conservative camp reunited them. Here the Marxist dogma became more conventional and the dislike of the ascendancy of the 'idle rich', made possible by the Public Schools, more strident. He had, however, no truck with the destructive cultural relativism of some of the Left. He was no Bazarov for he could write: 'The conservation of what is valuable in tradition does not involve the conservation of that distribution of wealth which called it forth.' The implication is that there were things worth preserving.

Here then we have his ideas at a formative moment. He was not to lose sight of what he regarded as the special characteristics of the English governing class: its willingness to receive newcomers and its ability to remake them in its own image, its readiness to collaborate with others to resist the Crown and hence also its continuity and almost uninterrupted possession of power. The wholeness of this vision was not yet blurred but it had dulled a little and sounded less lively and convinced in 1939 and 1941 when he wrote papers for undergraduate societies on the same topic. The word 'class' still rings but his acceptance of Marx's definition of the State as 'the instrument by which one class imposes its will upon the rest' was now somewhat more hesitant and qualified.¹ As he uttered it, his taste for this type of generalization dwindled. For the historian there were more urgent and immediate tasks to get on with.

There is an obvious paradox in one who so evidently disliked the governing class and its militia of suburban supporters—the General Strike of 1926 was not forgotten in the 1930 polemic—devoting most of his working life to studying it in all its aspects,

¹ For a discussion of these later papers with quotations see J. P. Cooper's introduction to the *Ford Lectures*, pp. xix, xx, xxi.

cultural no less than economic, social, and political, during the later Middle Ages. What is more, one of the opening arguments of his Ford Lectures in 1953 was directed against a prevailing royalist interpretation of later medieval English history which he felt was deeply prejudiced against 'that much-maligned body of far from average men, the landed aristocracy'.¹ The paradox is toned down though not dissolved by a characteristic trait in his make-up, his capacity to feel a certain affection for this or that amiable individual in a system generally rejected and disliked. More still, behind all the rigours of his fully developed method there remains in McFarlane's history a deep sense of humanity, sometimes melancholy, often wry and sardonic, but always intuitive which divided him from historical schools such as the generation that succeeded Marc Bloch at the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*. Despite his unease about the Beaufort biography he was in fact a past master of individual characterization. 'The diversity of its (the aristocracy's) members must never be forgotten in generalisations about the class', he wrote in his Raleigh Lecture on the Wars of the Roses (1964) which culminated, however, in a demographic refutation of the often voiced view that the high nobility were extinguished by these conflicts.²

He had to infuse this breath of life by imaginative reflection and inference rather than by merely translating it into modern English prose from the sources. The historian of the early and high Middle Ages finds in his chronicles, annals, *vitae* and *gesta* of bishops or kings, compelling images which they have irrevocably imposed on their subjects. Can we even think of Charlemagne without Einhard? The historian of the later Middle Ages in England finds these sources less useful. The St. Albans writers of the fourteenth century cannot compare with, say, William of Malmesbury, Ordericus Vitalis, or their own predecessors in the thirteenth. The immense mass of documentary sources is his gain but there are also losses. McFarlane made them good although that was not his main purpose. It was not his way to undervalue what the chroniclers said. Often enough he found they were right. He had, moreover, a fine sense for social nuances, the characterization of behaviour patterns, the identification of attitudes and types without which the history of an aristocracy cannot be written. Those dowagers, for instance, who profited hugely by the law of jointures and by surviving their husbands

¹ *The Nobility of Later Medieval England*, p. 3.

² *Ante*, I (1964), p. 89.

in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and whose incomes he could calculate to a nicety, are reawakened as the formidable and forbidding figures they were—with the help of Horace Walpole.¹ What distinguishes McFarlane's social history for better or for worse from some of the moderns is his ubiquitous literary sense. He was an addicted reader of *Lives and Letters* and over the years built up an enormous English library that almost matched in bulk his historical collections, now, by the gift of Dr. Helena Wright, in Magdalen College. His plea for the survival of valuable traditions after the destruction of the particular social and economic system that had given rise to them, was an important personal as well as objective reservation.

The retreat from early and relentlessly held beliefs is part of the phenomenology of the educated English Left. Its intransigence and seemingly uncompromising harshness turns brittle and slowly crumbles, yielding to second thoughts. The would-be destroyers of the existing order often end by being more afraid of their friends than their enemies, the defenders of that order. English upper-class intellectuals may have much to answer for and must bear a share of responsibility for the destruction of civilized values they themselves have always implicitly held. Given his tolerances, McFarlane retreated in the direction of scholarly objectivity, of allowing the demands of his subject, its exacting methodology, to take control. Ultimately the sources themselves prompt the questions which they can or cannot be made to answer. For these reasons his definition of feudalism, for instance, came to be the narrower, non-Marxist one. It excluded the relationships between lords, of whatever rank, and their customary tenants and humbler agrarian dependants and he upheld this also at the small Anglo-Russian conference of historians at Moscow in 1960. In an Anglo-Norman and Angevin setting it seemed to make better sense.

If his dogmatism paled and faded, his sympathies did not change so very much. After the war he showed them in small, practical ways, supporting the Trades Union Summer Schools at Oxford, showing parties of their students round the College and organizing a roster of a few colleagues to do the same year after year. He continued to believe in social reform and took the publications of the Fabian Society regularly. His splendid lecture on Henry V, now in print, was conceived and written specifically for the Oxford branch of the Workers' Educational

¹ *The Nobility of Later Medieval England*, p. 65.

Association. Once a member of the Pink Lunch Club he was now occasionally summoned to lunch at their house by the Misses Spooner whose unstinted, cheerful, and selfless services to many causes roused his admiration.

Throughout his life also, in his writings and in his lectures, he was prone to oppose *idées reçues* and to establish his own insights by way of antithesis. He did this more in the lonely pride of a discoverer staking out new ground than as a vestigial tribute to revolutionary dialectics. For many years his possession of his subject remained almost exclusive until some of his researchers and former undergraduate pupils began to make their own contributions to it. It was perhaps unfortunate that he found so little earlier work to build upon and so much to reject. The scholars whose views he took to task belonged mostly to a past, or at any rate older generation. There was first of all Stubbs's theory of a Lancastrian constitutional experiment which he dissected and buried in some of his most popular courses of lectures, now published in *Lancastrian Kings and Lollard Knights*. J. H. Wylie's *History of England under Henry IV* had appeared between 1884 and 1898, K. H. Vickers's *Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester* in 1907, and S. Armitage Smith's *John of Gaunt* in 1904.

The direction and scope of his work evolved swiftly after the abandonment of the Beaufort project. It is by no means summed up by his famed elucidation of the term 'bastard feudalism', i.e. the replacement of tenure as the basis of service and loyalty by money and indentured retainers and all the implications of this change, the fluidities of 'good lordship' in locality, at law, and in Parliament. From his earliest years of research McFarlane was also engaged on intensive studies of the machinery of government, the working of the King's Council, and the operations of royal finance. He had already amassed a considerable body of transcripts from the Public Record Office and some of them helped to underpin the chapter on the Lancastrian kings which he contributed to Volume VI of the *Cambridge Medieval History* (1936). As magnates and their retainers were bound by ties which fluctuated, the greater political and military conflicts of late medieval England could only be understood by exploring the make-up of affinities and this in turn required complex and painstaking prosopographical studies. As he wrote in his pilot article, 'Bastard Feudalism': it is of the nature of that society, the ties of which were personal, divorced from status, that it should only yield its secrets to the investigator who can base his conclusions upon the study of hundreds of fragmentary

biographies, many of the sources being still in manuscript.¹ The mastery of family histories, the reconstruction of careers, and the establishment of reliable genealogies were therefore the indispensable instruments for any major work on English political society in this period and he was now moving towards that objective, reaching a first peak in the Ford Lectures of 1953, a peak, however, which before long, turned out to be only a foothill.

McFarlane enjoyed this kind of drudgery and it became dear to him to an almost dangerous degree. He found much to correct both among the great antiquaries and county historians and more recent genealogists like the makers of the *Complete Peerage* and Wedgwood's *History of Parliament*. His topographical curiosity and patience with the sources were inexhaustible and wherever he went in England the families of the late-medieval nobility and gentry, that is to say their tombs, brasses, houses, and records, were visited and sooner or later annotated. To give an example, the lands, marriages, connections, and careers of an Oxfordshire knightly lineage, the Willicotes of Wilcote and Great Tew, became the subject of a walk, 'the Willicotes Walk' which took the better part of a day. If he is criticized for his tiring hobby-horse, it never carried him far away from his larger purpose and it was precisely this immense fund of detail which gave to his papers of synthesis, e.g. the one written for the Twelfth International Historical Congress at Vienna in 1965, such assurance and authority.

It was ready knowledge of this kind also which led to his discovery that the universally accepted date of Hans Memling's Donne Triptych rested on the false assumption that the patron, Sir John Donne of Kidwelly, had been killed at the battle of Edgecote in 1469. McFarlane was visiting the exhibition of the Chatsworth treasures in 1948 together with his friend Dr. Helena Wright when he noticed the error. 'But this is wrong', he exclaimed, and at once began to weigh the consequences of the mistake for the interpretation of Memling's artistic development. He threw himself into the *métier* of art history with all the prodigality of effort which, as in other cases, deprived him of the fullest return. He could not be content without mastering minute problems of style and form and in the end it seemed that he was committed to something much bigger than the evaluation of his discovery, almost a global study of the painter. Nothing less would do. The genesis of the Memling volume

¹ *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 20 (1945), p. 173.

which the late Professor Edgar Wind, assisted by Dr. G. L. Harriss, one of McFarlane's former pupils, edited, was briefly set out in an introductory note by Wind. He and McFarlane had become friends and had shared the pleasures of dissent, of exposing the weaknesses in the armour of authorities like Max Friedländer and Erwin Panofsky. The paintings of Memling, like all Bruce's work, became part of his life. He built up a library on the Flemish primitives and spent at least one long and a short vacation travelling round galleries in Europe. Friends were asked to bring back photographs if they happened to call at a collection he had been unable to visit.

In the meantime Dr. A. L. Rowse had invited him to contribute a volume on John Wycliffe to his *Teach Yourself History Library* and he responded to write the only book of his lifetime. It was published in 1952. Its terse narrative was harnessed to a sceptical, almost head-shaking view of the subject. The John Wycliffe admired and revered by Protestant tradition and historiography had already been criticized by others long before. Here the hero, if anyone, was Archbishop Courtenay who forced Wycliffe's leading Oxford disciples to recant. The book's incisive account of the university in which the reformer taught and of the management of the English Church between the royal government, lay pressures, and the papacy more than fulfils the aims of the series and makes Wycliffe's career understandable to the lay reader. With the same clarity and sureness he surveyed Wycliffe's writings and the activities of his followers. Nor did the book mark the end of his interest for it had an important sequel in his studies of the highly placed and well-connected career soldiers who patronized Lollardy. 'The Lollard Knights' were the subject of the last lectures he delivered in summer 1966. They have been edited by his friend and former pupil Dr. J. R. L. Highfield in the volume which contains also the vigorous account of Henry of Derby's career as appellant and king and the biographical portrait of Henry V. The *Lollard Knights* belong to his finest work. Lollardy itself is seen as but a manifestation of a much larger movement of lay piety in the later fourteenth century. The careers, connections, and associations of the knights are skilfully pieced together to reveal, against W. T. Waugh's view, how widespread sympathies with the moral and disestablishment tenets of Lollard preachers were.

Memling was to busy McFarlane intermittently for the next ten years, culminating in a course of lectures in 1962, but the Ford Lectures which he was invited to give in Hilary Term 1953

really determined the bulk of his work for the remainder of his life. Almost everything he published, the majority of his courses of lectures, classes for advanced students, and the papers he gave to learned societies, were devoted to the elaboration of their theme, 'The English Nobility, 1290-1536'. He did not regard the 1953 series as anything more than a first survey and some of the problems he encountered when preparing them he had not faced so consciously before. They could not be settled there and then, not least of all the question how the nobility of later medieval England saw itself as a group and how this group was to be defined by the historian. His views here changed. In 1953 also he found time only to point to the paradoxes and conflicting purposes in the landed settlements of the greater families, the different ways in which entails and feoffments to uses could be employed. He had, however, already identified and was able to unfold to his audience the nuclear source for the study of individual families, their resources, their expenditure, their administrative systems and their mode of life, namely valors, household and receivers-general accounts. It is not as if these records had never been seriously discussed before and samples of them had been edited long ago but on the whole historians had treated them as sidelights and subordinate material. In McFarlane's perspectives they became the key evidence and he was the first to attempt their systematic and comprehensive exploration. Yet the Ford Lectures were not yet based on the widest range of such accounts and had he not said on an earlier occasion: 'two or three examples do not make a generalisation'.¹ For many years he had enjoyed ready access to the large collection of Sir John Fastolf's business papers at Magdalen College and the main topics of the lectures, the nobility at war, land, service, expenditure, and maintenance were illustrated by them, the related Cromwell papers, and the central records left behind by the Staffords, the Beauchamps, the Bouchiers, and royal princes like Thomas of Lancaster, duke of Clarence. Once again his gift for characterization and fine sense for social nuances gave the lectures their tone although he was never even remotely sentimental. In the end the listener or the reader must be quite at home with these families and with his examples which are often used in more than one context.

This method with which the historian of earlier medieval societies might have to content himself, could be thought impressionistic, given that every important household must have

¹ *B.I.H.R.* 20 (1945), p. 175.

possessed an administration and records similar to the ones already known and used. In working for a large-scale and detailed synthesis of his subject McFarlane was therefore driven to look for more examples and to uncover more, if not the entire surviving substance, of these two types and kindred sources. For years after the delivery of the Ford Lectures he travelled in search of them, spending weeks at a time in Trust House hotels, transcribing all day in muniment rooms or local record offices. Gradually the imposing collection of materials in files arranged under families built up and as it grew it made his task of surveying and presenting the whole more daunting and less likely to be accomplished. The sources proved to be too numerous for him alone to encompass them all, yet the sense of being in sole charge of the ground had become a habit. Absorbed as he was in this gigantic enterprise he did not pay overmuch attention to the mounting volume of Continental scholarship on the problems of nobilities and governing classes. He took cognizance of the work of L. Genicot on the Namurois and R. Cazelle's *Société politique . . . sous Philippe de Valois*, but rarely entered upon comparisons. The world conferences of historians with their *Grands Thèmes* designed to present new perspectives and work in progress did not appeal to him and he was accident-prone even when he could be persuaded to participate. His paper on the 'Origins of the Lollard Movement' for the Tenth Congress at Rome in 1955 remained undelivered because the timetable slipped and his *Rapport* on 'The English Nobility in the later Middle Ages', now published with the Ford Lectures, was so faultily printed for the Twelfth Congress at Vienna in 1965 that he would not attend it.

If sudden death and the very scale of the task and the standards he set himself deprived him of his full harvest, the thirteen years after the Ford Lectures were anything but barren. They saw the publication of some of his finest papers and the completion of others not yet in print. During the nineteen-sixties he turned to the demography of the comital and lesser families, their rates of extinction, and their mortality during the plague years of the fourteenth century and the internal wars of the fifteenth. Some of his calculations and conclusions have found a place, not only in his Raleigh Lecture, but also in the studies published with the Ford Lectures. A new synthesis and organization of the material and the theme as a whole began to emerge in his last courses of lectures on the nobility in 1965 and 1966. He was perhaps not so far off from some of his goals.

Bruce McFarlane studied the later medieval nobility and gentry not only at their work, be it government, war, the amassing of wealth, or the upkeep of an affinity; he also became the historian of their culture and religion. He had often found good evidence for the contents of their libraries, the books they read and even wrote and no one surveying his work can fail to be struck by the flair and penchant he had for these topics. Whether he is discussing the education of the nobles' children, the scholarship of William of Worcester, the book purchases of the house of Lancaster, or the literate piety of Lollard knights, his treatment of these topics is coolly illuminating and admirably related to his wider aims. The final reflections on the religious temper of the pre-Reformation decades in *Hans Memling*, questioning J. Huizinga's celebrated image of a prevailing morbidity and terror, are very memorable. *Kulturgeschichte* is a word he would probably have tried to avoid but his own contributions to it, scattered about in his articles and books, need stressing. They unfold his full range as a historian.

There is another, less conspicuous branch of his craftsmanship which should not be overlooked. His first notice in the *English Historical Review* appeared in 1934 and it was characteristically devoted to a Record Office publication, the *Calendar of the Close Rolls, Henry V., vol. ii., A.D. 1419-1422*. He contributed a number of large and important reviews, for instance of S. B. Chrimes's *English Constitutional Ideas in the Fifteenth Century* (*E.H.R.* lxxviii, 1938) and R. Somerville's *History of the Duchy of Lancaster* (*E.H.R.* lxx, 1955). In these his differing orientation and his almost unrivalled critical command of the sources form an indispensable commentary. Occasionally he accepted invitations to review for the *New Statesman* and *The Listener*. Here he enjoyed himself and did not mind plucking a few feathers. Far more numerous, however, were his reviews and short notices of London and local record and especially P.R.O. publications, like *Calendars of Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London*, *Calendars of the Close Rolls*, and *Calendars of Entries in the Papal Registers relating to Great Britain and Ireland*. In these sometimes long and sometimes very brief pieces he patiently surveyed the uses of the source, selecting items for the light it threw on important problems, sampled the quality of the edition, and guided researchers towards its correct critical handling. Quite often he evaluated the contents on the spot, for instance the papacy's resigned powerlessness over provisions to English benefices under Sixtus IV (*E.H.R.* lxxiii, 1958, pp. 675 ff.) and

the confiscation of the goods of those convicted of treason in the Parliament of 1388. A few darting comments suddenly light up central themes. One example must suffice. In the *Calendar of Close Rolls, Henry VII, vol. ii: 1500-1509* he noted the fifty and more recognizances to keep allegiance to the king and his heirs and wrote: 'The point had almost been reached when it could be said, Henry VII governed by recognisance. In this he was neither 'medieval' nor 'modern' but *sui generis*.'¹ And musing about the ways Richard Grey, earl of Kent, was stripped of most of what he had by Henry and his councillors, the latter pocketing what they could, he concluded: 'Piety and greed grew rankly in the same soil.' These were perhaps the last words he himself published. In his hands the chore of the routine review became a new lead into an endlessly debated subject.

Magdalen College at the time of McFarlane's election in 1927, the last but one year of Sir Herbert Warren's presidency, counted thirty-four Fellows and among them C. S. Lewis and T. D. Weldon had already begun to make their mark as tutors. Fellows by Special Election included R. L. Poole, C. T. Onions, and the Revd. H. E. Salter. The College wore a dignified patrician air. It did not spurn academic distinction amongst its undergraduates but had hitherto not gone out of its way to demand it. Among the *alumni* were many men of great ability as their later careers showed, but a sizeable proportion of them took no honours degrees and a few no degrees of any kind. They absolved the required minimum of public examinations but failures at one or the other of the hurdles, beginning with responsions, were not infrequent. McFarlane was one of a small group of teaching Fellows who in the thirties helped to bring about a tutorial revolution. It began with some significant changes in the system of admitting commoners which had in Sir Herbert Warren's time still centred largely upon the President. The examinations for Demyships and Exhibitions controlled by the tutors now became a more important route of entry than hitherto, filling a larger proportion of the total number of undergraduate places. At the same time the number of awards was raised and the Tutorial Board also took charge of the ordinary College Entrance Examination in spring and in September. Above all, the men were taught. At first McFarlane had to cover not only the Middle Ages but also, as has been mentioned, the nineteenth century in English History and most

¹ *E.H.R.* lxxx (1966), p. 154.

Medieval European History as well. His senior colleague S. G. Lee looked after the middle period and C. S. Lewis taught historians their Political Philosophy. With the election of Mr. A. J. P. Taylor in 1938 both ends of the syllabus were formidably provided for. The Magdalen History School flourished as never before.

Shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War McFarlane was to have joined the Ministry of Food but in the end this plan somehow came to nothing and he stayed at Magdalen teaching exceptionally large numbers of undergraduates before most of them joined the forces after one year's residence. He served the College as Vice-President in 1942 and 1943 and after the death of George Gordon, Sir Herbert Warren's successor, on 12 March 1942, as Acting President. In 1944 he became Home Bursar for a brief turn and also, for the second time, Secretary of the Tutorial Board, having held the office for no less than five years before his vice-presidency. However, the war service for which his pupils and friends will always remember him was of a different order. He corresponded with them, writing hundreds of letters and so kept open their lines of communication with interests and aspirations then in abeyance. Parcels of books were dispatched to various theatres of war and home stations and the arrival of his letters was something to be looked forward to in Nissen huts, slit trenches, and gun-pits. He wrote with enjoyment and ease about people, his reading, his work, music, and the wartime College. He did not just want to entertain but to share.

The nineteen-thirties may have been his most carefree years. Despite the abandonment of the Beaufort biography his work was thriving. He had independence, many more friends, and the want of family ties was remedied to a degree by his lifelong attachment to the Wrights whom he first met in 1929. Dr. Helena Wright, the gynaecologist, and her husband H. W. S. Wright, the surgeon, had four sons and in this liberal and boisterous household which became his elective home he found much that he had missed in his own childhood. Moreover his hosts, especially Helena, radiated optimism. There was an answer to every problem however ineluctable and frightening. It captivated him and helped him to contain his own melancholy. Unfortunately the new-found well-being came to an end all too soon for in 1941 he contracted rheumatic fever followed by heart disease. From then onwards he had to struggle against recurrent ill health and his life really depended on the punctual

arrival of capsules of pills to control a permanent cardiac fault. Ordinary ills like colds, influenza, and rheumatism always seemed to hit his tall frame with twice their ordinary force and it was characteristic that the first Ford Lecture had to be given with a raging temperature. He needed periods of recuperation badly before he could plunge back into overwork. He feared illness, not without reason.

As Acting President in 1942 he had to conduct the presidential election brought about by George Gordon's death. So well had McFarlane filled the offices of Secretary of the Tutorial Board and Vice-President under exceptionally difficult circumstances that he became a favoured candidate for the succession but in the event the College elected Sir Henry Tizard. The tensions and duplicities of the occasion shocked and angered him and he was even thinking of leaving Oxford against his sense of loyalty to the absent pupils. Yet he overcame his dismay and when a few years later he was offered a distinguished chair elsewhere, he turned it down and remained a college tutor for the rest of his life. From then onwards he nursed few ambitions but when his stoicism, renouncing in advance what he might have liked to have, was exploited, it hurt. Honours like his election to the British Academy and the Society of Antiquaries gave him pleasure although he purported to make light of them.

He held not only College offices with distinction but also served for many years on the History Faculty Board, for some time on the General Board, and again for long spells on the Council of the Royal Historical Society, of which he became a Vice-President, the British International Committee, and the Council of the Canterbury and York Society. On all these bodies his judgement was greatly respected and valued. For McFarlane was an excellent man of business. The shrewd Scot in him, whom he would not deny, had a way of swaying College meetings and committees by admirably timed interventions and carefully planned surprises. He always knew exactly what he wanted and often turned almost certain defeats into victories. Yet he did not enjoy these passages of arms and the prospect of conflict agitated him and roused his pessimism. He usually feared the worst and was sometimes taken aback when it did not happen. If he felt his cause to be lost he would keep silent, reserving his intervention for when there was at least a faint chance of success. Speaking at public meetings and dinners he disliked intensely. Leaving nothing to chance he would spend many hours in preparation and he also took enormous trouble with academic

correspondence and references. Sometimes letters were drafted and redrafted many times before he was satisfied. Among the results were diamantine, albeit unpublishable, masterpieces but these inescapable chores diverted much, perhaps too much, of his effort. His influence was exerted consistently on the side of scholarship, of defending the interests of medieval studies, and helping those in need. He also saw to it that justice was done to his pupils and to examinees.

What is called collective research held no appeal for him and he did not collaborate readily with other scholars but that does not mean that he jealously guarded his discoveries and transcripts. On the contrary he gave away freely to colleagues and especially to his research students. Amongst the Oxford medievalists Mr. C. A. J. Armstrong of Hertford College stood perhaps closest to him in interests and they exchanged views continuously over the years.

It remains to say how he lived and what it was like to be taught by him. Bruce McFarlane was an awe-inspiring tutor who roused the wish to do their best in most of his undergraduates and he was not easy to please. Often the more gifted quite naturally and unwittingly began to turn into serious historians when they read the medieval English centuries with him even though they had no intention of embarking on any advanced work later. He knew how to communicate his current interests to his pupils and to make them feel close to the real matter of historical studies. He did not deliberately found societies for those reading the school at Magdalen but when the initiative came from his pupils he gladly accepted invitations to join or to preside. For the returned ex-service undergraduates who were mostly in their mid twenties he held a series of evening meetings devoted to the study of J. Smyth's *Lives of the Berkeleys* to which the comers contributed papers in turn. They met in his rooms and there were at least four future historians and academic teachers among them. In the ordinary tutorial his standards were very high and to generations of undergraduates he was known and referred to simply as 'the Master'. He could be forbidding: pretentious arrogance, shoddiness, and evident signs of boredom were usually in for a bad time. His cold anger had a far more devastating effect than another man's outburst of temper but hard work, even when very uninteresting, was instantly recognized. He had a soft spot for amusing cheek and spontaneity for, as many men leaning towards melancholy, he liked to laugh. There was forbearance also with well-meaning pomposity. Above all he was

generous with his time especially for those in need of help for any reason whatsoever. His generosity, often unsolicited, always prudent and practical, was also silent. Countless pupils, undergraduates, and researchers had reason to thank him.

Throughout his working life he drew large audiences to his lectures, even when the subject matter was quite technical, as for instance the courses on *Livery and Maintenance* and *Lords and Retainers* which he gave in 1956, 1959, and 1965. What attracted undergraduates in numbers large enough to fill the College Hall to these spirited but demanding hours? He never lectured from memory but always came with carefully prepared texts and only then did he allow himself improvisations and spontaneous asides. It was the authoritative assurance the lectures conveyed and also their sheer relevance and usefulness which drew the crowds. They had an economy which wasted nothing so that every sentence mattered. The majority of his audiences felt urged to take very full notes and sets of these were often coveted by those who had missed attending.

To undergraduates who had broken the ice and a number of pupils, friends and now colleagues, his rooms were open in the evening and visitors flocked in. They, like the day callers with their essays, would usually find him in a huge armchair with his cat on his lap or curled up not very far away. He kept one most of the time and from about 1950 onwards it was always a Siamese, the first, named after the thirteenth-century aristocratic, clerical pluralist, Bogo de Clare, the next one Stubbs, and then Jasper (Tudor). He had a large collection of porcelain cats and pupils sometimes waged bets as to the total number only to find that there was always an unexpected one hidden somewhere. Bruce entertained generously, well, and freely but the countless informal occasions were the more memorable. The main object of the callers was simply conversation. 'The Twenties', someone wrote, 'were the age of talk', and he remained attached to the habit of long conversations as a deliberate, civilized pastime. There was nothing studied or stilted about it. Anything from serious discussion about a recent publication or lecture to scandal and gossip might occupy the time or else he would play a fine recording—Mozart and Verdi operas and again Mozart but also Haydn chamber music were favourites—on his gramophone.

Though a bachelor he was not really a hardened College man. Already before the 1939–45 War he had leased a country retreat where he would go during the vacation and even weekends to

work, excuse, and entertain guests. At Coombe Wood near Wheatley and after the war at Stonor but finally at the beautiful old rectory in Quainton (Bucks.), renamed Brudenell House which he shared with Helena Wright, he kept house and preferred this to his rooms in College. The prospect and hope of a supernumerary Fellowship which at one time enabled bachelor Fellows to remain in residence after retirement, did not in the end appeal to him. When moving into a new study and library he would use his strength regardless of his health to shift frightening masses and weights of furniture. The style of his housekeeping is best described as luxurious simplicity and guests, who had to help with the chores, were in fact always spoilt. He enjoyed long and arduous walks, usually to see houses, and there was always 'church-crawling'. The experience of going to see a house or a church with him was daunting because his eye travelled very quickly and he would instantly detect faint traces of former roof-lines, arcading, or other features from which he could deduce the architectural history of the building long before his fellow visitor had even spotted the clue. The printed guide would usually confirm his conjecture and a mammoth collection of booklets on churches and houses and Ordnance Survey maps formed part of his library as a matter of course. He was also a great naturalist and there were few plants and herbs he did not know when he visited gardens or encountered them on his walks.

In 1949 the Board of the Faculty had conferred on him a Special Lecturership which enabled him to reduce his College teaching to ten hours weekly and so devote more time to research and the supervision of graduate students. He held it for altogether fourteen years but the term of tenure was limited and in 1963 he reverted to a C.U.F. lecturership. This meant that his teaching load automatically rose again to fourteen hours and above just when more time was imperatively needed to gather up his researches for the work of synthesis. He bore it uncomplainingly but it was damaging to him until early in 1966 the Board offered him a Readership. He was also asked to rejoin it as a co-opted member. Everything had been arranged with the College by the end of Trinity Term and he made plans to settle down for a long working vacation at Quainton. But the hoped-for opportunity had come too late and he was ambushed by a stroke which killed him instantly. It happened on his way to see a house, Saturday, 16 July.

To sum up Bruce McFarlane's achievement it is necessary to return to his beginnings and remember how little was then

known about the society and polity of later medieval England. Much of what he said and wrote has become the common currency of our understanding so that the originality and power of his insights and definitive papers are already in danger of being forgotten. Shunning collective research he founded a school all the same. Over thirty graduates were trained by him and many others whom he did not supervise owed scarcely less to his teaching. Together they make up an astonishingly large body of scholars in many universities and subjects who bear witness to the vitality of his influence and methods. These have not been improved upon by the neologisms of modern sociological approaches to the English later Middle Ages. It has become commonplace to be dissatisfied with Stubbs and his successors. McFarlane, as we have seen, often criticized the grand master and even more Stubbs's critics, and his own concern, subordinating the workings of institutions to those of society, broke new ground and departed from accepted canons. He belongs none the less to a tradition with enormous and still unexhausted reserves of strength. He enriched and enlarged it. Some of his work may have given ground here and there to the recent findings of scholars, mostly advancing on a less wide front than he tried to do. Its fundamentals have not been questioned. To a few he was also the best friend they could ever hope to have.

K. J. LEYSER

Personal recollections have played the largest part in this memorial. They were reinforced by letters and unpublished papers. I have been helped over many details and my memory was reawakened by conversations with Roger Highfield of Merton College and my colleague, Bruce McFarlane's successor at Magdalen, Gerald Harriss, who not only assisted Edgar Wind with the historical sections of *Hans Memling* but also edited the *Lancastrian Kings*. I owe the same debts of gratitude to John Cooper of Trinity College and James Campbell of Worcester College, the editors of *The Nobility of Later Medieval England*. For a detailed and searching study of K.B.'s evolution as a scholar John Cooper's introduction to this volume should be consulted. I am indebted to Professor Norman Gibbs who supplemented my scanty information about Bruce's early years as a tutor and to Dr. Helena Wright who told me something about his many stays in the Wright family-home in London and the visit to the Chatsworth treasures in 1948.