



Photograph by Walter Stoneman, 1952

AUSTIN LANE POOLE

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1889-1963

AUSTIN LANE POOLE was born in Oxford on 6 December 1889, the second son of Reginald Lane Poole (1857-1939), the most eminent medieval historian in the generation after Stubbs, whose influence and example were to shape his whole career. He was educated at Magdalen College School, whence he proceeded with a history scholarship to Corpus Christi College (Oxford), taking a First Class in Modern History (1911), and the following year winning the Lothian Prize Essay on Henry the Lion.² The following year (1912-13) he spent as a lecturer at Selwyn College, Cambridge, returning to Oxford on his election to a Fellowship at St. John's College. Within a year the even tenor of his scholarly career was interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War, in which as a lieutenant in the 8th service battalion of the Gloucester Regiment he served and was wounded in France. While still in the army he married Vera Dendy, an accomplished painter, daughter of the Professor of Zoology at King's College, London, thereby vacating his Fellowship. The war over, he was re-elected a Fellow and Tutor of St. John's. There he remained for the rest of his life, serving successively as Librarian (1925-31), Senior Tutor (1931-47), and finally President (1947-57). In that year he retired owing to ill health, and died on 22 February 1963, after six years of crippling illness, heroically borne. A very human, if serious-minded man, we think of him chiefly in Oxford as a don who won high distinction in the service both of his college and of the university. To a wider circle he will be remembered as a fine scholar whose research made a significant contribution to our understanding of twelfth-century English history.

Poole's career, divided between teaching, study, and administration was in the best tradition of Oxford dons; but in his case it would be truer to say that he lived two separate lives each pursued with equal zest and at high pressure. To teaching and administration he brought the trained and judicious mind,

¹ I am much indebted to the excellent *Times* obituary (25 February 1963); also to Dr. Poole's daughter (Mrs. Catherine Dupré), Mr. Colin Roberts, and Sir Douglas Veale.

² Published in 1912. He also edited the poems of Gray and Collins in *Oxford Standard Authors*, 1917, 3rd edition 1937.

intensely interested in the contemporary world; and this coloured his approach to the past, which he saw not as a romantic conflict of ideals or ideologies but rather as a hum-drum process of continual adaptation to changing circumstances. His active career limited his historical output no doubt, but without it his research would have lacked its distinctive touch of down to earth actuality.

Much about him and his way of life is explained, as so often, by his home and parentage. His father's lineage was studded with so many learned Lanes and Pooles as to provoke the (apocryphal) inquiry whether he was in any way related to the original Pool of Siloam! His mother, Rachel Emily Malleson, who came of a family much concerned with working-class education, specialized as a writer on the history of art, and was the fitting counterpart of her husband. There were four children—Dorothy, Margaret (always known as Peggy to mark the family connexion with Peggy Gainsborough), Edward Humphrey (always known as Ned), and Austin; and their holidays were spent at Dixton Manor near Winchcombe, their grandfather Malleson's house, and to the children a second home. In this normal Christian home there was much family affection, if little intimacy, between the parents and the children. 'Few boys', wrote Austin in a fragmentary autobiography, 'can have enjoyed a happier childhood.' Throughout his boyhood, too, his father, as editor of the *English Historical Review*, dominated the small world of historical research; and the best-known scholars of the day—Stubbs, Maitland, Vinogradoff, Creighton, and many others—were familiar figures in the house. No wonder then that Austin in this almost too intellectual environment had turned to history before he left school, with the ambition of gaining an Oxford Fellowship. Father and son indeed were very much alike in their devotion to Oxford University, its politics and its gossip, as well as to scholarship; and the difference in their careers perhaps turned on the vital accident by which the father became a Research and the son a Tutorial Fellow—the open road to university politics. However that may be, Austin's conception of scholarship was largely formed by his father from whom he learned more than from his college tutors. In particular, his father saw to it that Austin travelled widely and learned in German seminars the groundwork of German history and method in which his interest lay for many years before he turned to English history. His German training—superior to anything available in England—enabled him, at an early age,

to write the chapters on Germany for the *Cambridge Medieval History* (vols. iii, v, and vi) which made his reputation. Nor was it merely as an act of filial piety that in 1934, when his father was too ill to do it himself, he was called upon to edit his scattered papers under the title of *Studies in Chronology and History* (Clarendon Press). Eighteen years later, as another work of *pietas*, he printed in the *Cambridge Historical Journal* (vol. x, no. 3, 1952) the correspondence of his father with F. W. Maitland from 1894 to 1906, an impressive memorial to both men.

The comprehensive grasp of the continental sources gained from his contributions to the *Cambridge Medieval History* proved invaluable for his most important book *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta: 1087-1215* (1951), being the third volume of the *Oxford History of England*, edited by G. N. Clark. On this task—albeit a labour of love—he spent no less than twenty years of his life, examining and digesting the original sources with a minuteness never before attempted. The result was a masterly summary, which exactly fulfilled the purposes of the series, and the most authoritative treatment of its period as a whole since Stubbs's *Constitutional History*. More than seventy years had passed since that great book was written, and in the interval the Public Record Office—thanks to the efforts of Sir Henry Maxwell-Lyte—had either printed or calendared a great mass of record material. The new evidence of the Book of Fees, the *Curia Regis* Rolls, the Pipe Rolls, and much else was highly technical and difficult to assess. The patient examination it required was a task after Poole's heart. He was not a speculative historian. In scholarship, as in life, he distrusted all theorizing and all generalization, preferring to draw his inferences from a detailed induction. Thus the task of harmonizing the new material with established views was highly congenial, and his book was a major contribution to the history of the period. In his Ford Lectures, delivered in Michaelmas Term 1944, he had already dissected the complexities of social classification, and these were published with the title *Obligations of Society in the XII and XIII Centuries* in 1946. It was, perhaps, the most penetrating, as it is the most attractive of his writings, and it also enabled him to contain the big book within reasonable limits. Together they gave him a permanent place in medieval scholarship—a fact quickly recognized by his election to the British Academy in 1952.

The long delay in publishing *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta* was not entirely due to the pressure of heavy college and university activities. His concentration on the main objective

was also interrupted by the time-consuming obligations of friendship incidental to academic life. Already, while still occupied with German history, he had contributed an article on 'England and Burgundy in the Last Decade of the Twelfth Century' in the *Essays on History* (Clarendon Press, 1927) presented to his father. Six years later he wrote another and important paper on 'Outlawry as a Punishment of Criminous Clerks' for *Historical Essays in Honour of James Tait* (M.U.P., 1933); and in the same year, in conjunction with J. R. H. Weaver, a memoir on *Henry William Carless Davis* (1874-1928) (Constable) together with a selection of his historical papers. In 1948, on the retirement of Sir Maurice Powicke, he contributed 'Richard I's alliances with the German Princes in 1194' to the *Studies in History* also published by the Clarendon Press. There were, in addition, occasional reviews in the *English Historical Review*, and a couple of articles, one of which, on 'Livestock Prices in the Twelfth Century'¹—a little out of character, perhaps?—was his single excursion into economic history. But the greater part of his research first saw the light in his book.

Three years after its publication, Poole was closely concerned in a romance of medieval scholarship. A new edition of the then anonymous² *Gesta Stephani*, the key source for that most difficult reign, was being prepared for Nelson's *Medieval Texts*.³ The work, which was known only from Duchesne's seventeenth-century copy, was nearing publication when Sir Roger Mynors, *more suo*, discovered a fourteenth-century manuscript containing the vital final chapters missing from the transcript. In this crisis Poole, who had already revised the chronology of the reign,⁴ came to the rescue by contributing to the introduction a lucid exposition of the value of the new matter.

One other task was completed before he was overtaken by illness. This was a new edition of *Medieval England*, which he prepared for the Clarendon Press in 1958. Originally issued in 1902 as Barnard's *Companion to English History*, it had been edited and revised by H. W. C. Davis in 1924 with the new title. In half a century the book had become quite out of date, and Poole's edition was virtually a new work. With nearly twenty authors to

¹ *E.H.R.*, vol. lv, p. 284.

² Since identified by Mr. R. H. C. Davis as the work of Robert of Lewes, Bishop of Bath (1136-61). See *E.H.R.*, vol. lxxvii, p. 209.

³ *Gesta Stephani*, translated and edited by K. R. Potter (Thomas Nelson, 1955).

⁴ *E.H.R.* vol. xlvi, p. 447: 'Henry Plantagenet's Early Visits to England'.

contend with, he found it a heavy task, for he was already a sick man when it was published. To it he contributed a final article upon 'Recreations', a subject that had long interested him, perhaps because he himself had none. On these thirty pages he lavished great pains; and some might think the research involved was disproportionate to its subject. Anyway, it forms a happy epilogue to his more severe work, and its last words remind us of the touch of humour which runs through all he wrote. For after an exhaustive survey of every conceivable sport, pastime, game, or recreation his last word is

Yet the problem of the long dreary winter nights was not entirely overcome and perhaps the most satisfying pastime was love-making. So Thomas Campion, who wrote at the end of the sixteenth century, after recounting various forms of amusement concludes his poem:

Though love and all his pleasures are but toys,
They shorten tedious nights.

Side by side with his original work went his other life as college tutor (with a heavy load of teaching) and university administrator. In 1924 he was Senior Proctor. He served on the General Board of Faculties: was chairman of the Board of Modern History, and a member of the Hebdomadal Council for thirty years. He was also a Delegate of the University Press, and chairman of its financial committee. He was finally Pro-Vice-Chancellor. His devoted service to the University through a critical period of its reconstruction and expansion made him, for many years, its leading elder statesman. Reviewing the whole period, Sir Douglas Veale, then Registrar of the University, writes:

Poole entered university administration by the usual *cursus honorum*, after being Senior Proctor in 1924. In 1926 he was followed in the senior proctorship by K. N. Bell and in 1929 in the junior proctorship by G. N. (now Sir George) Clark. These three became, if they were not so already, firm friends, and between them they exercised a profound, if often indirect, influence on university policy. One of their instruments was a luncheon club, in the foundation of which C. K. (now Sir Carleton) Allen, Poole's colleague in the proctorship, was associated. This club was intended to bring together professors, other members of faculties, and members of the small full-time administrative staff, particularly the Registrar and the Secretary of the Chest. And it did what it was intended to do. Complementary to it was a dining club, including some members of the luncheon club, some other dons, and an equal number of men of affairs. These included Harold Macmillan, Wilfrid Green (later Master of the Rolls), E. V. Knox, Sir Frederick Leith-Ross, and Bernard Darwin. Neither of these associations was intended to be a

pressure group, but membership of them did help to interest a number of influential academic figures in policy and administration. It is worthy of note that the only scientist in either of the two clubs when they were founded was Harry Plaskett, the Savilian Professor of Astronomy. Poole never quite got over his distrust of the upsurge of science.

With one interval of five years, following upon the death of two of his children within a few weeks of each other in 1931, Poole was a member of the Hebdomadal Council from 1926 to 1957. That body is the nearest thing to a governing body which exists in the University. It may be compared to what a board of directors of a company would be like if the shareholders met every fortnight, and every decision of the board had to be confirmed or could be challenged by them. It consisted in Poole's time of eighteen elected and five *ex officio* members, one being the Chancellor who never attended. All its members are dons; and generally they are the sort who concentrate their interests within the University. It therefore tends to be conservative in outlook. Because its members are dons it has also a tendency to be dialectical or, to put it another way, the contribution to discussion of many of its members is to detect and confute the fallacies in the arguments of previous speakers. And so the views expressed by individual members depend a good deal upon the order in which they speak. But the members are all persons of ability, and therefore what they say is worth listening to.

On a body of that kind leadership passes naturally to those who are interested enough in general policy to have decided ideas of their own about what ought to be done, and are energetic enough to have mastered the relevant data. Poole was definitely one of the leaders. He was never fluent, he spoke seldom and always briefly. But he obviously knew his own mind. He seldom, if ever, analysed the arguments of other speakers, though the accuracy with which he could recapitulate the details of a debate proved that he must have followed its course with close attention. However strong his personal convictions might be, he never failed to recognize that the last word lay with Congregation.

He was by no means a reformer by temperament. But neither did he obstruct reform. When the reformers attacked anything he cherished, he took a lot of convincing of the need for reform. That is one reason for the difficulty in attaching his name to any particular reform. But he was never deaf to argument, and, once convinced that a reform was necessary, he would be fertile in plans for furthering it. Thus, though no enthusiast for Nuffield College when it was formed, he gave devoted service to the Committee which managed its affairs before it attained independence. Though it cannot be said that any major reform was due to him, many would never have been accomplished without him.

There were two major controversial issues in his early days on Council. The control of academic policy had fallen into the hands of the Curators of the University Chest; a body which was hag-ridden by fears of insolvency. The accumulation of separate reserves against

dangers which, at the worst, would never all happen simultaneously, was one of the causes which retarded the progress of science in the university. Poole was one of those who took the lead in securing that control of policy, always of course subject to Congregation, passed to Council, the Chest remaining responsible for advising how much money could be spent but not on what objects.

The other major issue was the extension of the Bodleian. On this the University was so gravely divided that the Rockefeller Foundation in the autumn of 1930 sent one of its senior officials to suggest to the Vice-Chancellor that the offer by the Foundation of the grant by which alone the extension could be carried out, should be withdrawn, and not renewed till there was some prospect of the University settling its disagreements. The Vice-Chancellor said that he was confident that he could get agreement, and Poole was one of the members of Council who, though holding very decided views of his own, gave indispensable help to the Vice-Chancellor in making good the assurance he had given the Foundation.

He offered determined resistance to anything which he thought tended to the lowering of standards; or to the destruction of irreplaceable amenities. In his view, an encroachment on the Parks was more or less a capital offence. He was a stickler for the dignity of university ceremonial. As chairman of the Committee of Council which nominated Oxford representatives on outside bodies, he took endless pains to find representatives who would be useful and project a true image of Oxford. This had not always been the practice of his predecessors.

Poole's other allegiance—perhaps the most absorbing of all—was owed to his College. On this angle, Mr. Colin Roberts, a friend and colleague at St. John's for more than twenty years, and Secretary to the Delegates of the Press, writes as follows:

Austin Poole's connexion with St. John's College began with his appointment as Fellow and Lecturer in 1913, and terminated only with his death, as an Honorary Fellow.

His pupils were apt to find him forbidding in their early days, and communication was not always easy; but as time went on there were few who did not appreciate being taught by a dedicated scholar of European reputation and fewer who did not appreciate the interest he took in them as human beings. This interest did not cease when he was no longer their tutor; many of his pupils became lifelong friends and they, with other friends academic and non-academic alike, will have the liveliest recollections of visits to one or other of the Gloucestershire farms in which the practical life and the study of history went on side by side in the '20s and '30s.

He served his College not only as Tutor, but as Librarian and Senior Tutor and, in the last years before his retirement, as President. He took his full share, perhaps more, of the burdens of teaching and administration

imposed by the aftermath of two wars; during the second his services in keeping the College in being and his unfailingly sympathetic handling of the problems of the young were conspicuous. The College gained much both from his native efficiency as an administrator and from his long and close experience of University business. He felt deeply and strongly where the interests of the College were concerned. The strength of his feeling and his intuitive grasp of what needed to be done were not always matched by an ability to give reasons for a course he favoured, or to convince those with whom he was not in close contact. Certain of his ends, he bothered less about the means. Those who did not know him well might be misled by an occasional wilful indulgence in prejudices which he had often himself already discounted. A combination of integrity, intuition, and experience, grafted on to an inherited knowledge of the traditions of College and University, made his contribution to both unique.

His sympathy with younger colleagues, whatever their field of study, was immediate and generous as well as practical; he was on the whole easier in his relations with them than with those senior to or contemporary with him in College. In his Presidency the Lodgings became for the first time for many years the centre of the College, and many of its members will recall the ready welcome and hospitality they received from him and his wife. He took great trouble too both in the administration of College livings and in the management of College estates, helped in the one by a natural piety as attractive as it was old-fashioned and in the other by a boyhood spent on his grandfather's estate in Gloucestershire; College parsons and College tenants were numbered among his friends just as much as his fellow scholars and old members of the College.

In 1944 he was appointed a Delegate of the University Press, and rapidly made his influence felt on the Delegates' publications in the field of history. His interest in the work of the Press was, however, much wider than this might suggest; he was a member of the Delegates' Finance Committee and became its Chairman in 1949, a post he only relinquished for reasons of health in 1957. For Poole this was not just one more Chairmanship of one more University committee; he took a deep and continuing interest in the various activities of the Press, and his concern for the work and well-being of the staff of the Press, at home and abroad, was widely appreciated.

By those who knew him Poole will be remembered as a tall, spare, solemn man whose great brown eyes looked you straight in the face.¹ He spoke slowly and with emphatic utterance, except on the rare occasions when he lost his temper—which could be frightening. Brought up in the Church of England, he was a simple Church and State man, who accepted the world as

¹ A portrait by Ruskin Spear hangs in the Hall of St. John's College.

he found it and shared to the full the prejudices of his time and class. His study was his workshop—he disliked working in libraries—and here he built up a select but superb collection of the books relevant to his studies. For him, as for Matthew Paris, ‘laziness was the enemy of the soul’, and in everything he did he stood, like Strafford, for a policy of Thorough. His tolerance and his charity failed only when he had to deal with pupils or colleagues who were plain idle or slipshod. Few men can have taken their daily life more seriously, or driven themselves harder. Each day, like his father before him, he worked till midnight, and the constant strain probably shortened his life. There was a German tinge in this exaggerated devotion to daily toil, whereby the very vacations served only as opportunities for more intensive study. In term he would spend an hour walking in the Parks—of which he was a curator—and would look at the cricket without being really interested in it. Out of term his only idea of relaxation was hard manual labour in ‘improving’ his successive Cotswold houses.

The serious cast of his mind was emphasized by his indifference towards sport and games. He neither shot, nor fished, nor hunted: he condemned the playing of bridge, and he positively hated golf. All these were just so many ways of wasting time. For the same reason he took little or no part in the historical conferences and conventions, and though he served on the Council of the Royal Historical Society from 1932 to 1936, he rarely attended meetings, from the conviction that its main task lay in producing its *Transactions*, the Camden Society volumes, and other valuable publications. Nor would he willingly attend lectures at Oxford (except officially as Pro-Vice-Chancellor), or even the meetings of the Medieval Group, so great was his distrust of the ‘group mind’ and the impromptus of learned discussion. But though you expel Nature with a pitchfork she has a habit of returning, and looking back I am inclined to think he found more relaxation than most of us can in his full and busy social life. He was a great diner and founder of clubs intended, as Sir Douglas Veale says, to focus interest upon university policy—and anyway great fun. He was a most hospitable man, and a perfect host in Common Room, or at home, where for many years Mrs. Poole and he entertained lavishly. An excellent conversationalist, deeply humorous, his mind was an inexhaustible storehouse of Oxford anecdotes, Oxford topography, and Oxford personalities. Like every good medievalist I have known, he was an out and out Conservative, well aware of the ‘wind of

change', though remaining himself largely unaffected by it. He could perhaps be best commemorated in Latin, for he embodied the ancient Roman virtues—dignity, gravity, and above all *pietas*.

Thus he lived all of a piece: a kind man of immense vitality, slow to make up his mind, but once made up, forthright in expressing it and inflexible: yet utterly reserved about his deepest convictions, and so essentially a lonely figure. This was increased in middle life by the tragic death of his two elder children. From this time onwards he sought relief in still greater dedication to the daily task. He was sustained too, by a few lifelong friends, and more especially by Kenneth Bell. Two more different men it would be hard to imagine. Yet Oxford owes them both and equally a very great deal.

In the six sad years of retirement, prevented by his infirmities from participation in university life, and unable any longer to work and even to read, his thoughts turned back more and more to his boyhood. Early in 1963 his condition grew serious, and he was moved from Oxford to Ticehurst. There, tended by his wife and daughter, he died, true to his Victorian principles and the simple Christian faith in which he had been brought up.

V. H. GALBRAITH