

*David Hugh Farmer - an appreciation and  
David Hugh Farmer - a bibliography of  
published works*

Article

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# David Hugh Farmer - An Appreciation

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On 29 June 1988, over 80 past and present members and supporters of the Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies gathered for its annual summer symposium, on this occasion dedicated to the theme of 'Saints' to mark the retirement of David Hugh Farmer. It may seem odd to begin an appreciation of David with a remembrance of the end of his time at Reading, but that June day (by happy coincidence the double feast of Saints Peter and Paul) very much summed up David's important contribution to Medieval Studies in this University. The large audience present testified to the affection and respect in which he was, and is, held by the many staff and students who have known him. Several unable to attend sent their greetings. The theme of 'Saints', which David has made very much his own, with such memorable consequences, proved as stimulating as it was appropriate to the occasion. The 1988 summer symposium was one of the most successful, enjoyable and uplifting meetings that the GCMS has ever staged. The spirit of good humour, combined with academic stimulation, permeated the assembly and David himself spoke with his customary sensitivity and commitment. It seemed only natural to publish a volume of essays on 'Saints' based on the proceedings of June 1988 (the papers by Drs Kemp and Millett), and we are extremely pleased that others who knew David either as fellow academics, in the case of Professors Holdsworth and Morris, or research students, in the case of Margaret Harris and Nigel Berry, have been able to add their contributions. This very mix of contributors bears witness to David's singular ability to engender respect within the academic community as well as within the ranks of students who have benefited from his wisdom and enthusiasm. I'm sure that David won't mind my saying that his period as a Benedictine monk at Quarr

Abbey gave him that 'hands-on' experience which the vast majority of medieval historians lack. Quarr was at that time a community half French, having its origins in the exile of Solesmes monks in the early twentieth century. David soon developed a command of French as well as a thorough knowledge of Latin and theology, which proved so valuable to his historical researches. He also developed considerable expertise in catering (he is now a superb host) and in the design and weaving of silk vestments. Indeed it might be said that silk weaving's loss was history's gain, for with a developing interest in the historical setting of the medieval theological works with which he had become so familiar, and which he was now involved in teaching in the Abbey, he turned his attentions to St Hugh of Lincoln, having his first article published by the Lincolnshire Architectural and Archaeological Society in 1956. This close study of the manuscript concerning the canonization of St Hugh (BL Cotton Roll XIII 27) was an early sign of an immense palaeographical and analytical talent. Dr Francis Wormald, then Deputy Keeper at the British Library, suggested that he should undertake with Miss Decima Douie an edition of the Life of St Hugh, a joint enterprise which resulted in the Oxford Medieval Text of 1961-2, now in its second edition, and in important contact with Sir Roger Mynors, then editor. At Quarr, David also worked on other saints' lives and works, contributed articles to the *Dictionnaire d'Histoire et Géographie Ecclésiastique* and over 100 reviews and short notices to the *Révue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, very much epitomising St Benedict's teachings on the spiritual value of personal industry. Though each worked individually, Quarr was notable in these years for its medieval researchers - in addition to David himself, the late Frederick Hockey whose work on the house itself is well known, and Paul Meyvaert who later moved to the U.S.A.

David's work on William of Malmesbury began in 1959 when, by virtue of a Leverhulme Research Grant, he spent a year at St Benet's Hall profiting from the inspiration of Sir Richard Southern, amongst others. After a few years at the sharp end of Redrice School, Andover, David decided to leave the Benedictine order and returned to Oxford. His was a perplexing case for any Admissions Tutor: rarely does one come across a student whose qualifications for entry are school matriculation, Fellowship of the Society of Antiquaries and a clutch of serious historical works. Here was the exception for which rules were made to be broken and David entered Linacre College to

commence his B.Litt. The Isle of Wight County Council took more persuasion until John Bamborough, then principal of Linacre, went straight to the top: after his meeting with Anthony Crosland, then Minister of Education, David received the offer of a grant within a week.

The rest, as they say, is history. David's first job interview was at Reading, where the dynamic J.C. (now Sir James) Holt was expanding the History Department staff. David, now married to Ann and with the facsimile edition of the oldest manuscript of St Benedict's Rule in the press, was appointed a lecturer. Anglo-Saxons, Vikings and Normans formed the principal topics of his lectures, but he also offered a first-year course on the Dissolution of the Monasteries as well as optional and special subject courses on Bede and on twelfth-century monastic life. By the time I arrived in Reading in 1978, David had been in the Department for eleven years, had been promoted to Reader and occupied the warmest office in the 'corridor of power'. By this time, too, he was hitting the headlines and the air waves with the first edition of his *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, which has resulted in not only huge world-wide sales, a translation and adaptation in Italian, and a specially bound presentation copy to the Pope during his visit to England in 1982, but also phone calls from the Antipodes. His work on St Hugh also prospered, with a contribution to the special volume edited by Henry Mayr-Harting, dedicated to the 800th anniversary of the Saint's election as Bishop of Lincoln. David was also a member of the national executive committee for these celebrations and organiser of a splendid exhibition at Bodley. He also retraced the steps of St Hugh to and from the Grande Chartreuse, and regaled us with splendid traveller's tales on his return.

David, as I said, occupied the warmest office in the Department, partly because it was directly over the boiler room but also because of the warmth of his welcome. He was an extremely well-loved and dedicated teacher, a worthy continuator of the Stenton tradition in Reading for Anglo-Saxon studies. His courses on the Vikings, the Age of Bede, Monks and Monasteries in the Twelfth Century, proved consistently popular, and, I know, are remembered by many of his ex-students as the high point of their time at Reading. He was also an invaluable contributor to the MA in Medieval Studies, where again his special insights into monasticism inspired many a dissertation and his long-gained expertise in palaeography led many a student to know

their 'pers' from their 'pros'.

David's greatest charm, perhaps, lies in his overwhelming desire to communicate his own deep-felt enthusiasm and commitment for his subject. He is a splendid conversationalist, and was a sensitive tutor and an inspiring colleague. Characteristically, his retirement from Reading has seen no let-up in his energies. He has since completed the first stages of a much needed new edition of William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Pontificum*, and is continuing his fascinating study of the conversion of the Vikings, as well as contributing new introduction, notes and new texts to the Penguin *Historia Ecclesiastica*. But David is not one to keep knowledge to himself: his courses in the University of Oxford Extra-Mural Department and in innumerable day schools continue to inspire all those he teaches.

I wish to take this opportunity on behalf of the Centre to wish him a happy and fruitful retirement, in the sure knowledge that historical studies will continue to benefit from his enthusiasm for, dedication to, and special insight into, the medieval world and its saints.

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