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THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE IN ITS HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THE WILES LECTURES
GIVEN AT THE QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY
BELFAST 1960

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THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE IN ITS HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

DENYS HAY

Emeritus Professor of Medieval History
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Second Edition

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THE COVER OF THE 1881 EDITION OF CIPOLLA'S 'STORIA DELLE SIGNORIE ITALIANE' (cf. below p. 45 and n. 7)

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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS usually come at the end of a preface. This must begin with several.

In 1957 the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press invited me to write a volume on the Italian Renaissance and I accepted their invitation. When I was asked a year later to deliver the Wiles Lectures in The Queen's University of Belfast it seemed to me that the subject I had promised to write about would be suitable for the lectures. The Syndics agreed to this suggestion and I am grateful to them for their approval of my change of plan.

The remarkable foundation established by Mrs Janet P. Boyd in memory of her father provides not only a lecturer but also part of his audience. To the discussions which followed each lecture I am indebted for a few corrections and much valuable comment; I should add that in the discussion the visitors were joined by some very lively Belfast historians; to both groups I wish to express my thanks. To Professor Michael Roberts, Mrs Janet P. Boyd, and the Vice-Chancellor and Mrs Grant I am obliged for much personal kindness. It is a pleasure to pay tribute to the resources of the Warburg Institute Library and to the unfailing courtesy of Mr J. B. Trapp.

The four lectures as written proved to be considerably too long for delivery and were abbreviated as spoken. For the printed version I have divided them into chapters and

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extended them further, mainly by inserting a section (chapter II) on the notion of the Renaissance as an epoch, since it was plain from our discussions that, however self-evident the concept may be to those of us who work in this field, it is less so for historians who are concerned with other ages.

I have tried to keep annotation to a minimum and I am well aware how greatly I have benefited from books and articles not here mentioned and from scholars here and in Italy with whom I have talked. (At the suggestion of the Press a list of works referred to in notes has been added, in which the works of greatest significance have been marked with an asterisk in the hope that this will be of service to those readers who wish to take the subject farther on their own.) To mention everything relevant would have produced a work which would have been excessively armoured for its task. This task is to provoke an unbiased and fresh appraisal of a phase in Italian and European history which has, more than most such 'periods', suffered from traditional and stereotyped treatment, above all by being dealt with as static and solid. We must have epochs and I have tried to say later in this book why the Renaissance seems to me to have characteristics which make it convenient to treat it as a unit. But within our arbitrary units we must accommodate change and see that general concepts are our servants, not our masters. In this sense all 'periods' are 'transitional periods', the Renaissance like the rest.

In all that follows I am at many points implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, at variance with the judgments and the approach of Jacob Burckhardt in his *Civilization of*

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the Renaissance in Italy, first published at Basle exactly a century ago (August 1860). Yet like all who have become prisoners of Renaissance Italy I was captured by Burckhardt. I first read his book in 1932 and I can still remember the excitement that it produced in me: it was history with a new dimension, for this attitude to the past, this attempt at a total view, had not yet been practised in other periods or really very much by other historians. Since then I have read the book through twice, once in a spirit of sharp criticism, and a third time with a growing admiration of his mastery in handling so subtly and so humbly the most difficult of all material. John of Salisbury (who joined our debates at Belfast once or twice) compared moderns to dwarfs astraddle the shoulders of the ancients.[1] If we can see farther or better nowadays than Buckhardt we owe it largely to his example that we see in this way at all. One other author, nearly contemporary with Burckhardt, I should like to mention: John Addington Symonds. His *Renaissance in Italy* (1875–86) is a remarkable and neglected work; again and again it anticipates some of the judgments of recent scholars and it is unjust to dismiss it as a kind of prolix English version of Burckhardt.

Now that we are detached from the Renaissance, as nineteenth-century scholars were not, we can, I believe, begin to judge it more surely. Yet much remains to be done—in political, economic, artistic and literary history—before we can talk with confidence about it. If the tasks are not daunting it is because the Renaissance is the last epoch when one man can hope to have a direct view of most of the sources. He may not be able to master more than a small

[1] The allusion should, of course, be to Bernard of Chartres.

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section of them, but like the medievalist and unlike the modernist, he can feel the whole texture and attempt a general view of the whole of a substantial period of time, as I here try to view the history of Italy from the early fourteenth century to the mid-sixteenth.

My thanks are due to Professor Giles Robertson for reading the typescript before it went to the Press, and to Professor Nicolai Rubinstein and the late Professor Roberto Weiss for reading the proofs.

D.H.

EDINBURGH
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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

THIS small book has been more useful than I had imagined it would be, granted the somewhat specialist occasion which produced it and the somewhat specialist audience which kindly assembled to hear and to criticise. I suspect the reason for its modest success has been that, unlike many books on the subject, it is written not only from a cultural but from a more purely 'historical' point of view. But something of this is said or implied in the preface I wrote in 1966 where the genesis of the book is described—an invitation from the Syndics at the Cambridge University Press combined with another invitation shortly after from the Trustees of the Wiles Lectureship at Queen's University, Belfast. To that account it would be proper for me to have added—what I overlooked at the time—that I had earlier given three public lectures on related themes at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne at the request of the late Professor W. L. Burn. This did a good deal to clear the decks for the Wiles lectures and this book.

Now the Syndics have again taken the initiative by inviting me to produce a revised edition and in accepting their proposal I should record my thanks to them for much help in the original publication and in regard to foreign translations. The Italian version (1966) was, indeed, slightly revised especially as regards the bibliography.

I have noticed that authors issuing new editions of books

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written some time before (I suppose the substance of this book was in effect more or less fixed by 1957) tend to dis-associate themselves from their work by some such phrase as 'If I were writing this book or these lectures *now* they would be very different and so revision is really not practicable'. The author then proceeds to write an introductory essay suggesting fresh approaches. On re-reading the book I find I cannot in all honesty say this. I am older now but not necessarily more learned let alone wiser (despite all the books I've read in the last twenty years) and I am certainly more diffident, more inclined to hesitate and qualify. Indeed, if I were cleverer or if I thought my opinions deserved a richer development, I should be tempted to construct a kind of dialogue such as Michel Butor provides in *La Modification*, not between the attractions of wife and mistress or between Paris and Rome, but between myself then and myself now. My 'Rome Express' would have been a library or a seat in a dozen libraries, including my own study. But I believe it would follow the same route as is traced in the following pages.

What I have tried to do in this second edition is: (1) To revise the style. I fear this takes the reader a stage further from the lecturing technique in which it was originally composed. I must therefore beg for the original context to be recalled: this is *not* a systematic manual but a series of spoken essays. (2) To alter the emphasis placed on the interpretation of certain concepts. (3) To revise more thoroughly bibliographical references in the final chapter, on the 'reception' of the Renaissance in the north. This is now, however, not much longer, since for English material I can refer the reader to papers I wrote for volumes com-

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memorating Garrett Mattingly (1965) and Paul Oskar Kristeller (1975), details of which are given in the List of References. (4) To bring up to date the references to books and articles, both in the text and in the List of References.

In the next few pages I shall try to explain what I intend in points 2 and 4 above.

The emphasis is changed for several reasons. Today devolution of political power in a major European country is by no means confined to Italy (see p. 28 below) and allowance must be made for this. A different issue is my growing conviction that, far from there being an antithesis between traditional Christian teaching and humanist concepts, the two are closely linked—indeed the former seem to be an important if not an essential element in the latter (cf. pp. 181-3). Third, I am even less persuaded than I was of sharp cultural disjunction between Italian values and those associated with the trans-Alpine world (pp. 189ff.). Finally (and this is a more general point) I believe that we must not overstress the concept of the Renaissance 'as a period'. That it has been so studied, that the foolish division between 'medieval' and 'modern' has been made much less distinct, is admirable. But for goodness' sake let us not erect new barriers, but treat 'Renaissance' with a certain degree of ironical reserve—as all historical abstractions should be treated.

In the List of References I have not attempted to include all the useful works, big and small, which have appeared in the last two decades, for this would have made the book half as long again. There is now an annual bibliography published by the admirable publisher (Droz) who gives us the *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et Renaissance*. There are a

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number of works which I unaccountably omitted in the earlier edition and these I have added, together with references to works quoted for the first time in this revision.

Throughout I have tried to preserve the brevity of the book, as being one of its virtues.

The volume was adopted by the Open University as a prescribed text for one of their arts courses. This led to an interesting account of the period written by Professor Arthur Marwick and his colleagues. I was allowed to see a draft of this and at times a dialogue ensued from which I greatly benefitted. But above all I must thank my colleague Dr M. G. Dickson for carefully reading and criticising the book; to him are largely due any improvements in this new edition. He must forgive me if I have sometimes neglected his advice.

EDINBURGH D.H.
February 1976

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