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0521650607 - Pragmatic Utopias: Ideals and Communities, 1200-1630

Edited by Rosemary Horrox and Sarah Rees Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Richard Barrie Dobson: an appreciation**John Taylor*

One of the chief characteristics of Barrie must surely be his attachment to the north of England. Born at Stockton-on-Tees in 1931, he spent his earliest years in South America, where his father worked for the Great Western Railway of Brazil. After Barrie returned to England before the outbreak of the Second World War, he went to school at Barnard Castle, at which time he came to know those parts of the north which have later claimed so much of his attention as a medieval scholar. Although he has lived for some time in the south, his recent return to the north underlines his strong commitment to that area. For this determined and intrepid hill walker the Lake District has always held a special attraction. Walks where 'Cambridge waters hurry by' do not, one suspects, hold quite the same appeal as some well-remembered climbs on Helvellyn or Fairfield. *Beati omnes qui ambulant*. Happiest of all, Barrie would certainly say, are those who go where the contour lines on the map lie closest together.

Like those of other distinguished northern scholars, Barrie's career led him eventually to the University of Cambridge, where in 1988 he was appointed Professor of Medieval History and elected a Fellow of Christ's College. In retrospect his life appears to have been an almost inevitable progression to that point. After Barnard Castle School a period in the army followed, including service in Malaya during the Emergency. At the end of his military service in 1951 Barrie went up to Wadham College, where his tutors were A. F. Thompson and Lawrence Stone. The medieval tutor was Reggie Lennard, an authority on early agrarian systems, and one of the founder members of the Friends of the Lake District. It was on one of Reggie Lennard's reading parties in a highly appropriate setting outside the Fish Inn in Buttermere, and against the background of Red Pike, that the writer of these words first met Barrie in the summer of 1951. At the end of a highly enjoyable and successful time as an undergraduate Barrie obtained a first in History. In 1956 he was

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elected a Senior Demy at Magdalen, and became a Junior Lecturer in the college. At Magdalen in those post-war years K. B. (Bruce) McFarlane was the senior medievalist. A formidable scholar, and a no less formidable personality, McFarlane exercised a powerful influence over a generation of Oxford postgraduates. His prosopographical approach to the history of late medieval England offered a new and exciting advance in historical interpretation. The exploration of the relationships which bound together the governing classes of late medieval England is not perhaps an approach immediately associated with Barrie. Nonetheless something of that approach can be seen in his work on Durham monks and York canons. As he himself has written, 'it is not often appreciated that the major religious houses of medieval Christendom often provide much the best hunting ground for the medieval prosopographer'.¹ During the years at Magdalen Barrie worked on his D.Phil. thesis, 'The Priory of Durham in the time of Prior John Wessington, 1416-46'. In this project he was fortunate in his supervisor. 'Billy' Pantin was a scholar who could inspire his pupils, who knew the Durham archives well, and whose advice was invaluable. No less a source of inspiration was Dom David Knowles, who was to be one of his examiners later. The days working as a postgraduate in the Durham archives were a formative period, and a time to which Barrie has always looked back with particular affection. In the course of this work he made many friends. One scholar with whom he established a special rapport was J. Conway Davies, whose knowledge of the Durham archives was exceptional. The thesis on Durham, successfully completed in 1963 and considerably expanded later, resulted eventually in the publication of *Durham Priory, 1400-1450* (1973). Although it was not published until after Barrie moved to York, this distinguished study reveals one feature which was to characterise much of his subsequent work, namely an archive-based interest in monasticism and the northern Church. *Durham Priory, 1400-1450* itself, with its rigorous analysis of the recruitment, economy and intellectual interests of a monastic community, was very much more than 'an account of life in a medieval abbey'. A work worthy to be set alongside Barbara Harvey's studies on Westminster, it is, as one reviewer said, 'a massive contribution to the religious and social history of medieval England'. As regards his time at Oxford, however, one should not dwell exclusively upon Barrie's academic accomplishments. Not the least of his achievements was to meet in February 1958, at one Oxford party given by Beryl Smalley, Narda Leon, a young graduate of St Hilda's to whom he was introduced by Menna Prestwich. Narda was in the process of completing a B.Litt. thesis at the Institute of

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Colonial Studies and was about to take up a post in Paris. This fortunate meeting, which occurred during Barrie's last year at Oxford, was to lead to their marriage in the following year.

In 1958 Barrie moved to a lectureship in Medieval History at St Andrews. Medieval history there consisted of a small department of four members which under the inspired leadership of Lionel Butler was to grow both in numbers and prestige in the decade which followed. The years at St Andrews were a good period. In the words of one of his friends, 'as a man from Barnard Castle with all the attractive prejudices of a northern Englishman, Barrie fitted happily into a Scottish environment'.² As the youngest member of a small but separate department which at that time was turning from the traditional Scottish dependence on lectures to a system which provided more tutorial experience, Barrie did his full share of teaching, lecturing on long historical periods, and taking seminars. His personal life also flourished. At the end of his first year at St Andrews Narda and Barrie were married. At St Andrews their children, Mark and Michelle, were born. The young couple entered fully into the social life of the university. As Donald Watt has said of these years, 'this was a good time to be alive'.

In 1964 Barrie moved to the north of England when he was appointed to a lectureship in the newly founded University of York. York in the 1960s was an exciting place to be. If the university was not exactly drawing new maps of learning, it was certainly encouraging new approaches to knowledge, and was encouraging university teachers to evaluate new ideas. Under the notable leadership of Gerald Aylmer these approaches were fully reflected in the Department of History. History at York had an organisation which involved all its members more fully than did most of the older, more traditional universities. It was also a department which experimented with new kinds of courses, and different types of examination. The sense of being part of a great enterprise released all Barrie's considerable energies. His time at York saw not only a long list of important publications, but also a considerable input into the teaching and administration of both the department and the university.³

An excellent tutor and lecturer at both undergraduate and graduate level, Barrie came into his own in a York setting. He had arrived at York in the second year of teaching, when the history staff had increased from five to ten. He soon began to teach a Special Subject on York and London, a topic which saw the beginning of his lasting interest in the medieval city of York. In a jointly taught first-year course in which students re-examined the traditional division between 'medieval' and 'modern' history Barrie

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led a series of seminars on a topic close to his heart, Sir Thomas More and his Utopia, ‘a paean to an orderly and educated society, despising luxury and display’.⁴ Not surprisingly, medieval English monasticism featured in his teaching. When the Medieval Centre in York came into existence in the 1960s with Elizabeth Salter as its leading figure, Barrie played a major part in the contribution which History was to make. As Gerald Aylmer says, ‘the B.Phil. in Medieval Studies would never have established itself as a genuinely inter-disciplinary degree course without his patience and firmness’. His sterling work in the Centre of which he became Co-Director (1977–88) emphasises the significant role he has always played in postgraduate studies, first at York and later at Cambridge. At York several of his postgraduate students, including Sarah Rees Jones and Heather Swanson, went on to make important contributions to the history of the city.

As regards his own writings, *Durham Priory, 1400–1450* duly appeared in 1973 in the Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought series. Apart from this publication Barrie’s best-known work written during his time at York was undoubtedly *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*: continuously in print (1970, rpr. 1983), useful to both student and specialist alike, and in constant demand. In this publication, which owed something to Gwyn Williams’s original inspiration, Barrie brought together a wealth of documentation to illustrate both the course of the revolt and its subsequent interpretations. Written with his customary elegance, searching in its analysis, the book brings to life the documents upon which it is based. If the student of history ‘should read the documents until he hears their authors speaking’, here indeed was the opportunity to listen to some of the voices of fourteenth-century England. A somewhat similar approach was attempted in *Rymes of Robyn Hood* (1976, rpr. 1989, 1997), produced in collaboration with the present writer. Following the debate concerning the origins and audience of the Robin Hood ballads inaugurated by Rodney Hilton and Sir James Holt in the pages of *Past and Present* almost twenty years earlier, the authors sought to illustrate the development of the legend through a selection of ballad texts and other sources, and at the same time explore certain of the problems concerning its origins. The major partner in this enterprise, Barrie brought all his formidable knowledge to bear on the quest for the forest outlaw. Although he approached the topic with impeccable scholarship, it may be that – as with the Peasants’ Revolt and the seminars on Sir Thomas More – he found in this subject one manifestation of an early search for ‘the just society’.

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No subject, however, was more central to Barrie's research interests at York than the northern Church. Here, after various articles had appeared on Durham, his interest centred principally on the diocese of York. Work on the perpetual chantries at York and Selby Abbey⁵ was followed by a magisterial chapter on the 'Minster in the Later Middle Ages', written for the *History of York Minster* (1977), edited by Gerald Aylmer and Reginald Cant. In his treatment of the canons of the Minster, whose wealth 'sustained active careers in the service of the chapter and archbishop, endowed chantries, maintained great households, and helped to rebuild the Minster itself', we see an example of the prosopographical approach. Equally, if not more, revealing of this approach was his treatment of the residentiary canons of York in the fifteenth century, in which (and perhaps prophetically in his own case) he noted the connection between northern clerks of exceptional ability and the University of Cambridge.⁶ As he was to remark later, northern clerks, none of whom was more significant than the Yorkshireman John Fisher, were to play a major part in the great days of Renaissance Cambridge.⁷ A further paper on 'Mendicant Ideal and Practice in late Medieval York' (1984) arose from his involvement with the York Archaeological Trust, of which he had been a member from the beginning, and to which he gave unstinting support during the difficult days of the early 1990s.⁸ His involvement with the Trust and its work on medieval urban archaeology underlined his continuing concern with urban history. His interest in these 'electric transformers' of medieval society found expression in articles on the city of York and other northern towns⁹ as well as in his edition of the *York City Chamberlains' Account Rolls 1396-1500* (1980). York was again the scene for Barrie's monograph on *The Jews of York and the Massacre of March 1190* (1974), one of the weightiest of the Borthwick Institute Papers. Yet another publication, which he edited, *The Church, Politics and Patronage in the Fifteenth Century* (1984), arose from his highly successful organisation of a colloquium of late medieval historians at York in 1982.

Through his teaching and his publications Barrie had by the middle years of the 1970s reached, according to Gerald Aylmer, 'a position of leadership, almost of dominance' among the medievalists at York. In 1977 he became Professor of Medieval History. To his effectiveness as a lecturer, and his achievements in research and publication, he also added for good measure a flair for academic organisation and management. At York, in addition to being a co-director of the Centre of Medieval Studies, he acted for (the customary) two years as Chairman of the History Board of Studies. Influential outside the department as

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well as within it, he served as Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University from 1984 to 1987. He had just become Head of the History Department, in succession to Professor Norman Hampson, when in 1988 he was offered the chair of Medieval History at Cambridge. His ability to get on well with others ensured success in administrative matters. He enjoyed challenges. Just as he is reported to have said on one occasion that he enjoyed driving through heavy traffic because it was a challenge, so the sorting out of academic difficulties he saw perhaps as a similar sort of challenge. Barrie's administrative ability has led to his being much in demand. On the national level he has been a Vice-President of the Royal Historical Society (1985–9), President of the Jewish Historical Society of England (1990–1), President of the Ecclesiastical History Society (1991–2), Chairman of the Friends of the Public Record Office, member of the Victoria County History Advisory Committee (1982–), and of the Advisory Committee for the Public Records. In the north he has been Chairman of the Council of the York Archaeological Trust (1990–6), a position which involved frequent journeys from Cambridge. He is Chairman of the British Academy Episcopal Acta Committee (1995–), a project based on the Borthwick Institute, and was, with Claire Cross, General Editor of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series (1981–6). Since 1987 he has been President of the Surtees Society. As President of the Surtees Society he is, in the words of Gordon Forster, 'a fair-minded and patient chairman, with a relaxed manner, undogmatic and flexible in style . . . a striver for consensus with a disarming ability to see good in quite a range of arguments'.¹⁰ Nonetheless, despite his very real administrative talents, Barrie has never allowed the administrative side to take precedence over his other contributions to academic life.

In 1988 Barrie moved to the Chair of Medieval History at Cambridge. There he followed in the footsteps of such distinguished scholars as Charles Previté-Orton, Zachary Brooke, and more recently Sir James Holt. He also followed, as he observed, a longer line of northern scholars, 'St Cuthbert's folk and the men from Eboracum', who had from late medieval times contributed much to the University of Cambridge. After such a lengthy period in the north the move to Cambridge was not without its problems. Housing was one such problem until Narda and Barrie found a suitable flat in Bateman Street where from his study (if he leaned perilously out of the window) he could just see the pinnacles of King's College Chapel. In the move to Cambridge Barrie was greatly helped by the fact that in Christopher Brooke, who held the Dixie Chair

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of Ecclesiastical History, he had an old friend from his time at York, when Christopher had taken groups of students to visit Yorkshire abbeys.¹¹ In Cambridge Barrie's formidable energies never let him down. As one colleague recalls, 'with a heavy load of teaching, and supervision of post-graduates, no call on his time was ignored'. In particular he attempted to ensure that in Part I of the History Tripos the history of the Church was given due recognition. He ran a Special Subject on late medieval towns. He presided over the new M.Phil. in Medieval History (an inheritance from Sir James Holt), and for much of the time presided over the Medieval Subject Group. Together with Rosamond McKitterick he conducted the affairs of the Medieval Research Seminar. No mere list of Barrie's teaching, however, does justice to the spirit which he brought to that task. As at St Andrews and York his great generosity of spirit was evident in all that he did, freely giving undergraduates and graduates alike time which on occasion he could ill afford. Christopher Brooke has remarked that Barrie is 'wonderfully supportive of colleagues', a feature which 'has had a deep influence in preserving the morale of medievalists in difficult times'. Barrie's wider sympathies have also been evident in his dealings with college fellows who did not have university appointments: he 'took special pains to get to know the wider constituency, to draw them into teaching, to make them feel full members of the university teaching staff'.

Despite a heavy teaching load Barrie was still able to make a significant contribution to Cambridge history. Throughout his time at Cambridge the publications continued to flow. In his Inaugural Lecture he dealt with those topics which had concerned him most over the years: medieval monasticism, medieval towns, and the medieval university – all examples of the richness of medieval group life.¹² These topics he continued to develop. Two substantial pieces to appear, highly impressive in their scholarship, were his chapter on 'The Religious Orders 1370–1540' in the *History of the University of Oxford*, and his contribution on 'The Monks of Canterbury in the Later Middle Ages' in the *History of Canterbury Cathedral*.¹³ Articles on York chantries and the connection between York and the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge developed earlier themes.¹⁴ The ties with Durham were not forgotten.¹⁵ The extensive range of Barrie's writings on the north, and his deep affection for, and understanding of, his native region, all of which have made him the foremost historian of the northern Church, are clearly seen in his recent collection of papers, *Church and State in the Medieval North of England* (1996).¹⁶ There is still to come his survey of English towns in the later

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Middle Ages in the forthcoming Volume 1 of the *Cambridge Urban History*, edited by David Palliser.

With a scholar as exceptional as Barrie there are inevitably aspects of his work that have not been mentioned. It is not possible here to deal fully with all his publications and academically related interests.¹⁷ Outside Cambridge his activities have been multifarious. He has been an indefatigable lecturer and examiner. As a reviewer he is in constant demand. He has been meticulous in his work for *Northern History*. He has been a frequent visitor to the United States and Canada, where he was British Academy Fellow in the Folger Library, Washington (1974), Visiting Professor at Swarthmore College (1987), and Visiting Fellow at Trinity College, Toronto (1994). A number of honours have come his way, most notably his election to the British Academy in 1988. One suspects that he values highly his Life Membership of the Merchant Taylors Company of York, of which he was Honorary Archivist. In 1999 he was appointed Honorary Professor at York University. At the same time there has been a life outside the university. He has a profound interest in the cinema, and at York was responsible for setting up a branch of the National Film Theatre in York (1968) which still flourishes. Above all there has been his family, Narda, and his children, Mark and Michelle. After his retirement from Cambridge in 1999 Barrie's return to the city of York has enabled him to see more of Michelle and Conrad, and of his grandson, Theo. It has taken him back to places he knows well.

In Barrie we have a very human person. His colleagues' judgements on him are unanimous, speaking of 'the generosity of his help, encouragement and friendship', his 'obvious integrity and likeability', his 'intense professional commitment', his 'strong sense of duty', his 'unswerving loyalty'. His warmth and the strength of his personality are apparent to all. It was once said by an eminent medieval scholar that intellectual friendships were the most valuable thing a university could offer. Those who have had the privilege of knowing Barrie and of sharing his friendship over the years will certainly have no difficulty in endorsing that judgement.

NOTES

1. See R. B. Dobson, 'Recent Prosopographical Research in Late Medieval English History: University Graduates, Durham Monks, and York Canons', in N. Bulst and J.-Ph. Genet (eds.) *Medieval Lives and the Historian: Studies in Medieval Prosopography* (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1986), pp. 181–200.

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2. Professor Donald Watt, to whom I am indebted for these comments about St Andrews.
3. Information concerning York and other matters was generously provided by Dr Gerald Aylmer and Professor Claire Cross. For the York background see Gordon Leff, 'Gerald Aylmer in Manchester and York', in John Morrill, Paul Slack and Daniel Woolf (eds.), *Public Duty and Private Conscience in Seventeenth-Century England, Essays Presented to G. E. Aylmer* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 9–17.
4. C. S. L. Davies, *Peace, Print and Protestantism 1450–1558* (St Albans, 1977), p. 151. For a different view, see C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (Oxford, 1954), p. 169.
5. 'The Foundation of Perpetual Chantries by the Citizens of Medieval York', *Studies in Church History* 4 (London, 1967), 22–38; 'The First Norman Abbey in Northern England', *The Ampleforth Journal* 74/2 (Summer 1969), 161–76. See also 'The Election of John Ousthorp as Abbot of Selby in 1436', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 42 (1968), 38–40.
6. 'The Residentiary Canons of York in the Fifteenth Century', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 30 (1979), 145–74.
7. 'Preserving the Perishable': *Contrasting Communities in Medieval England*, inaugural lecture, 22 February 1990 (Cambridge, 1991).
8. 'Mendicant Ideal and Practice in Late Medieval York', in P. V. Addyman and V. E. Black (eds.), *Archaeological Papers from York Presented to M. W. Barley* (York, 1984), pp. 109–22. For additional information on York I am indebted to Professor David Palliser and Professor David Smith.
9. See, for example, 'Admissions to the Freedom of the City of York in the Later Middle Ages', *Economic History Review*, Second Series 26 (1973), 1–22; 'Yorkshire Towns in the Late Fourteenth Century', *Publications of the Thoresby Society* 59 (1985), 1–21.
10. I am indebted to Mr Gordon Forster for a number of helpful comments.
11. The comments on Cambridge are considerably indebted to Professor Christopher Brooke. I am also grateful to Professor Patrick Collinson for information.
12. 'Preserving the Perishable'.
13. 'The Religious Orders 1370–1540', in J. I. Catto and Ralph Evans (eds.), *The History of the University of Oxford*, vol. II, *Late Medieval Oxford* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 539–79; 'The Monks of Canterbury in the Later Middle Ages, 1220–1540', in Patrick Collinson, Nigel Ramsey and Margaret Sparks (eds.), *History of Canterbury Cathedral* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 69–153.
14. 'Citizens and Chantries in late medieval York', in D. Abulafia, M. Franklin and M. Rubin (eds.), *Church and City 1000–1500, Essays in Honour of Christopher Brooke* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 311–32; 'The Educational Patronage of Archbishop Thomas Rotherham of York', *Northern History* 31 (1995), 65–85. See also 'Beverley in Conflict, Archbishop Neville and the Minster Clergy, 1381–8', in C. Wilson (ed.), *Medieval Art and Architecture in the East Riding of Yorkshire* (British Archaeological Association, 1989), pp. 149–64.

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15. 'Contrasting Chronicles: Historical Writing in York and Durham in the Later Middle Ages', in I. Wood and G. Loud (eds.), *Church and Chronicle in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to John Taylor* (London, 1991), pp. 201–18; 'The Church of Durham and the Scottish Borders, 1378–88', in A. Goodman and A. Tuck (eds.), *War and Border Societies in the Middle Ages* (London, 1992), pp. 124–54.
16. The recent publication, *The Church in Medieval York: Records Edited in Honour of Professor Barrie Dobson*, General Editor David M. Smith, Borthwick Texts and Calendars (York, 1999), is a fitting tribute to Barrie's own impressive contribution to the history of the Church in medieval York.
17. See, for example, his recent article, 'Robin Hood: The Genesis of a Popular Hero', in T. Hahn (ed.), *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression and Justice* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 61–77.