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BISHOPS AND LEARNING IN THE REIGN OF EDWARD III

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"High birth and spirit are expected in a prince" wrote the monk of Malmesbury, "but virtue and learning are required of a bishop."¹ In the reign of Edward III, however, John of Reading lamented "the mammon of iniquity raises the unworthy to be prelates. The Saviour of old founded the Church upon solid rock, but now its columns, to wit, many of its prelates, are set up not by virtuous life or learning, but by gold and silver."²

This cry was taken up by G. R. Owst who stated that, in the fourteenth century, "men did not hesitate to attribute almost all the ills in Church and State to the 'lost understanding and wit' of the episcopacy." He then went on to say, in explanation of this sad state of affairs, that it was, after all, "the age of the notorious Robert Stretton" who was rejected many times for a bishopric because of his utter illiteracy, but was at last consecrated "without examination" as a result of royal pressure upon the pope.³

Fortunately for the reputation of the late medieval bishop in the field of learning, he has not been without his defenders.—Kathleen Edwards has shown that Owst errs in his estimation of the fourteenth century prelate, at least in the reign of Edward II. Medieval sermon literature, upon which he draws heavily for his opinions, was, as she points out, essentially satirical and derogatory. Some chroniclers, it is true, seem to support his stand but "these, like the modern journalist, much preferred a good story to a true one. Moreover, some of them had personal or political reasons for hostility to certain bishops", who suffered in consequence from their pens. Edwards is able to prove that a majority of the bishops of Edward II were men with university training and that they took a considerable interest in learning.⁴ This also seems to be the case in the reign of Edward III.

When considered closely, if one lays aside the spectacular, the chroniclers in this latter period give us more evidence to indicate a highly educated episcopate than an ignorant one. The use of the title *magister* for so many bishops, particularly in promotion or obituary notices,

¹ *Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and Edward II*, ii. 252.

² *Chronica Johannis de Reading*, p. 178.

³ G. R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England*, Cambridge, 1926, p. 36.

⁴ K. Edwards, "The Bishops and Learning in the Reign of Edward II", *Church Quarterly Review*, April-June 1944, CXXXVIII, 57-86, especially pp. 57-58.

supports such a contention.⁵ The majority of the bishops of Edward III were trained at the universities and, of the remainder, not a few were royal or baronial clerks who certainly should not be considered as devoid either of knowledge or training, even if of a highly specialized sort. Some of the latter, such as Robert Wyville, earned unflattering comments from the chroniclers,⁶ but there is nothing to suggest that they were held in low esteem by those whom they had served. Indeed, in many cases, these used their influence to get their clerks promoted to bishoprics. In an episcopate of eighty-seven prelates, if we include the confirmed but un consecrated archbishop-elect John Offard, there is definite evidence that sixty-three bishops had degrees in some faculty or another. It is possible that two others, Richard Bury⁷ and William Edington⁸ also may have possessed degrees. Of the graduates with known degrees, fifteen had them in theology,⁹ two in theology and canon law,¹⁰ one in theology and both

⁵ For example, in *Chronicon Angliæ*, pp. 9-10, 29-30, 50, 53-54, 58, 62, Bishops Barnet, Bradwardine, Harewell, Islep, Lenne, Reade, Sheppey, Ralph Stratford, Sudbury and Wittlesey, are all called *magister*.

⁶ Adae Murimuth, *Continuatio Chronicarum*, p. 60, describes Wyville as "vir utique competenter illiterato et minime personato".

⁷ T. F. Tout, *Chapters in the Administrative History of Medieval England*, 6 vols., Manchester, 1920-1933, iii. 26. Tout holds that Bury was not a university graduate, despite Bury's literary pretensions. While sometimes called *magister*, he was given this title because he wished it: "clerks drafting writs were sometimes not unwilling to gratify this harmless vanity, though some precisians objected to this practice." On the other hand, Denholm Young (*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. XX, 4th series, 135-168), in an article entitled "Richard de Bury (1287-1345)", notes that in an Ashmolean manuscript Bury is described as a bachelor of theology. If this was true one would expect to find Bury so described in his papal bull of provision, but this is addressed only to "domino Ricardo de Bury, electo Dunelmensis" (*Durham Sede Vacante Register*, fol. 475r).

⁸ In *D.N.B.*, R. L. Poole says that Edington is reputed to have gone to Oxford. Early writers, such as J. Campbell (*The Lives of the Lord Chancellors of England*, 4th ed., London, 1856-1857, 10 vols., i. 251), go much farther. Campbell even tells of the reputation Edington acquired at Oxford for his skill in theology and law. No document that I have handled, however, calls him other than by the term *dominus*. There are a number of notations in a Wells manuscript concerning a "magister William de Edington", who served as an official of the bishop of Bath and Wells in 1321 (*H.M. Record Commission Reports*, Wells, i. 194-197; *Wells Cathedral*, pp. 88, 91, 129). Since Edington was over seventy in 1366 (*Canterbury Sede Vacante Register* G. fol. 151r), he could have been this official, but an identification would be purely conjectural.

⁹ Antony Bek, S.T.P. (*Register Bek*, fol. 73v); James Berkeley, S.T.P. (*C.P.L.*, ii. 174-175); Thomas Bradwardine, S.T.P. (*C.P.L.*, iii. 339); Gervase de Castro, S.T.D. (*Le Neve, Fasti*, i. 99; Eubel, *Hierarchia*, p. 127); Lewis Charlton, S.T.L. (*Reg. Islep*, fol. 231r; *C.P. Petitions*, i. 365); John Gilbert, S.T.B. (*C.P. Petitions*, i. 536); John Grandisson studied theology in Paris (*D.N.B.*; *Oxford Magazine*, 1892, XI. 122); Simon Mepeham, S.T.D. (Baker, *Chronicon*, p. 42; *Ecclesiastical Petitions*, 22/1); Roger Mortival, S.T.D. (Edwards, *op. cit.*); John Pascal, S.T.P. (*C.P.L.*, iii. 236); William Reade, S.T.P. (*Register Wittlesey*, Canterbury, fol. 132v; *C.P. Petitions*, i. 503); Thomas Ringstead, S.T.D. (*Register Lisle*, fol. 88; *D.N.B.*); John Sheppey, S.T.P. (*C.P.L.*, iii. 48; *Register Hethe*, ii. 737); John Swaffham, S.T.D. (*Alumni Cantabrigiensis*, iv. 188); John Trevaux, S.T.B. (*C.P.L.*, iii. 126).

¹⁰ Thomas Cobham, S.T.D., D.Dec. (Edwards, *op. cit.*); Ralph of Salopia, S.T.P., D.Dec. (*Ecclesiastical Petitions*, 22/29, Baker, *Chronicon*, p. 45; *C.P.L.*, ii. 165).

laws,¹¹ four in canon law,¹² ten in civil law¹³ and fourteen in both laws.¹⁴ Seventeen other bishops apparently were university graduates.¹⁵

The large number of lawyers holding high church office is a marked feature of the fourteenth century. Under Henry III, the education of bishops leaned towards the "queen of sciences", and there were fifteen theological graduates as opposed to three graduates in law.¹⁶ In the reign of Edward II the theologians and the lawyers were equal in number, but towards the end of that period law was obtaining the predominance.¹⁷ This trend can be seen clearly under Edward III.

Gibbs has drawn our attention to the "steady promotion of Oxford men which followed the archiepiscopate of Edmund of Abington" in the reign of Henry III. Ten of Henry's bishops studied at Paris, six at Oxford, one at Orléans and one at Toulouse.¹⁸ Under Edward II, three future bishops studied both at Paris and at Oxford, ten to twelve went to Oxford alone, one went to Angers, one incepted at Cambridge and another, Gilbert Segrave, may have been the chancellor and a regent master at that

¹¹ Thomas Lisle, S.T.D., Doctor of both Laws (*Register Lisle*, fol. 1; *D.N.B.*). His biography states that he was also a doctor of divinity.

¹² Thomas Appleby, B.Dec. (*C.P. Petitions*, i. 396); Thomas Brunton, D.Dec. (*Register Wittlesey*, Canterbury, fol. 138r); Thomas Bek, D.Dec. (Eubel, *Hierarchia*, p. 306; *D.N.B.*); Adam Orleton, D.Dec. (Edwards, *op. cit.*).

¹³ Richard Bentworth, P.C.L. (*C.C.R.*, 1333-1337, p. 518); Reginald Brian, B.C.L. (*C.P.L.*, iii. 292; *Register Islep*, fol. 8r); John Barnet, B.C.L. (*Register Islep*, fol. 21; *C.P. Petitions*, i. 364); Thomas Charlton, D.C.L. (*C.P.L.*, ii. 263); Henry Despenser, B.C.L. (*Register Wittlesey*, Canterbury, fol. 31r); Thomas Fastolf, D.C.L. (*Register Islep*, fol. 63r; *C.P.L.*, ii. 547); John Harewell, B.C.L. (*Register Langham*, Canterbury, fol. 90r; *C.P.L.*, iii. 341); John Ross, D.C.L. (Edwards, *op. cit.*); John Stratford, D.C.L. (Edwards, *op. cit.*); William de la Zouche, B.C.L. (*C.P.L.*, ii. 534).

¹⁴ William Bateman, Doctor of both Laws (*Register Bateman*, fol. 41v; Baker, *Chronicon*, p. 112); William Courtenay, Doctor of both Laws (*Register Sudbury*, Hereford, p. 1; *Register Bokyngham*, Institutions, fol. 342r); Ralph Erghum, Doctor of both Laws (*Register Langham*, Canterbury, fol. 22v; *C.P.L.*, iv. 144); Henry Gower, Doctor of both Laws (*Fædera*, ii. 747); Adam Houghton, Doctor of both Laws (*C.P.L.*, iii. 312); William Lenne, Doctor of both Laws (*Register Islep*, fol. 241r); Ralph Stratford, M.A., B.C.L. (*C.P.L.*, ii. 534), Doctor of both Laws (Baker, *Chronicon*, p. 112); Michael Northburgh, D.C.L. (*C.P.L.*, iii. 60), Doctor of both Laws (*Register Islep*, fol. 82r); John Offard, Doctor of both Laws (*Anglia Sacra*, i. 42; *Canterbury Sede Vacante Register*, G. fol. 34v); Simon Sudbury, Doctor of both Laws (*D.N.B.*, *Register Islep*, fol. 237r); Thomas Trilleck, licentiate in canon and civil Law (*Register Islep*, fol. 245v), M.A., B.C.L. (*C. P. Petitions*, i. 52); Gilbert Welton, D.C.L. (*C.P.L.*, iii. 54), Doctor of Laws (Eubel, *Hierarchia*, p. 289); William Wittlesey, licentiate of both Laws (*Register Islep*, fol. 245r), D.Dec. (*ibid.*, fol. 226r).

¹⁵ Thomas Arundel (*Register Wittlesey*, fol. 139); William Ayermin (Edwards, *op. cit.*); Lewis Beaumont (Edwards, *op. cit.*); John Bokyngham (*Register Thomas Bek*, Memoranda, fol. 24v); Henry Burghersh (Edwards, *op. cit.*); Matthew Englefield (*Register Islep*, fol. 342v); Stephen Gravesend (Edwards, *op. cit.*); David Martin and William Melton (Edwards, *op. cit.*); Simon Montacute (*Fædera*, ii. 959); Roger Northburgh (Edwards, *op. cit.*); Alexander Neville (*C.P. Petitions*, i. 373); Thomas Percy (*C.P.L.*, iii. 431, 566); Robert Stratford (*C.P.L.*, ii. 283); John Thoresby (*C.P. Petitions*, i. 115); Anian Sais (Edwards, *op. cit.*); John Trilleck (*Register John Trilleck*, p. 1; Reading, *Chronica*, p. 150).

¹⁶ M. Gibbs and J. Lang, *Bishops and Reform, 1215-1272*, Oxford, 1934, p. 2.

¹⁷ Edwards, pp. 58-61.

¹⁸ Gibbs and Lang, pp. 35, 192-196.

university.¹⁹ The episcopate of Edward II, moreover, was much smaller than that of Henry III.

Some bishops of Edward II were, of course, still alive in the reign of his son. In addition to those of this group who were university graduates, about twenty-three bishops of Edward III seem to have been educated at Oxford,²⁰ while seven, at least, had Cambridge connections.²¹ Two seem to have studied at the papal court,²² five went to Paris,²³ and one is reputed to have attended both French and Italian universities.²⁴ The number of future English bishops studying at foreign universities seems to have been declining, but study at French universities after the outbreak of the Hundred Years' War would have been difficult for English scholars.

There was a continuous rise in the proportion of bishops who had attended universities from the time of Henry III to the end of the reign of Edward III. The episcopate of Edward III was the best educated episcopate that England and Wales had known. This was the episcopate of which Robert de Stretton was a part.

As we have seen, Owst uses this bishop to point up the ignorance of the English higher clergy. More recently, W. A. Pantin, an Oxford scholar, again tells the story of how Stretton was "three times examined on his 'literature', and three times 'ploughed', twice by the archbishop and once by the pope, though he was at length consecrated in 1360 . . ." ²⁵ Others have stressed his unworthiness,²⁶ and W. G. D. Fletcher, in *D.N.B.*, asserts that he could not even read his profession of obedience to the archbishop of Canterbury.²⁷ Oddly enough, on the other hand, J. and J. A. Venn describe the bishop as a graduate of Cambridge.²⁸ H. E. Malden assigns to him a doctorate in both laws, and identifies him

¹⁹ Edwards, pp. 61-62.

²⁰ Arundel, Bradwardine, Brunton, L. Charlton, Courtenay, A. Bek, Erghum, Gilbert, Gower, Houghton, Islep, Sheppey, the three Stratfords, Ralph of Salopia, Welton, Wittlesley, Thoresby, John and perhaps Thomas Trilleck, Reade and Ringstead.

²¹ Bateman, Brunton, L. Charlton, Lisle, Pascal, Swaffham and Wittlesley who at least taught there. Bokyngham may also have gone to Cambridge. Some bishops attended both Oxford and Cambridge.

²² Harewell and Wittlesley.

²³ Brunton, Gilbert, Grandisson, Sudbury and Reade.

²⁴ Ringstead.

²⁵ W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century*, Cambridge, 1955, p. 13. This story is to be found in many other works (e.g., W. W. Capes, *The English Church in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, London, 1903, p. 93).

²⁶ James Tait (*Chronica Johannis de Reading*, p. 277) called Stretton the "illiterate protege" of the Black Prince.

²⁷ W. G. D. Fletcher, *s.v. Stretton*, who wrote "On 6 February following Stretton made the usual profession of canonical obedience in the archbishop's palace at Lambeth, 'alio professionem legente, quod ipse legere non posset.' It is difficult to conceive of such a degree of ignorance in a prelate, but the words of the register are conclusive."

²⁸ J. and J. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigiensis*, Cambridge, 1922, Part I, iv. 174.

as the first *custos* of Trinity Hall, the college founded by bishop Bateman of Norwich.²⁹

In 1347 Stretton was a clerk and almoner of the Black Prince³⁰ and, in that year, took part in the negotiations for a proposed marriage between his master and a Portuguese princess.³¹ In 1349 he was described as the prince's confessor.³² He may have been constable of the Black Prince's castle of Llanbadern Fawr, of which he held the rectory.³³ Stretton was important enough for the pope to request his assistance in 1355 in the negotiations for a treaty between France and England.³⁴ About the end of 1358, Stretton was elected bishop by the Chapter of Lichfield and the convent of Coventry, reputedly "ad preces Principis Walliæ". The royal assent to the election, 21 January 1359, is recorded in the *patent rolls*, the king notifying Simon Islep and styling the bishop-elect as "the king's clerk, Master Robert de Stretton".³⁵ From here on, what happened is confused.

The principal chronicle source for the election is Birchington, in Wharton's *Anglia Sacra*. The passage there to be found I quote in full:

Cum autem Dominus Robertus de Stretton ad preces Principis Walliæ in Episcopum Coventriensis & Lichfeld. Ecclesiæ electus fuisset; & idem Dominus Papa ipsius Electi & ejus literaturæ notitiam non obtinens, voluit quod dictus Electus ad Romanam Curiam Veniret, examinationem personaliter subiturus. Et quia Rex Angliæ pro dicto Electo scriberet Papæ; & amplius Rex quoque interim Temporalia dicti Episcopatus, & Archiepiscopus Spiritualia, toto tempore vacationis ejusdem habebat. Et cum dictus Episcopatus propter insufficientiam Roberti de Stretton Electi in literatura & in Romana Curia examinati propter defectum literaturæ repulsi, per biennium vacavisset; tandem ad preces dicti Principis idem Papa per Bullas suas examinationem dicti Electi in Anglia Archiepiscopo Cantuariensis & Episcopo Roffensi commisit. Unde dicti Principis precibus Dominus Cantuariensis Archiepiscopus excitatus, eundem Electum ad dignitatem Episcopalem insufficientem post examinationem personæ suæ factam tam ipse Archiepiscopus quam Episcopus Roffensis invenientes, propter remorsum conscientiæ ipsum acceptare non poterant nec volebant. Unde idem Electus non expeditus sic recesserat illa vice. Sed postmodum idem Electus a Domino Michæle London. Episcopo, cui etiam Dominus Papa vices suas commiserat, fuerat gratiose acceptatus, & die Dominica, in SS. Cosmæ & Damiani, anno Domini MCCCCLX in Episcopum consecratus.³⁶

²⁹ H. E. Malden, *Trinity Hall*, London, 1902, pp. 43-46. Malden dismissed the notion that Stretton was an illiterate, believing him to have been a doctor of laws. This information he seems to have obtained from the chronicler Whitelocke (*Anglia Sacra*, i. 449).

³⁰ *The Register of Edward the Black Prince*, i. 69.

³¹ *Ibid.*, i. 76; *Fœdera*, iii. i. 128; *C.P.R.*, 1345-48, p. 357.

³² *C.P. Petitions*, i. 155, 245.

³³ *Register of the Black Prince*, iii. 378, 492.

³⁴ *C.P.L.*, iii. 618.

³⁵ *C.P.R.*, 1358-61, p. 142.

³⁶ *Anglia Sacra*, i. 44-45. The election was also noted by John of Reading (*Chronica Johannis de Reading*, p. 134), who wrote: "Obierunt et hoc anno dominus Galfridus de Northbrugge, episcopus Cestriæ (successit, non canonicè sed prece vel pretio quia curialis, ille indignus gestis probatus dominus Robertus de Staunton', quondam alumpnus domini regis primogeniti) . . ." This seems a rather crushing

In *Anglia Sacra* there is also Whitelock's "Continuatio Historiæ Lichfeldensis", which describes Stretton as a distinguished man, a doctor of laws and one of the auditors of the Rota at the curia.³⁷ Knowing this to be inconsistent with Birchington's chronicle, the editor of *Anglia Sacra*, Henry Wharton, advised the reader to consult it. In his notes to Whitelocke's history, Wharton wrote that Stretton made his profession of obedience, "alio professionem legente (verba sunt Registri) quod ipse legere non posset".³⁸

Despite Birchington and Wharton, it is difficult to imagine that Stretton was an illiterate, 'ploughed' for his lack of learning, who had not the knowledge to read his profession. As a clerk of the Black Prince, and also possibly of the king, he had to have a reasonable education, even if not a formal university one. The Black Prince hardly would use a man ignorant of Latin, the international language of the times, on an important diplomatic mission. Finally, Stretton was a fully qualified priest at the time of his election,³⁹ holding benefices to which he had been provided by the pope, and these normally were not given without an examination of the providee for sufficiency.

In the archiepiscopal registers at Lambeth there is no trace of the examinations that Stretton reputedly failed. However, there are three interesting entries on Stretton's election which cast some doubt upon Birchington. The first is a bull concerning the cleric's election to Coventry and Lichfield, the second is a report by the bishops of London and Rochester on their examination of Stretton's suitability for the prelate, while the third is the entry on Stretton's oath of obedience to the primate.⁴⁰

Pope Innocent's bull notes that Robert de Stretton was elected in ignorance of a papal reservation of the twin see of Coventry and Lichfield. After accepting the nomination, Stretton feared a reservation of the see and submitted his election to the curia. Here it was declared invalid since the see was reserved, but the pope, having heard good reports of Stretton, decided to empower the archbishop of Canterbury and the bishop of Rochester to provide Stretton to the bishopric if they found him to be "utilem et idoneum ad regimen ipsarum ecclesiarum". This bull is curious. If, as he asserted, the pope possessed such good

indictment but the chroniclers never liked ex-administrators. Very bad things, for example, were said about Robert Burnell, Edward I's chancellor, but he was no illiterate.

³⁷ *Anglia Sacra*, i. 449.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, i. 449 n.a. This seems to be the source for story that Stretton could not read his profession of obedience.

³⁹ Stretton was examined for his suitability to hold a canonry at Lincoln, an examination which he seems to have passed since he later held the Lincoln prebend of St. Cross (*C.P.L.*, iii. 498; *C.P. Petitions*, i. 318).

⁴⁰ *Register Islep*, fols. 163, 165r, 222r.

reports on Stretton, why was this examination necessary? One can only imagine that someone had spoken against the cleric, and, since Stretton had been examined in the past for suitability,⁴¹ it is possible that the rumoured defect was not in his 'literature' but in his ability to perform the arduous tasks associated with the prelacy.

Perhaps the person who had spoken against Stretton was the archbishop himself. At all events, the bull allowed Simon Islep an "out" as far as his personal examination of Stretton was concerned. If he was unable to obey the mandate, the bishop of London was empowered to take his place. Whatever the cause, the archbishop did not act. The bishops of London and Rochester, Michael Northburgh and John Sheppey, conducted Stretton's examination. In the second register entry, their report to archbishop Islep, the bishops say that they have examined that cleric and found him fit for the prelacy in learning and in all other requirements. Stretton did not 'flunk' this examination! The register notation then goes on to say that the two bishops, by virtue of their delegated authority, had then confirmed, provided and consecrated Stretton as bishop of Coventry and Lichfield.

The third entry in Islep's Register is that concerned with Stretton's profession of obedience to the primate. Again, it is worth quoting in full:

Lecta fuit ista professio per magistrum Richardum de Bermyngeham tanquam organum vocis dicti episcopi viva voce constitutum in capella præfati domini archiepiscopi infra manerium suum de Lambeth coram ipso domino archiepiscopo Non. February MCCCLX et post lecturam dicte professionis præfatus episcopus manu sua propria scripsit ista verba confirmo et conscribo præsentibus magistro Willielmo de Witleseye officialo curo de arcubus Londonensis magistro Richardo de Warmyngton Richardo Wodeland Willielmo atte Dene notare publicæ Bathonensis et alii.

The entry certainly shows that Stretton's profession was read by a proxy, but the words "as if constituted the voice of the said bishop" are hardly the same as "another reading his profession of obedience for he himself was unable to read". A possible interpretation of this register entry is that Stretton did know how to read Latin, but at the time of his profession was physically unable to do so. The bishop wrote with his own hand "I confirm and I conscribe", which must mean that he could write Latin. It might be argued that Stretton had been coached to write these few words, but, if it was known that he was an illiterate, such a subterfuge was hardly likely to succeed. A more likely explanation of what happened is that the measures taken were necessary because the bishop was blind, or nearly so.⁴²

Possibly the somewhat nebulous opposition to Stretton's appointment arose because of such a physical defect in that cleric. His usefulness to

⁴¹ See note 39.

⁴² E. Venables, in *D.N.B.*, s.v. Lisle, stated that Stretton was declared incompetent by reason of his age and blindness but failed to give the source of this information.

the Black Prince would be over and this patron of Stretton may have sought to pension off the cleric with a bishopric. As a bishop, Stretton was far from active. He did serve once as a trier of petitions,⁴³ but he ceased to administer orders after 1365. In 1381 he was both blind and infirm and had to appoint a coadjutor to run his diocese.⁴⁴ Perhaps he was not completely blind in 1360: his sight may have prevented him from reading his profession but was good enough still to allow him to write a few words of Latin.

Stretton may not have been, then, the illiterate that many have considered him to be: he certainly was not the scholar that Malden and the Venns believed him to be. There was a Robert de Stretton, a doctor of laws, who was possibly the *custos* of Trinity Hall, and certainly an auditor of the Rota, but he certainly was not the bishop. This Robert was archdeacon of Derby in 1367, long after bishop Robert de Stretton was consecrated. He may have been a relative of bishop Stretton, for the latter employed him for a time as a proctor at the curia.⁴⁵

Stretton probably did not have a university degree. It is true that the royal notification to the primate of his election called him "Master Robert de Stretton", but this could have been the slip of a scribe: Stretton's normal title was *dominus*. If Stretton had been a scholar in the true sense of the word, one would imagine that he would have possessed some books, but his will mentions only missals.⁴⁶

On the whole, it looks as if Stretton was a fairly normal type: the administrator who became a bishop. Many of these, such as William Wykeham, did not possess degrees, but it would be wrong to say that they were "illiterate". It is even more wrong to classify the age as that of the notorious Robert de Stretton. It was also the age of archbishop Bradwardine, the Doctor Profundus of the Middle Ages, whose fame as an Augustinian philosopher was recorded in the "Nun's Priest's Tale" of

⁴³ *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, ii. 268, in 1362.

⁴⁴ *The Register of Robert de Stretton*, i. ix.

⁴⁵ This Stretton (or Stratton or Sutton) was a member of bishop Bateman's household (*C.P.L.*, iii. 570; *C.P. Petitions*, i. 276). In 1355 he seems to have made a grant of land to Trinity Hall, Cambridge (*Documents Relating to the University and Colleges of Cambridge*, 3 vols., London, 1852, i. 21). For a time he was a clerk of Thomas Neville, brother of the future archbishop of York (*C.P. Petitions*, i. 375; *Testamenta Eboracensis*, i. 72). By 1362 he was a papal chaplain and an auditor of the Rota, a post which he was still holding in 1364 (*C.P. Petitions*, i. 395, 418, 421, 470; *C.P.L.*, iv. 41). R. A. Wilson (*The Register of Robert de Stretton*, i. introduction), noted the existence of this man who, he said, was a curial proctor for the bishop in 1364, and archdeacon of Derby in 1367.

⁴⁶ *The Register of Archbishop Courtenay*, fol. 211r. Too much stress should not be placed upon the absence of books other than missals. Stretton could have given them away before death, if he possessed some, because of his blindness. It is interesting to note that Bermyngeham, the *organum vocis* of the bishop, was one of his executors.

Chaucer.⁴⁷ Bradwardine's work, "De Causa Dei contra Pelagium", was for many centuries to be a standard authority for theologians.⁴⁸ He was also famous as a mathematician and an astronomer.⁴⁹

A second Merton man, William Reade,⁵⁰ bishop of Chichester, carried on the Merton tradition of the archbishop in mathematics and astronomy. In the latter field he was the part author of a set of mathematical tables, and his mathematical instruments were still reputed to be at Merton in Godwin's time.⁵¹ John Ashington and Simon Bredon were his associates in these studies and all three enjoyed a considerable reputation.⁵² With the former, Reade is supposed to have predicted the Black Death and, in *Bod. MS. Digby, 176*, he is reputedly considering the significance of a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in Scorpio, which occurred in 1357.⁵³ While this is astrology not astronomy, the true science had not as yet separated itself from the pseudo-science. Reade's interests were not isolated ones, for Oxford included courses in astronomy on the arts' level, although degrees in the subject were not given.⁵⁴

Amongst the other scholars in the episcopate of Edward III were the Dominicans Ringstead, Lisle and Gilbert, and the Benedictine Sheppey. As St. Dominic, the founder of the Dominicans, emphasized study as a means of achieving skill in preaching, it is not surprising that the first three were famed as theologians. Thomas Ringstead, bishop of Bangor, studied abroad and achieved a doctorate in divinity from Cambridge. His work seems to have been limited to commentaries on the Bible, which gave him a high repute as a theologian.⁵⁵ His will provided a loan fund for poor students attending the university of Cambridge. Despite his Welsh see (or perhaps because he had experienced its turbulence) all Welshmen were specifically exempted from this legacy.⁵⁶ Lisle, another Dominican, who had a stormy episcopate at Ely, reputedly was an

⁴⁷ On the subject of God's foreknowledge and of human free will, one of the characters in this story was made to exclaim:

"But I ne kan nat bulte it to the bren
As kan the hooly doctour Augustyn,
Or Boece, or the Bisshop Bradwardyn . . ."

(*Canterbury Tales*, lines 4430-4432.)

This is one of the very few contemporary names in this great work.

⁴⁸ Reading, *Chronica*, pp. 112-113, mentions this work. It was edited in 1618 by Sir Henry Saville.

⁴⁹ R. T. Gunther, *Early Science at Oxford*, O.H.S., 1922-1929, 11 vols., i. 97, xi. 40.

⁵⁰ It is interesting to note that Reade was provided by Urban V whose father, William Gizaute (or English), was a physician and a scholar of Merton in 1292.

⁵¹ Gunther, ii. 56, thinks that they are still there but cannot be identified. He gives a list of Reade's works.

⁵² For Ashington and Bredon, see G. C. Broderick, *Memorials of Merton*, O.H.S., Oxford, 1885, p. 211. Bredon left Reade his smaller astrolabe.

⁵³ C. L. Kingsford, s.v. Reade in *D.N.B.*; Reading, *Chronica*, p. 327n.

⁵⁴ Rashdall, *Universities*, iii. 160.

⁵⁵ A. F. Pollard, s.v. Ringstead, in *D.N.B.*; B. Jarrett, *The English Dominicans*, London, 1921, p. 92.

⁵⁶ The will has been transcribed by B. Willis, *A Survey of the Cathedral Church of Bangor and the Edifices belonging to it*, London, 1721, pp. 217-219.

excellent theologian.⁵⁷ A third was John Gilbert, whose sermons were found at Ford by Leyland.⁵⁸ Some of the other members of this order may have been scholars of repute but the evidence to support such a view is not too trustworthy.⁵⁹

John Sheppey, bishop of Rochester, was famed as a theologian. His works that have survived are all sermons unless, and it seems unlikely, he wrote two short legal tracts often ascribed to him.⁶⁰ He seems to have been a resident teacher at Oxford, and as such for a time may have held his priorship of Rochester as an absentee.⁶¹ And although he had some fame as a diplomat,⁶² Sheppey is interesting, too, as a book collector. His very large library was broken up on his death. Many of the items were purchased by bishop Reade, who himself had at death some three hundred and fifty volumes.⁶³

The greatest collector of all was Richard de Bury of Durham, perhaps the most avid collector in the whole of the fourteenth century. He collected so many manuscripts, often by unscrupulous methods, that one wonders if he had time to read them.⁶⁴ What happened to Bury's library is a matter of some doubt. His books did not go to the University of Oxford as many have suggested. Considering the poverty in which Bury died, they may have been sold to pay his debts.

Many other bishops possessed sizable libraries. Bateman, who founded Trinity Hall, while alive gave to his college four complete copies

⁵⁷ E. V. Venables, *s.v.* Lisle, in *D.N.B.* The evidence for this statement is not too apparent.

⁵⁸ J. Leyland, *De Rebus Britannicis Collectanea*, ed. T. Hearne, London, 1774, 6 vols., iv. 150.

⁵⁹ The Dominican, Eaglescliff, was probably educated at some theological school of the order. He was never called *magister* but then Herve Nedelec, the general of the order, in 1321 tried to forbid the use of this term (*Histoire Littéraire de la France*, Tome XXXIV, Paris, 1934, p. 311). Gervase de Castro asked to be buried in the choir of the Black Friars' school at Bangor, where he may have been educated.

Friars of other orders had some pretensions to learning. The Carmelite Pascal is said to have been the author of six theological works (Tanner, *Bibliotheca*, p. 577). Swaffham is reputed to have obtained his see by writing a book against the doctrines of Wycliffe (J. Pitsei, *Relationum Historicarum de Rebus Anglicis*, ed. W. Bishop, Paris, 1619, p. 559) and H. Cotton thinks that he compiled the *Pipa Colomanni*, a manuscript illustrating the rights of the Irish diocese of Cloyne (*Fasti Ecclesiae Hibernicae*, 2nd Edition, Dublin, 1851, i. 292). It must be noted that most of these writers are not considered now to be too trustworthy.

⁶⁰ C. L. Kingsford, *s.v.* Sheppey, in *D.N.B.*, lists the sermons that have come down to us, and believes that Sheppey was not the author of the two legal tracts ascribed to him, *De Ordine Cognitionum* and *De Judiciis*. Sheppey's *Fabulae* was published by M. Hervieux in *Les Fabulistes Latins*, Paris, 1893-1894, iv. 160-70.

⁶¹ Sheppey seems to have been at Oxford when he was elected Prior of Rochester, and incepted about that time (*Register Hethe*, i. xxi; *Literæ Cantuariensis*, ed. J. B. Sheppard, R.S., 1887 ff. 3 vols., ii. 27).

⁶² C. L. Kingsford, *op. cit.*

⁶³ Reade left many of these volumes to Merton and is regarded as the founder of that college's library (Sir F. M. Powicke, *The Medieval Books of Merton College*, Oxford, 1931, pp. 87-92).

⁶⁴ Chambre, *Historia Dunelmensis*, p. 130, gives the oft-quoted picture of Bury's bedroom so cluttered with books that movement in it was difficult.

of the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* of five volumes each, a book of the decretals, several copies of the *Clementines*, a small Bible, and a *Compendium* of the Bible. After his death, by his will the college obtained seven volumes on civil law, fourteen on canon law and twenty-five on theology.⁶⁵ Archbishop Wittlesey left a good-sized library to St. Peter's Hall, Cambridge.⁶⁶ The value of these gifts can be estimated when we realize that a theological book was valued at half a good-sized ship or the farm of a large village.⁶⁷

Bury, as well as collecting books, inspired even if he did not write the famous *Philobiblon*. His authorship has been questioned but not his intimate part in the writing of this work.⁶⁸ But even if Bury was a dilettante, Petrarch who knew him admitted that the bishop had some skill and much curiosity about unknown things.

Education itself profited from the founding of a number of schools and colleges by the bishops of Edward III. In 1350 bishop Bateman of Norwich acquired prior Crauden's hostel at Cambridge from the prior and convent of Ely for the sum of three hundred pounds and obtained a royal charter to found Trinity Hall.⁶⁹ In addition, he donated a chest for poor scholars, called the "Chest of Holy Trinity", containing one hundred pounds, which was to be kept at the Carmelite priory in the charge of the white friars.⁷⁰ Simon Islep, perhaps a fellow of Merton, in 1363 attempted the establishment of Canterbury Hall, a college which violated the notions of his day.⁷¹ It contained both seculars and regulars, although the former were afterwards excluded by his successor, the Benedictine Simon Langham. Islep was supposed to have been interested in eugenics.⁷² Bishop Wykeham, although no scholar himself,

⁶⁵ Malden, *op. cit.*, 1-42, gives an account of Bateman's benefactions.

⁶⁶ *Canterbury Sede Vacante Register*, G. fol. 171v, contains a copy of Wittlesey's will.

⁶⁷ Powicke, *Medieval Books*, p. 38.

⁶⁸ J. Raine, editor of *Richard D'Aungerville of Bury, Fragments of his Register*, etc., Surtees Society, 1910, p. xl, argues "that, while external evidence is strong against Bury's authorship, the internal proofs are heavily in his favour. Whether or not every page of the book was actually written by him, no one can say; yet this is certainly the case, that the whole work on every page bears the clear impress of his personal character and his wish to let the world know what were his aims."

⁶⁹ J. Bentham, *The History and Antiquities of the Conventual and Cathedral Church of Ely*, Cambridge, 1771, p. 220; *Victoria County Histories*, Ely, p. 207. Bateman had much to do with the foundation of Conville and Caius College (see J. Venn, *Caius College*, Cambridge College Histories, London, 1901).

⁷⁰ J. W. Clarke, "University Chests", in *C.A.S.*, XI, 79. The bishop endowed the college with the revenues of the Church of Blofeld. The deed for the alienation is to be found in his register (*Register Bateman*, fols. 7-8).

⁷¹ *Calendar of Papal Petitions*, i. 460; Rashdall, *Universities*, iii. 211-3.

⁷² Gunther, *Early Science at Oxford*, xi. 41, states that Islep left 1,000 of his best ewes to improve the breed of the sheep belonging to the monks of Canterbury. This does not seem correct, for no mention is made of the sheep in Islep's will (*Canterbury Charta Antiqua*, A. 15). The monks did possess 477 of Islep's sheep after the archbishop's death (*Canterbury Account Rolls*, second Series, fols. 1-5).

founded the two St. Mary Winton colleges (including New College, Oxford). By these foundations and his contribution to school architecture, Wykeham deserves an important place in the field of education. Never having been at university himself, the bishop was unsympathetic to the "vices" of student life. He even included chess amongst the "noxious, inordinate and dishonest games" which were forbidden to his new college students.⁷³ Oxford, however, considered him an important patron and asked for his help against the friars in 1366.⁷⁴

Other bishops made contributions to learning by the method of school foundation. The grammar school of St. John the Baptist's Hospital at Exeter, created by bishop Stapleton, proved to be underendowed, and his successor, bishop Grandisson, remedied this defect.⁷⁵ Grandisson also donated a number of books to Exeter College, Oxford, of which he was the founder-visitor.⁷⁶ Wood recounts that still another bishop of Exeter, Thomas Brantingham, assisted the college by contributions to the fund for rebuilding her library in 1383.⁷⁷ Thomas Hatfield, who was not a university graduate,⁷⁸ entered an agreement with the prior and convent of his cathedral at Durham for the endowment of Durham college, but this was not completed until after the bishop's death.⁷⁹ Simon Langham, as bishop of Ely, gave the advowson of the church of Hynton to the master and scholars of St. Peter's Hall, Cambridge.⁸⁰

Certain of the bishops served the universities in teaching or administrative posts. The most famous of the administrators was Robert Stratford, chancellor of Oxford, with whom, according to C. R. L. Fletcher, "throughout the early years of the reign of Edward III, no Oxonian could vie . . . in importance or popularity."⁸¹ It was during Stratford's tenure of office that the Stamford Schism broke out, and the university ascribed to him the king's active interference in this matter for the benefit of Oxford.⁸²

Henry Gower, a fellow of Merton,⁸³ was another chancellor who became a bishop. His period of office, which began in October 1322,⁸⁴

⁷³ Rashdall, *Universities*, iii. 421.

⁷⁴ Snappe's *Formulary*, p. 308.

⁷⁵ *Historical Manuscript Commission Reports, Various Collections*, iv. 77.

⁷⁶ Wood, *Colleges and Halls*, p. 114; *Reg. Collegii, Exon.*, p. liii.

⁷⁷ Wood, *Colleges and Halls*, p. 114.

⁷⁸ *Calendar of Papal Petitions*, i. 472, says that Hatfield "has no degree in science and fears not the rod of discipline".

⁷⁹ Rashdall, *Universities*, iii. 187.

⁸⁰ *Documents Relating to the University and Colleges of Cambridge*, London, 1852, 3 vols., i. 22.

⁸¹ *Collectanea*, 1st Series, O.H.S. Oxford, 1885-1905, i. 31. Robert became chancellor 9 May, 1335 (Snappe's *Formulary*, p. 327).

⁸² For the Stamford Schism, see *Collectanea*, i. 3-16.

⁸³ Broderick, *Memorials of Merton*, p. 177, Oxford Hist. Soc.

⁸⁴ Snappe's *Formulary*, pp. 71-72, 325.

was enlivened by the resistance of the university to the jurisdictional claims of the archdeacon of Oxford, but nothing decisive was achieved.⁸⁵ Gower's fame, however, lies mainly in his skill as an architect, for which he has been "quaintly called the 'Menevian Wykeham'".⁸⁶

William Courtenay, the future archbishop of Canterbury, also filled the chancellorship, to which he was confirmed 10 June, 1367.⁸⁷ His tenure of office was apparently without incident. It is true that at a later date he forced a successor in the chancellorship to beg pardon at his knees,⁸⁸ and declared Oxford to be "the university of Heresies",⁸⁹ but on that occasion Courtenay's zeal in stamping out the roots of Wycliffe's teachings overshadowed, for the moment, his recollections of service within her walls.

Two other bishops or future bishops, Ralph of Salopia in 1328⁹⁰ and the friar Gilbert in 1376,⁹¹ were also chancellors of Oxford. The former appointment was perhaps the result of Ralph's connections with Oxford, where he may have been a resident teacher,⁹² but Gilbert seems to have gained the office as a political appointment. Gilbert was at Oxford in his youth, but his stay does not appear to have been a pleasant one. He requested papal permission to incept at Paris, because of the measures taken by Oxford against the friars.⁹³ Roger Mortival was also a chancellor of Oxford.⁹⁴

Godwin asserted that Lewis Charlton also was a chancellor of Oxford.⁹⁵ There is no foundation for this statement, although Charlton's brother, Humphrey, certainly held that office.⁹⁶ The two frequently acted together on university business and both Lewis and Humphrey were included in a list of Oxford's benefactors. Others in this list were Simon Islep, John Thoresby, William Edington, and John Gynewell.⁹⁷

We have already noted that Bradwardine, Reade, Sheppey, Islep, and Gower were teachers at the university of Oxford. Islep's nephew, the

⁸⁵ *Collectanea*, 1st series, 16-26; Anstey, *Munimenta Academica*, i. 148.

⁸⁶ T. F. Tout, *s.v.* Gower, in *D.N.B.*

⁸⁷ Snappe's *Formulary*, p. 85.

⁸⁸ *Historia Anglicana*, ii. 60-61.

⁸⁹ *Fasciculi Zizaniorum Magistri Johannis Wyclif cum tritico*, ed. W. W. Shirley, R.S., 1858, pp. 309-311.

⁹⁰ His confirmation has not survived (Snappe's *Formulary*, p. 74; see also *Register Burghersh*, Institutions, fol. 261).

⁹¹ Snappe's *Formulary*, p. 330; *C.P.R.*, 1377-81, p. 302.

⁹² *The Register of Ralph of Shrewsbury*, ed. T. S. Holmes, Somerset Record Society, London, 1895-1896, 2 vols., gives a long account of Ralph's life.

⁹³ *Calendar of Papal Petitions*, i. 536.

⁹⁴ Edwards, *op. cit.*, 74.

⁹⁵ Godwin, *De Præsulibus*, p. 541. Tout, in *D.N.B.*, *s.v.* Charlton, points out this error.

⁹⁶ Snappe's *Formulary*, p. 328.

⁹⁷ Anstey, *Munimenta Academica*, i. 186-7.

future archbishop Wittlesey, was a resident teacher at Peterhouse, Cambridge, around 1349.⁹⁸ Bishop Lisle of Ely granted a "magister Willielmus de Wittlesey" a license for a private oratory in his house at Cambridge during infirmity in June of the previous year.⁹⁹

From the above it seems fairly clear that the episcopate of Edward III was generally a well-educated one, with some men of considerable learning. Other members, while hardly scholars and often not even university graduates, did make contributions to the educational system of the day. Why then, if this was so, were there those who attacked the learning of these men? G. M. Trevelyan in his book, *England in the Age of Wycliffe*, comes very close to the answer when he describes the bench of bishops as one "composed of shrewd men of business".¹⁰⁰ Theology was being neglected for law.

The fourteenth century saw a resurgence of the old idea that a bishop should limit his attentions to his spiritual office.¹⁰¹ An expression of this is to be found in *Chronicon Angliæ* on Sudbury's acceptance of the chancellorship of England. This called forth the anger of some members of Holy Church, at least. It was not right, they said, that the highest churchman in the realm should hold the highest secular post.¹⁰² The legal and administrative duties of the chancellorship to such people, we may assume, were not compatible with the cure of souls, at least on such a high level. If a prelate was to restrict himself to the spiritual welfare of his diocese, theology was the obvious preparatory study for such a task. For the material side of diocesan work, however, a thorough knowledge of law was almost an essential in an age of unending litigation.

Wycliffe, nevertheless, thought that diocesan administration could and should be left to a lay seneschal. Preaching — "which alone could stop the growth of sin" and "was more precious than the administration of any sacrament" — should be the primary aim of any priest or bishop. But legal studies rather than theology were being chosen. This choice was natural enough. The papacy had become the crowning pinnacle of achievement for those skilled in canon law,¹⁰³ and advancement within the English government was largely limited to those whose legal educations fitted them for a world in which law played such a large part.

The chroniclers, on this basis, could well criticize the large number of very able men who served in the royal administration without university

⁹⁸ A. Walker, *Peterhouse*, Cambridge College Histories, London, 1906, pp. 74-75.

⁹⁹ *Register Lisle*, fol. 15r.

¹⁰⁰ G. M. Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wycliffe*, London, 1920, p. 106.

¹⁰¹ E. K. Lyle, *The Office of an English Bishop in the First Half of the Fourteenth Century*, Philadelphia, 1903, pp. 127 et seq.

¹⁰² *Chronicon Angliæ*, p. 255.

¹⁰³ For Wycliffe's views, see his *Sermones*, ed. J. Loserth, 4 vols., 1877f., i. 175-8, 248; ii. 179, 367, etc.

training at all.¹⁰⁴ Bishop Wyville of Salisbury, criticized by Murimuth, was one of these. Such men, like the lawyers, were hardly fit to cope with the spiritual side of the episcopal office. If we believe, with bishop Brunton of Rochester, that the bishop should labour only "in the Lord's vineyard", these men were ill-equipped for such a specialization.¹⁰⁵ Here I believe, and here only, is the basis for the chroniclers' complaints.

¹⁰⁴ See H. B. Vaisey, *The Canon Law of the Church of England*, London, 1947, p. 27.

¹⁰⁵ See T. F. Tout, "Literature and Learning in the English Civil Service in the Fourteenth Century", *Speculum*, iv 365-9, where this author said that the medieval official had a good education, but it was technical and not humanistic.