

# **A QUESTION OF FISH: GRADUATES AND THEIR MONASTERIES**

## **IN THE MIDDLE AGES**

The purpose of this paper is not to tell the story of medieval English monasticism and its relationship with the universities. That has been done elsewhere and has been done often. Rather, what I want to do is to focus upon what seems to me to be a neglected aspect of this history, namely the impact that the existence of graduate monks had upon their own communities. The life of monks in Oxford, their studies here and their other activities have all been studied in depth, but the more abstract question of their impact has been less well covered. We need to remember that for almost all of those who came to study at the three monastic colleges of Oxford and the monastic house in Cambridge, university was a transient experience, something which, however agreeable, would have to come to an end.

My aim is to proceed to answer the question of what kind of impact they had by a series of steps. In the first place, it is important to grasp how very privileged life at the universities was, attracting both supporters in the persons of those who were here, and opponents amongst those who feared that learning detracted from the heart of monasticism. Secondly, we need to understand the purpose of sending monks to university in this period, for it is only by understanding clearly what was intended by the monastic colleges that we can understand the impact of their produce. I would like to contend that the impact of monk graduates upon the shape of medieval monasticism was for most communities very much smaller than historians have tended to suggest. I think we have tended to be blinded by the outstanding role of graduates in a very few communities, and we have tended to assume the rightness of that famous remark of W A Pantin that the monk graduates were “olympian persons”. They may have thought themselves so – some clearly did – but they were rarely treated as so, except in the rarefied world of the General Chapters.

I have called this paper A Question of Fish. Why so? It is because in a small way we may gain a sense of the very special nature of monastic life in the universities from a Bull of 1423. It is not a Bull that has attracted wide interest, and it is striking that no copy seems

to survive in the archives either of Oxford or of Canterbury Cathedral, to whom it was directed. It is a short text and a simple one, which in between an elaborate Introduction and

a standard Papal Conclusion simply dispenses the monks of Canterbury College in Oxford from the need to eat fish on fast days. Justifying this exemption from the general requirement upon Christians to abstain from meat, the Bull states simply that fish is difficult to obtain in Oxford and that fasting is detrimental to the studies of the monks.

It seems to me a most remarkable Bull, for many reasons. It is without doubt an example of how far the Pope of 1423, Martin V, was prepared to go in his search for English support. It also reminds us how much the papacy had, from the pontificate of Boniface VIII, involved itself evermore in regulating the details of the lives of religious. Boniface had started with the nuns, but by the fifteenth century there was a long tradition of papal prescriptions relating to all the orders of monks, canons and friars. These are both interesting stories, but there are other stories. For our purpose, what this Bull reveals is the very great care with which the university monks were treated, the degree to which theirs was a life of particular privilege.

If a mere dispensation from fasting seems inadequate grounds on which to base this view, then it is worth remembering the expense incurred by the monasteries of the Middle Ages when they sent their students away from the house for studies. For the great houses, and especially for the cathedral priories, this was not so much of a problem, but for the smaller houses the expense of sending even a single monk to Oxford could comprise the largest single item in the annual budget. We see this clearly in the case of William Pygot, a monk and later the abbot of Selby in Yorkshire who in the year 1397-1398 was resident in Oxford. We are fortunate that the complete account book for Selby survives for this year, and amidst the various entries made by the different obedientaries for that year we are able to tot up the overall expense of his studies. In the first place, there was his annual pension of £10, a considerable amount when we recall that the prior of Selby was paid a pension of 10s, and the subprior a pension of 6s 8d. Secondly, the bursars record payments for horses and other necessities for travel, not only on the part of Brother William but also for those who went to see him. The bursars also list the cost of his inception as £6 13s. Against this entry, the bursar has written laconically “by command of the Lord Abbot”, a gentle reminder that it was possibly not with the full and wholehearted agreement of the bursars that such a cost was



incurred. Put together, these sums amount to the single biggest expense that the abbey faced in that year except for the upkeep of its abbot.

The later history of William Pygot reveals much of the financial state of Selby. In 1408 he was elected to be abbot of that community, but in the same year he left Yorkshire and returned to Oxford for three or four years. According to an episcopal indult permitting him to be absent from the monastery, we learn that this unusual step was taken “that the abbot and convent may have government at a moderate cost”. It was clearly felt that the absence of the abbot would make it possible to run the finances of the monastery more soundly. Pygot had proved an expensive member of the community.

These two images, the Bull of 1423 and the case of William Pygot, remind us of the two most important judgements that the historian must make about university education as part of medieval monasticism. It was thought worth paying for, and it was thought worth protecting. It was these two facts that rendered any residence in Oxford or Cambridge a time of especial privilege.

The degree to which the university experience of medieval monks was privileged can be viewed from both sides of the issue. On the one hand, there is ample evidence to demonstrate that the students themselves felt it to be so, and equally there is some evidence that university education had its critics, those who did not believe that a university education was either worth the expense or indeed proper to monks at all.

When looking at the evidence of students themselves, we need to be careful. The dominant impression of student life in late medieval Oxford has been created by a single source, namely the letters of Robert Joseph of Evesham of which I have written much elsewhere. When reading Robert Joseph, we need to remember that personal antipathy towards his abbot colours much of what he says. Nevertheless, he does reveal that the practical privileges of Oxford were real enough, and that their absence could be a source of difficulty. Let us briefly examine three such privileges, and three such difficulties.

In the first place there was money. More than a century before Robert Joseph wrote his letters, another student had told the prior of Canterbury that “a student’s first song is the demand for money”. Robert Joseph, back in his monastery at Evesham, laments that he is unable to send Christmas presents, that he cannot afford the books he wants. Writing to the future abbot Feckenham he signs himself *vale sed abs que pecunia*. The lack of money was not a problem which all monks experienced, for many of the obedientaries of the major houses would have been in receipt of substantial pensions in their own right, what amount effectively to annual salaries. Many monks returning from Oxford might have expected to gain such obedientary posts, but they did not all do so and many did not do so immediately. In Oxford, money was needed and expected, and the General Chapter was prepared to castigate particular monasteries that failed to pay their students enough.

A second privilege which could become a difficulty was the reduction in the choir duties of monks at Oxford. Here we have to be careful, because the General Chapters did make repeated efforts to encourage observance of the canonical hours, especially on feast days, but in the highly decentralised Gloucester College this seems almost always to have failed, and responsibility for ensuring common office devolved from the prior onto the senior monk of each house that had students at the College. Among these senior monks in the year 1537 was Robert Joseph himself, whose views on the subject are clearly stated within his letters. He tells one of his friends that the duties of the claustral life disturb the soul, and as his campaign to extricate himself from Evesham develops he calls his monastery *isto carcere*. There seems little doubt that the return to the full rigour of the late medieval office was a transition that Robert Joseph, for one, found difficult to make.

The third privilege was the simple fact of distance. Superiors could be a long way away, especially at Gloucester College but also at Canterbury and Durham, even though in those two Colleges the majority of the monks and the wardens belonged to a single house. In 1440 Prior Wessington of Durham found that it was necessary to threaten Thomas Brogham with recall from Oxford, on account of his tendency to prefer archery and alcohol to books. This was necessary even though Durham had a warden resident alongside Brogham, and *if* there were problems for Durham, where studies assumed the highest priority, we can only guess at the potential difficulties faced by superiors of other houses

in dealing with the difficulties

of monks leading a life away from the cloister. There is evidence from a number of houses that university monks could be uncooperative with their superiors on their return, a complaint that frequently makes its way into acts of visitation.

If Oxford's own students reveal the degree to which the life was privileged, so do its opponents. Though they have always received less attention from historians, perhaps because those historians themselves have little doubt as to the value of university education, there were always some who regarded the university experiment as either undesirable – mostly for financial reasons – or dangerous. Often their presence is more sensed than declared, though an undercurrent of hostility towards the universities can be sensed in a number of visitations. More direct evidence is not thick on the ground, but there were those who objected to the entire scheme of monastic university education on the grounds of theology. The *Speculum Monachorum* of 1430 regarded studies as threatening the primacy of psalmody, an opinion voiced during the height of attempts by the black monk General Chapters to legislate for compulsory attendance at the university. More significant still are the hesitations of Archbishop Peckham, who at the first glimmer of the idea of establishing a house in Oxford opposed it because it was introduced alongside a proposal to reduce the amount of psalmody said by monks. Peckham and others undoubtedly perceived that these two suggestions formed a single unit, formed a shift in emphasis away from the more traditional Cluniac understanding of monasticism and towards something new. His was, in the end, a profoundly theological objection to the establishment of an Oxford house, and the author of the *Speculum Monachorum* lies in his tradition.

But such attacks on the value of learning are rare, and the unanimity of opinion that it was right and indeed necessary to send monks to study prevailed. This unanimity persisted even as the difficulties became clear, and time and again it fell to the General Chapters to deal with these difficulties, even though the Chapter had very little power to enforce its view. It is in explaining this unanimity of opinion that we may seek to understand the impact that graduate monks had on their monasteries.

It is worth remembering that English communities sent their monks to Oxford before it



became required of them so to do. As has been indicated above, it was in the General

Chapter of 1277 that the Oxford scheme took definite shape, some fifty years before the definitive papal statement on the subject in the Bull *Summi Magistri*. The later thirteenth century General Chapters took it as their duty to revive monastic studies both within the monasteries and elsewhere, and their constitutional experiments brought results long before they were transformed into legal obligations. The first monk to take a degree at Oxford was William de Brok of the abbey of Gloucester, who incepted in theology in 1298. The history of Gloucester notes that this was “to the honour of this house and of the whole order”, and the sheer number of abbots who attended the ceremony is eloquent witness to its importance. It was a moment of change.

That change took definite shape in 1336, when *Summi Magistri* was promulgated as part of the fourfold reform of religious life introduced by the French Cistercian Pope Benedict XII (1334-1342). That Bull became the foundation charter for the Oxford monks, though it in turn built upon the general principles of monastic study laid down in the General Council of Vienne (1311-1312). If we want to understand why monks were sent to study, it is in these texts that we must first look.

The Council of Vienne issued its document on monastic studies under the title *Ne in agro dominico*. In this decree, the Council declared that its intention is firstly to promote divine worship, and under this heading it makes two recommendations. The first is that every monk “should have himself raised to all the sacred orders” unless some lawful impediment prevents

it. Beyond that, it declares that “in order that monks may not be deprived of the opportunity to make progress in knowledge” studies should be encouraged, both inside and outside monasteries. These are evidently general provisions, and in common with all medieval General Councils Vienne expected that its proposals would be taken up, modified or ignored at regional level. Nevertheless, Vienne provides an important starting point in that its justification for monastic study, and monastic ordination, is entirely spiritual. *Summi Magistri* takes up this theme, expanding at length upon the value of monastic study and relating this study directly to the scriptures. “By the exercise of reading the pearl of

knowledge is gained, and by the study of the sacred page one comes to an understanding of the excellence of God". We should note the highly traditional language here invoked, for the Cistercian Pope is conceiving of monastic studies in a language redolent of the earlier

monastic tradition. The whole purpose of setting up *studia* in houses and in universities is to enhance the practice of *lectio*. To this extent, the English General Chapters were, as Peckham observed, taking the wrong interpretation in associating monastic study directly with a reduction in the burden of psalmody. The General Chapters and the popes continue to speak of the same institutions in strikingly different ways, the popes spiritual and the Chapters distinctly practical.

That practical bent in the General Chapters is revealed clearly in a fifteenth century sermon preached at the beginning of one such Chapter. It emphasises the value of monk students for the order, and the preacher effectively tells the Chapter that they were getting value for money in sending their monks to Oxford. On the level of monastic theory, the preacher argues that the role of manual labour is replaced by study in order that the work of the monks in England could carry on. That work, in his conception, is the same work as that undertaken by St Augustine, a work which requires a grasp of both theology and canon law. The preacher goes on to deride those abbots who fail to allow their monks to study, referring to abbots living in splendour while denying funds for university education and citing St Bernard as a witness against abbatial pomp.

Such arguments over the purpose of monks studying at Oxford over-rode any opponents, though both sides were basing themselves on monastic tradition. There is little doubt that the overwhelming majority of those who considered the question continued to regard it as worth sending monks to study in Oxford, though the balance between the spiritual and practical justifications was never entirely resolved.

We are now able to begin to approach directly the question with which this paper started, the impact that graduate monks had on their communities. These graduates returned from Oxford and later Cambridge and elsewhere on the crest of both spiritual and practical justifications, but the effect of this new monastic group remains to be determined. One view is that they were and remained a breed apart from the normal cloister monks. In the language of Pantin, they were olympian persons, or to Peter Cunich a “privileged elite”. Pantin believed that the education the monks had received at Oxford set them above the rest, and he saw proof of this in their supposed dominance of the top jobs in the order, not

only

obedientary posts but abbacies and cathedral priories. They were, in other words, the ruling elite.

If this interpretation is the case, then we are effectively talking about two communities. On the one hand we have the leaders, the academics, and on the other hand the led, the non-academics. There is indeed some evidence that this was the case, both from the General Chapters and from what happened at the Dissolution. In 1444, the statutes of the General Chapter decreed that doctors should rank in procession immediately after major superiors, but before the plethora of secondary priors and subpriors. On any formal occasion, academic distinction was to take monks out of their normal community order, placing them immediately after those in authority. It was a poignant symbol, even if in most communities it seems never to have happened.

Much more significant is what certainly did happen at the Dissolution. As is well known, monks were paid a pension by those who dissolved the monasteries, and the size of that pension depended largely if not solely upon the university experience that the individual monk had. Thus at Evesham an annual pension of £10 was paid to monks with degrees or who had been to university for an extended period, while only £4 was paid for the rest. Even more than the processions, this can be argued to be a practical sign of the chasm between the university elite and the rest.

But we need to be careful before understanding medieval monasticism through the distorting prism of the Henrician reformers. I would like to suggest that we have misunderstood the role of monk graduates within their communities, and vastly over-emphasised their importance. This can be seen in three areas, with which the rest of this paper will be concerned.

The first evidence that we have exaggerated the chasm between graduate and non-graduate

in medieval monasteries is the argument from silence. There is really no evidence to suggest that the graduate monks were perceived by contemporaries as a dominant group. Indeed continual papal pressure suggests that, in the eyes of Rome at least, there was too little learning among the monks throughout the fifteenth century, and papal pressure was replicated

at the level of the General Chapters. Year after year there are complaints from the *prior studentium* and others that monasteries are not sending enough monks to Oxford, complaints that reached a peak in the middle years of the fifteenth century. In July 1423 the then *prior studentium* gave a list of ten abbeys that had failed in this regard, a list including both the great (Westminster and Evesham), the small (Hyde and Burton) and the immediate neighbours of Oxford, the monks of Abingdon. With regard to this last abbey, the prior declares that, though obliged to send two scholars, one every two years is ordered to stay in the monastery and never comes. The prior takes pains to point out, indeed, that of all monasteries Abingdon has the least excuse on the grounds of cost of travel.

Such lists of errant monasteries may be misleading, in that they take no account of the individual circumstances of the communities involved. But though they may be unfair, they clearly reflect a perception at the time, and the perception is clearly that there were too few monks studying rather than too many. If the graduate population of monasteries was indeed a detached Olympian elite, it is hardly conceivable that the desire to expand this olympian group would have continued.

Much more significant however is the evidence of appointments. Here we find ourselves in the presence of what can only be described as a historiographical myth that most of the superiors of the late Middle Ages were graduates. A recent publication on the history of Benedictines in Oxford, indeed, does a certain amount to keep this myth alive, though we should note the warning provided by Professor James Campbell that the proportion of those raised to high office amongst the graduate population has never been determined. He cites the example of the abbey of Westminster, where only half of the abbots between 1350 and the Dissolution had been to Oxford, and, as we shall see, Westminster was in fact at the top end of the range. Amongst the cathedral priories, only 22% of superiors in the southern province held degrees in the period between 1336 and the Reformation. If we take out of our calculations the last generation of priors, who were undoubtedly an exceptional body of men, the figure falls to just 16% of the total. This figure conceals huge variations, for where in Norwich more than 50% of the priors were degree-holders, in the entire period three communities only had one monk graduate as cathedral prior, namely Bath, Coventry and Rochester.





In the world of cathedral priories, the exception was certainly Durham. Between 1446 and 1540 it was ruled by degree-holders, many or most of whom had been ordans of Durham College before being elected priors. But there is every indication that Durham was exceptional, that it sought out young novices suitable for university life and that it specially trained its graduates for authority by making them priors of dependent houses as soon as they left Oxford. Significantly, Norwich had the same policy, and Norwich is the only cathedral priory apart from Durham which can claim a majority of degree-holders amongst its superiors.

If this was the situation amongst the cathedral priories, that of the abbeys provides even less proof for the usual historical argument. In Evesham, over the same period only two Oxford graduates were abbot, and only one of these had a degree. In the smaller houses, the situation was likely to be very similar, if only because the percentage of graduates amongst the community was so much smaller. I cannot emphasise strongly enough how little evidence there is to support the conventional view that monk graduates were inevitably destined for the highest offices.

Then why the myth? I think in part we have been blinded by the phenomenal achievement of Durham Priory, but Durham was in an exclusive elite of two such priories that had their own houses in Oxford. Significantly, at Canterbury the statistics are very much less supportive of the usual case, in that only five of the priors of Canterbury between 1300 and 1540 had degrees from the university, while a further two may have studied here at some time.

If the effect of monk graduates is not to be found in their dominance of high office in the medieval monastic houses, where else are we to look? In part, it is probably a question of lowering our sights, of remembering that beneath the glittering world of the superiors lay that body of monastic office-holders we call obedientaries. If the monk graduates did not occupy the senior post in any community with any regularity, lower down the community

there were posts where monk graduate seem to have dominated, especially that of abbot & chaplain. Yet even here, the figures are not conclusive, and I for one am unable to be convinced that monastic graduates changed the face of the internal structure of monasteries.

In part, this may have been because of the strength of that other, neglected element in the fourteenth century monastic reform, namely the encouragement of intramural studies in the monasteries. It is worth remembering that it was these programmes of study that were the first aim of the Council of Vienne and of *Summi Magistri*, and they may have been quite as important in forming the community as was the sending of monks away to Oxford and Cambridge. They were usually conceived as consisting of two levels. In the first place, all monks were instructed in the “primitive sciences” of grammar, logic and philosophy, and above this there was commonly a higher faculty of theology. In this area, as we would expect, the monk graduates play their most consistent role, yet in doing so they must in some ways have undermined their own position, for the better the intramural studies of any community, the less reason there was to send monks away to Oxford.

Here we should consider one of the most outstanding figures of that last generation of monk scholars produced by the universities. It has been widely accepted by scholars that the first four decades of the sixteenth century produced a unique generation of monastic superiors and monastic theologians, and high amongst them must rank Richard Kidderminster, a monk graduate who became abbot of Winchcombe in 1488, ruling his community until 1525. Kidderminster appears to have achieved something akin to the formation of his own mini university within his monastery, something which he describes in eloquent terms in a fragmentary text preserved by Brian Twyne from the ravages of the great fire of London. There, Kidderminster describes his monastery as “another new university” where strength of academic discipline coincided with fervour in regular observance. To him, a graduate of Oxford, the idea that nothing could be done outside the university was clearly quite alien. Indeed, so tempestuous was the experience of university that Kidderminster regarded it as altogether better to keep his monks within the *studium* of his own monastery. He reminds us of how well the fourteenth century system of monastic education could work, and how the natural place of learning did not need to be the university. Historians have tended to give only the scantiest attention to the work of these internal monastic *studia*, but they may have been a significant way in which monk graduates contributed to their own communities, and a significant means by which the distinction between graduates and non-graduates was blurred.

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graduated offices in the country. They have a long history of