

JOHN KENNETH HYDE, 1930–86

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Kenneth Hyde was born on 14 August 1930 into a family which owned a small company producing iron and steel. Founded in Sheffield in 1902, the firm had moved to Chesterfield in 1919 and then to Stoke in 1928. At the age of eight, about the time of his father's death, Kenneth was sent to board at Mostyn House, a well-known preparatory school at Parkgate in the Wirral. Striped black and white in the bold style of Cheshire, its frontage still looks across the Dee estuary to the green ridge rising on the Welsh side of the river, although the establishment itself has changed character and become an independent day school for boys and girls. Kenneth greatly enjoyed his time at Mostyn House, but what followed was far less agreeable. His experiences at Oundle helped to convince him that the army was a humane and civilized institution by comparison with certain public schools in the 1940s. After a happier spell of national service, in which he held a commission in the Ordnance Corps, Kenneth took up the scholarship he had won to Worcester College, Oxford. In 1953 the examiners in Modern History awarded him a second, and he stayed on first to acquire the Diploma in Social Anthropology and then to embark on research leading towards a doctorate.

To choose a topic was no easy task for a man of such varied interests: the potential research student hesitated between work on the Italian Middle Ages and work on English industrial history (he had written at school a dissertation on watermills of the Nene Valley, and the interest in water power and waterways never left him). Kenneth decided to follow up an idea suggested to him by Richard Southern, and D.M. Bueno de Mesquita, well known for his book on Giangaleazzo Visconti, the fourteenth-century Duke of Milan, guided Kenneth's research while he remained in Oxford. He was soon exploring the libraries and archives of Padua, with help from a learned Italian scholar, Paolo Sambin. His distinctive achievement in research qualified him well for an academic career in England, and he followed this at the University of Manchester. Appointed as an assistant lecturer when J.M. Wallace-Hadrill was professor of medieval history in 1961, Kenneth made steady progress up the hierarchy. By 1973 he had written the two good books that were often regarded as the necessary qualification for promotion to a senior lectureship, for Manchester's standards were high, and the even more distinguished readerships were

then awarded very sparingly and only to eminent scholars in late middle age. Having served six years as a senior lecturer, Kenneth was appointed in 1979 to succeed John Roskell in the chair of medieval history, and held this post until his death on 10 December 1986.

Kenneth had chosen for his research an Italian city of the second rank, caught up in the power politics of the March of Treviso. Padua in the thirteenth century was as large and complex as any European town north of the Alps. He concentrated on the period of collective government which lay between two tyrannies, from 1256 to 1328, when sovereignty resided in a Great Council to which about one-tenth of the population of 35,000 had access. With great skill he analysed the interplay of leading families and parties, and explored the vocabulary of contemporaries, the hidden meanings of the concepts of nobility and knighthood, in such a way as to uncover the social structure of the city – or at least the upper echelons of the hierarchy, from the established oligarchy to the minor guilds, for there were few documents concerned with the very poor. *Padua in the Age of Dante*, Kenneth's first book, was published by Manchester University Press in 1966, and proved to be a fascinating essay in total history, political, social, and intellectual, as far as the sources allowed. Padua was not a great commercial city like Florence or Genoa or Venice, thriving on banking and foreign trade and putting out colonies to the world beyond Italy. The Carrara lordship which triumphed in 1328 was not as powerful or enduring as the Visconti domain over the great regional state which centred on Milan. But Padua bred Marsiglio Mainardini, the physician who offered to cure the political sickness of Italy with his famous *Defensor Pacis*. The city itself was a settlement of landowners, dealing in the produce of a rich countryside, and judges and notaries were more prominent than merchants in its politics. It was perhaps these characteristics and achievements of his chosen city that helped Kenneth to appreciate the typical as well as the unusual, the whole as well as the parts: to become a historian of all northern and central Italy, rather than one of a crowd of specialists on one of the more spectacular and unusual civilizations within it, as many American, English, and French scholars have become. His later work was informed by a strong sense of the continuity between town and countryside, of the unity of the city and the *contado* which it ruled, of the movement of the well-to-do, at ease in both settings, between town houses and country estates.

Kenneth well knew that the effective teaching of Italian history, although its mainspring was the culture of regions and not the court and armed following of a centralizing monarchy, could not depend solely on the multiplication of research monographs, which studied the complexities of each *civitas* in loving detail. An overview was needed, and with the publication of his second book, *Society and Politics in Medieval Italy*, in 1973, he joined Philip Jones and Daniel Waley in a select company of British scholars who have generalized elegantly, even brilliantly, about the development of medieval Italian cities and their

dependencies. Now highly experienced in teaching a bold sweep of medieval European history to first-year undergraduates in Manchester, he saw how fatally easy it was to pour all European history into the more familiar north European mould. Hence he set himself the task, not only of surveying all aspects of the *vita civile* between the first millennium and the Black Death, but also of identifying the things that distinguished Italian from north European civilization, the small, densely populated city-state from the great feudal kingdom. 'Italian society', he wrote in a typically downright passage, 'cannot be made to conform to the pattern of other countries, nor can it be properly appreciated as a local deviation from the norm. The city-based civilisation of north and central Italy was no marginal exception, but a central and, in some respects, a dominant component of the medieval world, which calls for understanding on its own terms.' The book was a virtuoso performance; no characterless summary of the latest research, it was the lively expression of a series of fresh points of view, based on energetic reading and close contact with the sources. Discarded interpretations (as of the nature of Guelfs and Ghibellines) were sometimes restored to favour. Issues of some complexity – what exactly was a commune, and how did it differ from all the other *societates* that arose within a town? – were tackled with lucidity and zest, and the friendly voice of the guide, pointing the way out of confusion, was heard at the crucial times.

As Daniel Waley would write in *Renaissance Studies* for 1988, 'Kenneth was always moving in one direction, as it were, or perhaps it would be truer to say that one is strongly conscious that he had one particular set of intellectual strengths and interests.' A practical man himself, he appreciated the practical learning, the law and rhetoric, of the Italian communes, and he liked the manuals, guidebooks and compendia of useful advice that survived from medieval Italy: the anonymous *Oculus Pastoralis*, addressed to civic magistrates, the up-to-date model letters of Boncompagno da Signa, the *Pratica della Mercatura* of Francesco Pegolotti all receive honourable mention in *Society and Politics*. Kenneth was always sensitive to the literary qualities and hidden assumptions of works that had no literary pretensions. Much of the rest of his life was devoted to a subtle and ambitious book, which would have been entitled *Frontiers of Literacy in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Italy*. This, as he modestly described it himself, was to deal with 'the ways in which new types of material were committed to writing in Italy between about 1250 and 1450 and new literary genres invented.' They were to include chronicles, pilgrim books, ethnography, diplomatic reports, and merchants' handbooks. He never finished the work, though articles on some of its themes appeared, and a substantial chapter on pilgrim literature has been taken from his papers by Daniel Waley and edited by him for this volume.

Memories of Kenneth's early days as a scholar in Italy are difficult to recover. But Cecil Clough, who was with him in Padua and

preparing a monumental edition of the letters of the Vicentine Luigi Da Porto for his own doctorate, tells the following story:

In late 1955–early 1956 Kenneth and I had rooms in Padua, our landlady being a twice married hunchback called Rita Cinta Schesari. The house was on Riviera dei Businello [*sic*], not far from the Museo Civico, and was demolished some twenty years ago to make a through road, when the stream that fronted the house was entirely covered. The Signora spoke Paduan dialect and was not always easy to follow, but she took a great interest in her lodgers and liked to keep in contact even when they had left – Paolo Sambin had been there long before us and still called on occasion. ‘Mamma Rita’ was what we called the Signora, to her great delight. She thought much of Kenneth, not least (I like to think) because she believed him to be wealthy, a *milord inglese*: after all he had an expensive car (a two-litre Riley), and many girl-friends, and bought all kinds of things that impressed, including a whole Parmesan cheese on one occasion. She liked to protect him, as she saw it, from undesirables. Kenneth had met a Colonello and Mamma Rita was convinced he was an ex-Fascist, almost certainly a charlatan, after Kenneth’s money. The Signora never met the colonel and knew nothing about him really. Certainly the colonel claimed to have a castle in the Friuli, ‘ma non è vero’, sneered Mamma Rita. It had been agreed that Kenneth was to drive the colonel to see friends, even, perhaps, visit the castle in the Friuli. The night before the proposed visit Kenneth had taken one of his young ladies for a meal, then to her home in Treviso, and returned late. A note on his bedroom door requested that he should not be disturbed. I passed the news to the Signora on my way to my morning cappuccino at a bar. When I returned Mamma told me the colonel had ‘phoned, but since Kenneth was not down she had told him to call back later. This he did, repeatedly. At about ten o’clock the Signora finally crept into Kenneth’s room and found him still asleep. When next the colonel rang she told him sweetly, ‘L’angelino dorme.’ The colonel did not ‘phone again, indeed Kenneth heard no more of him. The Signora was delighted, and thereafter she and I called Kenneth ‘L’angelino’, it being one thing that he was not.

As a Manchester academic Kenneth reminded few colleagues or students of a little angel, but he did call to mind other, more earthy, creatures. He had about him something of the Water Rat – ‘there is *nothing* – absolutely nothing – half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.’ His abhorrence of organized sport and team games was matched by a passion for creative things he could do at his own pace, alone or with one or two choice companions. In the summer of 1965 it was still possible for friends in the history department to take the steam train from the station at Didsbury and out to Marple, there to be met by Kenneth in a punt powered by an outboard motor, and thence navigated to his house, Walbrook, High Lane, on the outskirts of Stockport, for entertainment along with his wife Maura. In time the versatile punt was succeeded by a narrowboat, an old canal ice-breaker named *Laplender*, the conversion and resplendent decoration of which were largely Kenneth’s own work. Often moored in the summer near Oxford, it was sometimes lent to other scholars in need of a base from which to read in the Bodleian. Approaching boats as a historian as well as an owner, Kenneth was a founder member of Ellesmere Port Boat Museum, and in his later years lived in a canal-side lodge, Brabyns, at Marple. He resembled Toad of Toad Hall in one respect only, for he did not drive to the public danger: the garden of Walbrook contained

for a time a gipsy caravan, until it was mysteriously destroyed by fire. It was not for taking to the open road, but served as a place of retreat for Kenneth, especially when some massive work of scholarship had just appeared in his field.

As a student of the *vita civile* and a historian of the early Renaissance, Kenneth appreciated and practised the virtues of an active citizen's life. To retreat into the contemplative existence of a pure scholar would neither have suited his temperament nor satisfied his sense of duty. His life in the history department was an extension of his scholarship and not a distraction from it; he reacted vigorously to the changes which overtook the place in the 1970s and 1980s. University constitutions bear a superficial resemblance to those of city states, for they too have their Signori, their great and small councils, their senates and their distant overlords. Some developments must have reminded Kenneth of the struggles of the *popolo*, of the guildsmen and the newly rich families of the Italian cities, to exert pressure on the old entrenched families and claim a role in the making of vital decisions and the framing of policy. Not all Manchester professors had, as A.J.P. Taylor once remarked, lorded it over a population of helot lecturers, even in the 1930s: Taylor's own reminiscence of Ernest Jacob, professor of medieval history in those years, qualifies that general statement. But the new university charter of 1973 brought a substantive change to academic life by substituting departmental boards, with chairmen and secretaries elected by all members of the department, for informal staff meetings called by the professors, who had hitherto done most of the administration. Intensely interested in the fine details of such work, Kenneth was an early choice for the position of *capitano del popolo* or chairman of the history board. Since this body was by the constitution only the adviser of the professors, and they could in theory have imposed a royal veto upon its resolutions, the position called for considerable diplomatic skills and a capacity for mediating between generations: between the older professors and the large body of youngish lecturers appointed in the 1960s and early 1970s. Kenneth did the job well, all the better, perhaps, for being an independent, unclassifiable man, neither Guelf nor Ghibelline, and not prone to ally himself with any particular faction or persuasion.

There were times when medieval and ancient history seemed threatened, for the department was troubled by an acute dilemma. Many schools were no longer teaching Latin, even to 'O' level, and it appeared that the department could no longer insist on its Latin entrance requirement, for this was frustrating the recruitment of good students at a time when the development of history at Manchester through the allocation of new posts depended heavily on the ability to attract large numbers. Yet the removal of the time-honoured qualification might well, or so some people feared, demote medieval history, on which the department's reputation had been built in the great days of Tout: for the cream of the student's experience in Manchester lay in the

special subject and the thesis, both of which relied on his or her capacity for reading sources in the original language. Kenneth behaved with characteristic realism and good sense, knowing that his branch of the discipline could survive by adapting to changed circumstances in the schools – though he was a stickler for languages himself, and never attracted great numbers into his own special subjects on Italian history. Their linguistic demands were quite severe, and it took him some time to agree to teach them from material in translation, though he came to this compromise in the end. No blind adherent to tradition, Kenneth was no great follower of new orthodoxies either. He disliked the assessed coursework on which some colleagues had set their hearts, out of a desire both to be fair to students with poor examination temperaments and to exact more work from the idle. To Kenneth an essay was a tentative statement that ought to be cheerfully torn to ribbons during a tutorial, with no hard feelings on either side, and not a finished product to be solemnly graded and stowed away in a filing cabinet to form part of a university examination. Believing that the things most vital to a historian were a sense of place and a sense of period, he had limited enthusiasm for courses designed to follow Lord Acton's advice to study problems, not periods – although, as his second book showed, he could equal most of his colleagues in the art of striding across the centuries and making trenchant comparisons on the way through.

Kenneth enjoyed becoming a professor and doing the jobs outside the university that senior status brought, including external examinerships at Liverpool and Edinburgh, service on the Faculty of Arts and Letters of the British School at Rome, and service on the council of the Royal Historical Society. He remained an iconoclast, however, and showed no sign of regarding either his new position or himself with undue reverence. A professor's chief function, he thought, was to act as a lightning conductor, bringing trouble down to earth. As he ruefully recalled, he had been appointed to the medieval chair on the day that Margaret Thatcher became prime minister. As public funding for universities contracted, as older colleagues took early retirement and their posts were left vacant, as university teachers became increasingly suspicious of the intentions of management, there was plenty of trouble to be contained. Believing passionately in the university and in the civilizing power of education, Kenneth was generously angry at the obtuseness which, as he saw it, threatened to undermine the finest university system in the world – and one of the greatest contributors to British prestige abroad – for the sake of petty savings. Like many of his colleagues he was disappointed at the seeming failure of senior university administrators to defend their inheritance more robustly, and thought they could have learned from the principle of putting subordinates' welfare first, instilled into army subalterns, himself among them, in the post-Montgomery era. He was sorry when reports on university management appeared to be emphasizing hierarchy

rather than collegiality, and doubted whether this accorded with the most enlightened and up-to-date management science. Always outspoken, he expressed these views in Senate, at length if need be ('I'm sure everybody's enjoying this, Professor Hyde, but *will* you put your motion?'). His protests gained added force from his obvious loyalty to the university, and from the fact that he had not been one of its more strident critics in the recent past.

Invincibly cheerful on public occasions, Kenneth laughed a great deal, and could be heard doing it from some distance away. A complex mixture of a chuckle, a gurgle and a guffaw, his mirth echoed down corridors, rang across the refectory, and penetrated the thin walls of the dull 1960s building that housed the history department. It proclaimed its owner's belief that universities, for all their earnestness and occasional pomposity, were really very funny places indeed, and it sometimes irritated persons of more lugubrious demeanour. But there was at times a gulf between this jolly, sociable exterior and Kenneth's inner feelings, which were not naturally confident or optimistic: he often suffered from the strain of putting on a brave public performance. In his late forties his life was touched by tragedy: the stroke which fell upon his wife Maura in 1977, and her death two years later, meant the end of a great happiness. At times the tension grew between the demands of his job and the claims of his family, for he had three beloved daughters, and bore a heavy responsibility for them. There were moments when his filing system, once so carefully organized, fell apart, and administrative deadlines were overshot. But he set his colleagues a magnificent example of stoicism and firmness of purpose, and they were glad to see him gradually rebuild his life as the years passed, especially after his meeting with Ann Norris. The important things, the relations with colleagues and pupils, were never neglected; he was often the first to realize that seemingly feckless and erratic students were actually in need of medical help.

In the late 1960s Kenneth had established and run for a few years a Medieval Italy Society that cut across departmental and university frontiers. It had closed down because he found no-one willing to succeed him in running it, but in 1986 he embarked once more on a similar enterprise. He was particularly anxious to promote co-operation in the study of the Middle Ages and Renaissance between practitioners of different disciplines – English, European languages and literature, social anthropology, history, geography, and so forth. He had a wide range of acquaintance himself, but knew all too well how a strong departmental structure could impede dialogue, and how the staff of museums and libraries could feel themselves excluded from the mainstream of academic discourse. Hence he talked untiringly to everyone he knew in the university who had interests in his period, and persuaded them to support an organization for holding conferences and seminars, whose primary purpose would be to enable colleagues, dispersed through different parts of the university's institutional

structure, to tell each other what they did. After his death this institution was adopted by the university and named the J.K. Hyde Centre for Late Medieval and Renaissance Studies. Several of its members have contributed to this volume.

Kenneth expected to live a long life, but it was not granted to him. On a December afternoon at the end of the strenuous autumn term of 1986, he was suddenly overcome by fatal illness during a meeting in the department he had served for twenty-five years. One of the last of his many acts of kindness and generosity, both with time and with money, had been to draft a trenchant letter, to be signed by all the professors of history, to the chancellor of another university which had treated a colleague cavalierly. Some students wept openly when his death was announced in lectures the following day. Kenneth would have been glad to know that Cecil Clough, Reader in Medieval History at Liverpool University, took on the last two students to enlist for his special subject and saw them through to their finals, and that they became engaged and got married to each other after leaving the university. He would certainly have enjoyed reading all the essays in this volume, which relate closely to the intellectual interests that helped to shape his life.

APPENDIX

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY OF J.K. HYDE

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