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Source: *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 1991, Vol. 1 (1991), pp. 151-172

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Royal Historical Society

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THE ENGLISH MONASTIC CATHEDRALS IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

By Barrie Dobson

READ 15 SEPTEMBER 1990

IT might well appear an excessively abrupt change of pace to turn from Professor Bossy's topic to my own—to move from the most personal of all manifestations of individual Christian worship to the most formidably complex institutional corporations late medieval England has to offer for our contemplation. However, there is little about medieval monasticism, that ambivalent exercise in seeking one's own route to the divine but not in one's own company, which is quite what it seems. For perhaps no audiences in fifteenth-century England would have listened to Professor Bossy's lecture with greater fascination than the monastic communities of Canterbury, Durham, Ely, Norwich, Rochester, Winchester, and Worcester cathedrals. Not only did those Benedictine monks have an obligation to pray as assiduously as any religious in the country but they were also and *ipso facto* required to do so in the most public and exposed of all possible arenas, the formal prayer houses *par excellence* as well as the *ecclesiae matrices* of seven of late medieval England's nineteen dioceses. Precisely how those monks would have explained what they were doing when engaged in acts of communal and private prayer is no easy matter for a modern historian to surmise; but it seems certain that many of them must have been highly concerned about the purpose and quality of their devotions, not least because they could hardly have ignored the priority placed on the *oratorium* and *oratio* within the Rule of St Benedict, to chapters of which they listened more or less attentively every day of their professed lives. Admittedly it may well be that St Benedict himself placed the performance of prayers to the Lord at the centre of his ideal monastery's spiritual life without always making it absolutely clear what types of contemplation he implied by such *orationes*.¹ Not that such ambiguity must in any case detract at all from the much more fundamental issue that it was as a manual for monastic meditation and prayer rather than, as is now often assumed, as a blueprint

¹ The apparent ambiguities here are discussed in *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. T. M. Fry (Minnesota, 1980), 412–14.

for the successful organisation of a monastery that the influence of the Rule tended to be most highly regarded in late medieval England.²

For the increasingly large number of historians who are currently inclined to interpret the achievements of fifteenth-century cathedral monasteries in terms of qualified success rather than of qualified failure, it is perhaps to the seventy-three chapters of St Benedict's Rule that they should first and most obviously turn. After all, no more enduringly influential model for the defence of a human community against internal and external pressures, no more satisfactory a written programme for whatever a communal collective strategy might happen to be, has altogether emerged in the last fifteen hundred years of European history. So obvious, if important, a truism deserves at least some slight preliminary emphasis if only because this lecture is unlikely to mention either prayer or the Rule of St Benedict again. There are indeed some obvious hazards involved in neglecting those aspects of the religious life which most self-respecting cathedral monks of the fifteenth century might have thought most essential to themselves and indeed to posterity. But then historians, especially perhaps historians of the medieval Christian life, are inured to the necessity of dealing with the inessentials. Moreover, the monastic cathedral communities of late medieval England have perhaps even greater claims on our attention than those provided by their prayers and their obedience to the Rule. 'Little as we know about the monks of Durham, we are better informed as to their recruitment, their education, their employment, their ambitions and their interests than those of any comparable group of men' of the fifteenth century.³ In the light of recent research among the records of the largest English monasteries, and in particular of Miss Barbara Harvey's recent exploration of monastic life at Westminster Abbey, that particular judgement no longer seems as secure in 1990 as it did in 1973. Nevertheless the case for a brief survey of pre-Reformation monastic cathedrals must rest most firmly on the fact that so extraordinarily much can be known

² B. Collett, 'The Civil Servant and Monastic Reform: Richard Fox's Translation of the Benedictine Rule for Women, 1517', *Monastic Studies: The Continuity of Tradition*, ed. J. Loades (Bangor, 1990), 211–28. As early as 1277 the statutes of the General Chapter of the English Black Monks in the province of Canterbury had required all novices to learn the Rule by heart: *Documents illustrating the activities of the General and Provincial Chapters of the English Black Monks, 1215–1540*, ed. W. A. Pantin (Camden Third Series, xlv, xlvii, liv, 1931–7), i, 73–4; cf. *ibid.*, i, 95, 111–12, 250; ii, 40, 70, 84. By the early fifteenth century English translations of the Rule were also readily accessible in monastic cathedral libraries: see, e.g., *Catalogi Veteres Librorum Ecclesiae Cathedralis Dunelm.*, ed. B. Botfield (Surtees Society, vii, 1838), 107.

³ R. B. Dobson, *Durham Priory, 1400–1450* (Cambridge, 1973), 51.

about how their brethren lived and 'consorted together', if so very much less about what they thought and what they believed.⁴

Although never subjected to the full-scale comparative analysis they deserve, the abundance of the surviving records and manuscripts of England's later medieval monastic cathedrals needs no particular urging. Accordingly it might well seem all the more unfortunate that for the last century so many formidably critical minds have devoted themselves to twelfth-century monastic charters and so few to the as yet mysterious administrative revolution which in the thirteenth century gradually brought forth the most sophisticated private archives known to medieval England. During the third quarter of the thirteenth century, probably—in secular cathedrals too—one of the most critical periods in a long evolution, it had clearly become common for monastic cathedral communities to compile and preserve (amidst much else) those two most valuable instruments in their documentary armoury—obedientary and other account rolls on the one hand and cartularies and registers (less happily perhaps termed letter-books by the late Mr W. A. Pantin) on the other.⁵ Monastic registers, still the most important source for the official activities of cathedral priories during the fifteenth century, were naturally not confined to the latter; and in fact more cartularies and registers survive from Bury St Edmunds than from any monastic cathedral chapter. Nevertheless, it might be argued that cathedral monks had a more urgent need for such registers than their counterparts in other Benedictine religious houses, sometimes to record their own exercise of diocesan jurisdiction *sede vacante*, and certainly to preserve authenticated copies of their confirmations of their bishop's more formal *acta* and his appointments to office.⁶ There are indeed some indications

⁴ Although E. H. Pearce's *The Monks of Westminster* (Notes and Documents relating to Westminster Abbey, no. 5, Cambridge, 1916) still remains the only systematic attempt to publish a complete biographical register of a major medieval English monastery, that omission is at last in course of being rectified by Dr Joan Greatrex, Mr Alan Piper and other scholars. Cf. R. B. Dobson, 'Recent Prosopographical Research in Late Medieval English History: University Graduates, Durham Monks, and York Canons', *Medieval Lives and the Historian: Studies in Medieval Prosopography* (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1986), 187–92.

⁵ R. A. L. Smith, *Collected Essays* (1947), 23–73. The first surviving obedientary account at the cathedral of Norwich is the *Camera Prioris* roll of 1265; and at Durham the earliest account is that of the bursar in 1278: H. W. Saunders, *An Introduction to the Obedientary and Manor Rolls of Norwich Cathedral Priory* (1930), 18–21; Dean and Chapter of Durham Muniments, Bursar 1278–9; Cf. (for a fragment of a Winchester receiver's account of as early as 1280–1) *The Register of the Common Seal of the Priory of St. Swithun, Winchester, 1345–1497*, ed. J. Greatrex (Hampshire Record Series, ii, 1979), 268.

⁶ *The Archives of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds*, ed. R. M. Thomson (Suffolk Records Society, xxi, 1980), 4–5; W. A. Pantin, 'English Monastic Letter-Books', *Historical Essays in honour of James Tait*, ed. J. G. Edwards, V. H. Galbraith, and E. F. Jacob

that on occasion it was the Benedictine cathedral monasteries which pioneered important thirteenth-century monastic administrative and archival developments, notably if predictably at Christ Church in the case of the southern province and at Durham in the province of York.⁷ By their very nature too, cathedral monasteries were always likely to produce more complex sequences of archives than most other religious houses. However, it was of course to the peaceful if somewhat haphazard transformation of England's eight major monastic cathedral communities into secular chapters between 1539 and 1542 that is due the survival of so many of these records. A much less happy archival as well as institutional fate was to befall those two unusual monastic 'semi-cathedrals', Bath and Coventry—to be excluded from consideration here as they were similarly excluded from discussion by Henry VIII in and after 1539. In the event neither Thomas Cromwell nor the king were at all responsive to Bishop Rowland Lee's eloquent plea for the 'continuance' of Coventry as a collegiate church 'for so much as it is my principal see and head church'.⁸

Despite such generally good fortune for the historian as well as for the last monks of every cathedral but Bath and Coventry, the present state of their archives still provides a classic object lesson in the selective vagaries of oblivion. The sources now available range from the chaotic abundance of Christ Church, Canterbury and the administrative wealth of Durham to the somewhat haphazard survivals at Worcester, the disappointments of Winchester and finally to a complete zero in the case of Henry I's unique foundation of a cathedral community of Augustinian canons at Carlisle.⁹ The state of preservation of these records is similarly variable to a degree: to unwind one of fifteenth-century Norwich cathedral's long sequences of obedientiary account

(Manchester, 1933), 201–22. Several monastic cathedral registers are in fact more informative about diocesan affairs than the external and internal concerns of the convent; see, e.g., Canterbury Cathedral Library, Registers F, R, G, Q (*Sede Vacante* Registers, 1292–1502); *Register of Common Seal*, *passim*.

⁷ A fully developed system of internal accounting is visible at Christ Church, Canterbury, by the early thirteenth century: see the *Assisa Scaccarii* rolls which survive there from as early as 1224. It was at a meeting of the Black Monk Chapter of the northern province at Durham in 1276 that Selby Abbey was instructed to introduce the then novel office of bursar 'to account for the receipts of that house': *Chapters of Black Monks*, i. 226, 238, 251; cf. R. A. L. Smith, 'The *Regimen Scaccarii* in English Monasteries', *Supra*, 4th ser. xxiv (1942), 73–94.

⁸ *Letters to Cromwell and Others on the Suppression of the Monasteries*, ed. G. H. Cook (1965), 229–30. The 20 Benedictines who served the cathedral church of Coventry eventually surrendered their convent to the Crown in the very same month (January 1539) as did the 13 monks of Bath cathedral priory: D. Knowles and R. N. Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses, England and Wales* (2nd edn, 1971), 59, 63.

⁹ R. B. Dobson, 'Cathedral Chapters and Cathedral Cities: York, Durham and Carlisle in the Fifteenth Century', *Northern History*, xix (1983), 24–5.

rolls is usually an unalloyed pleasure; but to try to do the same in the case of several Ely accounts of the same period (deposited in the Cambridge University Library since 1970) can sometimes involve the historian in seeing historical evidence vanish before his very eyes.¹⁰ In other words, no fully comparative history of the eight English monastic cathedrals will ever be an attainable ideal. However, if the archives of monastic cathedrals have descended to us in highly assorted shapes and sizes, so too have those cathedrals themselves. Although nothing can be said on this occasion about the insights into the monastic life provided by the architectural remains still standing within all eight cathedral precincts, it is worth stressing that the fifteenth-century historian often suffers from the particular misfortune that it is usually the monastic buildings adapted and constructed in the 150 years before the Dissolution which were most seriously at risk immediately thereafter.¹¹ Architectural historians have sometimes regretted that medieval England never produced a Perpendicular cathedral, with the problematic exception of Bath; but for the historian it may be a matter for even more regret that only in a minority of cathedrals can he or she still observe the authentic fifteenth-century monastic environment.¹²

Not only is the evidence for the history of late medieval England's cathedral monasteries riddled with disparities: so too were the status, role and welfare of those eight cathedrals themselves. How indeed could it have been otherwise? The grafting of seven Benedictine (and one Augustinian) cathedral communities onto the already highly idiosyncratic diocesan map of the late Anglo-Saxon and early Norman *ecclesia Anglicana* was essentially a historical accident, the product of *ad hoc* decisions made by Lanfranc and others at a time of unique 'synthesis and change' when the older monastic orders were lords of the ascendant and when the secular canons were much less evidently so.¹³ Not surprisingly, this Anglo-Norman experiment (only occasionally imitated elsewhere and then probably under English influence as at Coutances, Downpatrick and Palermo) created very uneven not to

¹⁰ D. Owen, *The Library and Muniments of Ely Cathedral* (Dean and Chapter of Ely, 1973). To the approximately 1,500 surviving medieval obediatory account rolls of Norwich cathedral priory the handlist available in the Norwich Record Office is a clearer guide than Saunders, *Rolls of Norwich*.

¹¹ For obvious reasons, chantry and other chapels, private chambers and the offices or 'checkers' of obediatories seem to have been especially vulnerable to destruction or alteration in the years after 1540: see, e.g., *The Rites of Durham*, ed. J. T. Fowler (Surtees Soc. cvii, 1903), 83-4, 99, 102-4, 283-4.

¹² A. Clifton-Taylor, *The Cathedrals of England* (1967), 195-6; J. Harvey, *The Perpendicular Style, 1330-1485* (1978), 215-33.

¹³ R. W. Southern, *Saint Anselm, A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge, 1990), 308-29; M. Chibnall, *Anglo-Norman England, 1066-1166* (Oxford, 1986), 41-3.

say erratic results.¹⁴ Accordingly in terms of size and influence, the eight English monastic cathedrals of the fifteenth century were not only *sui generis* but also fell most readily into three main categories already visible in the twelfth century. By any standards, pride of place must go to the two colossi, the communities of St Thomas at Canterbury and of St Cuthbert of Durham. Quite apart from being the homes of the most influential thaumaturges in fifteenth-century England, quite apart from being the only two Benedictine monasteries with the resources and the corporate pride to maintain their own university colleges at Oxford, these two houses were without much doubt the largest cathedral communities in the country. Leaving on one side the complexities of monastic demography during this period (a subject which, thanks to Dr John Hatcher, Miss Barbara Harvey and Dr Joan Greatrex, has been much elucidated in recent years), it can be safely said that between 1400 and 1500 the Christ Church community usually oscillated at a size of around eighty.¹⁵

The Canterbury monks accordingly comprised the largest monastic fellowship in England, whereas the cathedral priory of Durham held more steadily at a figure of about 70, of whom however over twenty were usually serving its daughter houses.¹⁶ No other monastic cathedral chapter had so many cells in its custody; and despite the legal and disciplinary problems often presented by these daughter houses in the fifteenth century, on balance they still probably did more to enhance than impair the prestige, influence and even the morale of the mother house.¹⁷ If not quite the size of Durham and Christ Church, the second group of English monastic cathedrals (Ely,

¹⁴D. Knowles, *The Monastic Order In England* (2nd edn., Cambridge, 1963), 619. The cathedral chapter at Coutances was in fact reorganised on a secular basis before the end of the eleventh century: see *Gallia Christiana*, ed. D. de Sainte Marthe (Paris, 1870–), xi, *Instrumenta*, 220; K. Edwards, *The English Secular Cathedrals in the Middle Ages* (2nd edn., Manchester, 1967), 8–17, 169.

¹⁵After an exceptionally severe demographic crisis in 1376, when only 46 Christ Church monks were present at Archbishop Simon Sudbury's visitation of that year, the extensive evidence suggests that the number of Canterbury Cathedral brethren never seems to have fallen below 70 during the course of the fifteenth century: see Canterbury Cathedral Library, Register G, fos. 229v, 235v–237, 285; D. Wilkins, *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae* (4 vols, London, 1737), iii, 110; E. F. Jacob, *Archbishop Henry Chichele* (1967), 20; R. A. L. Smith, *Canterbury Cathedral Priory, A Study in Monastic Administration* (Cambridge, 1943), 3–4.

¹⁶See, e.g., Dean and Chapter of Durham Muniments, 1.7. Pont., no. 17; Locellus XIII, no. 11; Register III, fos. 22–3, 213; *The Register of Thomas Langley, Bishop of Durham*, ed. R. L. Storey (Surtees Soc., 6 vols. 1956–70), i. 67–8; ii. 117–19.

¹⁷Dobson, *Durham Priory*, 297–341. However, these advantages, if such they were, were largely denied some of the other fifteenth-century monastic cathedrals, among whom only Norwich possessed as many as 5 daughter houses (all comparatively small) while Winchester held none at all (Knowles and Hadcock, 59, 61, 64–5, 72, 74, 80–1).

Norwich, Worcester and Winchester) were all impressively substantial religious communities by fifteenth-century standards: all four tended to house between thirty-five and fifty-five monks throughout the demographic vicissitudes of the century, the largest usually being Norwich and the smallest (somewhat surprisingly) Winchester.¹⁸ As few as thirty St Swithun's monks were recorded as present at the election of Bishop Peter Courtenay in December 1486.¹⁹

Finally, and much the smallest monastic cathedral chapters in fifteenth-century England, were the two communities of Rochester and Carlisle. Like their respective bishops, these two convents were the most financially insecure members of the upper echelons of the country's ecclesiastical hierarchy. Only now and then is it possible to be certain how many Rochester monks and Carlisle regular canons constituted those two cathedral chapters in the post-Black Death period; but it seems probable that there were usually considerably more than twenty of the former but only rarely many more than twenty of the latter.²⁰

Although highly impressionistic, these figures tend to reflect, predictably enough, the similarly very uneven comparative annual incomes of the monastic cathedrals in question. On the whole, and although the available evidence is usually uncomfortably indirect, it can be assumed that all eight chapters deliberately aimed at what Miss Harvey has called (in the case of Westminster Abbey) a numerical target. By the fifteenth century this target was less likely to be based on a traditional ideal complement of brethren than upon one related to the convent's estimate of its future yearly revenues in an age when new acquisitions of income-generating temporalities and spiritualities were no longer to be relied upon. In the words of the Durham monks in the late fourteenth century, only so many novices should be recruited into the community 'as its resources can support if they are well administered'.²¹ Like, to take an implausible analogy,

¹⁸ These provisional estimates will undoubtedly soon require refinement in the light of Dr Joan Greatrex's recent researches; but see, e.g., Cambridge University Library, Ely Cathedral Priory Muniments 5/3/1-2 (chamberlains' accounts), nos. 25, 26, 29, 33 (1404-46); 5/11 (feretrars' accounts), no. 3 (1423-4); Norfolk Record Office, DCN 1/5/95, nos. 94, 111 (chamberlains' accounts); Saunders, *Rolls of Norwich*, 160-2; Knowles and Hadcock, 64-5, 72, 81; J. C. Russell, 'The Clerical Population of Medieval England', *Traditio*, ii (1944), 189-90.

¹⁹ *Register of Common Seal*, p. 151; cf. pp. 24, 100-1.

²⁰ Russell, 'Clerical Population', 190; Dobson, 'Cathedral Chapters', 24-5; R. N. Swanson, 'Sede Vacante Administration in the Medieval Diocese of Carlisle; the Accounts of the Vacancy of December 1395 to March 1396', *Trans. of Cumberland and Westmorland Antiq. and Archaeol. Soc.*, xc (1990), 190.

²¹ *Visitations of the Diocese of Norwich, A.D. 1492-1532*, ed. A. Jessopp (Camden Society New Series, xliii, 1888), 73; *Litterae Cantuarienses*, ed. J. B. Sheppard (Rolls ser. lxxxv, 1887-9), i. 24; Knowles and Hadcock, 81; R. B. Dobson, 'Mynistres of Saynt Cuthbert':

university admissions offices in the 1980s, the cathedral chapters of the fifteenth century by no means always met their targets absolutely; but by and large numerical stability, more or less exact self-perpetuation indeed, seems to have been their deliberate aim. One rarely for instance encounters a fifteenth-century cathedral prior who was positively commended for increasing the size of his community, a far cry there from the heady expansionism of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Despite the late Dom David Knowles's occasional view to the contrary, it is in other words highly unlikely that the monastic cathedrals of this period 'were able to accept all who wished to come'.²²

Such considerations were self-evidently common to all the major monasteries of fifteenth-century England; and the point need hardly be laboured that in many other ways the Christian life led within the walls of the monastic cathedrals was not at all dissimilar to that conducted in the other great Benedictine abbeys of the country, several of which were quite as wealthy and quite as large. Heavily localised recruitment; entry into the fraternity through the gateway of the convent's almonry or grammar school; gradually increasing exposure to university education; an elaborate round of liturgical observance made ever more elaborate by the multiplication of communal and private masses; a fully developed so-called obediency system; the separation of powers (and revenues) between the monastic prelate and his flock; an increasing tendency for the superior to acquire supreme control in financial matters, often by taking monastic obediences into his own hands; the growing distinction between choir monks and those who held administrative office: all these, and many other, central features of fifteenth-century English religious life may sometimes be best exemplified in the monastic cathedrals but they are hardly unique to them.²³ So clearly is this the case that the question naturally arises whether members of monastic cathedral chapters normally thought of themselves as particularly different from, or superior to, their fellows in prestigious non-cathedral Benedictine communities. It is difficult to be positive; but at the least they would have had to concede that for the dignity of serving a cathedral they had to suffer the not insignificant indignity of being ruled by a prior rather than an abbot. In practice however it probably affected them very little that cathedral priors failed to receive an individual

the Monks of Durham in the Fifteenth Century (Durham Cathedral Lecture, 1972), 10–11.

²² D. Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England* (Cambridge, 1948–59), ii. 261.

²³ R. H. Snape, *English Monastic Finances in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1926), *passim*. For an extreme example of a cathedral prior (William Fressel of Rochester in 1511) simultaneously occupying the offices of treasurer, cellarer, chamberlain, almoner, precentor and infirmarian, see Smith, *Collected Essays*, 53.

writ of summons to the upper house of late medieval English parliaments but could be represented in the Commons instead.²⁴ Much more revealingly, the records of fifteenth-century Black Monk Chapters meeting every three years at Northampton leave an unmistakable impression that cathedral priors enjoyed no inherent prestige superior to that of, say, Abbot John Whethamstede of St Albans. Those records, and those of the Augustinian Chapters in the case of Carlisle, are the best evidence available that—except in the case of Christ Church, Canterbury—those priors and their proctors showed no signs of regarding themselves as *primi inter pares*: they were generally quite content to associate themselves with other Benedictine abbeys in the common purposes of their order.²⁵ It would no doubt be a mistake to assume that the brethren of any one fifteenth-century English monastic cathedral knew as much about their fellows within the seven others as we do; but they were at least likely, as in the case of Prior John Wessington of Durham when investigating episcopal installation practice within the southern province in 1439, to be aware of their location and—even more—of their privileges.²⁶ Few issues, to take only one example, ever provoked such rapid and alarmed response from the monks of Christ Church as the news that in 1355 the prior of Worcester had received papal licence to wear the mitre and other *pontificalia* denied to their own prior.²⁷

That the monastic cathedral chapters of fifteenth-century England, their corporate memories often still scarred by wounds inflicted in jurisdictional conflicts with their bishops not so long ago, were acutely sensitive to their comparative status need occasion no surprise. More problematic is their response to that more fundamental and perhaps unanswerable question, particularly applicable to themselves and never perhaps more cogently phrased than by St Jerome: ‘But what has a monk to do with cities, which are the homes not of solitaries but of crowds?’²⁸ What indeed? The remainder of this paper will attempt to consider, however briefly, that perennial question, first in terms of

²⁴ J. Enoch Powell and K. Wallis, *The House of Lords in the Middle Ages* (1968), 303–4, 499, 536, 553; Knowles, *Religious Orders*, ii. 299–306; R. N. Swanson, *Church and Society in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 1989), 109–10.

²⁵ *Chapters of Black Monks*, ii. 95–223; *Chapters of the Augustinian Canons*, ed. H. E. Salter (Oxford Historical Soc., lxxiv, 1920). The complete exemption of the monks of Christ Church, Canterbury, from the authority of the English Black Monk chapters had been confirmed by Urban VI in 1379: Canterbury Cathedral Library, Register G, fo. 213; Wilkins, *Concilia*, iii, 126.

²⁶ Dean and Chapter of Durham Muniments, Reg. Parv. ii, fos. 111–12; Dobson, *Durham Priory*, 229.

²⁷ *Lit. Cant.*, ii. 328–32; J. M. Wilson, *The Worcester Liber Albus* (1920), xiv.

²⁸ *Rule of St Benedict*, 1980, 313.

the contribution made by monastic cathedral chapters to the work of their bishops and to religious life in their dioceses, and secondly in terms of the impact of the monks' exposed situation upon their own life within their priory. One can be under no illusion that exactly the same results will emerge for each of the eight monastic cathedrals in question. Indeed in the case of communities as complex and well-documented as these it might well prove a mistake to hope for absolutely definitive or even dispassionate judgements at all. The time may well have come for historians to emulate the examples of recent archaeological, architectural and art historians in recognising that 'a great church is rather like a small universe, capable of absorbing any amount of study'.²⁹

Not that future research on English monastic cathedrals will ever be likely to remove the traditional judgement that these were institutions which suffered if not from original sin at least from a serious genetic flaw. Even for Dom David Knowles, in a paper he published nearly sixty years ago, 'the golden age of patriarchal rule in the cathedral priories was of short duration'.³⁰ Thanks, in other words, to Archbishop Lanfranc and his contemporaries, bishop and monastery had been joined together in a marriage within which proper conjugal relations were unattainable but from which divorce (although several archbishops of Canterbury before 1240 tried hard to achieve it) had proved impossible.³¹ To that particular problem no doubt the best, if not complete, solution would have been the elevation to the English episcopal bench of large numbers of monk bishops. However, between 1215 and the Dissolution, the only monastic cathedrals in England with a reasonable prospect of securing a monk or mendicant as their titular abbot were, predictably enough, the two poorest: eight bishops of Carlisle and seven bishops of Rochester were regulars in that period, only a minority of those being promoted from the ranks of the two cathedral communities themselves.³² By contrast, the sees of Canterbury and Winchester were very rarely held by a monk or friar again after the thirteenth century.³³

²⁹ R. Morris, *Cathedrals and Abbeys of England and Wales: The Building Church, 600–1540* (1979), 56.

³⁰ D. Knowles, 'The Cathedral Monasteries', *Downside Review*, li (1933), 88.

³¹ As late as 1228 Gregory IX had been prepared to discuss the archbishop's proposals to replace the Christ Church monks as the cathedral clergy of the see of Canterbury by secular canons: *Royal and other Letters illustrative of the Reign of Henry III*, ed. W. W. Shirley (Rolls ser. xxvii, 1862–8), i. 339; M. Gibbs and J. Lang, *Bishops and Reform, 1215–1272* (1934), 78–9.

³² John Le Neve, *Fasti Ecclesiae Anglicanae: 1066–1300*. ii (1971), 19–21, 76–8; 1300–1541, iv (1963), 37–40; 1300–1541, vi (1963), 97–9.

³³ Le Neve, *Fasti*, 1066–1300, ii. 6–8; 1300–1541, iv. 4–5, 45. Henry Woodlock (elected bishop of Winchester in 1305 when prior of St Swithun's) was the only

Against that all too familiar background, it is therefore all the more surprising to discover that there was a period, at the very end of the fifteenth century in fact, which witnessed a brief if limited revival of the English monk bishop, a possible portent of things that were not in the event to come. Quite how one should interpret the promotion of monks and canons like Richard Bell to Carlisle (1478), William Senhouse to Carlisle and Durham (1495 and 1502), Richard Redman to St Asaph (1472), Exeter (1495) and Ely (1501), and Henry Deane to Canterbury (1501) is not entirely clear. However, the elevation of these predominantly northern religious to predominantly northern sees seems hardly likely to be an altogether random phenomenon.³⁴ Perhaps indeed the emergence of these last of all medieval English monk bishops should be associated, however marginally, with one of the more intriguing currents of religious opinion in the pre-Lutheran age. As is well known, for several early Tudor bishops, like John Longland of Lincoln and perhaps even Cardinal Wolsey himself, the long awaited *reformatio regni Angliae*, if it was ever to come at all, might well be generated from within as well as without the monastic precinct walls of the English church.³⁵ For not altogether dissimilar reasons must Bishop Richard Fox of Winchester not only have translated the Rule of St Benedict into English for the edification of nuns but also contemplated the foundation of a substantial academic college or *studium* at Oxford for eight of his own cathedral monks.³⁶ By a final irony, it seems probable that in the early sixteenth century more in the way of spiritual example and spiritual leadership was being expected of cathedral monastic communities than had been expected of their predecessors for the previous two centuries and more.³⁷

member of the regular clergy ever to preside over the diocese of Winchester in the later middle ages. See H. Johnstone, 'Henry Woodlock of Winchester and his Register', *Church Quarterly Rev.* cxl (1945), 154–64.

³⁴ Richard of Gloucester's powerful influence undoubtedly helped to secure the promotion to high ecclesiastical office of Richard Redman and Richard Bell: C. Ross, *Richard III* (1981), 43, 156, 181; B. Dobson, 'Richard Bell, Prior of Durham (1464–78) and Bishop of Carlisle (1478–95)', *Trans. of Cumberland and Westmorland Antiq. and Archaeol. Soc.*, new ser. lxxv (1965), 207–11, 215.

³⁵ For Wolsey's decisive role in ensuring the completion of the English Augustinian canons' academic college of St Mary's at Oxford, see *Chapters of the Augustinian Canons*, 129–30, 134–5; E. Evans, 'St. Mary's College in Oxford for Austin canons', *Oxfordshire Arch. Soc. Reports*, no. 26 (1931), 369–89. Cf. M. Bowker, *The Henrician Reformation: the Diocese of Lincoln under John Longland, 1521–1547* (Cambridge, 1981), 17–28; *Humanism, Reform and the Reformation, The Career of Bishop John Fisher*, ed. B. Bradshaw and E. Duffy (Cambridge, 1989), 73–4.

³⁶ Collett, 'Fox's Translation of Benedictine Rule', 214–24; J. G. Milne, *The Early History of Corpus Christi College, Oxford* (Oxford, 1946), 2; C. Harper-Bill, *The Pre-Reformation Church in England, 1400–1530* (1989), 43.

³⁷ Cf. C. Harper-Bill, 'Dean Colet's Convocation Sermon and the Pre-Reformation Church in England', *History*, lxxiii (1988), 195–6.

Whatever the reasons for that change of attitude, at least there are good grounds for believing that during the course of the fifteenth century the delicate relationship between bishops and their monastic chapters had been gradually drained of its most divisive and poisonous effects. The marriage remained potentially uneasy no doubt; and in most cases, as the late Professor Hamilton Thompson always liked to observe, it was episcopal absence rather than presence which tended to make the monastic heart grow fonder.³⁸ Much, too, naturally depended on the personality and other preoccupations of the prelates in question; and on the copious evidence available one must never underestimate the likelihood of occasional explosions of irritability, that not entirely unknown episcopal characteristic in any period, on the part of pontiffs who were debarred by protocol and convention from having much significant influence within the church which housed their own *cathedra*.³⁹ More serious still for the bishop of a monastic cathedral was the lack of prebendal patronage at his disposal as compared with an archbishop of York or bishop of London: this was a deficiency tolerable no doubt in the case of Canterbury or Winchester but at times genuinely disabling as at Rochester, and especially at Carlisle.⁴⁰ However, most monastic cathedral chapters were obliging enough to make available at least some of their own ecclesiastical and other patronage to their bishop; and for that and other reasons it could be argued that during the fifteenth century relations between the bishop and his monks had more or less assimilated themselves to contemporary patterns of secular 'good lordship'. In the pathetic words of one anonymous poem, almost certainly written by a monk of St Swithun's, to Bishop William Waynfelete shortly after 1450, 'Off all oure lordys that nowe ben trustyde beste/My lorde of Wynchestre men seyn that hitt ys he'.⁴¹ However, if the characteristic stance of fifteenth-century prior and chapter towards their bishop was one of slightly nervous importunity, the latter for his part must have been only too aware that his cathedral community would provide him with those most precious of all blessings—the certain prospect of a permanent resting place in this world

³⁸ A. Hamilton Thompson, *The Cathedral Churches of England* (1925), 22–3, 165; *The English Clergy and their Organisation in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1947), 72–5.

³⁹ See, e.g., Dobson, *Durham Priory*, 227–9.

⁴⁰ At Rochester in the early sixteenth century it has been calculated that only 4% of the bishop's ecclesiastical patronage was derived from non-parochial sources: *Humanism, Reform and Reformation*, 72–3, 251–2. For the scarcity of episcopal clerical counsellors in the diocese of Carlisle, see Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, York, Reg. 18 (Henry Bowet, 1407–23), fos. 284–5.

⁴¹ E. Wilson, 'A Poem presented to William Waynfelete as Bishop of Winchester', *Middle English Studies presented to Norman Davis in honour of his seventieth birthday* (Oxford, 1983), 139. Cf. *Lit. Cant.*, iii. 274, 285, 287, 304, 333; Dobson, *Durham Priory*, 238.

as well as invaluable assistance (whether his chantry chapel was to be served by secular chaplains or the monks themselves) during his progress towards salvation in the next.⁴²

For these and other reasons the constitutional history of the fifteenth-century cathedral monastery usually emerges as a harmonious if fascinating exercise in the successful containment of once notorious occasions for conflict with the titular abbot. Of those occasions, formal episcopal visitation undoubtedly remained the most likely cause for danger, not least because of its tendency to exacerbate rather than diminish personal tension and faction within the cloister. All the more unfortunate therefore that episcopal visitation records of cathedral monasteries after 1400 are usually so much less informative than those recently studied by Dr Greatrex for the immediately preceding period.⁴³ However, there can be little doubt that during the course of the fifteenth century not only did episcopal visitations become less frequent but also, and somewhat ironically, they increasingly became an instrument for securing episcopal approval of initiatives the prior and *sanior pars capituli* wished to make anyway. Post-visitation episcopal injunctions of cathedral churches were, in any case, by then often compiled with the active assistance and full co-operation of the prior, a circumstance which emerges especially clearly in the case of Bishop Robert Neville's exceptionally well documented visitation of Prior John Wessington and the Durham monks in July 1442.⁴⁴ To that extent the bishop's visitations of his cathedral chapter, like the triennial visitations conducted in the fifteenth century by commissioners of the Black Monk Chapters, had often been deprived of much of their capacity to alarm and indeed to reform.⁴⁵ All in all, the visitation records of the late medieval cathedral monastery are more likely to be an accurate guide to its own administrative priorities and sense of propriety rather than, as is often assumed, to the real moral shortcomings of its inmates.

⁴² *Register of Common Seal*, 105–7, 113–14; G. L. Harriss, *Cardinal Beaufort, A Study of Lancastrian Ascendancy and Decline* (Oxford, 1988), 378–9; C. E. Woodruff and W. Danks, *Memorials of the Cathedral and Priory of Christ in Canterbury* (1912), 194–5.

⁴³ See, e.g., *Visitations of Norwich*, 7–8; *Kentish Visitations of Archbishop William Warham and his Deputies, 1511–12*, ed. K. L. Wood-Legh (Kent Records, xxiv, 1984), 1–6. Cf. J. Greatrex, 'Episcopal Relations with monastic chapters as reflected in 14th Century Visitation Records', *Sonderdruck aus Regulae Benedicti Studia, Annuario Internationale* 14/15 (1988), 309–22; B. Harbottle, 'Bishop Hatfield's Visitation of Durham Priory in 1354', *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 4th ser. xxxvi (1958), 81–100; C. R. Cheney, 'Norwich Cathedral Priory in the Fourteenth Century', *Bull. of John Rylands Library*, xx (1936), 105–17.

⁴⁴ Dean and Chapter of Durham Muniments, 2.7. Pont. nos 8, 9; Dobson, 'Mynistres of Saynt Cuthbert', 22–38; cf. *Ely Chapters and Visitation Records, 1241–1515*, ed. S. J. A. Evans, in *Camden Miscellany*, xvii (Camden 3rd ser. lxiv, 1940), pp. xiv–xvi, 52–67.

⁴⁵ *Chapters of Black Monks*, ii. 162; iii. 82–4; Dobson, *Durham Priory*, 247–8.

Nor is it altogether easy to know how seriously to regard that feature of the fifteenth-century monastic cathedral which would have appealed to Kafka most—the titular abbot's right to appoint monks to certain obediences within a monastery of which he was not in reality the effective *abbas*. In this sphere variation of custom between the eight cathedrals was extreme, to say the least. At Durham, for example, by the terms of the agreement or *Convenit* made long ago with Bishop Richard Poore in 1229, the prior and chapter of St Cuthbert were in practice more or less completely free from episcopal intervention in making such appointments. By contrast, at Worcester the reluctance of successive bishops to surrender their authority over the cathedral's sacrist to the prior engendered conflicts which lasted for more than two centuries and could lead to allegations of 'simony, disobedience, dilapidation' and even incontinence and fornication.⁴⁶ It would be readily agreed that bishops tended to enjoy, and monastic chapters tended to abhor, such appointments to obediences, above all as a demonstration of the titular abbot's otherwise usually remote personal authority over his most immediate flock. But was the prelate's right to select an important obedientiary anything more than a symbol of that authority? The answer to that peculiarly difficult question also varied from cathedral to cathedral and from bishop to bishop; but in almost all cases it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this was a custom certainly not worth the trouble it took to preserve. At its worst, as in the no doubt exceptional case of the last priors of Canterbury College, Oxford, who were appointed by the archbishop, the practice may positively have encouraged disobedience to the cathedral prior and chapter.⁴⁷ Fortunately for both parties the much more important issue of the selection of cathedral prior seems to have been remarkably uncontentious, controlled as it was by the meticulous if cumbersome processes of free canonical election in chapter: the bishop in his turn could be certain that the detailed results of such elections would be communicated to him, usually in notarial form, for inspection and approval.⁴⁸ On the other hand, record rarely survives of a prelate letting it be known in advance which prior he would most like to emerge from the capitular processes of scrutiny, compromise or the *via Spiritus Sancti*. But were fifteenth-century bishops in practice quite so scrupulous, or so indifferent, in the case of such an important

⁴⁶ Dean and Chapter of Durham Muniments, 1.4. Pont. no. 4; J. Greatrex, 'Monastic or Episcopal Obedience: the Problems of the Sacrists of Worcester', *Worcestershire Historical Society, Occasional Publications*, 3 (1980), 1–16.

⁴⁷ *Canterbury College, Oxford*, ed. W. A. Pantin (Oxford Historical Society, vi–viii, xxx; 1947–50, 1985), iii. 148–55; *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, xiii (i), no. 527.

⁴⁸ E.g., Canterbury Cathedral Library, Reg. S, fos. 231, 249, 251–4; Dobson, *Durham Priory*, 84–8.

appointment as they were bound to appear in public? One may sometimes doubt it; and in the admittedly special case of the *prefectio* of a prior of Christ Church, archbishops were almost always very careful to be present at Canterbury itself for a day or two before their 'scrutiny' of the election in the chapter house of the cathedral.⁴⁹

Throughout the fifteenth century a harmonious relationship between a bishop and his cathedral prior remained as critical to the welfare of the see as it had always been. For the former, his prior normally played a much more important role than that of personal deputy within the cathedral monastery. The two men can hardly not have known each other well; and the records relating to all eight monastic cathedrals and their dioceses are liberally adorned with references to personal encounters, to the mutual exchange of gifts and—by implication—to the discussion of difficult problems. From the time of Henry of Eastry onwards, the priors of Christ Church, Canterbury, present the best examples of the monastic superior as a sort of *éminence grise*.⁵⁰ However, the priors of Durham, to cite just another example, were often equally ready with advice to their bishop, sometimes inept as in their comments on how to contain the dangers presented by the Nevilles and Percys, sometimes astute as in their plans to protect the liberties of their church.⁵¹ In this connection it is worth stressing that the preservation of a cathedral church's inherited franchises usually mattered a good deal more to a residentiary prior and chapter than it did to their much more peripatetic bishop. Indeed the latter, by contrast, often valued his prior's services most highly when they were exercised on a wider stage than the cathedral monastery itself. Several fifteenth-century priors, like their predecessors in the fourteenth century, would have startled St Benedict by being very ready to serve as episcopal vicars general and commissaries: admittedly they most often did so at the beginning of a bishop's term of office and before he had found time to select his personal team of high-level diocesan administrators.⁵² The latter were themselves familiar figures in late medieval monastic cathedral churches, above all no doubt because so

⁴⁹ Stone's *Chronicle*, 21, 39, 46, 105–6, 116.

⁵⁰ Canterbury Cathedral Library, 'Eastry Correspondence'; *Lit. Cant.*, i. 221–43, iii. 70–2, 138–40; T. L. Hogan, 'The Memorandum Book of Henry of Eastry, Prior of Christ Church Canterbury' (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1966), i. *passim*.

⁵¹ A. J. Pollard, 'St Cuthbert and the Hog: Richard III and the County Palatine of Durham, 1471–85', in *Kings and Nobles in the Later Middle Ages: A Tribute to Charles Ross*, ed. R. A. Griffiths and J. Sherborne (Gloucester, 1986), 118–19; Dobson, 'Richard Bell', 205–6.

⁵² A. B. Emden, *A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to A.D. 1500* (3 vols, 1957–9), ii. 783; Jacob, *Henry Chichele*, 90; I. J. Churchill, *Canterbury Administration* (2 vols, 1933), ii. 5–6.

many of those cathedrals housed one, more or all of the episcopal courts. The meeting places of the Official's consistory courts in particular seem to have become increasingly fixed during the course of the fifteenth century. They were not always located within the cathedral church itself, being as far away as Cambridge in the case of the diocese of Ely; but they were usually held in a comparatively quiet part of the cathedral, as under the north-western tower of Canterbury and in the Galilee Chapel at Durham.⁵³

A more active, if unduly neglected, contribution of the cathedral monastic community as a whole to the spiritual welfare of its region concerned its participation in what Professor Roy Haines has recently called the 'penitential system at diocesan level'.⁵⁴ Senior brethren, and especially subpriors, within every one of the eight cathedral monasteries for which record survives were regularly commissioned by their bishop to act as penitentiaries; and there is indeed little doubt that within many late medieval cathedral cities these monks became the confessorial *corps d'élite*, with the natural exception of the bishops and suffragan bishops themselves. Once again, details of appointment and procedure varied from cathedral to cathedral; but in the not untypical case of Winchester the monk penitentiary was empowered to hear confession, to grant absolution and to impose penance not only on his fellow monks but also on all the other subjects of the bishop within the cathedral city and its diocese.⁵⁵ The effectiveness of this system of confession to diocesan penitentiaries, which remained intact to the Dissolution, more or less defies analysis; but it seems probable in this instance at least that monastic cathedrals had more assiduous confessors to offer the penitent than did their secular counterparts. More important still, nowhere else was the spiritual relationship between cathedral monk and members of lay society likely to be more literally close and personal.

Nevertheless it is tempting to suppose that it was as preachers rather than confessors that the cathedral monks of the fifteenth century exerted most influence outside their own community. The importance of trained preachers within a large abbey or cathedral priory of the fifteenth century was first made apparent in the late Mr W. A. Pantin's edition of material relating to the Chapters of the Black Monks; and what little work has been done on the subject since Pantin's death,

⁵³ D. M. Owen, *Ely Records: A Handlist of the Records of the Bishop and Archdeacon of Ely* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. vii–viii, 20–21; Woodruff and Danks, *Canterbury*, 274; *Rites of Durham*, 73, 252.

⁵⁴ R. M. Haines, *Ecclesia Anglicana: Studies in the English Church of the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto, 1989), 39–52.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 46; cf. *Register of Henry Chichele, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1414–1443*, ed. E. F. Jacob (Canterbury and York Soc., 1937–47), iv. 150–2, 241–2.

for instance by Dr Harvey in the case of Westminster Abbey, makes it clear that the issue remains an important one.⁵⁶ As Pantin himself appreciated, one of the primary purposes of the late medieval monastic *studia* at Oxford and Cambridge was in fact to train the most intellectually able university monks in the *ars predicandi*. From 1444 onwards it was in fact compulsory for all Black Monk scholars at Gloucester College to preach at least four times a year in both Latin and English so that their course of sermons might be properly accomplished when the time came 'for them to be recalled to their monasteries'.⁵⁷ However, although sermons by monks regularly punctuated the routines of late medieval Oxford and Cambridge and of the Black Monk Chapters at Northampton, for obvious reasons no Benedictine could normally hope to find a larger audience than within his own monastic cathedral. Readers of John Stone's chronicle and of other fifteenth-century Christ Church biographical notices will need no reminding of the large number of sermons delivered in Canterbury cathedral every year by a multiplicity of preachers, nor of the particular enthusiasm displayed towards any member of the community itself who developed into an especially '*egregius predicator*'.⁵⁸ More significantly still, some members of monastic cathedrals, like John Langdon of Canterbury and Robert Rypon of Durham, gained outstanding national oratorical reputations. As in the case of mendicant preachers, the sermons produced by cathedral monks might have the capacity to say the unexpected: why else would Thomas Cromwell himself have commissioned Brother William Sandwyche of Christ Church to preach at St Paul's Cross in July 1537?⁵⁹ But then, like the even more influential preaching of the friars, the sermons delivered by cathedral monks during the two or three generations before their sudden demise no doubt pointed in more than one direction. At this stage of research on the topic one can do little more than express the fairly safe conjecture that those directions were often more central to the Christian life in the later middle ages than is usually allowed.

A much more positive verdict seems possible, at least at first sight, in the case of the seriousness with which, as the fifteenth century

⁵⁶ W. A. Pantin, 'General and Provincial Chapters of the English Black Monks', *Supra*, 4th ser. x. (1927), 195–263; *Chapters of Black Monks*, iii. 400; B. Harvey, 'The Monks of Westminster and the University of Oxford', in *The Reign of Richard II*, ed. F. R. H. du Boulay and C. M. Barron (1971), 118–20.

⁵⁷ *Chapters of Black Monks*, ii. 214. For the university sermons regularly preached by the senior Black monk scholars at Oxford, see, e.g., Oxford University Archives, Reg. Eee, fos 362v, 366v, 392v.

⁵⁸ Stone's *Chronicle*, 24, 32–3, 188, 190, 193.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 137; *BRUO*, ii. 1094; G. R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1926), 28–32, 181–6, 249–51; A. B. Emden, *A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford, A.D. 1501 to 1540* (Oxford, 1974), 504.

progressed, all eight monastic cathedral communities committed themselves more and more intensively to the cause of university education. In many ways, as once again the late Mr W. A. Pantin was the first to appreciate, the progressive exposure of increasing numbers of monks and regular canons to academic study was the single most important new departure in the late medieval religious life. Although now a familiar enough theme, not least because the university monks of the fifteenth century lend themselves so well to biographical and prosopographical investigation, it continues to be difficult to evaluate: in many ways what Pantin diagnosed long ago as 'a new monastic movement' still remains remarkably obscure.⁶⁰ One complicating issue is naturally that Christian monastic attitudes to academic learning have themselves rarely been other than ambivalent. Such ambiguities lay not very far below the surface of late medieval monastic and cathedral chapters, with the result that their enthusiasm for university education often tended to vary and oscillate from century to century and even from decade to decade. But although the evolution of the '*moine universitaire*' is accordingly a highly complicated development, there is no doubt that cathedral monasteries played an important and, cumulatively speaking, perhaps a dominant role within that evolution. Because of their unique asset of controlling their own private monastic colleges at Oxford from the late fourteenth century onwards, the cathedral priories of Christ Church and Durham could hardly avoid becoming the homes of the largest conglomerations of university monks in the country. Although better documented than any other religious academic colleges within fifteenth-century England, at neither Canterbury nor Durham Colleges are the surviving administrative records at all complete. However, it seems certain that at least one in four of all Durham monks received some form of university education; and it would be surprising if future research did not eventually raise the comparative figure at Christ Church from the one in eight suggested by Pantin.⁶¹ More interesting still is Dr Greatrex's recent calculation that at least one in seven Norwich cathedral monks must at one time or another have been university scholars, a figure reasonably comparable with her own estimate of one in nine at Worcester.⁶² In the case of the other four monastic cathedrals the evidence from surviving obediitary accounts is much less com-

⁶⁰ *Chapters of Black Monks*, iii. p. ix.

⁶¹ *Some Durham College Rolls*, ed. H. E. D. Blakiston, in *Collectanea* iii (Oxford Historical Society, xxxii, 1896), 1-76; Dobson, *Durham Priory*, 351-3; *Canterbury College*, iv. 218-28.

⁶² J. Greatrex, 'Monk Students from Norwich Cathedral Priory at Oxford and Cambridge: their attendance record and their impact on their community, c. 1300-1530' (*E.H.R.*, forthcoming).

prehensive, but perhaps not sufficiently so as to invalidate the general impression that, more than nearly all English monasteries, the eight cathedral priories were the homes of a genuine academic élite—if not necessarily the only élite—within their fraternity.

Precisely what difference exposure to university study actually made to the eight English monastic cathedrals of the fifteenth century is a more problematic and indeed controversial matter. Certain practical consequences there obviously were. Academic learning must imply books, and more and more specialised books at that: it usually tends to imply increasingly comprehensive, well organised and catalogued libraries too. Admittedly, in this sphere as throughout this lecture, there always seem to be exceptions to break every rule. The monks of Rochester may have had to wait until a legacy from Archbishop Thomas Rotherham as late as 1500 before they finally acquired a separate library building or room; and it seems even more surprising that the community of Ely cathedral priory—according to Dr Dorothy Owen—never possessed a custom-built common library building as such at all.⁶³ Elsewhere however, with Christ Church and Durham as the best documented examples, there is little doubt that the fifteenth-century cathedral monasteries, influenced by Oxford college practice and vice-versa, were in the vanguard of the first great library boom in English history.⁶⁴ Admittedly nothing can be harder to prove than that those who enter a library actually read much within it; but at least the avid appetite of all eight monastic cathedral communities for imported printed books during the last twenty years of the fifteenth century suggests that the scholarly atmosphere there may have sometimes been permeated by currents of thought a little more impressive than the complete intellectual torpor and spiritual rusticity lamented by Dom David Knowles. Moreover, and as the *Rites of Durham* were so eloquently to remember, at least some of the resources of the cathedral libraries as well as the academic skills of the university-educated monks themselves were devoted to education within the cloister itself. In her Ford Lectures early last year Miss Harvey informed us that one of the last unresolved problems in the history of the medieval English religious orders is what monks actually did in the afternoons. Here again practice no doubt varied; but according to a chapter ordinance of 1448 what most of the younger monks

⁶³ W. H. Mackean, *Rochester Cathedral Library* (Rochester, 1953), 8; Owen, *Library and Muniments of Ely Cathedral*, 1–4.

⁶⁴ M. R. James, *The Ancient Libraries of Canterbury and Dover* (Cambridge, 1903), xxxv–lv; A. J. Piper, 'The libraries of the monks of Durham', in *Medieval Scribes, Manuscripts and Libraries: Essays presented to N. R. Ker*, ed. M. B. Parkes and A. G. Watson (1978), 213–49; J. Newman, 'Oxford Libraries before 1800', *Archaeological Journal*, cxxxv (1978), 248–50.

of Ely cathedral priory should have been doing between 1.30 and 3 o'clock precisely was receiving instruction in grammar and more advanced academic subjects.⁶⁵

Accordingly the many ecclesiastical historians who in future may wish to defend rather than to denigrate the achievements of the late medieval monastic cathedral communities will not be without the means to do so. However, it would be idle to pretend that such a defence will ever be completely straightforward, above all no doubt because it must now seem that those communities did so much less than one might expect to defend themselves. In retrospect, not only the monks of Ely and Rochester but of Christ Church and Durham too appear—the arguments are admittedly largely *ex silentio*—to have suffered from a failure of self-projection in the public arena. Despite the unascertainable effect of all their sermons, despite the crowds of pilgrims and tourists who visited their shrines every day, the cathedral priors and chapters can rarely be said to have advanced a particularly vigorous case for their own way of life, whether their critic was Wyclif, Henry V or Erasmus.⁶⁶ Such disinclination to articulate one's own religious values, which reached so undeniable and disturbing a climax in the case of nearly all England's monastic superiors in the 1530s, no doubt has profound and complicated roots. This excessively general lecture should end by mentioning three of them. In the first place, and to return to a theme with which this survey began, it is not hard to appreciate that a monastic community, even a monastic cathedral community, will often suffer from a chronic and inherent incapacity when faced with the need to justify its existence in public, to defend before a sceptical world what is defensible only as an indirect rather than direct apostolate. Nor will English university teachers of the twentieth century need reminding that most members of institutional corporations tend—ironically enough—to be too preoccupied with office, too immersed in the burdens of detailed administrative and other responsibility, to be the ideal defenders of the wider interests of their corporation as a whole. Miss Harvey has recently concluded that at late medieval Westminster Abbey approximately 60% of the community held a time-consuming obedience. In most of England's eight late fifteenth-century cathedral monasteries that proportion seems to have been considerably more; and in a list of the fifty-nine monks of England's greatest cathedral on the very eve of its

⁶⁵ Cambridge University Library, EDR, G2/3, fo. 28; cf. *Rites of Durham*, 48.

⁶⁶ No comprehensive investigation of saints' cults and shrines at fifteenth-century cathedrals has yet been attempted; but see R. C. Finucane's discussion of 'new shrines and old saints' in *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (1977), 191–202.

suppression, no less than forty are recorded as holders of administrative office.⁶⁷

Thirdly, finally, and perhaps most profoundly, both the strains of monastic administration and the effects of university education undoubtedly accelerated yet another development, a tendency towards what might be termed, for lack of a better phrase, enhanced individualism within the monastic and cathedral cloister. To use another word which may run the risk of being about to go out of fashion, the increasing 'privatisation' of the individual monk's personal religious life is obviously not easy to demonstrate; but the increasing privatisation of his economic position and of his environment is very easy to demonstrate indeed. By the early sixteenth century, private chambers and private offices (a particularly well-attested set at Ely, for example) were showing signs of becoming as important to senior cathedral monks as they are to us.⁶⁸ Or again, G. H. Rooke's short study of 'Dom William Ingram and His Account Book, 1504-1533' leaves no doubt at all of the way in which a Christ Church, Canterbury, obediitary could readily establish what amounted to his own miniature household economy within the most elaborate estates and management structure in the country.⁶⁹

Here and elsewhere in the intricate world of the fifteenth-century cathedral priory are we not at times likely to be observing an instance of somewhat paradoxical cause and effect? The larger and more publicly exposed the religious community, namely a cathedral monastery, the more possible perhaps it was for at least some of its inmates to retreat into metaphorical or real private fastnesses. Is the late medieval history of the major English religious houses, and of the eight monastic cathedrals above all, primarily an exercise in the gradual transformation of a unitary house of God into a divine mansion of many chambers? If so, one might also be tempted, although not all would, to judge this development as a source of greater strength rather than (necessarily) of weakness. Perhaps the last words on this issue might most appropriately go to a twentieth-century English churchman, now perhaps best remembered as the primary model for Paul Jago, the defeated candidate in C. P. Snow's *The Masters*, but also a celebrated canon who served one particular English cathedral chapter for several, not entirely happy, years. 'Ely Cathedral',

⁶⁷ *Canterbury College*, iii, 151-4; cf. *Compotus Rolls of the Obedientiaries of St Swithun's Priory, Winchester*, ed. G. W. Kitchin (Hampshire Record Society, vii, 1892), *passim*; Dobson, *Durham Priory*, 66-9.

⁶⁸ *The Monastic Setting of Ely*, ed. R. Holmes and G. Youell (Ely, 1974), 42-7; R. Gilyard-Beer, *Abbeys* (HMSO, 1958), 48.

⁶⁹ G. H. Rooke, 'Dom William Ingram and his Account-book, 1504-1533', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vii (1956), 30-44.

exclaimed Canon Charles Raven at a moment of more than usual exasperation, 'Ely Cathedral is a great white elephant which feeds on the souls of men'.⁷⁰ Those in this audience who have spent part or all of their careers serving corporations may not be entirely irresponsible to such a *cri de coeur*. In the fifteenth century too, such dangers certainly existed; but to the credit of the English monastic cathedrals of the later middle ages it now seems more likely than not that they provided their brethren with greater opportunities for influence, material welfare and even individual fulfilment than has ever been properly allowed since their unique position within the medieval English church was brought to so arbitrary and unanticipated an end.

⁷⁰ F. W. Dillistone, *Charles Raven, Naturalist, Historian, Theologian* (1975), 189. I am most grateful to Dr David Smith, Dr Joan Greatex and Miss Barbara Harvey for their comments on the original version of this lecture.