

Obituary

PROFESSOR R.H.C. DAVIS

Ralph Davis died suddenly on 12 March 1991 at the age of seventy-two. Other obituaries will describe his outstanding intellectual and personal qualities as historian, teacher and professor, but it is appropriate that *Oxoniensia* should record his contribution to topography, archaeology and the history of Oxford.

Ralph was an Oxford historian born and bred. (One could tell it by the confidence with which he rode his bicycle around North Oxford, or the ease with which he handled his rowing-boat on the reach between Appleton and Newbridge.) His father H.W.C. Davis, successively tutorial fellow of Balliol and Regius Professor of Modern History, began in 1904 the series *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum* which Ralph was to complete in 1968 with his own most important work, the volume containing the charters of Stephen and Matilda. In childhood he frequently visited Bampton, and an early-developed interest in the churches of west Oxfordshire and the Cotswolds produced at the age of nineteen an article on local masons' marks. Slight though it is, this first publication foreshadows his genius for extracting new insights from prosaic sources, and its contention that 'every great church had its own "hinterland" of "home-made" churches (without masons' marks) which mimicked the marvel of the neighbourhood' still remains strangely unexplored. After war-time service in the Friends' Ambulance Corps he graduated from Balliol in 1947, submitting as an optional thesis a classification of Perpendicular architecture in Oxford which was published that year in *Oxoniensia*. Eight years as a lecturer in London were followed by a tutorial fellowship at Merton, which he held from 1956 until his appointment to the Birmingham chair of medieval history in 1970.

As a historian Ralph will be most remembered for his work on the reign of King Stephen, but his interests in general and in local history often met. Oxford was prominent in the events of the 1140s, and some of the main sources for its development during the century after the Norman Conquest were published by Ralph in *Regesta*. Two of them elucidate the background to the first use of Oxford's municipal seal, as he showed in an article (*Oxoniensia* 1968) which illustrates his skill at teasing an important and exciting story out of a meagre handful of charters. A sense of place adds zest to the *tour de force* of historical detective-work in which he identifies the author of the *Gesta Stephani* as Robert bishop of Bath: like Ralph, Bishop Robert had an eye for buildings in the landscape. He was a strong supporter of the early work of the Oxford Archaeological Excavation Committee, and took an especially keen interest in its work on the Merton and Corpus sections of the city wall.

Much of his life was spent near the Thames, and he was fascinated by what he recently described as 'the never-ending struggle involved in the attempt to make the river behave in the way desired by man' (*Oxoniensia* 1988). One of his last publications (*The Merton Record*, October 1990) was a review of Prince Naruhito's book *The Thames as Highway*. His article 'The Ford, the River and the City' (*Oxoniensia* 1973) was a landmark

in the search for the origins of Oxford. It re-affirmed the view, now vindicated by excavation, that the original 'oxen-ford' lay near Folly Bridge on the southwards route from the town. More radically, it proposed a direct relationship between mill-weirs on the upper Thames, the prosperity of Oxford and the growth of the University: in the 11th century weirs proliferated, navigation improved and Oxford grew, but 'when there were so many weirs that the river ceased to be navigable [the town's] fortunes declined, the merchants moved out, and the scholars were able to take almost the whole place for themselves'. But he remained as undogmatic about mill-weirs as about larger historical problems, and participated in a lively debate on the subject at a conference on the Thames Highway held at Oxford in 1990. His interest extended to the Oxford Canal, on which he spent several summer holidays on a narrow-boat called the *Dayspring*.

Architecture and archaeology remained life-long interests. Ralph had a strong sense of the importance of grass-roots evidence, and insisted on the need to construct theories, whether broad or narrow, from the bottom upwards. A tireless protagonist for history in the community at large, he valued the accessibility of local studies. He belonged to that Oxford tradition which has been so important in promoting the integration of national history with local history, and of both with archaeology above and below ground. As he wrote in 1971, in a penetrating comparison of the *Victoria County Histories* with the work of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, 'any good study of local history cannot fail to discuss the monuments, and any good discussion of the monuments must also be historical'.

In 1984 Ralph and his wife Eleanor returned to Oxford. His retirement, during which he held an Emeritus Fellowship at Merton, was remarkably active. He continued to write (notably a delightful and original book on *The Medieval Warhorse*), to teach, and to participate in voluntary organisations. He appeared regularly at the meetings of the Oxford Antiquaries, and a few months before his death he became a founder-member of the Oxfordshire Archaeological Advisory Board. Everyone who knew him in retirement will remember his openness of mind, his spontaneous enthusiasm, and his utter lack of pretension. A most generous and hospitable supporter of pupils and younger colleagues, he treated the views of those far less experienced than himself with a respect which showed an extraordinary personal humility. I have two particularly vivid memories from the last year of his life. The first is of Ralph lecturing on a medieval author whom he had studied for many years, and assuring his undergraduate audience that if only they read the text carefully enough their ideas about it would be just as good as his own. The second is of a walk along the Thames near Appleton, with Ralph providing a running commentary, as entertaining as it was informative, on the earthworks, the bridges, the boat-houses, the trees and the livestock. All his Oxford friends will miss his cheerful, encouraging presence.

JOHN BLAIR