

Preliminaries

Article

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READING MEDIEVAL STUDIES

Volume XLI



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READING MEDIEVAL STUDIES

Volume XLI

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GRADUATE CENTRE FOR MEDIEVAL STUDIES

Celebrating Fifty Years of the GCMS

It gives me great pleasure to contribute this very short introduction to our commemorative volume, celebrating the half-centenary of the GCMS. The Centre's history is discussed separately, and is something of which we are very proud. It is equally pleasing to be able to say that all of the articles in this special edition have been contributed by friends, members and alumni of the GCMS, something which strengthens still further the connection between the ongoing celebrations and this special edition of *Reading Medieval Studies*.

Françoise Le Saux, whose piece on the GCMS itself opens the volume, has been a key member of the Centre since her arrival at Reading. Françoise's expertise as Director from 2001 to 2004, and Editor of *Reading Medieval Studies* from 1997 to 2008 make her ideally suited to provide the keynote for this edition. However, we can boast contributions from more than one previous Director of the Centre, since Philippa Hardman held the position from 1995 to 1998. Marianne Ailes is another long-term friend and member of the GCMS, who has worked with Philippa Hardman on their major, AHRC-funded project on 'Charlemagne in England' as well as having been a contributor to Summer Symposia and to Research Seminars. Newer recruits to the GCMS are also an important part of our community, and it is very satisfying that we have a paper by Anne Bailey, one of our recently appointed Visiting Fellows.

The network of friends built by the GCMS is extensive, and is well represented here by Dave Postles, who was guest editor for the special edition of *Reading Medieval Studies* in 2014, and by Irène Fabry-Tehranchi, who was a colleague at Reading for several years before leaving to join the staff of the British Library. Finally, perhaps furthest away but most central to this volume, is Carolina Escobar-Vargas, who achieves the distinction of being an alumna of the GCMS, a contributor to both this volume and the commemorative Symposium, and the Editor of *Reading Medieval Studies*. Celebrating the first fifty years of

the GCMS has made for a wonderful and fascinating year; and we hope that readers enjoy this volume as much as we enjoyed the commemorations which it exemplifies.

Dr Anne Lawrence-Mathers.
GCMS Director

The Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies celebrates its 50th birthday

‘Keep it small, keep it good’. Such was the advice of the then vice-chancellor of the University of Reading, the distinguished medievalist Sir Frank Stenton, when discussing the prospects for the newly-founded Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies.¹ Professor Frederick Pickering, the distinguished Germanist who first put forward his proposal for a ‘School of Postgraduate Medieval Studies and Research’ to the members of a Senate Working Party in December 1963, had an altogether more ambitious vision, comprising specially-appointed Centre staff and a Chair of Medieval Studies. In 1965, as nowadays, resource implications weighed heavily in the final decision; but Sir Frank’s emphasis on high quality in research provided a model which has allowed the GCMS to thrive. Another very positive outcome is that the GCMS is a close-knit community of like-minded individuals, whose shared commitment to medieval studies nurtures a culture of excellence that has placed Reading on the map of medieval scholars worldwide for the past half century.

When I was appointed to a lectureship in Reading in February of 1996, the GCMS was celebrating its 30th anniversary – the first intake of students had been in the academic year 1965-1966. The structure of the Centre had not changed much, a testimony to the thought put into the setting up of the GCMS by Professor Pickering. A Director, elected by the members of the Centre for a period of three years, was assisted by an Academic Secretary, also elected for three years, and drawn on a rotating basis from the different contributing Departments. All medievalists across the University were (and still are) members of the Centre, contributing to its activities as appropriate, including the teaching of the MA programme. The teaching component of the activities of the Centre gave a common, practical purpose to scholars working on many different aspects of the Middle Ages across Faculties as well as Departments. The interdisciplinary nature of the MA in Medieval Studies was a characteristic of the GCMS from its inception, ensuring rigorous training in the full range of specialised research skills

needed by the medievalist and their application in two very different Options. A stimulating annual programme of talks by invited lecturers kept members of the Centre abreast of recent developments and supplemented local areas of expertise (the absence of a Theology department in Reading making this a particular necessity). The most striking characteristic of the GCMS in the late 1990s was the commitment of its alumni to the Centre. The yearly Summer Symposium, the study trips, most of the lectures were attended by a richly varied audience, many of whom were not academics in the traditional sense, and who carried the reputation of the GCMS into many fields. The GCMS was also very much embedded in the local community, benefiting from and feeding into enthusiasm for the history of Berkshire or Oxfordshire villages and churches. Mature and part-time students were, and still are, one of the strengths of the GCMS, alongside young scholars often coming from far afield to train in their chosen field of research.

The Centre has also been markedly successful in adapting to changing conditions. The current one-year MRes (full-time) was thus a two-year programme in 1965, and proficiency in Latin and at least one medieval vernacular was a realistic expectation. The response of the GCMS to the growing need to teach these fundamental research skills has been highly successful; the intensive *ab initio* Medieval Latin course, integrated with teaching of palaeography, is among the most effective in the Higher Education sector. The past two decades have also seen successive waves of administrative restructuring at University level, resulting in corresponding adjustments within the GCMS. The Centre is no longer an independent unit answerable directly to the vice-chancellor. However, the commitment of its members to interdisciplinary cross-fertilisation in their own research and in the training of a new generation of researchers remains as strong as ever. Collaborative research projects, postgraduate conferences, publications and outreach activities bear witness to the continued vibrancy of the legacy of Professor Pickering and his successors. The spirit of 1965 lives on: long may it be so!

Professor Françoise Le Saux
Professor of Medieval Languages and Literatures
Former GCMS Director

Notes

¹ See J.C. Holt, *The University of Reading: the first fifty years* (Reading, Reading University Press, 1977), p. 124n.