Obituary

Geoffrey Haward Martin, an ‘Essex man’ of distinction, read History at Merton College, Oxford, and produced a history of medieval Ipswich before he came to Leicester in 1952 as lecturer in Economic History. Once here, he threw himself into the life of the community, joining the Leicester Archaeological and Historical Society and holding the office of Honorary Librarian between 1953 and 1964. As the historian of the Society has recorded, ‘Geoffrey Martin overhauled the library, improved storage, and made alterations to make books more accessible, but did not hesitate to sell books that were not needed.’ He was a true scholar, concentrating on the publication of works vital for the historian such as medieval chronicles, charters, and various other county records. At the same time that his academic career took off – he was appointed to a Readership and then to a Chair of History – he filled a number of important posts within the University. He was elected Public Orator, for one term the Head of the History Department, and eventually, the senior elected member of the University, the pro-Vice-Chancellor.

Notwithstanding all his publications and research Geoffrey was a brilliant teacher and his pupils always regarded him with enthusiasm. As a lecturer he exhibited all the traits and mannerisms against which young teachers are normally warned. He was continuously on the move in a little square dance; he polished and re-polished his glasses; he rubbed the toes of his shoes against the back of his trouser legs. And yet he was a fascinating lecturer, and I for one will never forget a lecture he delivered to the Leicester Students’ History society, on a subject far removed from either municipal or medieval history, the history of the Yukon gold-rush, lavishly illustrated with slides and fascinating his attentive audience.

Like most academics of his generation Geoffrey built up a wide and varied personal library, which eventually presented him with problems. He and his wife Janet moved into a Victorian house in Leicester and fitted up his collection on the first floor, only to find that they had to move it hastily to the ground floor as the weight of the books was causing serious distortion and subsidence!

In 1982 he was headhunted to become Keeper of the Public Records and he left Leicester for London. There were problems at that time about the reputation of the PRO, and Geoffrey faced the need to promote the PRO’s reputation with both the academic world and the general public. His prime achievement was the exhibition he organised in 1986 to mark the 900 anniversary of Domesday Book; this gained him considerable acclaim. He was active on the international archive scene but was equally content with some of the more unusual chores associated with the Office. One of these was linked with an exhibition in connection with the anniversary of the 1783 Peace of Versailles, recognising the independence of the United States of America. The Americans wanted to put the official text of the Treaty on display but, as it was a public document of record, it could not leave the custody of the Office or its responsible officer. In consequence the Keeper of the Public Records had to take the document himself to America, flying there first class with the signed Treaty safely encased and hand-cuffed to him on the seat beside him. A tough job, but someone had to do it.

He retired from the Keepership at the age of sixty and was appointed to a research chair at the University of Essex where he again combined his enthusiasm for teaching with a remarkable and eclectic output of publications. Medieval chroniclers, modern historians, predecessors as Keeper of the Public Records – all were duly covered for the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Retiring to the Lake District he made himself as much at home there as he had been elsewhere, becoming President of the Cumberland and Westmoreland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society.

Geoffrey represented the academic historian at its best. Scholar, teacher, administrator, he enriched all he touched and in a wide range of activities he placed the world of scholarship very much in his debt.

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