SIR FRANK STENTON, 1880-1967

President of the Berkshire Archaeological Society 1947-60

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FRANK Merry Stenton was born at Upper Norwood on 17 May 1880. His father was head of the firm of Stenton and Metcalfe, solicitors, of Southwell; his mother, his father's second wife, was the daughter of Thomas Merry of Honily, Warwickshire. Frank, their only child, was born with a club foot, fortunately operated on before he was a year old, but he suffered all his life from a muscular weakness in his left leg; and during childhood he was troubled by a weak chest that for many years necessitated tuition at home. His father's death, when Frank was seven, gave him a premature sense of responsibility, although his mother, a lady of sterling character, both kept the home near Southwell happily running and encouraged the interests of her son, interests that included geology, numismatics and music. During his adolescence he attended, on fine days, Southwell Grammar School, from which he won the Barrow Scholarship in the Natural Sciences to Cambridge. However, his interests were turning more towards music at which he was showing considerable promise as a composer and a pianist, and as a friend of the family was a lecturer in agriculture at Reading Extension College it was decided that Frank should join him there to be coached in music and other subjects before trying for an Oxford scholarship. Frank had always had an interest in history, and the skill in numismatics that he had by this time attained impelled him further in that direction. But what turned the potential scientist or musician into a historian was the influence of William McBride Childs, at that time head of the History Department and Vice Principal of the Extension College. Frank visited him soon after his arrival and so for the first time discussed history with a historian. Childs perceived his potentiality in that discipline, and persuaded him and his mother that he should try for a scholarship to Oxford in history. In 1899 he entered Keble College as a scholar, and in 1902 he graduated with First Class Honours in History.

The present-day organization for post-graduate research was entirely absent in 1902, and Oxford historians who wished to continue with the subject had, in the absence of a college fellowship, to raise a modest income by coaching while picking up the techniques of research by self-help and by personal approaches to the masters of the profession. Such a system put a premium on character and intelligence, and whatever its faults it produced men and historians of high quality. Marked competence in the techniques needed for investigation into medieval history and the publication of articles in learned journals gave Stenton the reputation of a young historian of promise, and he came to the notice of John Horace Round. Round was mighty among a generation of mighty historians, renowned for his irascibility and his demands for perfection, and was at that time a major figure in the recently-started project for the Victoria County Histories. But he had sufficient confidence in his new recruit to arrange that Stenton should undertake the Domesday sections for Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, and these were followed by other midland counties. But the financial uncertainties of this way of life persuaded him to accept a post as history master at Llandovery College in November 1904, where he remained for nearly four years, teaching history, writing his biography of William the Conqueror and gaining

through his cycling a reputation for powers of endurance. This cycling had really started when Stenton was at Reading and was to continue until after the first world war, for the great increase in mobility afforded by the new safety bicycle with its pneumatic tyres gave greatly extended scope to the young historian with a feeling for the countryside and its contents.

He had during these years maintained contact with his friends in Reading and his historical reputation was growing, but life at Llandovery left him on the fringe of the world of the professional historian. So an offer in 1908 from Reading University College of an appointment, at a very modest stipend, as Research Fellow in Local History was, despite its temporary nature, gladly accepted. Before the Fellowship came to an end in 1911 he had published a monograph on 'The Place-Names of Berkshire' and had done much of the work for another, 'The Early History of Abingdon Abbey', published in 1913. Financial assistance towards setting up the Fellowship and the cost of publishing the 'Place-Names' was given by Charles Keyser of Aldermaston Court, who had a great interest in local ecclesiastical antiquities and was at that time President of the Berkshire Archaeological Society. On the ending of the Fellowship Stenton was appointed to a lectureship in the History Department: one of the conditions of his employment was that he should conduct evening classes, an activity he continued long after any contractual obligation had lapsed. In 1912 Childs, by now both Professor of History and Principal of the University College, relinquished the former post to concentrate on the latter, and the newly-created Professorship of Modern History was applied for and won by Stenton. Professor of Modern History in first the University College, then the University, of Reading he remained until his retirement in 1946, refusing all offers of appointments elsewhere that his great and ever-growing reputation invited.

The challenges that faced him at the outset of his professorial career were three-fold: to create a department of standing in the university world, to aid in the development of what was still a fledgling institution, and to establish his place among professional historians. To accomplish these he brought personal qualities of a high order: a first-rate intelligence, an almost photographic memory, unfailing lucidity in speech and writing, and a marked capacity for committee work. Behind all these lay that indefinable quality known as personality, which combined with his innate good manners and quiet sense of humour to lead but never dominate. He set himself high standards and expected, indeed assumed, that others would have the same. But his outstanding characteristic was his ability not merely to appreciate other points of view but almost to see things from the point of view of the other party, and he could make people, even students and historians far his junior, feel that their views, jejeune and facile as they must often have been, were important. How well he met the challenges is shown in the outcome. For his department to cover a spread of history equal to that available in larger institutions both he and his small staff had to sustain a heavy burden of teaching over wide areas, a situation that continued for his whole career as professor. But the academic standing of his department contributed to the promotion in 1926 of the University College to full university status, for academic standards were among the reasons for this elevation. The obtaining of University status was the outcome of long years of work and negotiation by the Principal and the senior members of the University College, and one as skilful at committee work as Professor Stenton had a large share in producing the successful outcome. In 1934 he became Deputy Vice-Chancellor, a position that added major university duties to those he had as head of department, and which ultimately, with the illness of the Vice-Chancellor, became very heavy. But despite these calls on his time his output of published work was remarkable both in quantity and quality, and his status as a historian was recognized in 1926 when he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy. In

turn, his historical eminence and excellence as a lecturer and organizer led to ever-increasing demands from the historical world. That he managed to sustain all these burdens for so many years was due to a most happy marriage to a former student of his, Miss Doris Parsons. Mrs. Stenton, a lecturer in her husband's department, relieved him of all domestic responsibilities and many routine historical. She became a historian of national standing in her own right, and together they became known to the historical world simply as The Stentons.

These years had been extremely busy, but by 1946 the mortal illness of the Vice-Chancellor had necessitated Professor Stenton's taking over those duties virtually full-time, and in that year he was appointed Vice-Chancellor of the University of Reading. These four years until his retirement in 1950 were the busiest of his life for in addition to the internal affairs of the University he still had the many calls on his time that followed from his national, and, indeed, international, reputation as a historian, and he had the further obligations of representing the University in the outside world. Two events of these years were of special note: the one, in recognition of his services as President of the Royal Historical Society during the war years, was his knighthood, which gave enormous personal pleasure to all who knew him; the other was the purchase on his initiative by the University of the freehold of Whiteknights Park. This latter was of major importance in that it gave vital space for the expansion of the University, and it was fair recognition of his part in the purchase that in 1954 he ceremonially cut the first turf to mark the start of building operations there. His retirement from the Vice-Chancellorship was, far from a retirement from active life, but a return to his historical interests. He served on many committees, including the Editorial Committee of the History of Parliament, of which he was chairman; Whitley Park Farm, his home, saw a stream of visiting historians; and he turned to a youthful pursuit that he had never abandoned, numismatics, to such good effect that he was accepted as an expert by experts. Through these years his splendid powers remained virtually unimpaired, and it was only in his latest years that physical ill-health forced him to abandon many of his activities.

It was in 1947, when he already had vast demands on his time, that he was invited to become President of the Berkshire Archaeological Society and accepted the invitation. The first two Presidents, Sir John Conroy (1875–1889) and Sir George Russell (1890–1901), had taken no great part in the Society's affairs. Their successor was Charles Keyser who held the Presidency until 1929. His great interest was in ecclesiastical antiquities, mainly as shown in local churches, and it was on this subject that he many times addressed the Society, the outcome being papers scattered through the volumes of the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Archaeological, and many other, Journals. He was followed on his death by the Rev. P. H. Ditchfield, rector of Barkham, Hon. Secretary of the Society since 1890 and a prolific writer of good popular local history. He lived but one year, and from then until 1947 there were four successive Presidents—Rev. Dr. B. H. B. Attlee (1931–5), Very Rev. Dr. W. R. Inge (1935–7), A. T. Loyd, Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire, who did much to hold the Society together during the difficult war years (1937–43), Lord Meston (1946–7). Sir Frank Stenton was thus the first professional historian to become President of the Society, and his wide experience of such positions immediately resulted in an important change in the Society's procedure: that the Annual General Meeting of the Society should be the occasion of a Presidential Address. His thirteen-year tenure of the office gave time for the practice to become firm custom, but the crucially important principle he established was that the Address should be serious and scholarly and relevant to the avowed aims of the Society. His lucidity, humour and superb technique made each of these a memorable occasion, but much thought lay behind these ostensibly effortless performances for even

where the subject was not specifically on Berkshire it was from that county that he took his illustrations and examples. Unfortunately his very excellence has deprived posterity, for he carried his lectures in his head with only a few jottings on paper. But no publication could evoke the underlying personality, and the best memorial to this is the remark of an ordinary member of the Society: 'he makes it all sound so exciting'.

The time has not yet come to appreciate Sir Frank's place among historians. His published work was large in quantity, wide-ranging, and unfailingly of a high literary and technical standard. He himself recognized that historical investigation is a constantly evolving process; and if some of the conclusions he reached are now being modified, the historical world has no option but to pay the supreme compliment of starting modification from the point reached by him. His work ranged over general, local and technical history; he revolutionized interpretation of Danish influence on English development; he helped establish place-name study on a firm basis, and his name appears as joint general editor of many of the English Place Name Society volumes. Much of his work on early English history was brought together in what is probably his greatest book, *Anglo-Saxon England*; but running this very close in its influence is *English Feudalism 1066–1166*. His first academic appointment was as Research Fellow in Local History, much of his early work was concerned with Domesday Book entries for the midland counties, and a proportion of his later work was concerned with local themes. But he never regarded himself as a local historian, and had little sympathy with much of the mystique that developed round the subject. To him history was one; and just as he recognized that Anglo-Saxon England could not be studied apart from its European context, so he knew that Berkshire or Reading Abbey only made historical sense when seen in its historical context of time and space. But his knowledge of Berkshire was very extensive, due in part to his perceptive eye for country but far more to a critical and wide-ranging acquaintance with the main documentary evidence for the county's history. It was at the end of his first Presidential Address that he emphasized the main weakness to the present study of local history in the County, the lack of published records; and he suggested that the Society should attempt to publish at least the more important. It is to be hoped that the Society will ultimately create this memorial to a great president.

In his last Presidential Address Sir Frank concluded by welcoming the opportunity to say something about St. Ethelwold of Abingdon, the greatest man Berkshire had ever known. Few would dispute that claim, but among the County's eminent men during the twelve centuries or more of its existence Sir Frank must take first place among historians who have lived and worked within its bounds.

Subjects of Sir Frank Stenton's Presidential Addresses:

1947 Some Berkshire Place-Names.
1948 The Early History of Reading Abbey.
1949 Feudal Berkshire.
1950 King Alfred.
1951 The Domesday Book in Berkshire.
1953 The Origin of Berkshire Parishes.
1954 Pre-Conquest Charters as Material for the Historian.
1955 Post-Conquest Charters as Material for the Historian.
1956 The History of Parliament.
1957 Roman Britain and Saxon England.
1958 Reading before the Normans.
1959 The Anglo-Saxon Borough.
1960 St. Ethelwold of Abingdon and the Tenth-Century Reformation.