

ART. XI.—*Richard Bell, prior of Durham (1464-78) and bishop of Carlisle (1478-95)*. By BARRIE DOBSON, M.A., D.Phil.

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THE disappearance of the great majority of its records makes it impossible to hope that a fully comprehensive history of the diocese of Carlisle in the later middle ages can ever be written. By comparison with its great neighbours of the northern province, York and Durham, the bishopric of Carlisle offers relatively little information to the historian interested in its organization, its efficiency and its general prosperity in the 15th century. But although our knowledge of the administrative routines and practices over which the bishops of Carlisle presided remains regrettably incomplete, it is sometimes possible to examine the lives of the bishops themselves in considerable detail. Few of the fourteen bishops of Carlisle between 1400 and the Reformation played an outstanding rôle in the work of English church or state; but a study of their careers has its own interest and can often lead to an estimate of their attitude to their pastoral functions. The value of such an approach has been recently illustrated by Dr R. L. Storey's account of Marmaduke Lumley, bishop of Carlisle from 1430 to 1450, undoubtedly the best known and probably the ablest of the 15th-century episcopate at Carlisle.<sup>1</sup> Dr Storey stresses that Lumley was "a remarkable exception to the established

<sup>1</sup> See CW2 lv 112-131.

The following abbreviations will be used:

- DCD   Muniments and Manuscripts of the Dean and Chapter,  
          Durham.  
DRC   Carlisle Record Office; Records of Diocesan Registry,  
          Carlisle.  
CPR   *Calendar of Patent Rolls.*

pattern", and it might therefore seem worth-while to examine the life of Richard Bell, a bishop somewhat more representative of the Carlisle episcopal tradition and one whose eventful early career, thanks to his fifty years as monk and prior of Durham, is exceptionally well recorded.

Richard Bell made his profession as monk of Durham before the high altar of the cathedral church in 1426 or early 1427 at the unusually young age of sixteen.<sup>2</sup> At Durham, as in other large English monasteries, it was usual for monks to enter the community in groups, a practice which had the advantage of producing a convenient unit for teaching purposes during the noviciate. Bell was the junior and clearly the youngest of the eight novices who made their profession in 1426-27. The prior and chapter of Durham were generally careful to observe the rule that "Nemo ante 18 annum Monachatum sine necessitate, aut evidenti utilitate profiteatur"<sup>3</sup>; and the fact that they made an exception in Bell's case may reflect their belief that the boy already showed unusual promise, probably demonstrated by his work as a student at the convent's grammar school, the normal source of recruitment into the 15th-century Durham community. It is equally possible that Bell owed his early advancement to family connections. The official correspondence of Durham monks rarely preserves references to relatives outside the monastic walls while Bell's own surname was too common to provide any reliable guide to the names of his secular kinsmen. But it can hardly be coincidental that, when prior of Durham between 1464 and 1478, Richard Bell employed a public notary, a keeper of his park at Beaurepaire and a master-mason, all with the

<sup>2</sup> The approximate date of Bell's birth is established by a dispensation of 30 September 1432 allowing him to receive priest's orders in his 22nd year: DCD, Reg. Parv. II, fos. 65v-66. The date of his profession can be calculated from *Liber Vitae Ecclesiae Dunelmensis* (Surtees Society cxxxvi, 1923), fo. 70v and the subsequent appearance of the monks there listed in the monastic records at Durham.

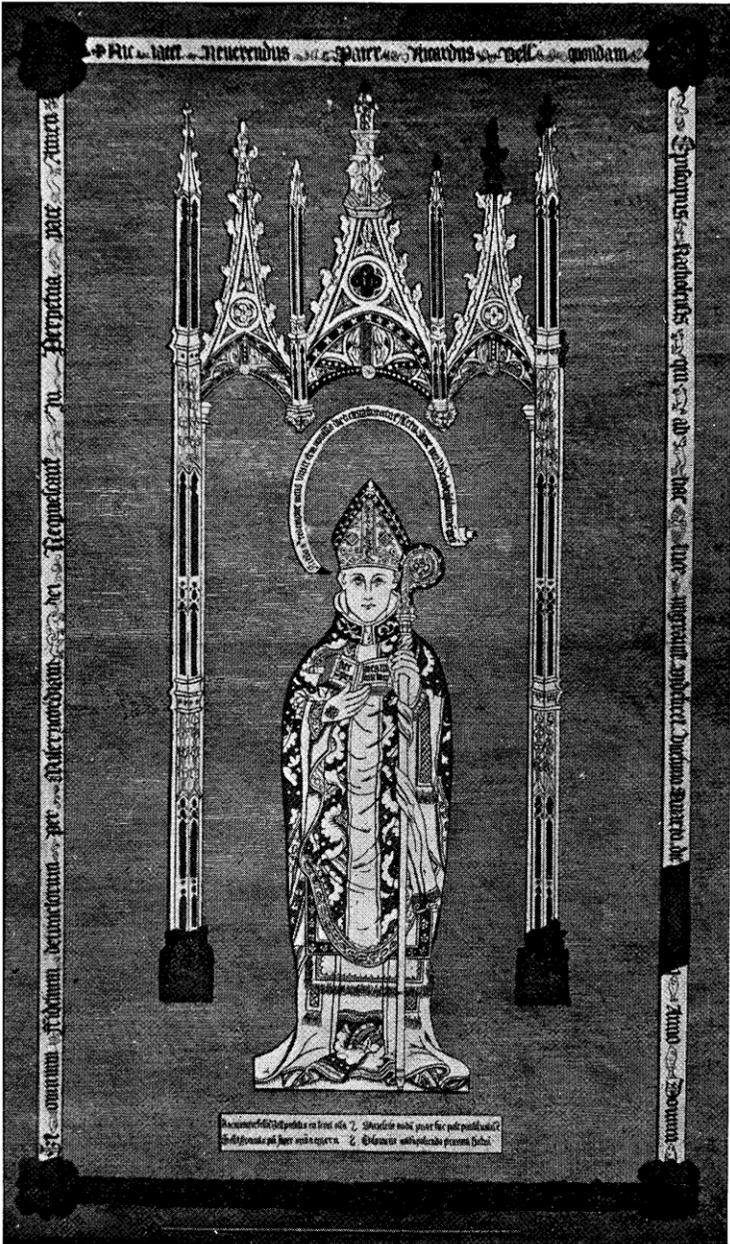
<sup>3</sup> W. Lyndwood, *Provinciale, etc.* (Oxford, 1679), 201.

same surname as himself.<sup>4</sup> In a letter of 3 March 1476 Prior Bell did name one of his close relations: he declared his intention of reserving a vacant prebend in the convent's collegiate church of Howden for Elias Bell, "scholar of Oxenford and my welbeloved neveu". Elias Bell, once a fellow of Merton College, must have been the nephew to whom the prior referred in the following year when he wrote to Anne Neville, wife of Richard of Gloucester, on 11 April 1477. Prior Bell reminded the duchess that he had presented his nephew to her husband during one of the latter's visits to Durham and expressed the hope that the duke would accept this clerk into his service and as "hys man".<sup>5</sup> Like other priors of Durham Richard Bell knew how to look after his own.

Much the most intriguing illustration of Bell's care for his relatives is, however, the case of a certain Alice Bell, the recipient of an extraordinary series of favours at the hands of the prior. An important part of the patronage of the prior of Durham consisted of his control of appointments to places in the two almshouses and two hospitals administered by the monastic almoner. Although some of these places were still being conferred on the poor and deserving, the introduction of licences to enjoy their emoluments without taking up residence encouraged late mediaeval priors to treat these "corrodies" as sources of income for friends, servants and relations. But in the entire history of the monastery at Durham there appears to be no parallel for the manner in which Prior Bell exploited this type of patronage in the interests of his namesake Alice. In February 1465, soon after Bell became prior, she was appointed to a position in the hospital of St Mary Magdalen on the outskirts of Durham. Less than ten years later Alice had become a pluralist with additional "corrodies" at the hospital of Witton Gilbert

<sup>4</sup> DCD, Reg. Parv. III, fo. 182; Reg. IV, fo. 168. References to John Bell, master-mason at Durham, are collected by J. Harvey, *English Mediaeval Architects* (1954), 29.

<sup>5</sup> DCD, Reg. Parv. III, fos. 168v, 175\*.



BISHOP BELL'S MEMORIAL BRASS  
(Choir of Carlisle Cathedral).

and the almshouse or *Domus Dei* in the Durham Bailey.<sup>6</sup> Even more significant was the conferment by the prior and chapter of letters of sorority on Alice Bell in March 1474.<sup>7</sup> The admission of a secular into the fraternity of the convent was considered an exceptional honour at late mediaeval Durham, generally reserved for powerful magnates or helpful knights and *armigeri*. Alice Bell's claims to the title of "sister" of the monastery remain doubtful unless it is assumed that she was a particularly close relative of the then prior. For this reason the elder James Raine suggested that Alice Bell was "in all probability" the mother of Richard Bell, an attractive theory although it assumes that Alice must have lived on into her eighties.<sup>8</sup>

On Richard Bell's entry into the Durham community the obscurity of his early life and origins is replaced by a comparatively detailed knowledge of his career. An essential feature of the Durham noviciate was the steady progress of the young monk through clerical orders so that within five or six years from his profession he was fully priested and able to celebrate mass at one of the many altars in the convent or its cells. Because of his youth, Bell was compelled to make a somewhat slower journey through the orders than was usual at Durham. Although ordained acolyte on 20 December 1427 and subdeacon a year later (18 December 1428) he had to wait for deacon's orders until 24 February 1431.<sup>9</sup> He was ordained deacon by Bishop Langley of Durham in the palace of Bishop Auckland; and was then said to be "per priorem presentatus", an unusual distinction which implies that his superior, Prior Wessington, had already begun to take an especial interest in the career of this young monk. Like other monks of obvious intellectual

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, fos. 130, 136v-137, 141v, 143v-144, 156, 160.

<sup>7</sup> DCD, Reg. IV, fo. 214.

<sup>8</sup> *Obituary Roll of William Ebchester and John Burnby* (Surtees Society xxxi, 1856), 112.

<sup>9</sup> *Register of Thomas Langley* (Surtees Society, clxiv-, 1956-), iii 61-62, 105-106; iv 5-7.

ability, Richard Bell was destined for an immediate appearance as a student and fellow of the convent's dependency of Durham College, Oxford. Accordingly Prior Wessington took the unorthodox though not unprecedented step of sending Bell to Oxford before he had taken priest's orders in his native diocese. When Bell joined the other fellows of Durham College in the autumn of 1432, he brought with him letters dimissory from Bishop Langley as well as Wessington's own dispensation enabling him to receive priest's orders in his twenty-second year; he was ordained priest in the diocese of London on 20 December 1432.<sup>10</sup>

Richard Bell's five years as a novice at the mother-house were succeeded by an eight-year period of residence at Durham College, Oxford. Like other fellows of the college, the majority of whom were always in their twenties or early thirties, Bell had presumably received some instruction in grammar and the other liberal arts as a novice at Durham. At Oxford he would at first continue his study of the Arts and then, according to the terms of the statutes of the college as re-founded by Bishop Hatfield fifty years earlier, begin more intensive work on philosophy and theology. At this early stage of his career, no Durham monk was encouraged to supplicate for a university degree in theology and it would be misleading to regard Bell's eight years at Oxford as being devoted exclusively to the pursuit of learning. As a fellow of Durham College, Bell was committed to continual participation in the services of choir and celebration of masses as well as to administrative responsibilities of considerable importance to the welfare of the community. The statutes of Durham College called for the appointment of two *receptores* who were to collect and disburse the cell's revenues, accounting quarterly to the warden

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, iv 70; DCD, Reg. Parv. II, fos. 65v-66; *Historiae Dunelmensis Scriptores Tres* (Surtees Society ix, 1839), ccxxv-ccxxvi; DCD, Bursar's Accounts, 1432, Expense Fratrum versus Cellas. See A. B. Emden, *Biographical Dictionary of University of Oxford* (Oxford, 1957-59), i 161-162, providing the best account of Bell's career yet published.

and their fellow-monks.<sup>11</sup> The choice of these obedientiaries was in the hands of the Durham prior and it was on 16 September 1435 that Prior Wessington first introduced Bell to administrative office when he appointed him one of the two Durham College bursars for the forthcoming financial year.<sup>12</sup> Record survives of Bell's reappointment as bursar of Durham College and it is clear from the extant college accounts (copies of which were sent up to the mother-house each year) that Bell held the office continuously from Michaelmas 1435 to Michaelmas 1440.<sup>13</sup> Bell's own *compoti* as bursar of Durham College provide detailed evidence of his labours: supplying the monks and secular students of the college with their commons, paying servants and financing small repairs to the fabric. Like other bursars he travelled fairly extensively through the country on college business, making frequent expeditions to collect pensions and rents from the community's appropriated churches in the dioceses of York and Lincoln.

The records of Bell's career at Durham College, Oxford, successful though this seems to have been, hardly prepare us for the next and perhaps the most surprising episode in his long career. On 13 February 1441, Henry VI "auctoritate parliamenti" collated Bell to the priory of Holy Trinity, York.<sup>14</sup> The withdrawal of any Durham monk from the community of his brethren was, in itself, an exceptional event in the history of the late mediaeval convent and Prior Wessington was hardly likely to agree to the removal of one of his ablest junior monks except under considerable pressure. On 17 February 1441 Henry Percy, second Earl of Northumberland, wrote to Wessington from London asking him to "graunt a licence to Dan Richard Bell professed in youre place that he may Receyve and occupy the Office of Priory of the Trinite

<sup>11</sup> D. Wilkins, *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae* (1737), ii, 614-617.

<sup>12</sup> DCD, Reg. Parv. II, fo. 88.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 93; Durham College Accounts, 1435-40.

<sup>14</sup> *CPR 1436-41*, 524.

in Yorke late graunted to hym be oure Soverein Lord the Kyng''.<sup>15</sup> On 9 March Prior Wessington, after examining the royal letters patent of the previous month, licensed Bell to accept the priorate of Holy Trinity, to which the latter was instituted two days later at York by Robert Blyth, prior of Tickford.<sup>16</sup> The reasons for the choice of Bell as prior of Holy Trinity, York, remain mysterious even if the collation bears witness to the Durham monk's contacts with government circles. But it became rapidly obvious that Bell's acceptance of this promotion had been most ill-advised as it introduced him to a sordid contest with the monks of the priory from which he was to emerge defeated and humiliated nearly three years later.

The detailed history of Holy Trinity, York, like that of other alien priories in the later middle ages, is one of considerable complexity because of the English government's disinclination to provide a radical solution to the anomalies caused by the Hundred Years' War. Since its foundation in 1089, Holy Trinity had been dependent on the great French abbey of Marmoutier in Touraine but the French wars of the 14th century had inevitably led English monarchs to claim and exercise the right to appoint priors of the monastery.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, at Holy Trinity as elsewhere, the government was reluctant to sever all links with the continental mother-house and it was only as a result of a parliamentary petition by the monks of Holy Trinity themselves that the priory received a grant of denization on 18 March 1426.<sup>18</sup> At the same time the brethren at the priory were conceded the right to elect future superiors from among their own ranks without the necessity of obtaining licence to do so from the king. Unfortunately a later English government found

<sup>15</sup> DCD, Misc. Charters, no. 5193; *Priory of Finchale* (Surtees Society vi, 1837), xxix.

<sup>16</sup> DCD, Reg. III, fos. 262, 296v. The alien priory of Tickford had been made dependent on Holy Trinity, York, in 1426.

<sup>17</sup> J. Solloway, *The Alien Benedictines of York* (Leeds, 1910), 227-228.

<sup>18</sup> *Rotuli Parliamentorum* (1783) iv 302; *CPR 1422-29*, 356.

itself unwilling to sacrifice its appointment to so wealthy a priory and the death of Prior John Castell, who had ruled the monastery for over forty years, in August 1440 precipitated the crisis in which Richard Bell became so seriously involved. After Castell's death the monks of Holy Trinity immediately elected one of themselves, John Grene, as his successor; relying on the royal letters patent of fourteen years earlier, they made no attempt to secure the king's *cong e d' lire*. On 4 December 1440 Henry VI commissioned several prominent York ecclesiastics and laymen to investigate this election and it was no doubt in response to their report that he collated Bell in the following February and proceeded to order his induction into the priory.<sup>19</sup>

Bell's appointment naturally earned him the immediate and intense hostility of the brethren of Holy Trinity. Not at all abashed by being ordered to appear before the king's council in the spring of 1441, John Grene began his vigorous campaign to retain the priorate by a slanderous attack on Bell's character. In the presence of John Stafford, bishop of Bath and Wells and Chancellor of England, it was alleged that Bell had been guilty of an unspecified "*lapsus carnis*" while at Durham and that he had also stolen various goods belonging to the monastery and carried them off with him to York. At Bell's prompting, Prior Wessington wrote to Stafford on 8 June 1441 testifying to the monk's good character ("*a tempore professionis sue in monasterio Dunelmense ipsum cognovi ac cognosco fuisse et esse bone fame, integri status et opinionis illese*") and denying that he had taken any goods from Durham except for a few clothes and small books which the prior had allowed him to retain for a time.<sup>20</sup> Although this testimonial, repeated a few days later in more general terms, can hardly be said to have been unsolicited, it seems to have served its purpose for

<sup>19</sup> *CPR 1436-41*, 503, 538; DCD, Reg. III, fo. 311.

<sup>20</sup> DCD, Reg. III, fos. 267, 269v; Reg. Parv. II, fo. 140v; *Priory of Finchale* xxix-xxx.

the argument as to the rightful prior of Holy Trinity then shifted to less personal grounds. The king's legal right to collate to the priory was highly questionable, as is suggested by the choice of Robert Blyth to institute Bell on 11 March 1441. Blyth was then described as proctor of the abbot of Marmoutier but it is clear that the French monastery had not been consulted about the problem at this stage. The resistance of the monks of Holy Trinity, however, persuaded Bell and his friends at the royal court that it would be advisable to do so; on 21 May 1442 the abbot of Marmoutier, welcoming the opportunity to revive his claim to appoint to the York priory, wrote from France to ratify Blyth's institution of Bell.<sup>21</sup> A marginal note at the side of the Durham register's copy of this letter shows that the abbot's confirmation of Bell's appointment had no effect: the king had decided to abandon his opposition to John Grene's election in face of the continued resistance of the Holy Trinity monks.<sup>22</sup> Bell's position throughout the years 1442 and 1443 could hardly have been less enviable. Not only had he failed to displace John Grene as prior of Holy Trinity but he now found himself in the dangerously isolated position of a quondam monk who no longer belonged to a monastery. Fortunately for Bell, Prior Wessington remained loyal to his protégé and negotiated his return to the ranks of the brethren at Durham. Wessington asked Master John Marshall, his most trusted representative among the canons of York cathedral, to settle the business and on 10 December 1443 John Grene and his monks officially withdrew their actions against Bell in return for his formal resignation of the priorate. On 13 December Bell appeared before his fellow monks in the chapter-

<sup>21</sup> DCD, Reg. III, fo. 311. The abbot of Marmoutier was still exercising spiritual authority over the monks of Holy Trinity, York, in 1448 and 1459-60. See E. Martène, *Histoire de l'Abbaye de Marmoutier*, ii (Mémoires de la Société Archéologique de Touraine xxv, 1875) 319-321, 330-331.

<sup>22</sup> Prior John Grene received a general pardon from the king on 30 May 1446: *Notes on the Religious and Secular Houses of Yorkshire* ii (Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series lxxxii, 1931), 90.

house, made a new profession to Prior Wessington and was readmitted to the Durham community.<sup>23</sup>

Richard Bell's attempt to break free from the ties of his mother-house had ended in embarrassing failure and he was to remain a Durham monk for the next thirty-five years of his life. In the long term he was no doubt fortunate in his failure, for the rule of the small and truculent York community would have given him much less opportunity to demonstrate his ability than turned out to be the case at Durham itself. But this episode is especially significant as the first illustration of Bell's remarkable and, for a Durham monk, unconventional ambition — a trait of character which is readily detectable in his later career. However, although this early and abortive attempt to leave Durham may have cost Bell some popularity among his fellows, Prior Wessington did not hold the set-back against him. Immediately on his return to the monastery, Bell was appointed "Seneschallus Hospicii Domini Prioris", a position which he held until several months after Wessington had been replaced as prior of Durham by William Ebchester in July 1446.<sup>24</sup> In the spring of 1447 he held his first major administrative office at Durham when he began accounting as almoner, until early 1448 as a colleague of Robert Westmorland and then for a further two and a half years by himself. Although only twentieth in order of seniority of Durham monks, Bell now occupied one of the most important of the Durham obediences and was responsible for the welfare of at least fifty brothers and sisters resident in or attached to the convent's almshouses and hospitals. He was accordingly recognized as one of the "seniores capituli" by the summer of 1450.<sup>25</sup>

In the autumn of 1450 Bell was promoted to the

<sup>23</sup> DCD, Reg. III, fos. 296-297; Reg. Parv. II, fos. 177-179.

<sup>24</sup> DCD, Bursar's Accounts, 1443-47. Garderoba; 1446/47, Solacium Prioris.

<sup>25</sup> DCD, Almoner's Accounts, 1447-50; Reg. Parv. III, fo. 40v; *Scriptores Tres* cccxviii.

wardenship of Durham College, Oxford, where he replaced John Burnby who resigned at Michaelmas.<sup>26</sup> Richard Bell's return to Oxford after an absence of almost ten years was a natural development in his career. All the priors of Durham between 1446 and the Dissolution were Oxford graduates in theology; and the most obvious reason for Bell's reappearance at the university was his desire to secure a degree, a distinction which had become an essential qualification for the highest office at the mother-house. The first extant register of Oxford University proves that Bell supplicated for the baccalaureate in theology as early as 11 November 1450, was admitted to oppose on 23 January 1452 and received the degree five weeks later, on 29 February.<sup>27</sup> A university degree gave its recipient status not only in the eyes of his fellow-monks but also in those of other English Benedictines when they met every three years at their General Chapter at Northampton. The prior of Durham rarely attended in person but sent one of his more distinguished university monks, normally the warden of Durham College, as his proctor. It was in this capacity that Bell appeared at the General Chapter which opened at Northampton on 2 July 1453, having called at Coventry two days earlier where he made a visitation of the cathedral priory in response to a commission by Prior Ebchester of Durham.<sup>28</sup> No record of the visitation proceedings at Coventry, presumably perfunctory as in the case of most Black Monk visitations, nor of the *acta* of the 1453 Chapter survive; but it may be inferred that Bell's presence at the Northampton meeting that year left him with no high regard for the value and effective-

<sup>26</sup> DCD, Durham College Accounts, 1449/50. H. E. D. Blakiston's suggestion that Burnby did not resign in 1450 but appointed Bell as his deputy is completely untenable: *Some Durham College Rolls* (Oxford Historical Society xxxii, 1896; *Collectanea* iii), 16.

<sup>27</sup> *Register of University of Oxford* i (Oxford Historical Society i, 1885), 11-12.

<sup>28</sup> DCD, Reg. Parv. III, fo. 58\*; *Documents illustrating the Activities of the General and Provincial Chapters of the English Black Monks* iii (Camden Third Series liv, 1937), 214-215, 242-243, 250-251.

ness of these assemblies for he never attended another General Chapter.

Shortly after his appearance at Northampton Bell returned to Durham on the reappointment of John Burnby as warden of Durham College on 30 September 1453.<sup>29</sup> Bell's own tenure of the wardenship had lasted for the unusually short term of three years and his willingness to return so soon to administrative responsibilities at Durham suggests that he never regarded academic life as best suited to his talents. The disappearance of the college account rolls for the period of Bell's wardenship renders it impossible to make any detailed assessment of his conduct of the office; but between 1450 and 1453 he can be found exercising his disciplinary powers, examining and admitting secular scholars to the college, protecting its revenues against aggression by local magnates and making contacts with influential secular clerks at Oxford, including the Chancellor of the University, Master Gilbert Kymer.<sup>30</sup> It was presumably at this period of his life that Richard Bell built up a personal library of manuscripts, a practice common among Durham university monks despite the rules forbidding *proprietas*. Bell passed on several of these manuscripts to his younger colleagues among the Durham monks and as these later found their way into the safety of the monastic common library it is possible to gain some impression, however vague, of the books he may have read. Leaving aside those books which were merely assigned to the common library by Bell when prior of Durham,<sup>31</sup> contemporary inscriptions on six surviving manuscripts show that they were once in his possession before being given to a younger Durham monk.<sup>32</sup> Among these works (the normal inscription

<sup>29</sup> DCD, Reg. Parv. III, fos. 64v-65.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, fos. 44v, 46-47, 50, 58-59.

<sup>31</sup> E.g. DCD, MS. B.II.5: see fo. ii v.

<sup>32</sup> Three of these manuscripts are still at Durham, where Bell's name appears in MSS. B.III.26, fo. 2v; B.IV.41, fo. 290v; B.IV.42, fo. ii v. The other three manuscripts are Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Laud. Misc. 368; Sidnev Sussex, Cambridge, MS. 56; Nottingham University Library, MS. MiLM 5. (For a transcript of the inscription on a fly-leaf of the last manuscript, I am grateful to Mr J. H. Hodson, Keeper of Manuscripts at the University of Nottingham; it is only legible under ultra-violet light.)

is "Liber Sancti Cuthberti et Ricardi Bell") were a fine 13th-century copy of the Bible, treatises by Anselm, Geoffrey de Vinsauf and Peter of Blois as well as a volume of interesting material relating to Black Monk organization, largely written by Durham monks early in the 15th century.<sup>33</sup> Another Durham manuscript of somewhat later date contains inside the elaborate initial *E* of *Explicit tractatus lincolniens' de lingua* the name "Ric. Bell" together with the words "Maria" and "Emmanuel": although comparison of the hand with Bell's known autograph fails to support the elder James Raine's conjecture that the prior wrote this manuscript "when he was a young man", the initial certainly suggests that Bell may have commissioned the work, a copy of Grosseteste's *De Linguae Viciis et Virtutibus*.<sup>34</sup> Bell's interest in this treatise seems typical of his conservative tastes. A study of all the extant manuscripts inscribed with his name suggests that his intellectual interests varied only within the conventional framework of the traditional classics of the late mediaeval English monastery. Humfrey Wanley's claim that it was Bell who made copious annotations to the 12th-century copy of Bede's *Life of St Cuthbert* now in the British Museum is very doubtful<sup>35</sup>; and no evidence survives of an original or characteristically individual approach to literature and learning on Bell's part.

On Bell's return to Durham in the autumn of 1453 he began to play a prominent rôle in the discussion and execution of monastic policy. Prior Ebchester had already complained of old age and illness in June 1453<sup>36</sup> and was prepared to give Bell the opportunity to conduct important business transactions with northern lords.

<sup>33</sup> This last manuscript (DCD, B.IV.41) is described in *Documents . . . of the English Black Monks* ii (Camden Third Series xlvii, 1933), x-xii.

<sup>34</sup> DCD, MS. B.III.18, fo. 227v (the manuscript originally commenced at what is now fo. 128); cf. *Priory of Finchale* ix (for an illustration of the initial) and xxxi.

<sup>35</sup> British Museum, Harleian MS. 1924, *passim*; cf. B. Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1940), 28.

<sup>36</sup> DCD, Reg. Parv. III, fo. 58\*v.

Between 1453 and 1456 Bell travelled widely, visiting William Booth, archbishop of York, as well as John Neville (younger brother of Richard, earl of Warwick) at Pontefract in attempts to win their support for his convent.<sup>37</sup> On such occasions Bell no doubt acted in his capacity as Durham terrar, an obedience to which he had been appointed by 8 June 1455 but which it seems virtually certain he had held from at least the previous Whitsuntide when he began to account as hostillar.<sup>38</sup> The offices of hostillar and terrar were normally held simultaneously by one monk at the 15th-century convent so that the comparative wealth of the first (the hostillar's annual receipts were assessed at £170) might compensate for the poverty of the second: the terrar with an estimated annual income of £20 was the most poorly endowed of all Durham obedientiaries.<sup>39</sup> As hostillar, Richard Bell was entrusted with the administration of a sumptuously furnished set of six sleeping apartments in the convent's Guest Hall as well as a "Somerhall" and "Wynterhalle".<sup>40</sup> As terrar, he had the even greater responsibility of supervising the collection of the large monastic revenues which were later recorded on the Durham bursar's annual account, and also co-operated with the priory's lay steward in general estate-management. It is therefore all the more surprising to discover that by the autumn of 1456 Bell was holding yet another and even more important obedience, that of subprior of the convent.<sup>41</sup> Durham priory, unlike many large monasteries of the later middle ages, was a community which rarely tolerated the concentration of several important obed-

<sup>37</sup> DCD, Bursar's Accounts 1453-55, Expense Necessarie; Reg. Parv. III, fo. 63v.

<sup>38</sup> *Scriptores Tres* cccxxxi; DCD, Hostillar's Accounts, 1454-57. All three of Bell's accounts as hostillar survive but his *compti* as terrar are now lost.

<sup>39</sup> DCD, Reg. II, fo. 357; *Scriptores Tres* ccli.

<sup>40</sup> See the "Stuffum Officii Hostillar. Dunelm." delivered to Bell on 8 June 1454, printed in *Durham Account Rolls* i (Surtees Society xcix, 1898), 147-150.

<sup>41</sup> DCD, Reg. IV, fo. 110.

iences in the hands of one or two all-powerful monks; and Bell's appointment as subprior must be regarded as strong evidence of the respect his fellows held for his ability.

This respect was to be put to a sudden and dramatic test when in 1456 Bell declared himself a candidate for election to the priorate of Durham. Prior Ebchester's resignation of his office after only ten years as superior at Durham, opened the path to that rarest of monastic occasions, at Durham as elsewhere, an openly disputed election. Of the three alternative methods of canonical election laid down by the Fourth Lateran Council's decree, *Quia Propter*, the way of compromise was much the most common at Durham although the *via Spiritus Sancti* had been used to elect Prior Wessington as recently as 1416.<sup>42</sup> The chapter's decision in October 1456, taken only "post plures comunicaciones et tractatus", to choose a new prior *per viam Scrutinii* (a procedure which forced all the electors to record their votes publicly) had no obvious precedent at Durham and suggests a situation in which the claims of the candidates were too evenly balanced to allow the adoption of a method less likely to arouse ill feeling among the community. Bell showed himself unwilling to stand down in favour of his rival for the priorate, Master John Burnby, a Durham monk whose official qualifications were certainly superior. Burnby had taken his monastic vows seven years earlier than Bell, had been a Doctor of Theology ten years before Bell took his baccalaureate, had been subprior of Durham six years before Bell and had been warden of Durham College, Oxford, for eleven years as against Bell's three.<sup>43</sup> The only obvious weakness in Burnby's claims for election in 1456 was his absence from Durham for all but three of the preceding fourteen years, a weak-

<sup>42</sup> *Scriptores Tres* 72, 73, 95, 102, clxvii; DCD, Loc. XIII, no. 11.

<sup>43</sup> DCD, Durham College Accounts, 1442-56; Hostillar's Accounts, 1440/41; Reg. Parv. III, fo. 64v; Loc. XXI, no. 50.

ness Bell was quite prepared to exploit. The official report dispatched to Bishop Neville of Durham, and described by Professor Knowles as a *locus classicus* of 15th-century monastic election practice, shows that the contest expressed a real division of opinion among the members of the community.<sup>44</sup>

Durham monks were always conscious of their vulnerability when without a prior and rarely risked the dangers of a long vacancy. Prior Ebchester made his formal resignation in the prior's chapel of St Nicholas at Durham on 5 October 1456; and on the following day Richard Bell as subprior, summoned a chapter meeting in which Monday, 25 October, was fixed as the date of the forthcoming election. Messengers were sent to request the presence of the convent's counsellors and experts in canon law as well as the attendance of the many Durham monks then resident in the convent's dependencies.<sup>45</sup> Two of the seventy-one Durham monks eligible to vote failed to respond to the chapter's citations and were declared contumaciously absent; the fourteen others who remained in the cells each commissioned one of their fellows to represent them at the election. The fifty-five monks present in chapter on 25 October therefore commanded sixty-nine votes between them, votes which were recorded by the three scrutators, sitting in a corner of the chapter-house as each monk in turn made his nomination before them. After the details of how each monk had voted were publicly announced, it was seen that John Burnby had received thirty-eight votes and Richard Bell twenty-five; William Seton, the monastic chancellor, collected four votes while the prior of Finchale and the ex-prior, William Ebchester, received one each. Interestingly enough the monk who voted for Ebchester was none other than Bell

<sup>44</sup> Printed in *Obituary Roll of Ebchester and Burnby*, 91-102, from DCD. Reg. IV, fos. 112-115. Cf. D. Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, ii (Cambridge, 1955) 251-252.

<sup>45</sup> DCD, Bursar's Accounts, 1456/57, Expense Necessarie. Loc. XIII, no. 13 contains a large collection of original documents relating to the 1456 election.

himself; while it may be understandable that Bell did not want to add his vote to those in favour of Burnby (who himself voted for William Seton), this curious choice suggests Bell's determination not to help the cause of a possible rival. But his hopes of becoming prior of Durham at the early age of forty-six were foiled by his failure to win the support of the senior Durham monks, most of whom — including the ex-prior, the chancellor, the third prior, the bursar and the prior of Finchale — supported Burnby. The result was clearly a bitter disappointment to Bell, made all the more humiliating when the chapter thought it canonically necessary to supplement Burnby's claims to the priorate with the argument that he was a monk of greater merit ('*meritis prestancior*') than his defeated opponent.

The election of 1456 marks the lowest point of Bell's career. Not only had he failed to reach the highest office but he now found himself in the invidious position of having to accept a successful rival as his religious superior. Not surprisingly, it was thought impossible for Bell to continue as subprior under the new regime and his future presence in the Durham chapter could hardly have failed to prove embarrassing for both himself and his fellows. Fortunately for themselves the Durham monks had long possessed a means by which this type of situation could be remedied.<sup>46</sup> At Whitsuntide (1457) Thomas Ayre, the existing Prior of Finchale, was removed in favour of Richard Bell who spent the next seven years of his life as superior of this Durham dependency situated in a bend of the river Wear five miles north-east of the mother-house. Although a monk with Bell's ambitions must have regarded the priorate of Finchale as something of a backwater, it was a pleasant backwater nevertheless. With an average income of almost £200 *per annum* Finchale was the most richly endowed of all the nine

<sup>46</sup> Cf. J. Scammell, "Some Aspects of Mediaeval English Monastic Government; The Case of Geoffrey Burdon Prior of Durham (1313-1321)", *Revue Bénédictine*, lxxviii (1958) 227, 241, 245.

Durham dependencies and Bell's annual account rolls as prior there show that he had no difficulty in maintaining the prosperity of the cell.<sup>47</sup> Nor should the isolation of Bell's new position be exaggerated: Finchale was treated as a recreational centre by the late mediaeval Durham community and the prior entertained many other Durham monks besides the seven or eight over whom he ruled and with whom he observed the *opus dei*.<sup>48</sup> The most interesting feature of the history of Finchale priory during the last century of its existence was its conversion into an establishment where the prior's lodgings became "the centre of the life of a reduced convent".<sup>49</sup> The construction of the new prior's quarters to the east of the existing claustral complex at Finchale cannot be dated precisely; but the accounts for 1457-65 which include many references to major building operations as well as the first recorded mention of the well-situated Douglas Tower, prove that Bell was a key figure in the significant architectural transformation of the priory.<sup>50</sup> It was at Finchale that Bell gained the experience of large-scale building enterprises which he was later to apply both at Durham and at his episcopal palace of Rose Castle.

The sudden and apparently unexpected death of Prior John Burnby on 17 October 1464 was, however, to bring Bell rapidly back to the forefront of monastic politics and to give him the prize which he had missed eight years earlier. As in 1456, there was no long vacancy. Bell was himself one of the two Durham monks who rode to Bishop Lawrence Booth of Durham to obtain the latter's *congé d'élire*; when this had been secured, the date of election was fixed for 26 November and the appropriate citations dispatched to the cells. This time Bell had no possible rival. As the most distinguished and experienced Durham

<sup>47</sup> *Priory of Finchale* cclxv-ccxcix.

<sup>48</sup> DCD, Loc. XVI, no. 12(e); cf. *Priory of Finchale* 30.

<sup>49</sup> R. Gilyard-Beer, *Abbeys: an Introduction to the Religious Houses of England and Wales* (H.M.S.O., 1958), 48.

<sup>50</sup> *Priory of Finchale* cclxxix, ccvii, ccccxxvii.

monk of the time and one of the only three university graduates then in the community, he was acclaimed prior by the 66 electors *per viam Spiritus Sancti*. Although some show of hesitation was expected of the elect, Bell did not allow his fellows to wait long. On 27 November 1464 in St Andrew's chapel in the monastic infirmary he formally consented to his postulation, and his confirmation as prior by Bishop Booth followed soon afterwards.<sup>51</sup> Richard Bell was to be prior of Durham for over thirteen years, the most vigorous and influential period of his life and certainly the best recorded.

Bell's tenure of the priorate of Durham between 1464 and 1478 presents the student of his career with special problems. The survival of the convent's muniments and, above all, of the prior's own small register or letter-book allows an examination of Bell's conduct of monastic business at a very detailed level. On the other hand, the very fact that for thirteen years Bell's own career became merged with the general history of the great Benedictine monastery of Durham makes it all the more necessary to stress that it would be dangerous to assume that the will of the prior was always the source and origin of all policy. At Durham, as in most English monasteries, it is notoriously difficult to distinguish the actions taken by the superior on his own initiative from those arising out of consultation with the senior monks of chapter. For this reason alone a comprehensive study of the convent's history between 1464 and 1478 would throw only partial light on Bell's own character and personality and all that need be attempted here is a brief survey of the major problems with which the prior was confronted.

The late mediaeval priory of Durham presents the familiar problem of an apparently extremely wealthy religious corporation whose financial position was never-

<sup>51</sup> For Bell's election in 1464, see DCD, Reg. IV, fos. 158-162; Loc. XVI, no. 12; Bursar's Accounts, 1464/65, Expense Necessarie; *Calendar of Chancery Rolls of Bishop Booth* (35th Annual Report of Deputy Keeper of Public Records, 1874) 81.

theless always a cause for anxiety and sometimes for alarm. When Richard Bell became prior in November 1464, he inherited a situation of genuine crisis. Prior Burnby's tenure of the priorate had coincided with a period of exceptional financial strain, as Burnby himself admitted when referring in a letter of 7 March 1464 to "the gret infortunes and hurts that hath happynd us now late in brynyng of our kirke, and lone of CCCC marcs unto the queene Margaret, lesyng of our bell metall by the see, stailyng of our catall by thefes of Tyndall, with our grete losses in plee for Coldyngham, Rodyngton, Hylton and othir, and the grete necessity that we stande in".<sup>52</sup> Four years later, in a letter of 10 November 1468 written to Master William Clayton, one of his several representatives at the Curia, Bell allowed himself to take an even more gloomy view of the convent's problems: "Moreover we are so oerchargid now of dayes What with dyemes new imposicions and other prestes made unto the king and what with plaiez bath temporall and spirituell And other gret losse of goods by way of extorsion and robbery that our monastery is likly within processe of tyme to be cast so ferr in dett that withoute the more speciall grace of Almighty god, supportacion also of you and other good frends of the said Courte, it shall noyt in many yeres here aftir he broght to as goode state as it was within thies few yeres."<sup>53</sup>

Bell's forebodings were not, however, to be realized and it is to his credit that when he left Durham in 1478 the convent enjoyed greater prosperity than it had done on his accession to the priorate. The monastery's financial resources, although inevitably limited in the conditions of the late 15th century, could be maintained at a satisfactory level when supervised by a prior, like Bell, who was prepared to fight vigorously in their defence. Thus the annual account rolls of the Durham bursar, which

<sup>52</sup> *Priory of Coldingham* (Surtees Society xii, 1841), 191.

<sup>53</sup> DCD, Reg. Parv. III, fos. 139-140.

furnish the most reliable index to the economic well-being of the convent, show that this officer's net receipts (excluding previous arrears but including current "wastes and decays") rose from an average of less than £1,350 *per annum* in the 1450's and 1460's to slightly over £1,400 *per annum* in the 1470's.<sup>54</sup> The most interesting symptom of some revival in the monastery's fortunes during Bell's priorate is his inauguration of the last great building enterprise ever undertaken by the monks of Durham, the complete reconstruction of the central tower of their monastic church. When he became prior, Bell found the existing tower in an extremely dangerous state and decided to replace it with a completely new structure. The late 15th-century Durham sacrist's rolls (unfortunately not a complete series) show that the lower stage of the present tower must have been more or less complete by the time Bell left for Carlisle; but work on the second and upper stage was still proceeding in the 1480's.<sup>55</sup> Two of the corbels carrying the internal arcade at the foot of the tower are carved with a representation of a bell (the prior's rebus, used also on his signet seal); and the prior's personal involvement in the building led him to keep the sacrist's office in his own hands during the mid-1470's. In at least two letters of this period Bell referred to the costs of "the re-edificacion of our steeple" and admitted that lack of funds had prevented the work from being completed as rapidly as he had hoped.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, the central tower remains, despite a free restoration by Gilbert Scott in 1859 after half a century in which the upper stage was encased in Roman cement, as the most lasting memorial of Bell's priorate at Durham.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, Bursar's Accounts, 1464-77 (an uninterrupted series); for an "Inventarium Prioratus Dunelmensis" made at Bell's accession, see *Feodarium Prioratus Dunelmensis* (Surtees Society lviii, 1871), 98-211.

<sup>55</sup> *Durham Account Rolls* ii, 412-417, prints most of the details of the *Reparacio Campanilis*. J. Harvey's dating of the two stages of the tower to 1465-75 and 1483-90 respectively (*English Mediaeval Architects*, 340) is more precise than the evidence allows.

<sup>56</sup> DCD, Reg. Parv. III, fos. 158, 160. Cf. J. R. Boyle, *Comprehensive Guide to the County of Durham* (London, n.d.), 204, 328-330.

Throughout the 15th century the number of Durham monks remained remarkably stable and, as prior, Bell ruled over approximately seventy members of the community, of whom forty were in residence at the mother-house while thirty were dispersed among its dependencies. There are no grounds for believing that the conduct of monastic life at Durham between 1464 and 1478 was other than harmonious and at least outwardly respectable. The Durham cloister seems to have been free from the personal scandals which had interrupted the tranquillity of the first half of the century, and it is clear that Bell exercised his office in the traditional manner. Whatever his inclinations may have been, no late mediaeval prior of Durham could act as autocrat. Bell found it necessary to accept the advice and guidance of the senior members of his chapter and entertained all his subjects both at his table in the prior's apartments at Durham and at his *ludi*, normally held four times a year at the neighbouring manor of Beaurepaire. Although the late mediaeval prior of Durham was more closely associated with the daily routine of his convent than most wealthy monastic prelates of the period, much of his disciplinary authority was delegated to the subprior. Bell was unusually fortunate in that another distinguished university monk, Thomas Caley, acted as subprior throughout the entire period of his own priorate.<sup>57</sup>

Prior Bell's supervision of those monks he sent to serve the Durham cells is naturally more fully revealed by his register. In this sphere he showed himself a stern and vigilant superior. One unnamed fellow of Durham College guilty of frequenting the house of a common prostitute in Oxford was threatened with the severest penalties unless he amended his way of life. Thomas Knowte, one of the two Durham monks on Farne Island, was rebuked for rowing to the mainland and keeping suspect company there as well as because "you layse a part thy stamyns

<sup>57</sup> DCD, Reg. IV, fos. 151, 158, 159v, 184; cf. Emden, *op. cit.*, i 342.

and daily weres sarks of lynyn cloth".<sup>58</sup> This last was a subject about which Bell apparently felt particularly strongly for in March 1472 he sent letters to superiors of Durham cells reminding them not to allow the use of linen shirts except in cases of severe illness or skin infection.<sup>59</sup> With the obvious exceptions of Durham College, Oxford and Finchale (the only two cells over which Bell had himself presided) the history of Durham dependencies in the later middle ages presents a general picture of economic decline and spiritual *malaise*. Nevertheless, Bell was perhaps even more devoted to the preservation of their traditional connection with Durham than any 15th-century prior. In 1474 he went so far as to rescind his previous appointment of John Eden as prior of Lytham in Lancashire because he feared that this Durham monk might be tempted to seek papal exemption from his obedience to the mother-house "like as dan Willyam Partrik dyd in his dayes the which god defende".<sup>60</sup> Nowhere is Bell's determination to maintain the traditional liberties and possessions of St Cuthbert's church more fully obvious than in his resolute last-ditch struggle to prevent the priory of Coldingham from falling into Scottish hands. Although most of the relevant documents were published by the elder James Raine well over a century ago, a detailed account of the extraordinarily complex and tortuous process by which Coldingham was finally detached from Durham still remains to be written. Yet it is clear not only that the "causa de Coldyngham" was the foremost issue of Bell's priorate, but that the prior was fighting a battle which he could never hope to win. A regular flow of letters on the subject passed backwards and forwards between Bell and his representatives

<sup>58</sup> *Scriptores Tres* cccli-ccclii; DCD, Reg. Parv. III, fos. 135-136; J. Raine, *North Durham* (1852), 355.

<sup>59</sup> DCD, Reg. Parv. III, fo. 130, 151; *Scriptores Tres* ccclii-cccliii.

<sup>60</sup> DCD, Reg. Parv. III, fos. 153-154. The allusion is to a Durham *cause célèbre* of the 1440's: William Patrick, prior of Lytham 1431-46, was forced to return to Durham after a series of protracted and expensive law-suits consequent on his attempt to hold the priorate in perpetuity.

at the Curia but it became gradually obvious to the Durham monks that expensive legal successes at Rome made no impression on the Scottish government. It was only after Bell's removal to Carlisle in 1478 that they were in a position to recognize the inevitable. One of the first actions of the new prior, Robert Ebchester, was to write to his proctor at the Curia urging "that the mater slepe for a tyme to such season as it may pleas God and Seynt Cuthbert that we may have better spede than we can have yit".<sup>61</sup> Not surprisingly, the Coldingham case was never re-opened and Bell proved to be the last Durham prior who fought for the survival of this colony of English monks on Scottish soil.

Prior Bell's defence of traditional Durham privileges involved him in several other contests, none of which was more serious than that with Lawrence Booth, bishop of Durham from 1457 to 1476 and archbishop of York from 1476 to 1480. During Bell's priorate, friction tended to centre round such issues as the prior's right to archidiaconal jurisdiction over his appropriated churches in the diocese of Durham and (after 1476) the chapter's claim not to include the word *obediencia* in their presentations to the archbishop of York.<sup>62</sup> Neither issue was a new one and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Bell irritated Lawrence Booth unnecessarily by his tactless handling of these disputes. From his very early months as prior, Bell showed himself extremely, and indeed unduly, ready to appeal for support against his ecclesiastical superior to other English magnates. It is exactly this cultivation of good relations with the English nobility, however, that forms the most characteristic and individual feature of Bell's priorate as well as providing the central explanation for his rise to the episcopate in 1478. Bell was not a political partisan by choice, and like other prominent ecclesiastics he found the aristocratic

<sup>61</sup> *Scriptores Tres* ccclxvii.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* cccx, ccclix-ccclx; DCD, Reg. Parv. III, fos. 125v-126, 128, 131, 133-134, 173v, 175.

feuds and dynastic upheavals of the period distinctly embarrassing to himself and dangerous to the country: in a letter of 29 March 1477 he advised the new bishop of Durham, William Dudley, to "stand as one" with the Nevilles "for many of the gentlemen er guydit full menely, and foloweth yonge counsell".<sup>63</sup> But complete political impartiality was impossible during a period when both the welfare of the monastery and Bell's own personal advancement depended on the support of the most powerful "good lords" of the north. Bell made occasional errors of judgement and was unfortunate enough to make out letters of fraternity to George, Duke of Clarence, on 29 September 1477 only a few months before the latter's execution<sup>64</sup>; but his major decisions in this field — to cultivate the Nevilles in the 1460's and Richard of Gloucester in the 1470's — paid him extremely handsome dividends.

Bell's ability to win the favours of the northern magnates depended directly on the skill with which he exploited the extensive patronage at his disposal on their behalf. Although his letters written in response to requests for vacant benefices show that he soon became adept at balancing the claims of one lord against those of another, the pressures imposed on him were often overwhelming; as he wrote on 3 March 1476 to a clerk interested in a forthcoming vacancy among the prebends of the convent's collegiate church at Howden, "I and my brether are so ofte tymes cald uppon in sich things by diverse lords of right high astate that we may noght have our liberty to dispose sich smal benefices as ar in our gifte to our frends like as our will and intent wer forto do, as God knawith and me repentith".<sup>65</sup> There were other ways

<sup>63</sup> *Scriptores Tres* ccclix.

<sup>64</sup> DCD, Reg. IV, fo. 181.

<sup>65</sup> DCD, Reg. Parv. III, fo. 168v. Bell's apologia is slightly disingenuous as it is clear that he expected and received substantial compensation for his use of ecclesiastical patronage on behalf of English magnates; the best example is the case of the Yorkshire vicarage of Bossall in 1477, when the original presentation of William Laxe was jettisoned in favour of one of the duchess of Gloucester's chaplains — in return for the Gloucesters' support against Archbishop Booth on the *obediencia* issue: *ibid.*, fos. 172v, 175, 175\*; R. Donaldson, "Sponsors, Patrons and Presentations to Benefices during the Later Middle Ages", *Archaeologia Aeliana*, Fourth Series xxxviii (1960), 174-176.

in which Bell was able to further the interests of the northern magnates. In his first year as prior he not only sold the marriage of Cuthbert Billingham, one of the convent's tenants by knight service, to Sir Humphrey Neville for £40 "pro utilitate et supportacione domus", but also advanced £24 to the earl of Warwick out of the future proceeds of a clerical subsidy in the diocese of Durham, having "putte my self in grete daunger for your sake and made shyfte of asmuch money".<sup>66</sup> Bell became prior of Durham at the period when the Neville ascendancy in national and northern politics was at its height; so it is not surprising to find him sitting at the second table in hall at that most famous of all Neville gatherings, the lavish banquet which followed George Neville's enthronement as archbishop of York in September 1465.<sup>67</sup> Ten years later Richard, duke of Gloucester, had replaced the earl of Warwick as the convent's *dominus specialissimus*. On a visit to Durham in April 1474 he was entertained by Prior Bell and received into the fraternity of the house, an honour also conferred on Gloucester's wife, Anne Neville, two years later.<sup>68</sup> Throughout the mid-1470's the prior was relying on Gloucester's support in his quarrel with the archbishop of York and there is no doubt whatsoever that Richard's powerful influence secured Bell's elevation to the bishopric of Carlisle in 1478.

Bell's claims to a bishopric naturally rested on the record of his priorate at Durham and his reputation as an active administrator. But an aspiring bishop was expected to show a wider range of experience outside the monastery walls than was usual among priors of Durham. It was here that Bell's membership of several royal commissions to negotiate with the Scots added significantly to his other qualifications. He was chosen one of the

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, fo. 126; Bursar's Accounts, 1464/65, Allocaciones.

<sup>67</sup> Leland, *Collectanea*, ed. T. Hearne (London, 1774), vi 3. Bell's expenses at this enthronement (45s. 11d.) are recorded in DCD, Bursar's Accounts, 1465/66, Expense Necessarie.

<sup>68</sup> DCD, Reg. IV, fos. 172-173, 214.

English commissioners to treat *de conservatione induciarum* on 18 July 1470 and served on several similar commissions in the following years. Records of his travelling expenses to Newcastle and Alnwick “pro trugis ibidem tenendis”, as well as of his personal expenditure of a hundred marks on a new peel tower at Shoreswood near Norham, prove his active participation in the work of maintaining peace in the Marches.<sup>69</sup> His services on behalf of the English government naturally encouraged Bell to consider himself a prospective bishop, and his promotion to the episcopate in 1478 was the fulfilment of an ambition which dated from at least four years earlier. A letter written on 31 August 1474 to Master Peter de Mellinis, the proctor Bell employed on the Coldingham and other causes at Rome, is particularly revealing.<sup>70</sup> At this date Bell was hoping to become the next bishop of Chichester although his views as to how this aim could be achieved remained extremely indefinite and naïve. Not yet certain of royal support and conscious of the dangers of infringing the statutes of Praemunire, he asked Mellinis to investigate the possibilities of a papal reservation of the see. Bell placed much confidence on the influence that the archbishop of Rouen might be able to exert on his behalf in the Curia and informed Mellinis that he was prepared to send large sums of cash to Rome if the project seemed worth pursuing. On 26 April 1475 Mellinis replied with a letter in which he pointed out the dangers and difficulties of Bell’s proposals: “Sciat paternitas vestra quod tales reservationes nunquam consueverunt fieri, nec possunt aliquo modo obtineri”. It would be

<sup>69</sup> *Rotuli Scotiae* (Record Commission, 1814-19) ii 422-423, 430-431, 433-434, 437-438; *Calendar of Documents relating to Scotland* (Scottish Record Office, 1881-88) iv 283. *Durham Account Rolls* iii 646; DCD, Bursar’s Accounts, 1471/72, 1473/74, Expense Necessarie. Among Bell’s fellow commissioners in the Marches were two men whose influence and favour were to bear decisively on his own future, Edward Story, his predecessor as bishop of Carlisle, and Humphrey, Lord Dacre of Gilsland. Bell received both men into the Durham fraternity, Dacre on 13 January 1477 and Story on 12 February 1478 (DCD, Reg. IV, fos. 179, 181v).

<sup>70</sup> DCD, Reg. Parv. III, fos. 156-157.

more sensible for the prior to wait until a suitable English bishopric became vacant and then Mellinis would do what he could to further Bell's provision.<sup>71</sup>

The death of John Arundel, bishop of Chichester, on 18 October 1477 gave Bell his opportunity. Although unable to obtain Chichester itself as he had once hoped, the translation there of Edward Story left vacant the diocese of Carlisle, the bishopric for which Bell was most obviously qualified. On 11 February 1478, the pope provided Bell to Carlisle and translated Story to Chichester.<sup>72</sup> News of Bell's promotion had reached London by 26 February when Bishop Dudley of Durham wrote to the chapter informing them of their duty to prepare for a new election.<sup>73</sup> In itself, Bell's provision to Carlisle can hardly have surprised contemporaries aware of his connections with Richard of Gloucester. Much more startling was the news that Sixtus IV had accompanied his bull of provision with a licence allowing Bell to continue to hold the priory of Durham in commendam. This extraordinary attempt to deprive the Durham monks of their traditional right to be governed by a canonically elected and independent prior has no parallel in the history of the convent and few elsewhere. Monasteries in England, unlike those of France and Scotland, largely escaped the evil effects of commendam, a practice which did not begin in this country until 1472.<sup>74</sup> In that year Richard Redman had successfully petitioned the pope to be allowed to retain his abbacy of Shap despite his promotion to the bishopric of St Asaph, the only obvious precedent for Bell's attempt to carry out a similar manoeuvre in 1478. All allowances being made for Bell's understandable desire to supplement the slender revenues of the bishop of Carlisle with those he already enjoyed as

<sup>71</sup> *Priory of Coldingham* 232-235.

<sup>72</sup> C. Eubel, *Hierarchia Catholica*, ii (Munster, 1914) 128, 170.

<sup>73</sup> DCD, Reg. IV, fo. 182.

<sup>74</sup> W. E. Lunt, *Financial Relations of the Papacy with England, 1327-1534* (Mediaeval Academy of America, 1962), 173, 820-823.

prior of Durham, it is almost inconceivable that he can have expected to bring off such an audacious stroke. When in October 1478 the new Durham prior and chapter wrote to Master Peter de Mellinis to rebuke him for the part he had played at the Curia in furthering Bell's intrigues, they expressed their genuine amazement that anyone should have attempted to introduce the practice of commendam to a monastery which had been ruled by its own prior for over four hundred years.<sup>75</sup>

Admittedly Bell had taken the precaution of seeking Richard of Gloucester's support, and on 13 April 1478, at the height of the crisis, the latter wrote from Middleham to the subprior and chapter warning them to postpone their election of a new prior, "considering that it is said that your ffader the prior hath the prialite in a commendam".<sup>76</sup> But this was an issue which even Gloucester's great influence failed to resolve in Bell's favour. Despite their consternation at the news, the Durham monks remained firm and could rely on the indispensable support of their bishop, William Dudley, who protected their interests throughout this period of "grete daynger and heavynesse". Rumours reached Dudley in London of Bell's attempts to put pressure on the community; and conscious of the dangers of "confederacions, conspiracies, or othre ungoodly demenyngs among you" he referred to the possibility that Bell had placed the convent's common seal "under suche warde and keypyng that ye may not wele atteine ther unto". But by late April Bell's attempt to enjoy the commendam of Durham priory had already been defeated. On the advice of Dudley and others, Edward IV had informed Bell "ut solo Episcopatu et nullo modo prioratu gauderet"; and it was only after Bell had renounced his right to the commendam that the king agreed to accept his oath of fealty on 22 April. On the following day Bishop

<sup>75</sup> *Priory of Coldingham* 235.

<sup>76</sup> DCD, Reg. IV, fo. 182.

Dudley informed the monks of Durham that Bell's "auctorite over you is now utterly expired and extinct".<sup>77</sup>

By the time that Robert Ebchester was elected the new prior of Durham on 22 May 1478, Richard Bell had already been bishop of Carlisle for a month. The royal mandates ordering the restitution of the temporalities of the see were dated from Westminster on 24 April 1478 and in London two days later, on Rogation Sunday, Bell was consecrated by the new bishop of Chichester, Edward Story.<sup>78</sup> Bell's inability to adopt the normal practice and secure consecration at the hands of his metropolitan is readily understandable in view of the age and illness of Archbishop Lawrence Booth; but he was obliged to make a written profession of canonical obedience to the archbishop, an undated copy of which was entered in Booth's York register between documents of 7 May and 24 June 1478.<sup>79</sup> As Bell was able to exercise effective control over his diocese from the date of his consecration, he seems, like many late mediaeval English bishops in the same position, to have been in no particular hurry to secure installation and enthronement in his cathedral church. The mandate to enthrone Bell (a duty which pertained to the archdeacon of York) was dated as late as 24 August 1480.<sup>80</sup> By this time the seventy-year-old bishop had already taken up residence in his diocese and begun the last phase of his long career. Unfortunately and paradoxically the evidence for Bell's rôle as bishop of Carlisle between 1478 and 1495 is much less plentiful than at earlier stages of his life. However, the modern historian is in a slightly more favourable position than William Hutchinson who commented on Bell's

<sup>77</sup> DCD, Reg. Parv. III, fos. 182, 186v; Reg. IV, fos. 182-183; *Scriptores Tres* cclxi-ccclxv.

<sup>78</sup> *CPR 1476-85*, 105; *Scriptores Tres* 149, cclxi; British Museum, Lansdowne MS. 721, fo. 56v. Story consecrated Bell in the London house of the bishops of Carlisle.

<sup>79</sup> St Anthony's Hall, York: Register of Lawrence Booth, fo. 6.

<sup>80</sup> British Museum, Cotton MS. Galba E. x, fos. 136v-137.

episcopate at Carlisle that "in the course of eighteen years we collect nothing singular in his life".<sup>81</sup> The survival of a valuable collection of 15th-century accounts by officials of the bishop of Carlisle helps to throw some light on the obscurities of the late mediaeval history of the diocese. Such accounts exist for eight years of Bell's episcopate at Carlisle and several, especially the audited *compti* of his receiver-general, make it possible to establish some conclusions about his activities as bishop.<sup>82</sup>

When Bell became bishop of Carlisle in 1478, he inherited an administrative and financial organization of the diocese which was already well established and which he himself made no attempt to change. The see was divided into four deaneries but its one archdeacon was usually a royal clerk absent from the diocese. The bishop's staff of officials and servants followed the same pattern, though on an unusually small scale, as that encountered in other English dioceses of the period. The bishop employed the services of a vicar-general (often the prior of Carlisle), a registrar (who can sometimes be identified with the official of the diocese) and an apparitor, while he also found it necessary to retain a proctor at the York curia. Bell was unable to afford the expense of a permanent suffragan bishop, but occasionally employed the services of one of the York suffragans to celebrate orders at Carlisle. The bishop's lay servants included the bailiffs of his estates, of whom the most important were those of Dalston, Penrith, Caldecote, Linstock and Aspatria, as well as the steward of the barony of Dalston, the constable of Rose Castle and the steward and bailiffs of Horncastle in Lincolnshire. All these officers accounted to the bishop's receiver-general who

<sup>81</sup> W. Hutchinson, *History and Antiquities of Cumberland* (Carlisle, 1794), ii 627.

<sup>82</sup> Carlisle Record Office: DRC/2, nos. 13-21 (1478-79; 1480-81; 1482; 1487-88 with duplicates; 1488-89; 1489-90; 1492-93; 1493-94). The 15th-century episcopal accounts of Carlisle were used by Canon James Wilson — notably in *Rose Castle* (Carlisle, 1912) and *VCH Cumberland* ii 37-44 — but were then mislaid and only rediscovered three years ago.

held a central place in the administration of the diocese and normally combined this position with that of household steward (“seneschallus hospicii domini intrinsecus”). Bishop Bell’s household was itself probably little larger than that with which he had been surrounded when prior of Durham; most provisions were bought locally but the bishop’s wine supplies had to be obtained from Newcastle or even Hull and then conveyed across country to Rose at considerable expense.

The poverty of their diocese was the greatest problem facing the mediaeval bishops of Carlisle, a problem which Bell had hoped to overcome by holding Durham in commendam. The see of Carlisle had never been richly endowed and its revenues, like those of all northern landlords in the 15th century, suffered severely as a result of Scottish raids and falling rent values. Only their possession of the lordship and rectory of Horncastle in Lincolnshire, which provided over a quarter of their total income, preserved the bishops of Carlisle from complete insolvency. By the time that Bell was provided to Carlisle in 1478 it was no longer possible for him to expand his sources of revenue in any significant direction. The clerical population of north-western England was neither numerous nor wealthy enough to be able to contribute more than a few pounds to his income in the form of fines and subsidies; another possibility, the appropriation of churches in the bishop’s patronage, had already been exhausted earlier in the century.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, although Bell’s financial situation was always a matter for concern, there is some evidence to suggest that he was able to achieve some stability and that, as at Durham, he left his office somewhat more prosperous than he had found it. A valor, taken in 1462, of episcopal revenues in the dioceses of Carlisle and Durham showed that there had been a fall from the previous total of £389 to a figure of £349 *per annum*.<sup>84</sup> But a comparison of

<sup>83</sup> *VCH Cumberland* ii 35; Storey, CW2 lv 121.

<sup>84</sup> DRC/2, no. 9.

the receiver-general's account for 1480-81 with that for 1487-88 suggests that the decline was being reversed during Bell's priorate. In 1480-81, the annual receipts (not including arrears) of Bell's receiver-general were £363, a figure which had risen to £427 in 1487-88. In the former year £95 was delivered into the bishop's own hands and £60 handed to the steward of his household: the comparative figures for 1487-88 are £110 and £164.<sup>85</sup> At the beginning of his episcopate, Bell was heavily in debt, especially to Agnes Rodes of Newcastle upon Tyne from whom he had borrowed £80 in 1478, presumably to help meet the cost of his *servitia* at Rome. But within a few years, Bell had not only repaid his creditors but was in a position to undertake extensive building operations at Rose Castle, the best-known feature of his episcopate. Although the extant accounts are somewhat less informative about the details of the rebuilding at Rose than one could wish, they show that the "novum opus" at Rose was in full progress between 1487 and 1489, resulting in the construction of a new chapel with an elaborate and probably timber-framed roof as well as a new tower which bears Bell's initials and is still known, despite extensive modifications at later periods, by his name.<sup>86</sup>

The rebuilding at Rose Castle suggests not only that Bell's financial resources could withstand the strain of heavy capital expenditure but that he often stayed there. His officials' accounts leave a similarly strong impression that he was normally a resident bishop and lived at Rose throughout most of his episcopate. Bell probably visited London infrequently after 1478 and allowed his predecessor, Edward Story, to remain a resident at the bishop

<sup>85</sup> DRC/2, nos. 14, 17.

<sup>86</sup> *Rose Castle* 75, 86, 125-126, 212-219. The rebuilding of Rose was continued by Bell's successors, notably Bishop Kite (1521-37): Leland, *Itinerary* (1906-10), v 56; *Collectanea* (1774) ii 347. Another building repaired by Bell at about this time was the choir of the parish church of Crosby-on-Eden (appropriated to the bishopric of Carlisle); here, early in the 18th century, Bishop Nicolson noticed Bell's rebus, "the letter R cut in stone, with a Bell hanging under it": W. Nicolson, *Miscellany Accounts of the Diocese of Carlisle*, ed. R. S. Ferguson (CW Extra Series i, 1877), 105.

of Carlisle's London house, Carlisle Place, on the south side of the Strand.<sup>87</sup> Although as a spiritual peer Bell received an individual summons to parliaments between 1478 and 1495, the rolls of parliament provide no evidence of his attendance. The most interesting of Bell's recorded excursions outside his diocese was made, appropriately enough, in the interests of the greatest of his former patrons, Richard of Gloucester. Bell was one of the five bishops who accompanied the newly crowned Richard III as he rode triumphantly under Micklegate Bar into the city of York on 29 August 1483 and was apparently still in attendance on the king a week later when the latter invested his son Edward as Prince of Wales.<sup>88</sup> There were other occasions on which Bell left the comparative seclusion of Rose Castle: early in 1481, for example, he spent some time at Bardney in Lincolnshire (presumably in order to visit his neighbouring lordship of Horncastle), and five years later he rode to Jarrow in the company of a retinue partly provided by the prior of Lanercost.<sup>89</sup> Such expeditions seem, however, to have been comparatively rare and Bell's pastoral duties within his diocese must take the central place in any account of the last years of his life. Whether at Rose, where he personally corrected the transgressions of the diocesan clergy and gave his blessing to newly elected abbots, or at Carlisle, where he celebrated orders and presided over diocesan synods, he showed himself a responsible ruler of his see.<sup>90</sup> Bell's relations with the Austin canons of his cathedral church at Carlisle were inevitably close; he stayed at Carlisle priory on several occasions and like Richard III helped to support Prior Gudybour's plans

<sup>87</sup> S. J. Madge, "Worcester House in the Strand", *Archaeologia* xci (1945) 158.

<sup>88</sup> Minster Library, York: Vicars Choral, "Statute and Minute Book", fo. 48; Dean and Chapter, "Register of Terriers" (Davis, *Medieval Cartularies*, no. 1092), fo. 70; *Fabric Rolls of York Minster* (Surtees Society xxxv, 1858), 211.

<sup>89</sup> DRC/2, no. 14; *Rose Castle* 164.

<sup>90</sup> These aspects of Bell's episcopate are best recorded by his registrars' accounts, DRC/2, nos. 13, 18, 19, 20.

for the repair and redecoration of its fabric. The close resemblance between one of the series of late mediaeval paintings on the back of the Carlisle choir-stalls and the illuminations in a 12th-century Durham copy of Bede's *Life of Saint Cuthbert* has led to the suggestion that this manuscript was loaned to Carlisle priory at Bell's request; and the survival of the same carved badge (a mermaid with comb and glass) on both the tower arcade at Durham and one of the miserere seats at Carlisle can be taken to symbolize Bell's association with both of the northern cathedrals.<sup>91</sup>

At first sight Bishop Bell's withdrawal into the world of diocesan affairs may seem difficult to reconcile with the wider rôle played by most late mediaeval English bishops and with Bell's own reputation as an ambitious ecclesiastic. But it is not difficult to find an explanation for Bell's retirement from secular affairs. The theory that episcopal appointments to Carlisle were made "not so much to give the see a bishop as Rose Castle a captain",<sup>92</sup> is only partly valid and fails to apply in Bell's own case. Although, as bishop, Bell headed royal commissions of peace for the counties of Cumberland and Westmorland,<sup>93</sup> real political power in north-western England rested throughout his episcopate in the hands of the Lords Dacre of Gilsland. Humphrey, Lord Dacre and (after 1485) his son Thomas were successively governors of Carlisle Castle and Lieutenants of the West March: not only did Bell welcome visits from the Dacres but he sought their help at times of crisis, as in 1487-88 when

<sup>91</sup> B. Colgrave, "The St Cuthbert Paintings on the Carlisle Cathedral Stalls", *Burlington Magazine* lxxiii (1938) 17-21; "History of British Museum Additional MS. 39943", *Eng. Hist. Rev.* liv (1939) 673-677. For an earlier loan of this highly-prized manuscript to Bishop Neville of Durham on 19 July 1438 see DCD, Misc. Charters, no. 2352. The carving of the mermaid at Carlisle is illustrated by R. W. Billings, *Architectural Illustrations, History and Description of Carlisle Cathedral* (1840), plate XXXV; but Billings's further suggestion (*Geometric Tracery of Brancepeth Church in the County of Durham*, 1845, p. 4) that Bell influenced the design of the geometric panelling at Carlisle cathedral is very unconvincing.

<sup>92</sup> C. M. L. Bouch, *Prelates and People of the Lake Counties* (Kendal, 1948), 118.

<sup>93</sup> *CPR* 1476-85, 556, 577; 1485-94, 484, 504; 1494-1509, 634, 664.

Cherly welbelovde Broder I hartely recomende me to you and praye  
you that the Kinge have put me to such Luffe as is fit for  
that heere my Secretorie came thence to you that I am enforced to  
make request for and great somme of money I would be lothe to call upon  
any of mine for the same but such as I trust be my speciall frends  
wherefor I hartely desire you that I may have such money as you  
may conveniently fynde and doubt ye not ye shalbe repaid of the  
same at any next Audite that I comte me to god at London the  
day of mine next following be so  
Rich: Bell

LETTER FROM RICHARD BELL, BISHOP OF CARLISLE,  
TO THE PRIOR OF DURHAM  
(Muniments of Dean and Chapter, Durham: 1. 14. Pont. no. 16).

a quarrel broke out between Lord Clifford and Sir Christopher Moresby. One lord who played a more considerable rôle than Bell in public affairs of the north was not only yet another supporter of Richard III but also another "monk-bishop". Richard Redman, although bishop of St Asaph until his translation to Exeter in 1495, was a native of Westmorland, and as abbot of Shap continued to visit Bell's diocese at frequent intervals. Relations between the two bishops seem to have been cordial, for in October 1488 Bell rode to meet Redman at Penrith.<sup>94</sup> Redman was much more heavily involved in diplomatic activity throughout the last quarter of the 15th century than Bell; the latter, although a member of the royal commission appointed on 13 February 1487 to arrange a prolongation of the Anglo-Scottish truce, took relatively little part in the official business of the Marches after leaving Durham.<sup>95</sup>

Another reason for the apparent decline of Bell's political influence was the paradox that as bishop of Carlisle he actually had less attractive patronage at his disposal than when prior of Durham. After William Strickland's appropriation of the church of Horncastle at the beginning of the century there remained few benefices in the bishop's gift wealthy enough to attract the serious attention of royal clerks. So impoverished were most of the churches in the diocese that the bishop often found it difficult to make suitable provision for his own ecclesiastical officials. Thus Bell instituted his registrar, Robert Fisher, to both the rectory of Cliburn and the vicarage of Torpenhow because the revenues of only one of these churches would have failed to support him.<sup>96</sup> Bell's control over the appointment of his lay officers was

<sup>94</sup> DRC/2, no. 17. For Redman's association with Richard III see R. J. Knecht, "The Episcopate and the Wars of the Roses", *University of Birmingham Hist. Journal* vi (1958) 125, 127.

<sup>95</sup> *Materials for Reign of Henry VII* (Rolls Series, 1873-77) ii 120; cf. *Rot. Scotiae* ii 461, 464, 478, 487, 499; A. Conway, *Henry VII's Relations with Scotland and Ireland, 1485-98* (Cambridge, 1932) 10.

<sup>96</sup> DRC/2, no. 18.

even more limited. When he arrived at Carlisle in 1478 he discovered that the important positions of Constable of Rose Castle and bailiff of the barony of Dalston were in the hands of John Borell and Walter Story, both of whom had received letters patent from Bishop Story appointing them for life.<sup>97</sup> Many of the descendants of Bishop Strickland "continued at Rose and Dalston, holding the offices of constable or bailiff to the bishop in almost hereditary succession from 1414 to 1747",<sup>98</sup> and there is evidence that even ecclesiastical benefices could be partly monopolised by members of the same local family. When Master John Whelpdale senior vacated the church of Caldbeck in 1488 he was succeeded by John Whelpdale, "clericus".<sup>99</sup> As bishop of Carlisle, Bell ruled over a diocese largely administered by a few influential Westmorland and Cumberland families. None of the servants employed by Bell at Durham can be proved to have followed him to Carlisle after 1478, and the bishop's freedom of action was more restricted by powerful local interests than perhaps he had himself anticipated.

Any account of Bell's rôle as bishop of Carlisle must also take into account the fact that he was an extremely old man throughout his episcopate. Although Bell was the only bishop of Carlisle to resign his office between 1246 and 1946, the decision is readily understandable when it is remembered that he had reached his eighty-fifth year in 1495. Bell's resignation was admitted by the pope on 4 September of that year, and William Senhouse, abbot of St Mary's, York, provided to the see.<sup>100</sup> Senhouse, another Benedictine monk, received his temporalities on 11 December and was to be more fortunate than Bell seventeen years earlier in that as bishop

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 14, 17.

<sup>98</sup> Bouch, "Descendants of William Lowther of the Rose", CW2 xxxix 109.

<sup>99</sup> DRC/2, no. 18.

<sup>100</sup> W. M. Brady, *The Episcopal Succession in England, Scotland and Ireland* (Rome, 1876-77), i 102-103. Cf. *CPR 1494-1509*, 58.

he continued to hold the abbacy of St Mary's in commendam. The traditional belief that Bell then returned to Durham to spend the last few months of his life as a monk finds no confirmation among the Durham records and is difficult to reconcile with his eventual burial in Carlisle cathedral. Nor is it altogether likely that the Durham monks ever forgave Bell for his attempt to retain the priorate in 1478, especially as he had carried off with him to Carlisle a valuable collection of silver plate.<sup>101</sup> It is probable that Bell never completely severed relations with his old monastery; but the only extant letter he wrote to his successor at Durham was hardly calculated to arouse affection. Bell complained that the king's business had compelled him to find "oon great Some of money" and, signing himself in his own handwriting, asked the prior to loan him "such money as ye may conveyently spare".<sup>102</sup> Possibly Bell spent the very last period of his life at Carlisle rather than Durham cathedral; but speculation seems pointless in view of the complete disappearance of his name from the records after his resignation. Bell's monastic status prevented him from making a will, and even the accepted view that he died in 1496 seems to derive merely from the unsupported assertions of Nicolson and Burn in their history of Westmorland and Cumberland.<sup>103</sup> The inscription round the edge of his magnificent brass on the floor of the cathedral choir at Carlisle only adds to the mystery, for it includes the day but not the month and year of his death: "Hic iacet Reuerendus Pater Ricardus Bell quondam Episcopus Karliolensis qui ab hac luce migravit Videlicet Vicesima Quarto Die . . . Anno Domini . . .

<sup>101</sup> *Priory of Finchale* xxx-xxxii; DCD, Reg. Parv. III, fo. 188.

<sup>102</sup> DCD, I, 14. Pont. no. 16. I am grateful to Mr Martin Snape for bringing this letter to my attention. The letter is addressed to "my Broder the Prior of Duresme" and was sent under the (now missing) bishop's signet seal.

<sup>103</sup> Nicolson and Burn, *History and Antiquities of Westmorland and Cumberland*, ii 276. Cf. Browne Willis, *Survey of Cathedrals* (1727) i 295-296.

Et omnium fidelium defunctorum Per misericordiam dei Requiescant in Perpetua Pace. Amen.”<sup>104</sup>

Richard Bell was the first of three members of the religious clergy who, between them, ruled the diocese of Carlisle for all but six of the forty-two years between 1478 and 1520. The re-emergence of the “monk-bishop” at Carlisle towards the very end of the monastic period is a somewhat remarkable phenomenon and a commentary not only on the aspirations of the more ambitious religious prelates of the time but also on the poverty of a diocese which failed to attract the attentions of the greatest royal ministers and servants, and was consequently a prize open to the professed monk. With the possible exception of Rochester, Carlisle was the poorest of all the English dioceses, and the annual income of its bishop at the end of the middle ages was only slightly higher than that of the see’s richest monastery, the abbey of Holm Cultram.<sup>105</sup> The late foundation of the diocese, the subsequent division of its already limited endowments between the bishop and the Augustinian canons of the cathedral church together with the inability of the late mediaeval episcopate to augment their sources of revenue ensured that the bishop of Carlisle could never count himself among the wealthiest magnates of England. Such was certainly the case; and the familiarity of the argument that Carlisle was a relatively poor bishopric hardly lessens its importance in explaining why a monk like Richard Bell secured the see. On the other hand, it is essential to emphasize, more perhaps than previous historians have done, that the financial and other

<sup>104</sup> No photograph can do the original brass full justice. Bishop Bell is depicted in full mass vestments, holding the bible in his right hand and reciting the *Credo*; he wears a high jewelled and crocketed mitre and his right hand grasps the pastoral staff. The quatrain at his feet (now barely legible and sometimes mis-read in the past) appears to read as follows:

“Hac Marmor Fossa Bell presulis en tenet ossa  
Duresme dudum prior hic post pontificatum  
Gessit sed renuit Christum super omnia querit  
Dispiciens mundum poscendo precamina fratrum.”

<sup>105</sup> *Valor Ecclesiasticus* (Record Commission, 1810-34) v 273-274, 282-283.

responsibilities of the bishops of Carlisle were as limited as their resources. The diocese included within its boundaries only ten religious houses and less than a hundred parish churches; although its organization may well have been as effective as those of other sees, it could clearly afford to be much less extensive and costly. Even if allowances are made for the adverse effects of the Scottish wars on the financial position of the late mediaeval bishops of Carlisle, there is no evidence that poverty ever prevented the adequate performance of their pastoral duties. Provided that the bishop in question was content, unlike Marmaduke Lumley, to play a rôle in local rather than national politics and society, it seems clear that his income allowed him the opportunity to do so. Questions of prestige and status set apart, there were at least some material advantages to be gained by Bell when he eagerly exchanged the priory of Durham for the bishopric of Carlisle in 1478. By Lumley, the see of Carlisle was clearly looked upon as a stepping-stone (on which, however, he had to wait reluctantly for twenty years of his adult life) to one of the richest bishoprics; but for Richard Bell the episcopal throne at Carlisle marked the culmination of an already long and eventful career. Despite later rumours that he aimed at the papal throne itself,<sup>106</sup> even Bell's ambition had its limits.

<sup>106</sup> Blakiston, *Some Durham College Rolls*, 17.