

## XVIII.—REVIEW.

*A history of Antony Bek, Bishop of Durham 1283-1311*,  
by C. M. Fraser. Clarendon Press: Oxford University  
Press. Price 42/-.

Antony Bek, bishop of Durham, was a formidable figure in the England of Edward I, and the chronicles and records are full of references to him. Unfortunately the catastrophe which has befallen almost all of the episcopal registers of Durham has not spared his; but there is a great body of other material, which Dr. Fraser, who in a previous publication has collected the surviving unprinted sources under the title *Records of Antony Bek* (Surtees Society, 1947), is peculiarly well qualified to put together. The task must have been an arduous one, for the documents are divided between London and Durham, and the materials at the Public Record Office scattered among a wide variety of classes. One cannot perceive that any likely record source has been neglected, and the author moves among all her documents with the assurance and accuracy of one who is thoroughly acquainted with their technical problems. There is no allusion to the verse chronicle of Langtoft, whose obvious interest in Bek<sup>1</sup> seems never to have been explained. But it is unlikely that much more will ever be known about Bek than what is here set forth. The book includes chapters on his early life, his accession to the see, his diplomatic work; on his relations with the cathedral priory, his work as a bishop, and as ruler of the palatinate (this last making use of some important unpublished plea rolls); an itinerary from 1274-1311 and a full bibliography. With a work like this

<sup>1</sup> See the index to the very inadequate Rolls series edition, s.v. *Anthony*.

to set alongside the recent study of bishop Hugh de Puiset by Mr. Scammell, students of the history of the see of Durham have good cause to be thankful.

The present reviewer should not be thought ungrateful for all that is done here if he draws attention to the peculiar difficulties arising from the nature of the materials. Professor Cheney has recently reminded us of the implications of the fact that medieval records are so overwhelmingly concerned with litigation and with property.<sup>2</sup> In the present case we have no contemporary biography, very little personal correspondence, and (in consequence of the loss of his register) little evidence of Bek's concern with the spiritual side of his duty as bishop; and so the modern biographer is forced back upon records which by their very nature tend to confirm the popular impression that he was a grasping and quarrelsome person. By modern standards there is no doubt a strong element of truth in this, for the reporter who described the three-days debate at York in 1300 as *pulcherrima disputatio*<sup>3</sup> reflects a common medieval attitude to the delights of litigation. But it cannot be the whole story; there is an obvious sincerity about the tributes of the chroniclers to the "magnanimous" bishop, and in their confidence in his judgment at times of crisis:

Now assist Anthony, and do your wise work,  
For in this case there is no remedy without thee.<sup>4</sup>

One could perhaps wish that the author had faced this problem more explicitly, even at the expense of some of the detail, in itself very interesting, of the bishop's disputes. For example, one would like to know more clearly her views upon Sir Maurice Powicke's charge that Bek was guilty of "bad faith" in his treatment of the agreement reached at Evenwood in 1300. Nobody is in a better position to discuss

<sup>2</sup> C. R. Cheney: *Records of Medieval England* (1956).

<sup>3</sup> F. M. Powicke: *Thirteenth Century* (1953), p. 493.

<sup>4</sup> Langtoft ii, 200.

such matters, but she does not seem inclined to debate the bishop's character as tested by such episodes as this.

It should be clearly realized that this book is of great value and interest to students of the history of the see and the palatinate of Durham: a fact which may not always be appreciated from the title. The author also deserves high commendation for the care with which she has followed the innumerable side-issues involved in a "Life and Times" such as this. Many of them involve technicalities far removed from her main subject, but we have not observed more than a very few doubtful points which deserve mention. The Anglo-French treaty of Paris of 1259 did not provide that Limousin and Perigord should pass to England after the death of Alphonso of Poitiers (p. 20) nor was it even provided that the whole of these territories should pass to England under any conditions (p. 17). Alexander III of Scotland did not do homage to Edward I in 1278 specifically "for his English lands" (p. 19). Edward I's eldest son was not a "prince" in 1290 (p. 55). Edward I did not *arbitrate* in the Great Cause (p. 57; cf. *Scott. Hist. Rev.* xvi (1918), pp. 1 foll.). The itinerary on pp. 233-249, where it depends on charter witness lists, must be subject to the doubts which are known to exist about the actual presence of witnesses on the date of the grant. And one suspects that the reference in the bibliography to "Wardrobe Accounts 202" should really be to volume 202 in the Miscellaneous Books of the Treasury of Receipt.

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