

XIII.—SPONSORS, PATRONS AND PRESENTATIONS
TO BENEFICES—PARTICULARLY THOSE IN
THE GIFT OF THE PRIORS OF DURHAM—DURING
THE LATER MIDDLE AGES.

BY ROBERT DONALDSON.

It is generally appreciated that medieval presentations to ecclesiastical benefices were not always a simple matter of choice on the part of the recognized patron. The most spectacular interferences with the rights of patrons—papal provisions and royal presentations during minorities of lay tenants in chief and vacancies in bishoprics and abbeys—have received their full share of historians' attention. Less has been written about a third type of interference: the type which occurred when the patron presented a candidate suggested to him, and to a greater or less degree pressed upon his attention, by another sponsor. If this kind of recommendation for presentation has had less than its fair share of twentieth-century printer's ink spilled upon it, it was correspondingly neglected by the medieval scribes. We can be reasonably certain that it had much more influence upon appointments to benefices than the written sources reveal. Suggested candidates might be named by word of mouth to local abbots or priors with patronage at their disposal, and even if such suggestions were committed to writing at all, they would rarely be transcribed into any official records, for patrons could not ignore the uncompromising canonical denunciations of "pacts and transactions" in appointing to benefices.¹ In one of the few written records of the exertion of influence upon a diocese of Durham patron—a successful petition addressed by the burghers of Berwick to the monks

¹ Cf. Wilkins, *Concilia*, i, p. 587; Lyndwood, *Provinciale*, 1679, p. 74.

of Durham to present John de Ederam to the vicarage of Berwick—the petitioners were careful to note that they had no legal claim to the advowson, “lest it seem that they sold the presentation to us”.²

Isolated examples of sponsorship can be established or inferred from royal, episcopal and papal records. Thus it is entered in the *Calendar of Papal Letters* that on 30 September, 1471, Pope Sixtus IV ordered the abbots of St. Agatha’s and Alnwick in the dioceses of York and Durham to hear the case of Robert Mason, LL.D., rector of Richmond and canon and prebendary of Norton, who had appealed to the pope against John Neville, lord of Montagu, alleging that he had imprisoned him and forced him to resign these benefices in favour of Oliver Bland, Neville’s chaplain, who had thereafter received *de facto* collation.³ As the prebends of Norton were all in the gift of the bishop of Durham, the probability is that Neville had prevailed upon Bishop Booth to collate his chaplain. Royal letters patent and episcopal registers add four examples of attempts to influence presentations made by the abbey of St. Mary’s, York, to its Durham rectory of Middleton in Teesdale, two by the king (1333 and 1486) and two by the earl of Warwick (1379 and 1432/3).⁴

Such occasional references in the official records give us no idea of the extent and importance of the influences exerted upon the local patrons. The right to choose an incumbent was an important one, and no patron was likely to present a candidate chosen by somebody else unless it was made worth his while, either by some specific payment or service, or (probably much more common) by a vaguer understanding that the sponsor’s good will would be at his disposal if required. If the sponsor was a local potentate or if he had influence in governmental or high ecclesiastical circles such good will was always worth having. The distinction between

² Durham Chapter Archives, *Miscellaneous Charters*, no. 5983.

³ *Calendar of Papal Letters*, xiii, p. 307.

⁴ *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 1330-34, pp. 397, 426; 1485-94, p. 89; *Register of Bishop Hatfield* [Durham Chapter Library], f. 156v; *Register of Bishop Langley* [Durham Chapter Library], ff. 202v-203, 301.

good will, services and outright simony could, however, be a nice one, and any regular documentation of transactions between sponsors and patrons must consequently be sought in private rather than public records.

We do not have many records of this kind, but in the circumstances we are lucky to have any at all, and particularly lucky in that those we do have relate to benefices in the gift of one of the most important local patrons, the priory of Durham. These records are now preserved in Locellus XXV of the Archives of the Dean and Chapter of Durham, a box of about 150 documents, eighty-six of which record petitions to the priors asking that certain clerks be given preferment. The period covered by these documents is approximately 1380 to 1500. In her article, *The social position and influence of the priors of Durham as illustrated by their correspondence*,⁵ Miss E. M. Halcrow has printed abstracts of most of the items in Locellus XXV which contain requests for preferment. A few documents of a similar nature have been copied into the small register (*Registrum Parvum*) or letter book of the priory of Durham, now in the Chapter Archives. Unfortunately, all but five of the petitions which specify individual benefices ask for churches or prebends outside the diocese of Durham itself. Although the priory of Durham held patronage within the diocese to a greater value than that of any other patron except the bishop, its most attractive benefices were those which derived from the early Yorkshire franchise of St. Cuthbert. Particularly sought after were the prebends of the collegiate churches of Howden and Hemingbrough. It appears to be the genuine popularity of these benefices south of the Tees rather than any administrative grouping of documents that accounts for the preponderance of Yorkshire benefices among the petitions in Locellus XXV, for many of the other documents in the collection deal with matters pertaining to the diocese of Durham itself. In any event these eighty-six petitions provide a unique opportunity of studying the effect of spon-

⁵ Ante, Ser. 4, xxxiii, 1955, pp. 70-86.

sorship upon the presentations of one of the most important Durham patrons, and are therefore worth considering even if most of them do not relate to benefices within the diocese.

Forty-seven of them came from north-country sources, twenty-four from the nobility, fourteen from the clergy, notable among them being the archbishops of York, seven from gentry and two from burgesses. All five petitions for benefices in the diocese of Durham itself came from local nobles and gentry, and all sixteen petitions for vicarages emanated from local sponsors. Most petitions from south of the Tees were made by royalty.

In attempting to estimate the effectiveness of the petitions in Locellus XXV we are in a fortunate position, in spite of the sparseness of Durham episcopal registers of the fifteenth century and the lack of printed York registers after 1315. The priory of Durham was the only local patron known to have kept a full private record of institutions and inductions to its benefices. This record is preserved in the five volumes of the *Registrum Magnum* now in the Chapter Archives, and, unlike the series of bishops' registers, it is continuous throughout the fifteenth century. By checking the petitions against the entries in this register we can see exactly how effective they were.

Only eleven of the eighty-six petitions cannot be checked in this way, because they do not name a clerk on whose behalf they are despatched, but merely refer to "a clerk" of the sponsor or of some other would-be patron whom he was supporting. Of the seventy-five petitions which did name the candidate, twenty-seven resulted in appointments to benefices in the priory's gift. (It is of some interest to note that out of 171 papal provisions which might have led to appointments to parish churches or prebends in the diocese of Durham between 1311 and 1540 thirty-nine are known to have done so, and that in the same period 101 royal presentations *sede vacante* or during minorities resulted in forty-seven certain appointments. These figures are obtained mainly from entries in the Calendars of Papal Registers and Patent Rolls and in the

surviving Durham episcopal registers. Due allowance should be made for gaps and other imperfections in these records.)

Between the major groups of sponsors—royalty (31 petitions; 11 successful) and northern magnates (31 petitions; 13 successful)—there is little to choose in the effectiveness of their petitions. What is clear, however, is that a petition which asked for a particular benefice stood a better chance of success than one which simply requested an appointment to any benefice or to the next vacant benefice in the gift of the priory. Twelve of the petitions were of this type and only two of them were effective.

An important reason for the failure of petitions was, of course, competition from other petitioners—a point which can be illustrated from letters in the priory letter book (*Registrum Parvum*). A letter of Prior Wessington, dated 9 September [1440],⁶ relates that the nephew of the earl of Northumberland had asked for a vicarage for one of his protégés and for a pension and a prebend for another. His priest, Sir William Hakforth, had just resigned the vicarage of Giggleswick in Yorkshire, recommending as his successor Sir Christopher Altam, who was thereupon suggested by Percy to the prior, together with a request that Hakforth, as the retiring vicar, should have a pension from the fruits of Giggleswick church, and also that he might be presented to the next vacant prebend in the collegiate church of Hemingbrough. The prior in his reply acceded to the requests for the vicarage and the pension (Altam was presented to Giggleswick on 9 September, 1440⁷), but in the meantime turned down the other on the ground that there was already a substantial waiting list for Hemingbrough prebends, sponsored by the king, the bishop of Durham, Sir William Eure and the earl of Northumberland—that is the present applicant's own uncle. In this letter of Wessington are illustrated the attempts of the aristocracy and the gentry to advance their younger sons in clerical careers (for both the earl and Sir William Eure

⁶ *Registrum Parvum*, i, ff. 128v-129.

⁷ Durham Chapter Archives, *Registrum Magnum*, iii, ff. 259v-260.

were sponsoring their offspring) and the fact that, particularly for the more attractive benefices, the regular patron might well have a roster of sponsored applicants from which to make his choice. While it appears that the king's candidates occasionally received some priority, they sometimes had to wait their turn and were the subjects of two or more petitions,⁸ and it would seem that the local sponsors had as much success as the members of the court. Indeed a good deal probably depended upon a sound local knowledge of what benefices were likely to be on the market and when. Moreover, the priors of Durham appear to have been adept at using one petition as an excuse for not complying with another and presenting in the long run the clerk of their own choice.

Several cross-currents of lay and ecclesiastical patronage may be seen at work in the course of the appointment to the Yorkshire vicarage of Bossall in 1477. The evidence is contained in three documents transcribed into the prior's letter book. In the first, dated 19 March 1476/7, Richard Bell, the prior, replied to a letter of Anne, duchess of Gloucester, asking that her chaplain be presented by the monks. The prior asked her forgiveness for having by an oversight neglected her request and presented another clerk—Sir William Laxe—to the vicarage. But the archbishop of York had taken exception to the form of presentation and refused to institute, and, the case being *sub judice*, nothing further could meanwhile be done. The letter ended by assuring the duchess, for whom and her husband, later King Richard III, the monks of Durham, in common with many in the north of England, seem to have had no small regard—that her protégé would have either the vicarage of Bossall “or another as good when it shall fall in our gift”.⁹

Ten days later, in a letter dated 29 March 1477, the prior made an effort to break the deadlock with the archbishop by requesting William Lawe, the warden of Durham College,

⁸ Locellus XXV, nos. 68, 158; *Registrum Parvum*, ii, ff. 11v-12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, f. 172v.

Oxford, to go to London and point out to the prelate, with the aid of a competent lawyer and documentary evidence (of which the archbishop was to be given only paper copies, not the originals, in case he failed to return them), that the form of presentation was entirely in accordance with precedent, and that the "obedience" which the metropolitan wished to have mentioned in the document had never been so used before. But, added the prior, it might be as well if the warden first sought out in London the bishop of Durham and enlisted his support, and in addition he should acquaint the archbishop with the interest of the duke and duchess in the benefice, particularly if the prelate wished to present one of his own clerks.¹⁰

The efforts of both the prior and his representative were in vain at this stage, however, and on the 11th of April Prior Bell seems to have decided in the face of archiepiscopal firmness to cut his losses and jettison the claim of Laxe. Determined, nevertheless, not to yield on the issue of the terms of the presentation deed, he now wrote to the duchess informing her that he would now present her nominee *in the same form as he had earlier presented the other chaplain*. The intention of obtaining the Gloucesters' full support of the prior's case against the archbishop is too obvious to require stressing. But this is not all; for in the same letter the prior took the opportunity of asking the duchess to present to her husband his nephew, the bearer of the present missive, and to request the duke to give him a position among his servants. Not, Prior Bell was careful to add, that he expected the duke and duchess to be at any great expense on the youth's behalf; he merely wished that his nephew should enjoy the normal advantages and prestige of being the duke's man.¹¹ But however modest the prior's demands for his relative may have been, it is evident that he planned to get just as much as he could in return for his defeat over Laxe's presentation to Bossall.

¹⁰ *Registrum Parvum*, ii, f. 175.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, f. 175 bis.

The documents in the letter-book do not go into detail about the form taken by the "obedience" which the prior was so resolved not to mention in his letter of presentation. Presumably it implied an acknowledgment of the authority claimed by the archbishop of York in the administration of the priory's Yorkshire franchise, and, if so, the case forms an interesting example of how the system of presentation and patronage could influence and be influenced by the local constitutional politics of the church.

Although the examples of disputed presentations discussed above have concerned two vicarages and a prebend, the evidence of Locellus XXV suggests that the petitions for such benefices were more successful than those for rectories. Thus fourteen out of thirty petitions for prebends were successful, six out of seventeen petitions for vicarages, and only five out of twenty-four petitions for rectories. Possibly the explanation of the comparatively large number of successful petitions for prebends lies partly in the fact that these benefices tended to change hands more often than churches with cure of souls.

As most of the petitions in Locellus XXV came from royalty and the local families, it is not surprising to find that over three-quarters of the candidates whose connections or qualifications were stated in the letters were either royal clerks or clerks or relatives of the local magnates. Eighteen were royal clerks, of whom eight succeeded in obtaining a benefice, twenty-six were magnates' clerks (eleven successful) and five were magnates' relatives (one successful). The only other distinguishable group among these candidates was formed by twelve academically qualified clerks, four of whom received appointments. No curial clerks, episcopal clerks or aliens were sponsored in any of the Locellus XXV letters.

The evidence of the Locellus XXV documents and the few entries relating to sponsored presentations obtained from other sources is far from telling the full story about this subject. In particular, we are far from knowing exactly how many attempts to influence patrons were made and thus

being in a position to estimate accurately their quantitative importance as an influence on clerical appointments. Two points have emerged, however, which are of considerable relevance in evaluating this kind of second-hand patronage. First, if the priors of Durham were at all typical of northern English patrons, not more than a third of the attempts to influence their choice of incumbent had a decisive effect. Secondly, the sponsors were certainly trying to use their influence to obtain benefices for their clerical servants and dependants. Sponsorship was by no means a certain road to preferment, but it did introduce into the benefices of local monastic patrons a limited number of incumbents who might not otherwise have obtained them.

