THE TEACHING OF PALAEOGRAPHY IN GREAT BRITAIN

In 1988, the Palaeography Working Party of the now obsolete University Grants Committee in Britain published a Report. It used the term Palaeography to cover in principle all aspects of manuscript studies — scripts, codicology, manuscript illumination, diplomatic, epigraphy, papyrology. In practice, however, it was primarily concerned with “western palaeography”. While the report appeared fully to appreciate the importance of palaeography both in itself and in relation to other fields of scholarship in British universities, its stress on Palaeography as a technical skill or tool led it to make recommendations of limited value.

The Report acknowledged the need:

(a) to make not only basic provision for teaching specific aspects of a subject (for example, someone editing a twelfth-century text learns how to read a twelfth-century script);

(b) to ensure wider expertise (for example, the teaching offered introduces students to the range of scripts in the middle ages, the evolution of letter forms and codicology);

(c) to promote the professional Palaeographer who advances the scholarly study of the subject and is the expert “of last resort”.

One could add a fourth element (d) not invoked in the Report, namely, the importance of placing the history of the book within a broader context as an integrated element in another discipline, such as history, philology or literature.

The recommendations made in the Report, for the most part, proposed posts in palaeography where the holders were also to be associated (in ways left vague by the Report) with the University Libraries of the institutions in which they were based and carry out library duties as well as the teaching of palaeography. If acted upon, they would have done something for element (a) rather less for (b) and virtually nothing for (c), let alone (d), though of course, the development of any position would depend very much on the personality and commitment of the individual concerned. The palaeographer’s role ought not to be purely one of teaching a skill.

Nevertheless, anything might be regarded as better than nothing, and the Report’s recommendations were intended to alleviate the dire state into which palaeographical study had fallen in Britain in the late 70s and early 80s, where many posts that had existed, notably in Oxford and Cambridge, were abolished, staff elsewhere much reduced and the survival of the teaching of the subject left very precarious. In many universities it was, and is, only as the result of efforts of lecturers adding palaeography to their normal teaching obligations that the subject can be taught at all. Had the recommendations been acted upon in any degree much might have been achieved. Unfortunately, the Working Party had no teeth and, more crucially, no money. All recommendations were dependent on the Universities cited in the report being willing to make material provision for the recommended post(s) without making the post(s) dependent on the willingness of the Faculties and departments of the universities concerned to relinquish other lectureships in other subjects to make room for a Palaeography lecturer. It is generally recognized that a palaeographer can offer much to many different subjects (Classics, Medieval languages, History, English, Music, the History of Art and Divinity). In practice, however, different subject areas and departments were asked to choose between palaeography and other areas within their responsibility. With medievalists in the minority in most departments, it is not surprising that Paleography did not fare well. The University of Cambridge’s Readership in Palaeography, for example, was an ad hominem post and was not replaced by palaeography but by early modern economic and social history when the holder retired in 1975. The Oxford Readership in Western palaeography has been disestablished, though the Readership in Diplomatic has, thankfully, been restored. The only Chair in Palaeography in the country, at King’s College, University of London, was filled after the death of Julian Brown, but what will happen when the present incumbent, Albinia de la Mare, retires, is uncertain. Such is the prestige of this chair, and its proven importance within the graduate curriculum of the University of London, that one would hope that it will be retained.

Many of the problems identified by the 1988 report still exist. There remains a wide range of palaeographical expertise among those teaching the relevant subjects (History, Classics, English, Medieval and Modern languages, oriental studies, the history of art and the history of music). Even so, this range continues to decrease with the reductions in staffing of humanities in many British universities. The training of the next generation of those who need palaeographical skills is often provided by the supervisors of graduate students and is therefore very specifically focussed on necessary reading skills. In only a few universities is a greater range of expertise available in a number of Departments or Faculties (for example, Oxford, Cambridge, York, Leeds, London, Durham, Reading). In the University of Cambridge, for example, teaching is provided separately in the Faculties of English and History to graduate students. In the English Faculty, the focus is necessarily on English
scripts; in the History Faculty the range is European for the early and central middle ages, but for the later middle ages it is English, though all students are required to attend a short general course before concentrating on their specialist period. In addition, there is an optional course on book production, medieval libraries and codicology which is available to and taken by medievalists from the Faculties of History, Law, Music and Medieval Languages. The Cambridge courses are also able to exploit the manuscript resources of the University and College libraries. In still fewer instances are there institutions or posts specifically geared towards the provision of palaeography teaching, such as the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research in the University of York, the Institute of Historical Research in London (in both of which the main focus is on documentary scripts extending into the early modern period), and the University of London itself. London remains the leading centre for the teaching of Palaeography.

The subject is, moreover, taught almost exclusively at graduate level. One exception (there may be others) is the undergraduate course in insular (that is, British) palaeography before 1100 in the department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic in the University of Cambridge. The emphasis tends to remain, therefore, on the acquisition of specific reading skills related to a specific set of documents required for doctoral research rather than the teaching of the discipline of Palaeography in the Munich tradition of Traube and Bischoff, even though the Munich tradition is maintained against the odds by a few individuals.

Apart from the provision made for Latin and Greek Palaeography in some departments of Classics, Byzantine and Ottoman palaeography is catered for in the University of Birmingham's Centre for Byzantine Studies.

The study of manuscript illumination flourishes in many universities (such as Cambridge, London, Edinburgh, Courtauld Institute, Warburg Institute, the University of East Anglia, Leeds and Manchester), but art historians rarely follow courses in medieval palaeography as a prescribed part of their training. Music palaeography teaching in Cambridge is strong at both undergraduate and graduate level, but is seldom taught elsewhere apart from Oxford and London. Epigraphy is still taught at Cambridge, London and Oxford.

In considering the provision of teaching of palaeography and manuscript studies in this country, a number of factors have to be borne in mind. Quite apart from the subject needs for research involving manuscripts and documents in the humanities within the context of university education mentioned above, there is the necessity for the specialist provision of expert curators of manuscripts to look after the many important collections of manuscripts in such libraries as The British Library in London, The Bodleian Library in Oxford, Cambridge University Library, Durham University Library, Manchester University's John Rylands Library, Edinburgh University Library, Glasgow University Library, The National Library of Scotland (Edinburgh), The National Library of Wales (Aberystwyth) and many cathedral libraries — Lambeth Palace, Durham, York, Hereford, Salisbury, Lincoln etc.. In all these collections, of course, the “manuscripts” include vast repositories of post-medieval documents and papers. Thus curators of manuscripts may well be those who have been trained in archive administration and are more familiar with the handwriting of scripts from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries and typewritten unpublished papers of the twentieth century, than with medieval manuscripts. Where the funds for curatorial posts are limited, it may be that there will not be a mediavalist on the staffs of Manuscript Departments in Libraries at all.

Archive administration and Librarianship courses, notably those offered in University College London, Aberystwyth (in collaboration with the National Library of Wales and the Dyfed Record Office), Leeds, Liverpool and Birmingham, certainly offer training in palaeography, though the concentration here is on English, Welsh, Scottish and documentary scripts, and often only of the later medieval period onwards. It is thus difficult for western palaeography to be maintained, though some students will have access to broader courses for other subject areas and their interest may thereby develop further.

An important recent development in the system of graduate research and funding in Britain has left many institutions badly exposed. The British Academy funds research in the humanities, and is now insisting on the greater proportion of graduate students doing a “training year” before embarking on the three years of Ph.D. research. This “training year” for anyone in medieval studies includes palaeography, and it is a notable feature of the many M.A. or M.Phil. courses, either recently established or well-established (York, Leeds, Reading, Durham, Cambridge), that palaeography features prominently. It is here that hope for the future may lie, for it accords palaeography a defined place as part of the necessary training for research; universities may start to provide adequate teaching staff to maintain it. At present, teaching resources in the shape of individuals employed solely to provide palaeography teaching are almost non-existent, but there are various steps now being taken to remedy this.

Of further benefit to paleography, manuscript studies and historical bibliography is the study of the history of the book and the interest aroused by the new project on the history of the book in Britain. The subject, by definition, is potentially relevant for all the humanities, though so far the current homes for courses on the history of the book at postgraduate level have tended to be in departments of English or History. The University of Cambridge is the only university in Britain to offer an undergraduate course on the history of the
book. Designed to consider both manuscript and printed books in Europe between c. 1300 and c. 1700, it focuses on the themes of production, distribution, reading and control, and the first section of the course also introduces students to the history of the book and of libraries before 1300. It is taught by Roger Lovatt, Rosamond McKitterick and James Raven. In the University of London from the year 1995-96, it will be possible to study the history of the book at graduate level (Part time or full time) for a new separate London M.A. course within the School of Advanced Study's centre for English studies, with support from the British Library, the British Museum and the National Art Library in the Victoria and Albert Museum as well as London's many Research Institutes. The course director is Robin Alston. Like the Cambridge course the core course for this M.A. embraces both manuscript and printed book, and is divided into thematic segments comprising Publication, Manufacture, Distribution, Reception, Survival. The course is interdisciplinary, it will provide “an introduction to the physical artifact and use aspects of material bibliography to move into larger themes of the sociology of the text”.

There are also Optional subjects, including one on the Medieval Book focussing on manuscripts in Britain before 1600, which aims, in the words of the course prospectus: “to give students some practical experience in working with medieval manuscripts. Students will study the physical appearance of the book within the context of its function and role in medieval society. From the production in monastic scriptoria of books necessary to the conduct of divine service to the emergence of an urban trade producing books in the vernacular for the enjoyment of the laity, manuscripts will be used to exemplify how content and purpose have influenced the book’s appearance. Students will be encouraged to acquire some palaeographical skills since script is as important as content and purpose have influenced the book’s appearance. Students will be encouraged to acquire some palaeographical skills since script is as important as content and purpose have influenced the book’s appearance.”

In recent years, therefore, several factors have emerged which may well lead to a renaissance of palaeographical study in this country. The Munich and E.A. Lowe tradition remains strong among many individuals. There are a handful who studied in Munich under Bernhard Bischoff, and many more who learnt from the great Oxford palaeographers E. A. Lowe, Neil Ker, Richard Hunt and Malcolm Parkes, from Alan Bishop in Cambridge, from Francis Wormald and Julian Brown in London and from Ian Doyle in Durham. They, and their pupils, have not forgotten the need to promote the discipline. Groups such as the Seminar for the history of the book before 1500, and new publishing ventures such as those of the British Library and of the Cambridge Studies in Palaeography and Codicology keep the Munich tradition and its principles alive. Despite all the hindrances, lack of funds and sympathy, there are many of us within Britain, both in the Universities and the major manuscript collections of the country, who are deeply committed to palaeography. Indeed, there is a sufficient number among the younger generation to give hope for the future, provided that formal institutional support be established. The British Academy's new insistence on a “training year” may prompt the provision of palaeography teaching not only as a technical skill but also to embrace the wider imperatives of the discipline integrated into the concerns of historical, literary and philological research. The commitment of Libraries to the proper management of their manuscript collections may ensure that sufficient expertise is encouraged among their staff, though it is depressing how few medievalists there are on the staffs of the major manuscript collections in this country. Thirdly, as noted earlier, the development of the interest in the history of the book, and the association of manuscript studies with historical bibliography could benefit palaeography.

Nevertheless, much remains uncertain about the future of paleography and manuscript studies in Britain. It is vital that the London Chair continues to provide academic leadership. Everyone devoted to the medieval book, in Britain and elsewhere, needs to be well-informed as well as active. It is hoped that the Gazette will be able to provide some summary statement of the situation in all the countries with which we have connections. We should welcome statements from our readers.

As an international community, palaeographers need to support each other in order to ensure the survival of their discipline, taught as it should be taught, within the scholarly canon.

R. MCK.

La situation dramatiquement précaire de la paléographie et de la codicologie dans l'enseignement universitaire vient d'être soulignée de manière frappante par des développements récents, qui illustrent le bien-fondé des observations pessimistes de R. McK.

En Allemagne, l'Université de Göttingen a l'intention de supprimer la chaire de Sciences auxiliaires de l'histoire à partir de 1997 (date à laquelle l'actuel titulaire, le professeur M. Thiel, prendra sa retraite) pour la remplacer par une chaire des Sciences de la communication (Medienwissenschaften). Avec elle disparaîtrait ainsi l'une des trois seules chaires existant en Allemagne pour cette spécialité — ce qui est d'autant plus alarmant que la chaire de Göttingen est le fruit d'une longue tradition, remontant au XVIIIe siècle.

Aux Pays-Bas, la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Leyde (Leiden) se propose d'abolir la chaire de Paléographie occidentale et Codicologie (actuellement occupée par le professeur J. P. Gumbert), qui est la seule du pays. Cette mesure devrait prendre effet vers 1997. Ce serait alors la fin de l'enseignement et de la recherche en paléographie à ce niveau pour les
Pays-Bas : il ne resterait qu'un poste de niveau intermédiaire à Groningen et quelques postes partiels consacrés à la paléographie-diplomatique du bas Moyen Age. La décision n'ayant pas encore été prise de manière formelle, il reste quelque espoir de sauver cette chaire ; mais ce n'est qu'un mince espoir.

Il est probable que la communauté internationale des paléographes et codicologues voudra manifester sa réaction à de telles situations, notamment en adressant un message de soutien aux titulaires des chaires menacées :


— Prof. J. P. Gumbert, Vakgroep Westerse Paleografie en Handschriftenkunde, Faculteit der Letteren, Postbus 9515, NL-2300 RA Leiden, Pays-Bas.

Bien que l'on puisse redouter que cette tendance ne se propage prochainement à toute l'Europe, d'autres indices montrent que la situation n'est pas partout aussi dramatique. Certaines autorités universitaires prennent conscience, au contraire, du rôle qu'ont à jouer nos disciplines pour l'étude et la préservation d'une certaine part de notre héritage historico-culturel. La récente création d'une chaire de Codicologie à l'Université de Huelva (sur laquelle on trouvera ci-dessous de plus amples informations) apporte une touche d'optimisme dans ce sombre arrière-plan. — G.L.M.

NOTES ET DISCUSSIONS

La Codicología en los nuevos planes de estudio en España

Según las directrices marcadas por el Ministerio de Educación, en las Universidades españolas se están comenzando a impartir nuevos Planes de Estudio en todas las licenciaturas. De esta forma, en la recién creada Universidad de Huelva, cuyas Facultades pertenecieron — hasta octubre de 1993 — al Distrito universitario de Sevilla, la Codicología tendrá a partir del curso 1994-1995 un lugar en los planes de la licenciatura de Historia, ya que hasta el momento sólo se había impartido en dicha Universidad en los cursos de doctorado.

Lo cierto es que en las Universidades españolas la Codicología ha estado y está escasamente representada. Así, a excepción de la materia optativa que, desde hace varios años, se ofrece a los alumnos del segundo ciclo de la licenciatura de Historia en la Universidad autónoma de Barcelona, bajo el nombre Historia del Libro y Codicología, impartida por el Dtor. Jesús Alto Peruchó, sólo ha figurado en los cursos de doctorado de la misma universidad catalana (El libro en Cataluna en época medieval), impartida asimismo por el Dtor. Jesús Alto Peruchó; en los de la Universidad de Sevilla (Introducción a la Codicología), impartida por la Dra. Pilar Osto Salcedo y en los de la Universidad de Huelva (Técnicas de descripción del Patrimonio Bibliográfico Español: el libro manuscrito y los artesanos del libro en la Edad Media), impartida por mi misma.

Sin embargo, a partir de ahora, la Universidad de Huelva se convierte, junto con la Autónoma de Barcelona, en los dos únicos centros españoles en los que nuestra disciplina tiene carácter oficial en sus respectivos planes de estudio. Así, como asignatura cuatrimestral, los alumnos onubenses del primer ciclo podrán optar por cursar la materia titulada Historia del libro manuscrito, concebida principalmente como una disciplina de iniciación, dada su ubicación en los primeros años de la carrera, pero a través de la cual podrán empezar a conocer las posibilidades de estudio e investigación que ofrecen los códices, concebidos como objetos materiales, para hacer Historia.

Dada la importancia que dicha disciplina creo que debe tener en la formación de los historiadores y dado el notorio interés que, en años anteriores, despertó entre los alumnos del Tercer Ciclo e, incluso, entre mis alumnos de Paleografía, cuando en algunas ocasiones me refería a ella durante las clases, creo conveniente hacer todo lo que estuviera en mi mano para incluirla en los nuevos Planes de Estudio.

Las exigencias docentes no permitieron otra cosa que una asignatura cuatrimestral y optativa, lo cual no es mucho, pero desde luego es un comienzo. Asimismo, sólo fue posible su ubicación en el Primer Ciclo, lo cual puede resultar un handicap, que, creo, puede ser subsanado con su orientación de tipo introductorio.