A Lamentable Book

The list of English bishops murdered (or known to have been murdered) in the later middle ages is mercifully not a long one: two archbishops of Canterbury (Thomas Becket, Simon of Sudbury), an archbishop of York (Richard Scrope), and bishops of Salisbury and Chichester (William Ayscough, Adam Moleyns). A manuscript in the College Library was separately owned by two of these men. MS 90 contains two works by the Oxford philosopher, Richard FitzRalph (*c.* 1299–1360). It was apparently made for Richard Scrope, archbishop of York, whose arms are inset in the illuminated initial that heads both texts. The arms are those of the Scropes of Masham within a bordure charged with mitres, identifying the archbishop (Azure a bend Or over all a label of three points Argent set within a bordure Gules charged with eight mitres Or). Richard Scrope (*c.* 1350–1405) was the third son of Henry Scrope, 1st Baron Scrope of Masham, and was elected archbishop of York in 1398. In 1405, with the renewal of the Northern Rising against Henry IV, he sided with the Percys and took most of the city of York with him. He rode out, as he thought, to parlay with the king's men in open space near York, but was instead seized and imprisoned. After a summary trial in front of a royal commission held in his own palace, Scrope was declared a traitor and was taken back to York where he was executed, the first English prelate to suffer judicial execution. It was reported that, kneeling at the block, he turned to the headsman and asked to be dealt five blows, for the five wounds of Christ. The king permitted Scrope's burial in the Minster and was subsequently embarassed by the martyr-cult that was fostered at the grave. The only book known to survive from Archbishop Scrope's library is our New College manuscript. He seems to have commissioned it himself since his arms are part of the original decorative scheme.

The book was later owned by William Ayscough (*c.* 1395–1450), bishop of Salisbury (*sedit* 1438–50), who signed on a blank page at the front ('Volumen domini W. Sarum Episcopi', fol. i^{v}). His own family hailed from near Masham in Yorkshire, so possibly the book had escaped forfeiture at the time of Scrope's execution and was retained by the Scropes of Masham, to be passed on to Ayscough once he was himself raised to the bishop's bench. He subsequently became King Henry VI's confessor, an extraordinary thing for one who was already a bishop. It served only to identify him yet more strongly as one of the despised members of the king's inner circle. During Jack Cade's Rebellion in 1450 he left London for the comparative safety of his castle at Sherborne in Dorset. En route, he had halted at the community of the Bonshommes at Edington in Wiltshire and was celebrating mass when an angry mob broke in and dragged him out and butchered him on a nearby hillside. With no time to prepare his will, we know little of his personal situation and nothing of what sort of library he might have had and wished to bequeath. The only other books connected to him that we can point to now are at Eton College, two volumes of a bible with the commentary of Hugh of Saint-Cher (now Eton MSS 28 and 29). He was much involved in making arrangements for the king's new foundation at Eton, and his clear *ex dono* inscription is on the first leaf of both those books; but there is no similar inscription in ours.

The author inside MS 90, Richard FitzRalph, gains importance in the stories of both prelates for being the sole author to survive from their libraries. FitzRalph was himself a prelate, the archbishop of Armagh. He was a doctor of Oxford and chancellor of the university from 1332 until 1334, the year he was first summoned to the papal curia for his opinion (on the theology of the beatific vision). He became one of the chief defenders of the rights of the secular clergy against the friars on the question of evangelical poverty. Of FitzRalph's two works in MS 90 the first is a copy of his sermon-diary, a record of his preaching, partly in note-form and partly as fully transcribed sermons, which has here, uniquely, been rearranged to accord with the liturgical year (*de tempore*, *diuersis*, and *de sanctis*). The other work in the volume is FitzRalph's *Summa de quaestionibus Armenorum*, a philosophical piece in which he addressed the problem of the revelation of future contingents—namely, how can a future dependent on contingent actions be revealed by God without losing its contingency? Scrope and Ayscough would have found that question of

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theoretical interest when reading it, with no conception (we assume) of the contingencies already in play that would soon lead to their violent ends.

How this manuscript arrived at New College is not known: neither Scrope nor Ayscough had any known connection with the place. But it arrived sometime in the century after Ayscough's death since the Tudor bibliographer John Bale (d. 1563) examined it there. The book is a true literary curiosity. I cannot think of another to which one can award the melancholy distinction that it was owned by not one but two murdered English bishops.

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