

BRIAN WORMALD

Thoughtful Peterhouse historian who published little but left a lasting impression on his pupils

DURING more than 40 years as a fellow of Peterhouse College, Cambridge, Brian Wormald occupied many college offices, and in the 1950s, when the Peterhouse fellowship was small, he virtually ran the college in tandem with Charles Burkill and Roy Lubbock. Wormald had one of the most distinguished historical minds of his generation and for a quarter of a century after Herbert Butterfield became a professor, presided over the Peterhouse history school.

Thomas Brian Harvey Goodwin Wormald was born in 1912. His father, an Anglican clergyman, was Rector of Solihull in Warwickshire. After Harrow, Wormald went up to Peterhouse, where he took firsts in both parts of the historical tripos and won several university prizes. After a couple of years as a research student at St John's College, he returned to Peterhouse for good in 1938.

As an undergraduate and young don he was much influenced by Butterfield, whose mistrust of entrenched historical interpretations left a permanent, and beneficial, mark on Wormald's mind. It also made him mistrustful of his own interpretations and enabled him to see around the next historical corner — both of which hampered his acquisition of the routine capabilities necessary for extensive historical writing.

Wormald did not follow Butterfield uncritically. He complained about Butterfield's "methodism", alluding not to

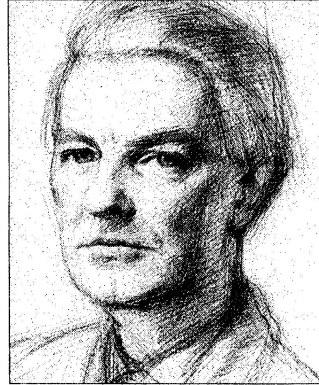
Butterfield's membership of the Methodist Church but to a sect-type mentality which was alien to Wormald's Anglican world view and which, as he believed, inhibited Butterfield's decisiveness.

As a tutor, Wormald was considerate to all his pupils, even the most worthless. In undergraduate supervisions, his method, if it can be called a method, involved pauses, silences and a great deal of cigarette smoke which together signalled the idea that historical thinking was a matter of high seriousness and that Wormald felt personal sadness when an undergraduate did not succeed in rising to its challenge.

He was especially well informed about 17th-century English history and the history of modern historiography. He delivered intellectually polished lectures about both in the Cambridge History Faculty, but was out of sympathy with the Marxist message which Christopher Hill was inserting into 17th-century English history in Oxford and the procrustean professionalism which Geoffrey Elton was imposing on 16th-century English history in Cambridge.

Wormald's first book, *Clarendon* (1951), was described in the 1980s as one of the few seminal books published about English history since 1945. But it was not followed up; indeed, Wormald wrote almost nothing else, apart from lectures and unpublished sermons, until a large book about Bacon was published in 1995.

During the war he was ordained dea-



con in the Church of England on the title of his fellowship and then spent a short time at a theological college during its evacuation to Cambridge. Though he did not seek clerical employment outside Cambridge, he was for a time chaplain and dean of Peterhouse, made religion the centre of his intellectual life, and had a comprehensive knowledge of thought and writing about history, politics, morality and religion between 1930 and 1970.

As an Anglican, Wormald adopted the Tractarian socialism of Figgis and Tawney, along with the Tractarian identification of the Church of England with the Church Catholic. In the 1950s he was alienated from Anglican compromise and backsliding and came

to admire Pope Pius XII's definition of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary as an assertion of the authority which he missed in the Church of England. He renounced his orders to become a Roman Catholic layman and, despite uneasiness occasioned by Pope John XXIII, remained such for the rest of his life.

In his early years as a don, Wormald wore light grey suits, red socks and white ties (instead of dog-collars). He and his beautiful and intelligent wife Rosemary, the sister of Lord Lloyd of Berwick (who himself began legal life as the Peterhouse law Fellow), were an elegant and glamorous couple who brought something distinctive to the drabness of postwar Cambridge. It was only after the dissolution of their marriage that Wormald adopted the gruffness and eccentricity of manner, and carelessness of appearance, which not only characterised his later years but also issued in the vocally aggressive condemnations of what the Peterhouse fellowship had become in his seventies and eighties.

Wormald was predeceased by his former wife and two of their four sons, of whom one was a medieval historian and a student of Christ Church, Oxford, and the other, as a result of his interest in Indian religion, had his ashes scattered along the Ganges.

Brian Wormald, historian, was born on July 24, 1912. He died on March 22, 2005, aged 92.

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