BERYL SMALLEY TO R. W. HUNT ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ALEXANDER NECKAM

THE most widely consulted thesis in the Bodleian Library for most of the twentieth century was that of R. W. Hunt: ‘Alexander Neckam’, completed in 1936 for his D.Phil. at Oxford under F. M. Powicke. He was later its Keeper of Western Manuscripts, from 1945 until 1975. The list of those who have consulted the thesis, pasted in the front of the volume, stretches for many pages. Hunt had made a leap forward in the knowledge of this author’s life and works, but never published more than a few notes on Alexander before his death in 1979. The thesis finally appeared as a book in 1984 as The Schools and the Cloister, lightly revised by Margaret Gibson. Published statements imply that Hunt never made a serious effort to publish it himself. But a rare letter from Beryl Smalley, who destroyed her papers shortly before her death, shows that Hunt had in fact made efforts to publish his work in 1960. The letter also offers her own insight into Alexander’s widely misunderstood biblical commentaries.

Print this just as it is with the strictly necessary additions and revisions! It reads well as it is. I only suggest preparing or adding an account of A.N.’s significance. He strikes me now, fresh from looking at Châtillon’s Libri exceptionum, as marking the very end of the Victorine tradition with the whole trunk bursting open and scattering its contents over the railway station. Does any scholar of the turn of the century sum up so many divergent trends as A.N.? He’s both secular scholar and monk or rather canon. The next generation would produce an encyclopaedia


6 In Hunt, Schools, vii–viii.

7 Alexandri Neckam De naturis rerum libri duo. With the poem of the same author, De laudibus divinae sapientiae, ed. Thomas Wright, Rolls Series, xxxiv (London, 1863).
as such, not all mixed up with a commentary. He seems to have been the last of the great non-specialists except for Grosseteste and even he’s less all-round because he kept no equivalent of the monastic commentaries.

Smalley goes on to make a few ‘small points’ on areas for improvement, proposing only minor modifications to the text, and suggesting more discussion of Alexander’s significance.

Following Smalley’s letter is a note from the Clarendon Press, dated 26 July 1960. ‘As we agreed last week, I am now returning your typescript, on the understanding that you are going to truncate it somewhere about page 200 and let us have it back as quickly as you can for publication.’ The remainder of the note lists the publisher’s terms. This pruning applied to the second part of the thesis, consists of extracts from primary sources concerning Alexander’s life, alongside representative samples from his writings.

This scheme is the one carried out by Margaret Gibson, and the removal of the extracts is the primary difference between the thesis of 1936 and the book of 1984. Although she integrated many of these extracts into the book’s footnotes, some of the material remains unpublished, notably Hunt’s edition of part of Alexander’s *Glose super psalterium* that demonstrates the soundness of his identification of the author’s autograph corrections in Oxford, Jesus College, MS 94. This is given almost no argument in the final book, and appears as little more than a conjecture, but the extract shows that Hunt made the statement only on the basis of text-critical analysis. The thesis, therefore, retains some value to researchers. She also includes the many references to newer literature that Hunt was sent over the years and left looseleaf in the typescript, but without revising his arguments. It is still representative of the cutting edge of 1936, as reviewers note.8

It seems that the public statements of Smalley and Southern were both correct in their own way, even if neither acknowledged how close the book was to being published in 1960. Like her advice on publication, Smalley’s approach to Alexander’s commentaries on the Wisdom books proved far-sighted. The idea of *De naturis rerum* as an encyclopedia, first mentioned tentatively by Lynn Thorndike,9 has since been blown out of proportion in scholarship; Smalley’s linking of Alexander with the Victorines is much closer to the mark.10

Andrew N. J. Dunning

The British Library

doi:10.1093/notesj/gjw239

The Author (2017). Published by Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. For Permissions, please email: journals.permissions@oup.com


10 Thanks are due to the Principal and Fellows of St Hilda’s College, Oxford, for permission to publish the letter of Beryl Smalley; to the college archivist, Oliver Mahony, for his research assistance; and to Bruce Barker-Benfield, James Willoughby, and Richard Sharpe for their comments.