

Obituary Sir Howard Colvin (1919-2007)

Historians and students who seek an overview of the English Premonstratensians, still generally turn to *The White Canons in England* (Oxford, 1951) by Sir Howard Montagu Colvin. Though it has been subjected to the process of historical revision, it can truly be said to have largely withstood the test of time, with its beautifully-crafted accounts of the foundation of England's Premonstratensian abbeys and chapters on various elements of canonical life. It is therefore with sadness that we learned of the death of the author of the first scientific history of our order in England.

Colvin was born in Sidcup in Kent on 15 October 1919. His interest in history – architectural history – began as a school boy. In 1938, at the age of 19, Colvin published his first historical paper, which initiated a series of articles on the Premonstratensian abbey of Dale (1938-43, in the *Journal of the Derbyshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*). As well as joining the Royal Air Force during the Second World War, he read history at University College London, and was assistant lecturer in history from 1946-48. His book on the English Premonstratensians was based initially on his research for a doctoral thesis. However Colvin obtained a fellowship at St. John's College, Oxford, and remained there for the rest of his life, acting as Tutor (1948-78), Librarian (1950-84), and Emeritus Fellow (1987-2007), as well as the grant of a personal readership in architectural history in 1965. He devoted much time to voluntary work on official bodies – for example he was president of the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain (1979-81) and a commissioner of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts (1981-88) – and was awarded a knighthood in 1995.

Howard Colvin was a great historian in so many ways. Although we are particularly indebted to his work on the English Premonstratensians, he will be chiefly remembered as one of the greatest English architectural historians of the twentieth century. His *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1660-1840* (1954, and now in its fourth edition), is said to be the finest reference book of modern times produced by one author. Colvin was a medievalist and a post-medievalist, a scholar who was meticulous in his research, with a detailed working knowledge of archives. The first two volumes of *The History of the King's Works* (1963-92), largely written by Colvin, are still regarded as the definitive history of the castles, palaces and religious foundations of the English

medieval kings. On a personal note, I had the good fortune to meet Sir Howard at St. John's College, Oxford, when I was a post-graduate student at Cambridge. He very generously shared with me his knowledge of unpublished and inaccessible Premonstratensian manuscripts in an English castle, including the amusing story of how he got access to them with the aid of a nurse (!). However I was but one among many historians who benefited from his kindness, expertise, and correspondence, and who continue to value his lasting contribution to historical studies. Sir Howard Montagu Colvin died on 28 December 2007, aged 88.

Requiescat in Pace.

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