

An Account of Bibliophile Richard de Bury's Life
from the
Continuation of the History of Durham
William de Chambre

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[The account of Richard of Bury's episcopate begins the continuation].

Richard of Bury was born in a small village near Edmundsbury, and his father was the knight, Lord Richard Awngeville. He was sent by his uncle, the rector Lord John de Willyby, first to grammar school, then to the *studium* at Oxford for a certain time. From there he was selected to tutor Edward Windsor, at the time Prince, who was later called Edward III. Later he was ordained principal tax-collector (*receptor*) of the father of this same Edward in Gascony. At that time, the aforesaid Edward fled with his mother to Paris; when their resources were running out, Richard himself came secretly [to Paris] with a great sum of gold which he collected in the aforementioned office. As a consequence, the king's lieutenant pursued him with twenty-four lancers all the way to Paris, where, in fear of death, he was hidden for seven days in the bell-tower of the Friars Minor.¹ After these events, he was appointed *cofferarius*, then treasurer of the wardrobe, the cleric of the Privy Seal, for five years. During that time he went twice to the highest pontiff, John.² On the first occasion he went to him, the pope ordained him principal chaplain of his own chapel; and Richard received from him a *rochet*³ in place of a bull, for the next vacant see thereafter in England. At this time, too, he was advanced in his ecclesiastical benefices, such that he could spend up to five thousand marks. On the second occasion when he visited the highest pontiff, he received from him three hundred graces and seven for promoting clerics. Every time he came into the presence of the

¹ The Franciscans.

² John XXII.

³ The *rochet* was an ecclesiastical vestment often made of linen and worn as an overtunic.

highest pontiff or cardinals, he came with twenty of his own clerics in the dress of one cute,⁴ and thirty-six men-at-arms in clothes of another cut. Afterwards, as he was returning to England and heard in Paris of the death of Bishop Louis of Durham, he greatly lamented that the King had sent a letter to the highest pontiff to secure this bishopric for him. When one of his clerics named William de Tykall, rector of Stanhope, urged him to send letters to the cardinals and to his other friends at the Curia in order to obtain this bishopric, he responded that he was not going to send a letter for that bishopric or any other. On the Sunday before Christmas, at age 46, he was consecrated bishop of Durham by the archbishop of Canterbury, John Stratford, in the abbey of the Black Monks of Chertsey. At this consecration Henry Burwesch, bishop of Lincoln, paid all the expenses by order of the lord king. After this he served as Treasurer of England; and in this same year (on the fifth of June by William Cowton, prior of Durham) he was installed [in his see]. At the installation [ceremony] there was a great celebration attended by the King and Queen of England, the mother of the king of England, the King of Scotland, two archbishops, five bishops, seven counts with their wives, and all the magnates on this side of the Trent, many knights and men at arms, and many abbots, priors, and men of religion, along with an innumerable number from the community [of Durham]. And in this same year he was established as Chancellor of England. And within three years he approached the king of France as the ambassador of the king of England to claim the kingdom of France. Later he went to Handewarp and on another occasion he went to Brabant. Thus he was worn out for nine years in the service of this embassy in many different places. Meanwhile, all the liberties of the church of Durham were preserved without any injury. Then he returned to England.

Richard delighted much in the company of clerics and always had many clerics in his household. Among them was Thomas Bradwardine, later archbishop of Canterbury; Richard

⁴ The term *secta* could refer to a coat of arms, but I am as yet uncertain of what precisely this means.

FitzRalph, later archbishop of Armagh; Walter Burley, John Maudit; Robert Holcot; Richard of Kylwington, all doctors in theology, Richard Benworth, later bishop of London; and Walter Segraffe, later bishop of Chichester. And on any given day he used to have a reading at table, unless he was prevented from doing so by the arrival of important persons. Everyday after the meal he would hold a disputation with the aforementioned clerics and others of his household, unless a major issue prevented him. On other occasions, he spent time in divine service or with his books, unless he was prevented from doing so by demanding business.

In addition, each week he distributed eight quarters of ground wheat over and above the leftovers from his household. And if many remained after the distribution of the aforesaid alms, he offered a coin (*obolus*) to each. In addition, when he went between Durham and Newcastle he sometimes gave away twelve marks in alms; and between Durham to Stockton sometimes eight marks; and between Durham and Auckland five marks, and between Durham and Middel one hundred *solidi*. After his death, one of his chests was found full of linens, albs, and breeches made of haircloth. In it was supposed to be found his treasure.

In the bloom of life, the aforesaid lord Richard gave to the church two vestments, one of red velvet, with three copes of the same cut that were subtly embroidered; the other was of black camica with three copes of the same cut with three suitably decorated *oraries*. Since he intended to have left much to the church, namely the vestment of red velvet, which his executors sold to Ralph de Neville, who later, moved by his conscience, turned over to the Church. He also gave another of white camice with three copes of the same cut which he had had embroidered nobly in honor of St Mary. This the sacrist acquired with great difficulty from his executors.

At his funeral, as is clear from the public document made regarding it, the sacrist had two great horses carrying his body on a litter and one mule-horse carrying a chapel. The same sacrist had two little boxes, one pastoral staff, one mitre, a ring, sandals, two silver candelabra, one silver and

gold thurible, with an incense boat, nine pieces of rich cloth made red silk cloth with vines and letters embroidered into it, nine pieces of silk cloth with four-footed animals which have gilded heads and feet; and one green cloth embroidered white and red roosters. Out of all of these pieces of cloth were made vestments for the great altar and the other altars in the church. Likewise, from for of his seals one gilded chalice was made. And as is clear from these verses written under its base:

Of Richard, the fourth at Durham, born at Bury,
Four seals gave rise to this wondrous cup.

One day, while he was sitting at table in York with seven companions, John Wawham suddenly arrived and announced to him that Robert Graystones had died. So much did he lament his death that he could not bear the presence of the messenger. When his companions asked him why he was so sad about [Richard's] death, he said: "Certainly, if you knew of his industry the way I know it, I believe that you would be just as sad as I am." He added: "For he was more capable at the papal curia than I or all those like me down to the lowest rank in the church of God." He loved to keep with him in his household the sons of the generous people of his diocese, and his actions cultivated a great friendship between himself and the generous persons of the land; he also held the monks of the church of Durham in great honor.

He had ruled the diocese of Durham, which he held by provision of the Apostolic See, in fitting peace for eleven years, two months, and twelve days, while the other parts of England were worn out by manifold travails and tribulations. In the twelfth year, completely wasted away by long illness, he ended his last day at Aukland on 14 April in the year of our Lord 1345, and on the 21 day of the same month, he was buried honorably in a certain way, although with fitting enough honor before the altar of the blessed Mary Magdalene in the southern corner of the church of Durham.

Richard was a man of adequate learning, discrete in the regulation of his household, generous in entertaining guests, and most careful in distributing alms. When he heard something that he did not like, he was easily roused to anger but recalled from anger even more easily. He took

the greatest delight in a multitude of books. Indeed, he had more books, it was everywhere said, than all the bishops of England. For in addition to those books which he had housed separately in his various manors, wherever he stayed with his household, so many books lay scattered about in the bedroom where he slept that those entering could scarcely stand or enter without trampling on a book with their feet. Later, as he was returning to England, he heard in Paris about the death of Louis, bishop of Durham, and much lamented that the King had sent a letter to the highest pontiff to acquire this bishopric for himself. When a certain cleric of his named William de Tykall, rector of Stanhope, urged him to send a letter to the cardinals and to other friends at the Curia to obtain the aforesaid bishopric, he answered that he was going to send a letter neither to obtain the aforesaid bishopric nor for any other. On the Sunday before Christmas, when he was forty-six years of age, he was consecrated bishop of Durham by the archbishop of Canterbury, John Stretford in the abbey of the Black Monks of Chertsey. At this consecration, the bishop of Lincoln, Henry Burwesch, paid all the expenses by order of the lord king. After this, he became treasurer of England, and in this same year [on June 5] he was installed by William Cowton, prior of Durham. At this installation there was a great celebration, where there were present the king and queen of England, the mother of the king of England, the king of Scotland, two archbishops, five bishops, seven counts with their wives, and all the magnates on this side of the Trent, many knights, and arms bearers, many abbots, priors, and religious men, and an innumerable multitude of the community (*communitas*). In this same year he became chancellor of England. And within three years after that, he went to the king of Paris as an envoy of the king of England to claim the kingdom of France. Later he went to Handewarpe and on another occasion to Brabant. Then he returned to England.

This fellow conferred some exceptionally beautiful and fitting ecclesiastical adornments on the church of Durham, and he intended to confer still more had he lived longer.