

Beryl Smalley to R.W. Hunt on the Significance of Alexander Neckam*

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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.¹ 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 1979.² The thesis finally appeared as a book in 1984 as *The Schools and the Cloister*, lightly revised by Margaret Gibson.³ 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,⁴ shows that Hunt had in fact made efforts to publish his work in 1960. The letter also

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- 1 David Vaisey, "Hunt, Richard William (1908–1979)," ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Howard Harrison, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/53058>.
- 2 Raphael Loewe and R.W. Hunt, "Alexander Neckam's Knowledge of Hebrew," *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1958): 17–34; R.W. Hunt, "English Learning in the Late Twelfth Century," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th ser., 19 (1936): 19–42, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3678685>; reprinted, "English Learning in the Late Twelfth Century," in *Essays in Medieval History: Selected from the Transactions of the Royal Historical Society on the Occasion of Its Centenary*, ed. R.W. Southern (London: Macmillan, 1968), 110–24.
- 3 Her approach is summarized through a quotation of Mark 2:21: R.W. Hunt, *The Schools and the Cloister: The Life and Writings of Alexander Neckam (1157–1217)*, ed. Margaret T. Gibson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), iv.
- 4 G.H. Martin, "Smalley, Beryl (1905–1984)," ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Howard Harrison, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/45660>; for an assessment of her career, see Henrietta Leyser and Deana Copeland Klepper, "Beryl Smalley (1905–1984): The Medieval Bible in the Modern Academy," in *Women Medievalists and the Academy*, ed. Jane Chance (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 657–69.

offers her own insight into Alexander's widely misunderstood biblical commentaries.

The reasons for Hunt's delay in making his findings public are somewhat mysterious, and the statements made by his friends on this seem at first contradictory. R.W. Southern writes that Hunt was indifferent towards the work, and distracted by other tasks.⁵ The preface to the published version of the book by Beryl Smalley implies that Hunt was simply a perfectionist, explaining that his work at the Bodleian prevented him from publication.⁶ Smalley does not mention that Hunt had indeed made plans to publish the book. What the preface describes as 'the author's copy of his thesis' still survives: it is a lightly edited and annotated typescript prepared for Oxford University Press, with slightly different pagination from the thesis and the title changed to *Alexander Nequam*. The Bodleian's archives from Hunt were arranged and made accessible for researchers by Bruce Barker-Benfield. The thesis is found in box 102, which also includes an annotated copy of the Rolls Series edition of Alexander's *De naturis rerum*.⁷ Hunt 101 and Hunt 103 similarly contain miscellaneous notes from research on Alexander.

Loose in the front cover of the typescript is a letter from Smalley herself, dated 13 July 1960 at St Hilda's College, Oxford:

Dear Richard,

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 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

⁵ R.W. Southern, "Richard William Hunt, 1908–1979," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 67 (1981): 376–78; reprinted, "Richard William Hunt (1908–1979)," in *History and Historians: Selected Papers of R.W. Southern*, ed. Robert Bartlett (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 198–99, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470755785.ch11>.

⁶ In Hunt, *Schools*, vii–viii.

⁷ Thomas Wright, ed., *Alexandri Neckam De naturis rerum libri duo. With the poem of the same author, De laudibus divinæ sapientiæ*, Rolls Series 34 (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1863), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139208239>.

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. Though 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.

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⁸ The most thorough are A.G. Rigg, review of *The Schools and the Cloister: The Life and Writings of Alexander Nequam (1157–1217)*, by R.W. Hunt, *Speculum* 61, no. 3 (July 1986): 666–68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2851624>; John Marenbon, review of *The Schools and the Cloister: The Life and Writings of Alexander Nequam (1157–1217)*, by R.W. Hunt, *The English Historical Review* 102, no. 403 (April 1987): 470–71, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/CII.403.470-b>.

⁹ *A History of Magic and Experimental Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923–1958), 2:193.