

Jean Truax, Archbishops Ralph d'Escures, William of Corbeil and Theobald of Bec. Heirs of Anselm and Ancestors of Becket, Farnham, Burlington (Ashgate Publishing) 2012, 293 p., ISBN 978-0-7546-6836-7, GBP 55,00.

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This is the third volume in a new series from Ashgate that has been developed in association with the Lambeth Palace Library archives. It examines the reigns of three twelfth-century archbishops of Canterbury whose careers are bookended, and in many ways overshadowed, by two of the most celebrated occupants of the archiepiscopal see, namely St Anselm, whose archiepiscopate is the subject of the first volume in the series by Sally N. Vaughn, and Thomas Becket. Having previously been characterised merely as three »ciphers« between these two giants of the medieval English Church, by studying their careers as one »unit« Truax seeks to do justice not only to their respective achievements, but also »to highlight certain developments in the English Church that are not so easily visible when considering a single pontificate« (p. 3). In this she largely succeeds, but as Truax herself notes, while these three men may not have been of the calibre of Anselm and Becket, they have not been entirely overlooked by modern scholarship. Indeed, the *acta* of Ralph d'Escures and William of Corbeil have been edited as part of the »English Episcopal Acta« series (vol. 28, ed. by Martin Brett and Joseph A. Gribbin, Oxford 2004), while Theobald of Bec is the subject of a full-length biography by Avrom Saltman (New York 1969). Much of what is known about the careers of these men has, therefore, already been explored in these pages, or elsewhere in general surveys of the period, with the end result being that the work under review here often becomes one of synthesis, rather than a vehicle for significant new discoveries.

The book itself opens with a brief survey of the English Church under Archbishops Lanfranc and Anselm (p. 3–26), before going on to examine the career of each archbishop in chronological order. It is no mean feat to condense into such a short space the various developments of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, but Truax handles the task well, although it might perhaps have helped to divide this part into subsections such as »King and Archbishop«, »York-Canterbury«, »Rome«, »Neighbours«, etc., since these various themes recur throughout the book. Moreover, it is in reading the introduction that one first becomes aware of one of the book's main weaknesses, for while Truax seems perfectly fluent in British and American scholarship, there is almost no reference to anything published outside the English-speaking world (a survey of the bibliography of secondary sources reveals a total of seven works published in French and two in German). This is of lesser consequence when Truax is writing of the local activities of the archbishops, but the absence is striking when issues or personalities of international significance are discussed, as they often are, or when one remembers that two of the men (Ralph d'Escures and Theobald of Bec) had spent a considerable amount of time in Normandy before being elected to the archiepiscopate. Admittedly, little is known of Theobald's time as abbot of Bec, but Ralph's career as abbot of Saint-Martin de Sées is treated to a lengthy entry in

Véronique Gazeau's superb survey of the Benedictine abbots of ducal Normandy¹. Here it is noted that it was during Ralph's abbacy that a famous liturgical manuscript was completed (the »Bible de Sées«), while reference is also made to the abbot's repeated appearances in the abbey's surviving cartulary. Examination of the latter may have shed light on his dealings as abbot, in particular with the troublesome Robert de Bellême, about whom Truax writes at length (p. 28–30), again without reference to any of the extensive French literature on this family, or it may have revealed something to confirm or temper Truax's image of Ralph as a likeable man with keen diplomatic skills.

In turning to deal with Ralph's role in the York-Canterbury primacy dispute (p. 49–74), Truax is once again faced with a topic about which much has already been written, especially from the York perspective, and at times the archbishop gets lost in the narrative of these events, on which he found himself on the losing end. Truax nevertheless argues convincingly that the achievements of Ralph's archiepiscopate are greater than has hitherto been admitted, while this particular chapter ends with a useful survey of the archbishop's administration of his diocese. This is followed by two chapters dedicated to William of Corbeil. The core of the first (p. 75–92), which opens with a brief survey of William's early life and the circumstances leading to his trip to Rome in 1123, is largely given over to discussion of the texts known today as the Canterbury Forgeries (p. 79–89), which were presented by the archbishop-elect to papal representatives in support of Canterbury's claim to primacy. Although Truax could hardly have passed over these documents in silence, such a lengthy digression does disrupt the narrative somewhat, and might have been better placed in Appendix 1, where English translations of the forgeries are printed. What remains could have been usefully combined with the second chapter (p. 93–112), which deals first with William's role in resolving the succession crisis caused by the death of William Aetheling in 1120, then with his achievements as archbishop. Here Truax shows that William was certainly more than the archbishop condemned by Henry of Huntingdon as having little to be said in his favour (»no one can sing his praises because there's nothing to sing about«, is his caustic summary of William's career), but there is little here in this regard that cannot already be found in the introduction to the edition of his *acta* by Martin Brett and Joseph Gribbin or in Frank Barlow's entry on William in the »Oxford Dictionary of National Biography«.

The career of Theobald of Bec presents Truax with perhaps her most difficult subject. Active in a period about which much has already been written, and himself the focus of a detailed biographical study, Truax is faced with synthesising a great deal of existing research while keeping the archbishop at the fore, a task she accomplishes with mixed success. Indeed, much space in Chapter 6 (p. 113–132), which chronicles Theobald's election and the difficulties of King Stephen's reign, is devoted to rehearsing the details of many of the well-known episodes of these years, while Theobald often plays second fiddle in the narrative to the irrepressible Henry of Winchester. The next chapter, however, contains a very useful discussion of the archbishop's charters and his household, evidence for both of which increases noticeably during his reign. There then follows an examination of the relations between Canterbury and its neighbours, although as Truax herself admits (p. 156), Theobald played

¹ Véronique Gazeau, *Normannia monastica* (X^e–XII^e siècle). Princes normands et abbés bénédictins. Prosopographie des abbés bénédictins, t. 2, Caen 2007, p. 355–358.

almost no role in the election disputes that arose in Durham and York during these years. The chapter concludes with a survey of the explosion of new monastic foundations (p. 158–161), and on this subject in particular it seems that more could perhaps have been written, given that over a fifth of the archbishop's charters were issued in favour of new houses and that this is an issue that Saltman does not address in detail in his study of the archbishop. The final chapter dedicated to Theobald considers the other great change that occurred during his reign, namely the increased involvement of the papacy in English affairs (p. 163–180), discussion of which Truax uses effectively to re-examine relations between Theobald and Henry II, which some have seen as containing the seeds of discord that would blossom so violently during Becket's reign.

All in all, despite the shortcomings noted above, this is a well written book that generally remains true to its stated goal of highlighting the developments that occurred during these years and the roles played by the three archbishops in them. The appendices contain a useful collection of contemporary materials (letters, *vita* extracts, etc.) in English translation, often with facing-page Latin text, which has the benefit of making these materials widely accessible. The book is well presented, although slightly more care should have been taken in proof-reading the testimonials on the back cover, one of which commends the work as »a readable study of three twelfth- and thirteenth-century archbishops«, despite the fact that nothing beyond 1162 is discussed. Nevertheless, this book will prove a useful resource, although perhaps more for students than for specialists of the period, who will find little here to really sink their teeth into.