

Encyclopedia of Archival Writers, 1515–2015

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Contents

Editorial Advisory Board	vii
Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Encyclopedia	1
Alphabetical List of Writers	555
Chronological List of Writers	559
Writers by Country	561
About the Editors	565
About the Contributors	567

Michael T. Clanchy (1936–)

LIFE

Michael Clanchy was born in 1936 in Reading, England. After receiving his BA in modern history from Oxford in 1959, he taught school in Reading from 1959–1961. In 1962, he obtained a diploma in education at Oxford and in 1962–1964 was lecturer in history at St Mary's College, Strawberry Hill. In 1964, he was appointed to the University of Glasgow as lecturer in medieval history. In 1961, he began working part time on his PhD thesis, which was accepted by the University of Reading in 1966. In 1982, he became reader in medieval history at the University of Glasgow, a post he held until 1985. From 1986–1992, he was research fellow at Westfield College, University of London, and from 1993–2000 he was research fellow at the Institute of Historical Research at the University of London. From 2001–2002, he was professor at the Institute for Historical Research.

In 1966, the year he earned his doctorate, he won the Alexander Prize of the Royal Historical Society, which is awarded to a published essay or article based on original historical research by a doctoral candidate or someone who has recently earned a doctorate. Other honors and responsibilities followed. In 1972, Michael Clanchy was research fellow at the Harvard Law School; in 1974, he became a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries; and in 1999, he was made a fellow of the British Academy. From 1997–2003, he was vice president of the Selden Society. Highly appreciated as a lecturer, he was the Neale Lecturer in History at University College London (1988), Edwards Lecturer in Diplomatic at the University of Glasgow (1990), Medieval Acad-

emy of America plenary lecturer at the Thirtieth International Conference on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University (1995), F.E.L. Priestley Lecturer in the History of Ideas at the University of Toronto (1998), scholar-in-residence and distinguished lecturer at New York University (1998), Denis Bethell Lecturer at University College Dublin (2001), Denys Hay Lecturer at the University of Edinburgh (2001), and lecturer at the Musée National du Moyen Âge in Paris (2001).

INTELLECTUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Michael Clanchy's book-length studies started with two editions and translations of records produced by the justices itinerant in 1249 and 1248, respectively. They concern more in particular the civil pleas of the Wiltshire Eyre of 1249 (Clanchy 1971), complementing the edition of the crown pleas of that year's Wiltshire Eyre by C. A. F. Meekings (1961) and the roll and writ file of the Berkshire Eyre of 1248 (Clanchy 1973). They provide a translation of all pleas, and in the case of the Berkshire Eyre, of all pleas and writs, accompanied by an edition. The introductions of these two editions, a spinoff of the work done for his 1966 thesis, not only give a detailed description of the records themselves but also provide a study of the lawsuits that occasioned the records to be written, and of what can be learned from them about literacy in thirteenth-century England. There is also attention to the work of the clerks (e.g., Clanchy 1973, lxxv), and even the tedium this might entail (Clanchy 1971, 8). In retrospect, these introductions can be read as the kernel from which

the ideas of what has come to be termed “pragmatic literacy” were to grow.

Excellent as these editions may have been, their importance is incomparable to the influence of Michael Clanchy’s third book, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307* (Clanchy 1979). This monograph consists of two parts. Part 1 deals with “The Making of Records” and examines the making, keeping, and using of written records, mainly by the English royal government and its agents. Part 2, “The Literate Mentality,” deals with the language of records and the distinctions between literate and illiterate and between hearing and seeing, and it discusses trusting writing and practical literacy. The impact this book has had on scholars of literacy, not only in medieval England but in all medieval Europe, cannot be overestimated. The book has become the canonical reference for anyone studying literacy in the medieval West. The first edition was followed in 1993 by a much enriched second edition, and in 2013 by a revised third edition. All three editions were very well received on the European continent and have led to several generations of scholars becoming attuned to questions of writing and its uses in the exercise of power, the reasons for the growth of the production of records in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and the implications of this type of literacy for our understanding of medieval history in general. *From Memory to Written Record* inspired, for example, a fourteen-year research project at the University of Münster (Meier 2006), which in turn inspired similar research in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, and east-central Europe. Clanchy’s expression “practical literacy” became “pragmatische Schriftlichkeit” in its German translation made in Münster. The German expression was then suggested by a Münster historian to an English colleague, who adopted it for the title of a collection of essays on *Pragmatic Literacy, East and West, 1200–1330* (Britnell 1997, vii), and this retranslation became a standard expression for studies of practical literacy worldwide.

Michael Clanchy’s teaching led to several other book-length studies. In 1983, *England and Its Rulers, 1066–1272: Foreign Lordship and National Identity*, an introduction to medieval England in the two centuries after the Norman Conquest, was published. Several new editions of this book have slightly altered titles, reflecting changes in its con-

tent. In *Early Medieval England*, published by the Folio Society in 1997, extracts from the second edition of *From Memory to Written Record* were added to the corrected text of the first edition of *England and Its Rulers*. The true second edition of the latter work was published in 1998 with the subtitle *With an Epilogue on Edward I (1272–1307)*. The third and fourth editions, published in 2006 and 2014, respectively, both have the title *England and Its Rulers, 1066–1307*. In the fourth edition, a new chapter on family and gender roles was added, reflecting developments in the author’s historical interests.

In 1997, Michael Clanchy published his biographical study *Abelard: A Medieval Life*. The book is dedicated to the students who from 1970–1985 took the Abelard special subject class at the University of Glasgow. Chapters 2–14 all have titles dealing, roughly in chronological order, with topics that were central to Abelard’s life. Chapter 3 is entitled “Literate” and starts with a short section on “Gender and Literacy.” The book, which was translated into French and German, was well received. It also led to the invitation to undertake a revised edition of Betty Radice’s *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, a translation which had been published by Penguin in 1974. The revised and augmented edition was published in 2003.

Meanwhile, a new interest in gender unmistakably rose in a series of articles in which Michael Clanchy reviewed his ideas on literacy. Already in the 1990s he had been contemplating a book on female literacy but was prevented from undertaking it by work on *Abelard* and the new editions of *From Memory to Written Record* and *England and Its Rulers*. In 2004, the article “Images of Ladies with Prayer-Books: What Do They Signify?” appeared. This was followed a year later by another article titled “An Icon of Literacy: The Depiction at Tuse of Jesus Going to School.” In 2011, “The ABC Primer: Was It in Latin or English?” and “Did Mothers Teach Their Children to Read?” were published. These four articles attest to an appreciation of the role of mothers in the teaching of reading. Together, they show a shift from the earlier emphasis on pragmatic literacy to attention for the forms of literacy in which women may be presumed to have played a large role. These articles also show a widening of the geographical and chronological scope of Clanchy’s investigations of literacy, as an increasing number of examples is introduced from

outside England and the continental kingdoms ruled by its kings in the period 1066–1307. In 2018, these four articles were republished, together with two other republished articles and a new introduction, in *Looking Back from the Invention of Printing: Mothers and the Teaching of Reading in the Middle Ages*.

—Marco Mostert

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