

Comparative Perspectives
on History and Historians

Essays in Memory of Bryce Lyon (1920–2007)

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MEDIEVAL INSTITUTE PUBLICATIONS
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo

Bryce Lyon and the Royal Historical Commission of Belgium

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MY TASK for this commemoration of Professor Bryce D. Lyon is to report, as a former general secretary, on the role of this American scholar in the Royal Historical Commission of Belgium (Koninklijke Commissie voor Geschiedenis, Commission royale d'histoire), of which he was one of the most prominent correspondents. If there is any single explanation for the ambition of Bryce Lyon as a magnificent and expert editor of medieval texts, it is marriage. Bryce's spouse, Mary Lyon, was a scholar in classical studies and as such the perfect companion for his conviction of the usefulness of critical text editions. His second source of inspiration was professor Carl Stephenson.¹ Bryce Lyon was a student of Stephenson at Cornell University, who influenced his young graduate student at least in three ways. As a former student of Pirenne in Ghent, in 1924–25, Stephenson introduced Lyon to Pirenne's writings and his manner of seminar teaching.² Secondly, he immersed his student in the study of medieval financial history. Finally, Stephenson told Bryce that he had experienced Pirenne in Ghent not only as a master of broad synthesis, but also as an outstanding erudite, fascinated by the importance of critical text edition as a first and crucial step to real knowledge of the past.³

I had the good luck to sit several times in the front row to observe Bryce Lyon's various talents. Just like Raoul Van Caenegem I saw him in action as a guest teacher for our Ghent students: his warm and sonorous voice, his emphasis of the

¹ On the link with Carl Stephenson, see Lyon, *Henri Pirenne*, pp. xiii–xiv, 300, 338.

² I refer to a few studies on Pirenne published since Lyon's biography: Despy and Verhulst, *La fortune*; Bierlaire and Kupper, *Henri Pirenne*; Violante, *La fine*; Schöttler, "Henri Pirenne"; Boone, "Henri Pirenne"; Prevenier, "Henri Pirenne."

³ On the impact of Pirenne on his American students and scholars, see Boyce, "Legacy."

essential lines, his love for sensitive one-liners, all of that was close to the habits of the Pirenne that Ganshof and my other Ghent teachers so often pictured.⁴ As a secretary of the Royal Commission of History I also saw the other side of the coin, also very Pirennean: Lyon as a scrupulous text editor, wrestling with the many questions that critical editions pose. Bryce had a perfect understanding of the underlying philosophy behind the sophisticated edition rules of the Belgian commission, so that in the heated discussions of technical remarks by the four readers of the commission, he most often won. He had a strong ally in Mary Lyon, for whom, as a philologist, Latin had no secrets. My favorite memories include the many meetings that my wife and I enjoyed from the late 1970s until recently with the Lyons in Brussels, Ghent, and Sint-Martens-Latem, and even more our encounters in marvelous American places, such as Providence, Hilton Head, and Hanover, New Hampshire, which were always filled with wonderful anecdotes about common friends. These brief encounters were always extremely cheerful: the Lyons were perfect hosts, with a great sense for the enjoyable *choses de la vie*, filled with wines, literature, art, and history. But I also recall that I never escaped their incredible professionalism. None of the otherwise very social evenings could end without forcing me to give my opinion on how to streamline the next index, how to justify in the forthcoming text edition the solution of an abbreviation of an unknown family or place name.

Bryce's first sojourns in Belgium in 1951–52 were linked to his research on the transition from feudal to non-feudal contracts in England and the Low Countries during the late Middle Ages.⁵ This topic greatly interested Jean de Sturler, professor at the University of Brussels and a member of the Royal Commission of History.⁶ De Sturler invited Bryce to publish his first text edition in the *Bulletin* of the commission in 1955, an account of the Exchequer of King Edward I, which reveals some crucial links between England and Brabant.⁷ During the successive Belgian stays Lyon's earlier fascination for Pirenne got a new incentive through his friendship with François L. Ganshof of the University of Ghent, Hans Van Werveke, and later with the younger generation of Ghent medievalists. It led to systematic archival research for Lyon's authoritative biography on Pirenne of 1974.⁸ That project became the genesis for most of his text editions through the Belgian commission. First, in 1966 he published the correspondence of Henri Pirenne with Karl Lamprecht.⁹ An even more impressive

⁴ Ganshof, "Pirenne."

⁵ Published as Lyon, *From Fief to Indenture*.

⁶ See the statement in the edition of Lyon et al., *Wardrobe Book of William de Norwell*, p. viii.

⁷ Lyon, "Un compte de l'échiquier."

⁸ Lyon, *Henri Pirenne*. Note also Lyon, "Henri Pirenne: *Connu or inconnu?*"

⁹ Lyon, "Letters." In 1972 Hans Van Werveke edited a few more letters: Van Werveke, "Karl Lamprecht et Henri Pirenne."

edition is a book of the letters to Pirenne from Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, between 1921 and 1935, when Pirenne died, that includes a long and penetrating introduction.¹⁰ The Bloch-Febvre letters brought an excellent and original view on the early history of the influential French review *Annales: Économies, sociétés, civilisations* and a significant insight into the way historians of the early twentieth century communicated and influenced each other. The third publication, of the scholarly notes of Pirenne as a war prisoner in Germany from 1916 to 1918, was no less spectacular.¹¹ These notes revealed many unknown facets of Pirenne's personality, particularly his early fascination with sociology and anthropology. They also formed some of Pirenne's early reflections on issues treated in two later, major works, *Mahomet et Charlemagne* and *Histoire de l'Europe*.¹² One more text edition of the Lyons on Pirenne, but not published by the Belgian Commission, is Pirenne's war diary covering 1914–18.¹³

Bryce's other early interest, the financial records of the English kings, never waned after the first publication in 1955. Bryce and Mary Lyon published two editions of account books of the English Wardrobe. The first was the record of William de Norwell, royal keeper of the Wardrobe, which details English military logistics in the Low Countries from 1338 to 1340.¹⁴ Its fascinating information includes military expenses, wages, horses, and ships, as well as gifts (money and jewels) to and from Continental allies, merchants, and bankers. Bryce's introduction relates the historical *fortuna*, the Pirennean *hasard*, leading to the edition: in 1951–52, while working in the Belgian archives, Bryce had the good fortune to meet Henry S. Lucas, a specialist in the history of the Netherlands, who told him what a wonderful source this Wardrobe Book was. When Lucas died in 1961, he had transcribed half of the 362 folios of the manuscript. After a talk with Jean de Sturler and a visit to Lucas's widow, who gave them the unfinished transcription, Bryce and Mary were invited by de Sturler to publish it through the Belgian commission. A second Wardrobe Book edition concerned the campaign of King Edward I in Flanders against King Philip IV of France in 1297.¹⁵ It is a goldmine of military information on the nine thousand soldiers and the 273 ships in the operation, but no less for diplomatic activities and the purchase of political support on the Continent. Later Bryce and Mary edited another much shorter account, by the clerk Robert de Segre, of the campaign of the English

¹⁰ Lyon, *Birth of Annales*.

¹¹ Lyon, "Réflexions d'un solitaire."

¹² Soon after he returned from Germany Pirenne published his first article on these "reflexions": Pirenne, "Mahomet et Charlemagne."

¹³ Lyon, *Journal de Guerre*.

¹⁴ Lyon et al., *Wardrobe Book of William de Norwell*.

¹⁵ Lyon, *Wardrobe Book of 1296–1297*.

army against the French King in Flanders and Brabant in 1297. It gives fascinating information on the residence of the English king at the courts of the count of Flanders in Ghent and Bruges and on the salaries of Flemish workers hired by the royal army.¹⁶

Over the years the Lyons developed exceptional friendships with the Royal Commission of History and several of its members, especially Carlos Wyffels, with whom Bryce discovered good Belgian beers and many archival treasures;¹⁷ Raoul Van Caenegem, who wrote a poignant memoir on Bryce as a member of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium;¹⁸ and Adriaan Verhulst, with whom he wrote an erudite comparative study on financial institutions in England and the Low Countries.¹⁹ In 2007 the commission initiated a new type of text editions, memoirs and testimonials on important people. Bryce Lyon opened the series with his personal memories of François-Louis Ganshof.²⁰ Altogether Bryce was an assiduous collaborator of the commission for fifty-two years.

In his capacity as text editor Bryce Lyon entrusted the commission with an endowment to be used for a yearly award, but of course without any suggestion on the name of the prize. In its session of June 26, 2004, the commission accepted this proposal and created a prize for young text editors, agreeing unanimously to call it the Bryce and Mary Lyon Prize.²¹ The prize is given every two years, for the first time in December 2005.²² The prize is intended to encourage the publication of scientific texts. It is awarded to the youngest author, aged thirty at most, whose works were published in the two previous years in either the *Bulletin* or another of the commission's collections. Although the republic of letters is universal and knows no frontiers, the prize will certainly keep the memory alive of the remarkable familiarity with Belgium of two marvelously erudite scholars: Bryce and Mary Lyon.

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¹⁶ Lyon, "Account."

¹⁷ Lyon et al., "Carlos Wyffels."

¹⁸ Van Caenegem, "Bryce Lyon."

¹⁹ Lyon and Verhulst, *Medieval Finance*.

²⁰ Lyon, "François Louis Ganshof."

²¹ "Séance du samedi 26 juin 2004," *Bulletin de la Commission royale d'histoire* 171 (2005): 402–3.

²² See comments and names of the laureates of the Bryce and Mary Lyon Prize on the website of the Royal Historical Commission: http://www.kgeschiedenis.be/en/prixAnnuels/lyon_en.html [accessed May 2011].

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