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THE ENGLISH CIVIL SERVICE

IN THE

FOURTEENTH CENTURY

A LECTURE

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15TH DECEMBER, 1915

BY

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UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

Reprinted from "The Bulletin of the John Rylands Library"
April-June, 1916

MANCHESTER: THE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 12 LIME
GROVE, OXFORD ROAD. LONGMANS, GREEN & CO., 39
PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON, E.C., NEW YORK, BOMBAY,
CALCUTTA, AND MADRAS. BERNARD QUARITCH, 11
GRAFTON STREET, LONDON, W. MCMXVI

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THE ENGLISH CIVIL SERVICE IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY.¹

By T. F. TOUT, M.A., F.B.A.

BISHOP FRASER PROFESSOR OF MEDIÆVAL AND ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER.

THERE is little need to expatiate to a twentieth-century audience on the nature and functions of the Civil Service of the modern British state. To us the civil servant is with us always. He rules us from a score of palaces of bureaucracy in Westminster and beyond. Each time that our benevolent rulers extend for our benefit the sphere of state intervention, they are compelled to make a new call on the activity of this ever-increasing class. The result is that those who fondly imagined that modern England was a democracy are gradually discovering that it is in reality a bureaucracy. Our real masters are not the voters. Still less are they the vote-hunting politicians who flit from office to office, either singly or in whole packs. Our masters are the demure and obscure gentlemen in neat black coats and tall hats who are seen every morning flocking to the government offices in Western London at hours varying inversely with their dignity.

I am far from saying that our masters do their work badly; on the whole they perform their task quite well. It is true that their point of view as governors is not always ours as the governed, and that the loyalty to tradition, which springs up, like a mushroom, in the youngest office, seems to us outsiders occasionally to degenerate into what we irreverently call the cult of red tape, and that their noble sense of their own dignity may occasionally incline towards pomposity and superciliousness. Our masters mainly live and work in London, and only rarely and reluctantly do the higher grades of the class establish themselves permanently in the "provinces". But they are always glad to inspect or to visit or in some other way to direct the

¹ An elaboration of the lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library, on 15 December, 1915.

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benighted provincial into the right road of progress. Thus we in the North, though we see but seldom in our midst the more exalted types of bureaucrat, have constant occasion to realize their activities. We have been forced to protect ourselves from them by the homœopathic method of creating lesser bureaucracies of our own. How successful we are is shown by the fact that our own local palace of bureaucracy in Albert Square is, for all its vastness, insufficient to contain the myriad of servants of the city corporation that should normally pass within it their working lives.

However much we may grumble, this growth of bureaucracy is inevitable. It is in fact a result of the increasing complexity of modern civilization, and is emphasized by the constant growth of state intervention. Time was when a serious effort was made by our grandfathers to realize the ideal of *laissez faire*; but *laissez faire* was always much more theory than practice, and in neither relation did it ever come near success.

Our life could not be lived on the hypothesis that the state was nothing more than a glorified policeman. Now we are all more or less socialists: we all recognize that the mission of the state covers the whole of life. To discharge so wide a function the public service, both central and local, requires all the skill that training and knowledge can give. We have therefore imperative need for the trained specialist who makes administration the work of his life. At his best, his skill enables us to be well governed. At his worst, he may still save us from the vagaries of the amateur, who, whether as member of parliament or city councillor, thinks that the leisure of a busy life is sufficient to devote to the highly technical and difficult trade of government. We cannot therefore do without the professional administrator, the bureaucrat. Our amateur politicians, on the other hand, have the equally indispensable task imposed upon them of calling the tune which the bureaucrat should sing, and of watching over his restless activity and turning it into profitable channels.

We are sometimes told that the elaboration of the political machinery of the state, which involves the existence of a bureaucratic class, is the work of quite modern times. No doubt many of the refinements of permanent officialism are modern enough. The very words, civil service, civil servant, which we familiarly use to describe

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the permanent public official, are things of yesterday. No instances of the use of these terms can be found in our language before the reign of George III. It originated apparently among the early British administrators of India rather than in the British Islands. It seems first to have been used by the East India Company, after Clive's conquest of Bengal, to distinguish the administrative officers of the company who were not military by profession. It was only slowly that the technical phrase of the Anglo-Indian was also adopted for home use. The *New English Dictionary* gives us no instance of the wider employment of these terms earlier than some sixty years ago. Indeed I can find no earlier example of the familiar use of the phrase civil service, as applied to the officials of the British crown, than in the title of the report, issued in 1853, on "the organization of the permanent civil service". This report is memorable as having first suggested to an unheeding generation of place-hunters the policy of the free admission to the public service, without jobbing or nomination of all such male persons of sound health as have acquitted themselves best in a stiff competitive examination. It was the work of two officials, Sir Charles Trevelyan of the Treasury, and Sir Stafford Northcote of the Board of Trade, who were encouraged to persevere in their views by the reforming zeal of the new chancellor of the exchequer, W. E. Gladstone. If we study the correspondence and discussions provoked by Trevelyan's report, we find—for the first time so far as I can find—the word "civil service" applied to the permanent public servants of the English state. We can read it in 1854 in the letters of Lord John Russell opposing Trevelyan's revolutionary plans, in those of Gladstone advocating them, and in the note to Gladstone in which Queen Victoria gives a very guarded and reluctant assent to the general idea. The establishment of the Civil Service Commission in 1855, to carry out the new plan of examinations, made the term, so to say, official. It did not at once spread outside political circles. Thus Dickens, who published in 1857 in *Little Dorrit* his well-known denunciations of the Circumlocution office and of the Barnacle clan, never speaks of the civil service, though one Mr. Barnacle describes himself as a "public servant". In the light of these suggestions it seems as if the notice of the phrase civil servant in the *New English Dictionary* would be the better for a little elaboration. If I may venture to hazard a guess

on a topic quite outside my ordinary studies, it almost looks as if Sir Charles Trevelyan, a retired Indian civil servant, to whom the phrase was an everyday one, was perhaps unwittingly responsible for extending into general currency a term restricted in an earlier generation to the civil service of India. Within a few years the term civil service was to be heard from every one's lips.

Whether or not we have the name, we have the thing, hundreds of years earlier. The public servants of the crown, whose special sphere was administration and finance, and who were professional administrators, not professional soldiers, go back to the earliest ages of the English state. They existed, but barely existed, in the later days of the Anglo-Saxon monarchy. They first became numerous, powerful, and conspicuous when the Norman kings gave England a centralized administration and a trained body of administrators. Their influence rose to a high level in the reigns of Henry II and his sons, when England, thanks to their work, was the best governed and most orderly state in all Western Europe. By this time another process was beginning. The early civil servants, like all early public officials, were simply members of the king's household. The king's clerks, accountants, and administrators belonged to the same category as the king's cooks, scullions, grooms, and valets. The public service of the state then was hopelessly confused with the domestic service of the court. Bit by bit, however, we get to the first stages of the long process by which the national administrative machine was slowly disentangled from the machinery which regulated the domestic establishment of the monarch. The time was still far distant when the modern distinction was made between the king in his private and public capacities, between the royal officers who ruled the king's household, and those who carried on the government of the country. Our mediæval ancestors were moved even less than ourselves by theoretical considerations. But for very practical reasons the kings found it impossible not to draw some sort of line between the men who helped them to govern the country and the men who waited on the monarch or strove to keep in order his vast and disorderly household. For one thing the king was always on the move. A Norman or Angevin monarch had no fixed "residence" and still less a fixed "capital". Business and inclination united to make him live a wandering life from one royal estate to another. Economic necessity alone

kept him plodding through his continued journeys. So great was the dearth of means of communication, and so difficult was the transport of bulky commodities, that it was much easier to take men and horses to their food than to bring their food to them.

The whole administrative machine of our early kings was a part of the court. Accordingly it followed the king on his constant wanderings. It was not the least of the troubles of those who wished to transact business with the government, that they had to find out where the king was and to attend him in his restless movements from place to place. So long as the magnates of each district ruled each one over his own estate, so long as the freemen of shire, hundred, or borough were mainly governed in their local courts, these inconveniences occurred so seldom that they counted for very little. But by Henry II's reign the English king had centralized so much authority under his immediate direction that all men of substance had frequent occasion to seek justice or request favours at the court. Moreover, as the administrative machine became more complex, it became a constantly harder task to carry about with the court the ever-increasing tribe of officials, to say nothing of the records, registers, and rolls that they found necessary for business or for reference. The remedy was found in establishing a headquarters for each administrative department at some fixed spot, where permanent business was transacted and where the records of the office were preserved. It was for this practical reason that the civil service slowly differentiated itself from the domestic environment of the king. For similar practical reasons London, or rather Westminster, was found the most convenient fixed spot for each permanent central bureau.

The financial administration was the first to acquire a separate life of its own. In days when government meant exploitation, the highest aim of the ruler was to get as much out of his subjects as he could. The good king of those days promoted his people's welfare because he had the wit to see that a prosperous community could afford to pay more taxes and was likely to yield them up with less friction or rebellion. It was natural then that finance should loom largest in the royal scheme of the universe, and that the greatest attention should be devoted to the collection and administration of the royal revenue. Accordingly the good old days when Edward the Confessor kept his treasure in a box in his bedroom passed away. Under Henry I the first of modern

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government offices arose in the king's Exchequer, and under Henry II the king's Exchequer had a permanent home of its own at Westminster. If the title of chamberlain, borne by some of the king's Exchequer officials, shows its origin in the king's bedroom or chamber, the Exchequer was before the end of the twelfth century in all essentials an independent office of state. Its staff was quite separate from the service of the court. It was in modern phrase a branch—for the time being the only branch—of the king's civil service.

I have spoken of the Exchequer as a financial office, and I have done so because its main concern was with finance. But we must not expect meticulous distinctions in these days between various branches of the royal service. The business of government was still so primitive: the number of skilled officers so small: their resources so limited, that every servant of the king had, like the modern country workman or the present Indian civilian in a remote district, to turn his hand to any job that came in his way. If he did not do it, there was no one else who could, and the job remained undone. Accordingly the Exchequer officer is often found trying lawsuits, going on missions, and transacting all sorts of business that had no close relation with finance. As time went on, this proved inconvenient, and just as the twelfth century saw the creation of the financial department, so did the thirteenth century witness the slow separation from the court of a second office of state, whose main business was administration. This administrative department grew out of the little office where the chaplains of the court occupied themselves in writing out the king's letters between the hours of divine service. One of these chaplains, called the chancellor, was entrusted with the custody of the king's seal. Now in an age when writing was a rare art with laymen, and when all writing looked much alike, a great man did not authenticate his letters by signing them but by affixing his seal to them. The keeping of the king's seal then involved responsibility for the composition of the king's correspondence. Now the confidential clerk, who writes a man's letters, may generally more or less suggest the policy these letters involve. It resulted that, as the king's general secretary, the chancellor became the most trusted of all the king's ministers, his secretary of state for all departments, as Stubbs has rightly called him. He was, in effect, prime minister, and to do his work he had to gather round him a staff of skilled officials. The result was the complete separation

of the king's scribes from the king's chaplains, the growth of a class of clerks of the Chancery who by the fourteenth century were the ablest, most powerful, and most energetic of all officers of state. The Chancery, however, long remained a part of the court, mainly because it was to the king's interest to have his chief minister always by his side. But as the office became larger, and as its prudent habit of enrolling all its acts swelled its official records to an enormous size, the same reason, which separated the Exchequer from the court, began to apply also to the Chancery. The process was made more imperative when the barons put in their claim to control the government of the country equally or almost equally with the king. At last a sort of compromise was arrived at by which the Chancery, though still partly following the court, wandered less freely and in smaller circles. It now had headquarters of its own in London, where the clerks lived a sort of collegiate life in common. It kept there its ever-increasing mass of records, and kept them in the very same place where the Public Record Office now preserves the accumulated archives of every great department of state. By the days of Edward II the Chancery, like the Exchequer since Henry II, had become a government office, self-contained, self-sufficing, with its own staff, traditions, and methods, and plainly separated from the court.

The Exchequer and the Chancery, the office of finance and the office of administration, were the two first government departments in the modern sense. A third and lesser office separated itself from the court in the reign of Edward III. This was the office of the privy seal, whose keeper and clerks gradually drifted out of court in the generation succeeding the differentiation by the Chancery from the household. The king's privy seal was originated about the reign of John when the great seal, and its keeper the chancellor, became so much public officers that they were no longer always at hand when their lord wished to write a letter. Moreover, the chancellor was a great man, who, though nominally the king's servant, often had a will of his own and often agreed with the barons rather than his royal master. The result was that, as Chancery and chancellor drifted out of court, there still remained, as closely attendant as of old on the monarch in all his wanderings, the ancient writing and administrative department which continued to do for the king's household the work originally done by the chancellor. It was soon natural for the king

to set up his domestic chancery against the public chancery, the privy seal against the great seal. The barons tried to stop this by claiming the control of the household office as well as the public one. Neither king nor barons could get all their way, and in the long run a sort of compromise was again arrived at. The privy seal went "out of court". It became a minor administrative office, sometimes perhaps relieving the Chancery, more often, I suspect, clogging the wheels of the administration. The result was a third type of fourteenth century civil servant in the clerks of the privy seal.

Though all these offices of state arose one after the other from the royal household, the household itself went on much as before. Even under Edward III the line between domestic and public administration was not yet drawn. The household offices continued to overlap the offices of state. If the Exchequer controlled the national revenues, it had a rival in the domestic office called the king's chamber, which remained, as in primitive times, the household office of finance. The king's wardrobe in the same way was no longer the cupboard where the king hung up his clothes, but a well-equipped office of domestic administration. It was in effect the private chancery of the court, and almost rivalling the public chancery of state. Each branch of the king's household was now manned in part at least by skilled professional administrators. The clerks of the chamber and the clerks of the wardrobe might well be included as a fourth type of mediæval civil servant. If I speak but little of this class it is because, with all its importance in the administration, its best work was over by the death of Edward III. As we near the fifteenth century, it became increasingly absorbed in its domestic work and less and less employed in the public government by the state. Yet no sooner had this process gone forward to a considerable degree than new court administrative offices began to take the lead in directing national affairs. I should, however, get far beyond my period were I to speak of the secretariat of state, the signet office and the newer administrative machinery of the last period of the middle ages. We must remember, however, that these new departments had their origin in the course of the fourteenth century.

So much for the offices: and now for the men who filled them. My apology for troubling you so much with the growth of the administrative departments is that some knowledge of them is indispensable for the appreciation of the work and position of the official

class with whom we are primarily concerned. It will be my business now to try and suggest what manner of man was the civil servant who filled these offices of state.

The bare sketch of the growth of the offices will suffice to dissipate the illusion that the middle ages had no civil servants. In some ways the bureaucrat was as active and vigorous in the fourteenth century as he is in the twentieth. But we should be rash to think that he closely resembled the civil servant of the modern state. Mediæval society was always on a small scale even in great kingdoms. Mediæval resources were miserably feeble as compared with those of modern times. Men were as clever then as they are now; they were almost as "civilized". But they were overwhelmingly inferior to moderns in the command of material resources, and but a fraction of the meagre material forces at the disposal of society was under the control of the mediæval state. Hence the very slight extent to which the division of labour could be pushed. When the principle of differentiation had gone so far as to make a civil service possible, its members were but imperfectly specialized. The offices of state were few; nevertheless they overlapped hopelessly; everything was in a state of flux; and the mediæval civilian, like the modern blue-jacket, was compelled to be a "handy man" by the situation in which his lot was cast. Even in our own highly organized society it is possible, especially in times like this, for clerks to be shifted from one office to another, or for outsiders to be called in to discharge temporary war work. Under mediæval conditions the same end was attained by everybody doing everybody else's job, sometimes to the neglect of his own. The mediæval civil servant then was much less specialized than his modern counterpart.

Another striking point of dissimilarity between the modern and the mediæval civilian is that the great majority of the latter were clergymen. We still call the civil servant a clerk, just as we speak of the clerks of a bank or a merchant's office. If we ever ask ourselves what "clerk" means, we should probably say that it involves a life devoted to the mechanical task of writing, book-keeping, accounting, and copying. But historically a clerk means simply a clergyman, a member of the broad class of actual or potential ministers of the Church. In the early middle ages it was a matter of course to regard all men of education as clerks. Writing and accounting were rare gifts for a layman, the

more so since all letters were written and all accounts kept in Latin. It was because they knew how to write and keep accounts in Latin that clerks were alone trusted to man the primitive offices of state. Now these clerks were not necessarily "clerks in holy orders"; they were not even necessarily "clerks in minor orders". You could enter the clerical profession as soon as you had induced some prelate to give you the "first tonsure". With the shaven crown went the clerical dress and the important privilege of benefit of clergy, that is the right of being judged for all offences by members of your own order, and in practice the useful privilege of committing your first crime with comparative impunity. The tonsured clerk, might, if he would, afterwards proceed to "orders," minor or holy; but in numerous cases he did not even enter minor orders, and it was quite common for him not to take holy orders, that is he never became a sub-deacon, deacon, or priest. Very often he passed through these stages, hastily and perfunctorily, when his service to the state received its crowning reward in a bishopric. There were few instances of mediæval civil servants declining the office of bishop, the highest stage of holy orders. Now for the majority of clerks in government offices there was little need to assume more clerical responsibility than prudence required. For holy orders were permanent and indelible; the tonsure alone gave benefit of clergy, and the worldly clerk only needed orders to qualify him for a benefice. Thus the clerical class was very elastic and very large. In fact it comprehended all educated men, most lawyers, most physicians, all scholars, graduates, and students of universities, and most boys in grammar schools. And the clerk, when a clerk, had the disabilities as well as the advantages of his profession. All professional men then were compulsory celibates; by abandoning the clerical status they lost all prospect of worldly advancement in the one profession that had great prizes to offer.

By the fourteenth century this state of things was already passing away. There was an ever-increasing number of educated laymen, and a new lucrative profession was fully open to lay enterprise. This was that of the pleaders and exponents of English law. The schools of the "common lawyers" in London were the first schools in England where men could study for a profession without becoming clerks. But we have not got to the time when to be a barrister was to possess the master key to politics. The lawyers had, then as now, more than their

share of good things ; but the common lawyer at least was rarely a civil servant, though he might sometimes become a minister. It was the civil and canon laws, the law of Rome and the law of the church, not the common law, that were most pursued by those who aspired to the public service. The civil and canon laws were the only laws studied in the universities : their students then were all necessarily clerks.

There were some advantages in the clerical official. He was better educated on the average ; often a graduate, sometimes a distinguished doctor, or master, of Paris or Oxford. He was generally a man with a career to make, and likely therefore to be more devoted and less scrupulous in the service of his master. Moreover, clerks could easily be rewarded without expense to the king. They could be enriched by livings, dignities, prebends, bishoprics ; while the laymen could only be satisfied by grants of land that belonged to the royal domain or by the custody of royal wards or by the hand of heiresses in the king's guardianship. At the worst, the clerk could be quietly got rid of by being given some job that kept him away from his office. Moreover, a strong practical disadvantage that told against lay officials was the fact that in the early middle ages all lay offices tended to become hereditary. For instance in the Exchequer, the oldest of the offices of state, there had been from the beginning a considerable lay element. Originally the layman did the rough work, while the clerks wrote, directed, and kept accounts. But by the fourteenth century laymen were as often as competent as clerks for these delicate operations. Long before that, however, the original lay offices of the Exchequer had become "hereditary sergeantries," and had fallen into the hands of families so swelled by the profits of royal service that their representatives were too dignified to do their work. Accordingly, they were allowed to appoint some person of inferior social status who was not too much of a gentleman to be afraid of soiling his hands with labour. The result was that many actual working members of the Exchequer staff were appointed not by the king but by some nobleman, and that nobleman was often a bitter enemy of the royal policy. We may well pity Edward II when one of his fiercest opponents, the grim Earl of Warwick, nicknamed by the royal favourite the Black Dog of Arden, had the right to nominate the man who did the work of his hereditary office of chamberlain of the Exchequer. The Black Dog showed that he could bite by killing Gaveston ; but until the earl's dying day the king had to accept the man his enemy

chose to discharge the functions in the Exchequer which devolved by inheritance to the house of Warwick. There is no wonder then that to the king the clerk, who could not legally found an hereditary house, was a better servant than a layman who expected to be the source of a new landed family. It was only by employing clerks that the monarch could be master of his own household.

This state of things was beginning to pass away by the fourteenth century, but the warning of the Exchequer sergeantries had not been lost. In the Exchequer clerks did, under the Edwards, the work which, under Henry II, was performed by laymen, holding office from father to son. Moreover, Exchequer business was now largely in the hands of personages called "barons of the exchequer". It was perhaps for reasons like this that the Exchequer clerical staff was larger in the fourteenth than in the twelfth century. For instance, the barons could be, and were, indifferently clerks or laymen. But the head of the office, the treasurer, was always a clerk and generally was, or became, a bishop. The most rigidly clerical office was that of chancellor of the Exchequer, an officer who had the pay and status of a baron. This post remained clerical because the chancellor kept the Exchequer seal, and seal keeping was still looked upon as essentially clerical work. Of our modern famous chancellors of the Exchequer perhaps Mr. Gladstone might have felt a greater satisfaction in the early clerical traditions of his office than, say, Sir William Harcourt or Mr. Lloyd George.

As contrasted with the Exchequer the newer offices of state, one and all, opened up few chances to the layman. The Chancery, for instance, was entirely staffed with clerks. Not only was there a clerical chancellor, but the very numerous Chancery clerks who worked under him were clerks in fact as well as in name. The Chancery clerks were, I imagine, both the most important and the ablest of mediæval civil servants. Many of them were doctors of the civil and canon law. Among their special spheres was diplomacy and foreign politics. In the fourteenth as in the twentieth century diplomacy was the genteelest of professions. To this day the Foreign Office is spared the disastrous results on its manners and tone that might have followed had its officials, like those of less dignified departments, been selected by open competition. Perhaps brains and social graces do not always go together, and even nowadays a little more brains might have its

use in diplomacy. But the practical mediæval mind secured the happy mixture of good breeding and capacity necessary, let us say, to persuade or coerce a Balkan prince of German origin, by putting a great nobleman at the head of a foreign embassy, while associating with him a bishop, who had, perhaps, begun life as a chancery clerk, to help out his intelligence, and a chancery clerk or two still on the make, to supply the necessary hard work and technical knowledge. At home, even more than abroad, there were many fields open to the zealous Chancery clerk. Accordingly the Chancery was thronged by the academic youth of ability anxious for distinction in the public service. Fourteenth-century Oxford had already marked out this career as its own; but while the modern lay Oxonian prepares himself for the public service by reading for a stiff examination, his mediæval prototype, already pledged to a clerical career, was forced to avail himself, to procure office, of the methods of influence and intrigue by which a few of our public offices are still staffed. And if the lay civil servant seemed to the mediæval mind almost the last word in radicalism, it goes without saying that mediæval conditions and ideals made it unthinkable to employ women in the public service of the state.

• • Let us next speak of methods of appointment. In the beginnings of the public service under the Normans, the crown sold offices of state to the highest bidders, who recouped themselves for their capital outlay, not only by the legitimate profits of office but still more by the unlawful but customary peculations and extortions in which the early mediæval functionary delighted. By the fourteenth century this primitive method had been partly outgrown; though we had a modern recrudescence of it in the sale of commissions in the army, only abolished in 1871. I have already spoken of the prevalence and of the inconvenience of the hereditary transmission of office. There was only one alternative way to it for the modern method of recruiting the civil service by open competition was inconceivable in an age when the cult of the examination was a novelty. This other way was the method of nomination, sometimes perhaps by conscientious selection, more often I fear by jobbery, local, family, or personal. Still under the circumstances then prevailing, I am fairly sure that the young man of parts and push had nearly as good a chance then as he has nowadays. Yet jobbery there was to almost any extent. There were innumerable mediæval instances of the sublime method of appointment still pre-

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valent in subordinate posts in the law courts by which, we are told, it happens that at present of nine chief officers of the King's Bench seven are relatives of judges and of the eight clerks of assize five are sons of judges. This is the system than which a luminary of the Scottish bar ingenuously tells us that he "does not know of any better". It would be impossible to draw from contemporary politics a more happy and complete survival of the mediæval mind.

It was one of the happy results of the clerical element in the mediæval service that our celibate clerical officials had not, or ought not to have had, so many opportunities of jobbery for their sons as are vouchsafed to the sages of the law in modern democratic Britain. Here again the layman had a better chance than the cleric, though the cleric's family feeling could find plenty of scope in promoting the interests of his numerous nephews. But there are other forms of jobbery besides hereditary jobbery; and although family influence was very strong in the middle ages, the commonest of all sorts of mediæval jobbery seems to have been "feudal" and local, rather than personal. The official that had "got on" planted not only his kinsfolk but his tenants and retainers and their families, in humbler cases the youth of his own village or district, in any posts of which he had the patronage. In the same way the king, as the ultimate fountain of office, always bestowed special favour on men sprung from manors on the royal domain. It is astonishing how large a proportion of mediæval officials showed by their surnames—surnames of the local type—that they traced their origin to some royal estate. Nor was this method of selection merely the result of favouritism. The close personal tie of lord and vassal was, under fourteenth-century conditions, the strongest possible guarantee of faithful service. And loyalty and fidelity were then plants so rare that they deserved cultivation on whatsoever soil they were able to grow. If a mediæval minister had been asked to justify his methods of appointment, he could have said with a better conscience than a modern lawyer that he "knew no better". Anyhow, as things went in these days, the king was often ably and sometimes honestly served. In the atmosphere of slackness and speculation which prevailed in the middle ages, we can expect no more than this.

The modern civil servants are proud to be non-political and permanent. Can we say the same of their mediæval comrades? The answer, as to so many other historical questions, is both "yes"

and "no". The public servant was "non-political" in the same sense that we use the term to-day, that is, the sense of non-party. This was inevitable since there were no parties such as we moderns are only too familiar with. To a limited extent there was the nucleus of a party system, to say nothing of a pretty rank growth of faction. The chronic struggle between courtiers and the barons of the opposition, the contest between bureaucracy and aristocracy, which we can discern all through the fourteenth century, foreshadows to a modest extent the more recent strife between Whig and Tory. But these factions represent tendencies rather than organized parties. Mediæval principles were too fluid, political conditions too unstable, to permit of the growth of permanent parties, aiming at the control of the state. There was consequently only the faintest suggestion of party government, for it was universally allowed that the king governed England with the help of such ministers as he personally chose to help him. The most that the politician could hope to do was to induce the king to take his advice. If the king could not be persuaded to listen to his minister, that functionary had, like Vezelios, to retire into private life and let the king do as he would. Failing this, his only resources were coercion, conspiracy, or rebellion, courses which, under a weak king, an Edward II or a Richard II, had always a good chance of success. But even the feeblest king had a way of turning the tables on the successful opponent of the royal will. The best way of securing a permanent change of policy was to depose or kill the peccant king, and put somebody with sounder principles in his place. This happened twice within seventy years, and on the whole the process did as much good as harm.

You may say that I am straying from my subject and am digressing from civil servants to politicians. But this is not so, for another of the distinctions between mediæval and modern political conditions is the fact that there was no clear line of division between the politicians in high office and the permanent public officials. A few great earls and barons might have an hereditary right to take a leading share in the king's councils without the preliminary training of the public service. But the greater lay magnates ruled by influence rather than as officials, for the highest dignitaries in the administration, the chancellor and the treasurer, were ecclesiastics, and in many cases had worked themselves up to these posts and to the bishoprics, which were

the material reward of their political services, as public servants in the Chancery, the Exchequer, and, still more often, in the wardrobe and household. In fact the minister of state was as likely as not to be a promoted civil servant. Mediæval England, down to and including Tudor times, was ruled, like the modern German Empire, by ministers who had made their mark in the civil service of the crown. In Great Britain the best of modern civil servants can aspire to nothing higher than the influential obscurity of a permanent under-secretary, acting under the orders of the "lawyer politician," the party leader, the Cabinet minister, whose ignorance of the technicalities of the work for which he is responsible, causes him, if a prudent man, to adopt his more experienced underling's advice. But our greatest political ministers of the fourteenth century were, like the leading German statesmen from Stein and Bismarck down to Bethmann-Hollweg, promoted civil servants. Thus Robert Burnell and Walter Langton, the strongest ministers of Edward I, William of Wykeham, the best-known chancellor of Edward III, were alike in this that they were officers of the household, raised by their talents and royal favour to the highest ministries of state.

Under these conditions the English civil service was almost as "non-political" and a good deal more "permanent" than were the mighty ministers of state who so largely emerged from the official class. This is seen when, among other foreshadowings of modern conditions, we find in the reign of Edward III something like the beginnings of parties and two ministerial crises, those of 1340 and 1371, in which one party drove its rivals from the king's favour and therefore from office. In both these years the whole ministry was turned out, really because the king disliked their policy, nominally because they were clergymen. Let us not, however, look upon even this as a clearly marked party triumph. To the shrewdest of contemporary chroniclers it was a struggle not between parties but between the king's confidential household advisers and the ministers holding the great offices of state.¹ But when in 1340 the clerical treasurer and chancellor gave way to the first laymen appointed to these offices, the chief clerks of the Chancery and Exchequer, numerous judges, sheriffs, and other minor officials shared their fate. The underlings went into the wilderness along with the heads of the departments, just as in the

¹ Murimouth, *Continuatio Chronicarum*, p. 323.

United States every petty office is vacated when the swing of the political pendulum replaces a democratic by a republican president. The doctrine, sacred to Tammany and the machine politician, that to the victor belong the spoils was one which might well have appealed to the politician of the fourteenth century.

Such general changes as those in 1340 were extremely rare. They were the more infrequent since the mediæval placeman—high and low, and especially the low—was as a rule very much of the vicar of Bray's way of thinking. Whatever king or policy reigned, he regarded it to be the very root of the matter that he should cling tightly to the emoluments of office. And his easy-going masters seldom disturbed him as long as he did his daily task decently and did not criticize the higher powers. Nor need we blame the mediæval placeman for his apparent want of principle. High affairs of state were no more his business than they were the concern of the man in the street. He was a paid functionary, not always a well-paid functionary, when duty was obedience to his masters. He trusted his masters to do his thinking for him and to understand what it was no business of his to study. Obedience, loyalty, discipline were the ideals before him. Thinking out the rights and wrongs of policy was outside his job. Inspired by these conceptions, the rank and file of the civil service grew grey in their offices, vacating them only by reason of promotion, death, or incapacity to discharge the daily task. Even if they moved from office to office, they remained functionaries for the whole of their working lives.

Let us turn from the principles, or the want of them, of the mediæval placeman to the payments given for his services, to his professional prospects, as we should say. His direct pay was inconsiderable and irregular, and it was only after his particular office got separated from the household that the mediæval civil servant had the advantage of pay at all. To this scanty wage, when he got it, he clung with touching devotion. Let us not blame him, for the labourer is worthy of his hire, and it was a hard job under mediæval conditions to secure a living wage. But let us not think that the mediæval public servant was an idealist. Like most mediæval men, he would do nothing until he saw the chance of getting something out of it. The richest of mediæval members of parliament saw no harm in taking the few shillings a day, paid them by their constituents, for each day's attendance at parliament. The sentiment of an eminent modern statesman,

which I read in to-day's paper, "I take my salary and am going to continue taking it," would have struck a sympathetic chord in every mediæval breast, and have elicited even warmer emotions than the "loud cheers" which greeted the utterance in yesterday's House of Commons. The mediævalist may again stray wide of his subject to express his satisfaction that the impalpable "mediæval atmosphere" is not altogether dissipated by the drab-coloured conditions of modern times.

If the pay of the mediæval public servant was scanty and irregular, the indirect advantages of serving the state were open, gross, and palpable. Here the clerical official had the same pull over his lay colleagues that the clerical schoolmaster—another curious survival of the one profession period—still has over the lay instructor of youth. Besides the chances of his immediate career, the prizes, small and large, of a great profession were open to him. Clerical preferment increased the scanty wages of his post, while he held it; clerical preferment enabled him to retire betimes and enjoy a comfortable old age on his living, his prebend, his deanery, or even his bishopric. We have an interesting survival of the state of things when the church decently eked out the scanty wages of the state in the fact that a large amount of ecclesiastical preferment is still in the hands of the modern lord chancellor, who in name, though not in reality, represents the chancellor prime-ministers of the middle ages. The "chancellor's livings," still coveted in some clerical circles, go back, I imagine, to the time when the chancellor was at the head of a corporation of clerical subordinates who saw that their easiest and most natural way of increasing their income was to obtain preferment to livings in the king's gift. While the king dispensed the larger patronage, it saved him trouble for the chancellor to scatter directly the small bones that were meaty enough to attract the hungry dogs kennelled in the inferior stalls of the Chancery. To this day "chancellor's livings" are mostly bad ones. As there are no longer clerical officials to receive them, they fall to ordinary non-official divines.

Besides ecclesiastical preferment, the worn-out civilian could look for pensions from the crown, transference to less laborious or nominal service, or, at the worst, to what was called a "corrody," that is authority to take up his quarters in some monastery and be fed, clothed, and lodged at the expense of the monks. These latter resources were

particularly welcome to laymen or to those clerics who had disqualified themselves for advancement in the church by matrimony. A still better refuge was a pension from the exchequer. But there was one drawback to the enjoyment of this most satisfactory of direct sources of support, a royal pension. It was that it was not always regularly paid. In those days the dependents on the state were always the first to suffer when war or some other exceptional cause of expenditure restricted the royal bounty, or when a careless or extravagant king neither wished nor could keep his plighted word. Lastly, we must not neglect among these supplementary sources of income the perquisites, lawful and unlawful, of office. Mediæval propriety was not outraged by public officers receiving gratifications in money or kind from all who came to transact business with them. It was natural that the receiver of a favour should pay a fee to the source of his satisfaction. The preparation of a writ was immensely expedited when a suitable *douceur* from the applicant quickened the activity of the chancery or privy seal clerk responsible for its issue. We find that religious houses regularly entered in their accounts the sums they had given to ministers to obtain their good will. On a much lower plane was the direct bribe to do something known to be wrong; yet that also was by no means rare. Mediæval man used the discreet term "curialitas" (courtesy) to indicate transactions that varied between perfectly permissible presents and open and shameful corruption. And there were few public servants who did not take advantage of their position to do a good deal of business on their own account, such as administering or managing estates, lending money, acting as sureties, as attorneys or proxies, and the like.

Taking everything into account, the mediæval civilian's prosperity was not to be reckoned merely in wages. Besides money payments, there were also wages in kind. In the old days, when the public servant was attached to the court, he had, as we have seen, no salary, or a very small one. But he made up for this by receiving lodging, clothing, food, drink and fire-wood at the king's expense. He had, therefore, as little need of money as a soldier in the trenches or a monk in a convent. We have already noticed how the offices of state, one after the other, went "out of court," some, like the exchequer, early, others, like the chancery and the office of the privy seal, at a much later date. The records of these last two depart-

ments show us that, when an office went "out of court," its head, in these cases the chancellor and the keeper of the privy seal, lived with his subordinates a sort of common life in what were called the household of the chancery and the household of the privy seal. The expenses of these were kept up by a block grant to the chancellor or keeper, and it was his business to provide his subordinates with adequate entertainment. We have glimpses of these semi-collegiate households of celibate government clerks, settled down in some central establishment in London, or wandering more uneasily about the country, according to the needs of the public service. They do not seem to have had a bad time; there was plenty of rough good fellowship and conviviality, and the humours of the civil servant in his leisure moments were not disturbed by any too exacting standard of reticence or decorum.¹ Yet these official households were never perhaps very satisfactory or very comfortable. Corporate life fitted in ill with the fierce individualism of a greedy bachelor fighting his way through the world. Mediæval colleges never had the amenities of a modern college, and even in colleges, common rooms only came in with the seventeenth century, and the tavern, not the college, was the chief social centre.

As time went on, the common life of the mediæval civil servants began to break up. Their official chiefs were too dignified to live among them, and delegated the maintenance of the household of their subordinates to some senior clerk of the office. Many of the clerks grew tired of the monotony and lack of privacy involved in such a life. Some had money or preferment of their own; others were married and wished to live with their own families. It was perhaps because the exchequer had always a large lay staff that the common life of this oldest of public offices was always less intense than that of the purely clerical offices of the chancery and privy seal. But it was one of the many signs of the incoming of the modern spirit in the days of Edward III. that the layman began to demand his share of posts

¹ The ideal of life of an unknown wardrobe clerk of the end of the reign of Edward I. is written in the margin of a book of wardrobe accounts of that period, in the form of a parody of the beginning of the Athanasian Creed: "Quicumque vult salvus esse ad tabernam debet esse servare luxuriam". *Exch. Accts. K.R. 364/13 f. 103 d.* Such facetious marginalia occasionally brighten the path of the record searcher.

hitherto monopolised by the clergy. At first his ambition was concentrated on the great ministerial charges, the chancellorship and the treasurership, and here, as we have seen, he triumphed both in 1340 and in 1371. But the lay ministers still had special difficulties to face. The first lay chancellors were put by reason of their laity into a very awkward position. Still lawyers on the make, they had not the hereditary resources of a baronial or the official resources of an episcopal chancellor. As married men with households of their own, they could not be expected to leave their comfortable homes to be the resident heads of a celibate college of poor and pushing clergymen. As men of limited means, they could not treat their "households" so generously as their episcopal predecessors. An attempt was made to meet their cases by increasing the public allowance made to them for the support of themselves and the "household of the chancery"; but the extra expense involved did much to promote the reaction which soon brought back well endowed bishops to the chief office of the state. Meanwhile their difficulties were increased by the difference of profession, outlook, and life between the lay chancellor and his clerical staff. The latter "knew the ropes" better than their chief. They were not only more useful; they were cheaper to the state. Small wonder then that economy and efficiency triumphed over theories of equal opportunity. The lay chancery clerk only came in with the Tudors, and by that time the chancellor's mediæval glory as prime minister had passed away, and the chancery was heading straight towards its modern declension into a court of equity.

The chancery did not stand alone. The year 1371, which saw a lay chancellor appointed because he was a layman, also saw the first lay keeper of the privy seal. But the office of the privy seal, like the chancery itself, remained a clerical preserve, though, unlike the chancery, its importance shrivelled up so much that the status of its staff ceases to be a question of much importance. Despite all this, the lay civil servant had got himself established before the fourteenth century was over. Education had ceased to be a clerical monopoly, and if the laymen were still outside the universities, the London law schools enabled the lay common-lawyer to receive an education quite as complete as that afforded by the academic schools, and much more practical as well. Moreover, cultivated laymen such as Geoffrey Chaucer, himself a civil servant, and John Gower, showed that a complete intellectual equipment

could be obtained outside either universities or professional schools. Yet for the wholesale importation of the lay element into the civil service we have to turn once more from the decadent mediæval departments to that fountain of all honour and place, the king's court, from which in the transition between the mediæval and modern periods new administrative organizations were to arise out of which sprang the modern offices of state.

One question still remains. How did the mediæval civil servant do his work? How far was he efficient, and, if he were remiss, how far could the peccant official be controlled or punished? On the whole I am inclined to think that a respectably high level of general competence was attained. Our best evidence for this is that afforded by the wonderfully complete and well kept series of our mediæval archives still surviving in the public record office. The mediæval public servant had plenty of disadvantages as compared with his modern successor. All the devices by which book-keeping, letter-writing, account-keeping and the like are made easy were unknown to him. His works of reference were unpractical rolls that had to be unrolled in all their length before he could verify a single entry. His material for writing on was parchment so expensive that abbreviation of his matter was necessary and to waste a slip something of an offence. The exchequer clerk had to keep books and do sums of extraordinary complexity. The very addition of roman numerals was painful enough in itself. It was made more laborious by reckonings by scores and by hundreds, by sums, calculated indifferently in marks and in pounds, shillings and pence, being all mixed up together in the same columns of figures. Yet you will very rarely find mistakes in arithmetic even in the most complicated of accounts; and if you take the trouble, which some of our modern historians have not done, to understand the accountant's system before you make use of his figures, you will not often catch him committing many serious errors. No one can turn over mediæval official records without admiration for the neatness of the caligraphy, the immense pains taken to facilitate reference and eliminate blunders, the careful correction of erroneous entries, and the other innumerable evidences of good honest workmanship on the part of the ordinary rank and file of official scribes. It is the same with the innumerable writs and letters, all neatly drafted in common form, and duly authenticated by the appropriate seals and the signatures of the responsible clerks.

The system of enrolment of the accounts passed and the letters written in every office leaves nothing to be desired in completeness and precision. Anyhow, the mediæval official took plenty of pains to discharge his daily task, and his labour was all the more praiseworthy since mediæval casualness and mediæval indifference to labour-saving contrivances exacted the maximum of effort and trouble in every case. Similarly, if we turn to the collections of examples, precedents and forms, which were from time to time written for the guidance of the various offices, we strengthen our impression of sound business traditions, laboriously developed and meticulously maintained. A reforming bureaucracy too is generally an efficient bureaucracy, and a long series of reforming edicts, inspired by the chiefs of various departments, bears high testimony to the useful activity of the fourteenth century civil service. Thus the last years of the dreary reign of Edward II witnessed an immense amount of administrative reform, notably the reform of the exchequer by the treasurer Stapeldon. Yet, despite all this, constant control and watchfulness were needed to keep clean the administrative machine and there was no control so effective as the personal oversight of the sovereign. In the monarch's absence the executive always tended to get out of gear. But the return of Edward I in 1289 after his three years' sojourn on the Continent, the return of Edward III in 1340 after his long preoccupation with war and diplomacy in the Low Countries, were immediately followed by the two greatest sweepings out of the Augean stables of administrative incompetence that mediæval history witnessed.

Up to this point I have striven to put my rather desultory observations on the mediæval civil service in as general a form as possible. If I have occasionally mentioned a name, it is from the well-known personalities of political history that I have chosen them, and that simply with the view of illustrating the wide career to official talent in the service of the fourteenth century English crown whose officers rose not seldom to the highest posts of both state and church, to the chancery and the treasury, to bishoprics by the score, to archbishoprics in fairly numerous instances. But my chief concern is not with the exceptional man so much as with the ordinary person, partly because the personal element in history is in my opinion still somewhat overstressed, and partly because in the weary studies of the innumerable rolls and records from which I have derived the impressions here set forth, I

have perforce had my attention devoted to the system rather than the individual, and so far as to the individual, to the obscure and unknown individual rather than to a few shining and conspicuous exceptions to the general rule of obscurity. It is the calibre and discipline of the rank and file, the competence of the subalterns and subordinate commanders that makes the difference between a heroic mob and a well ordered military force. So it is not the occasional brilliant exception so much as the competence of the average official that makes a bureaucracy a success or a failure. Leaders of course there must be ; but leaders can look after themselves. If they do not arise spontaneously, there is anyhow no patent method, then or now, for creating the rare and divine gifts of inspiration and leadership. But a good system can make the average man competent to do his job. And this can, I think, be said to have been done by our mediæval civil service despite all its shortcomings.

The hardest problem in dealing with mediæval records is to disentangle the human element from the dull forms, and to tell what manner of men they were whose official acts and external history we know in such elaborate detail. It needs a good deal of historical imagination to vitalize the writs and rolls of a mediæval office. Besides what we can do in that way, we must not neglect our occasional chance to realize the individual character of the mediæval official. Accordingly I will now seek to illustrate what I have said from the careers of three civil servants of the fourteenth century, of whom we know by accident more than is the case with the majority. The first is a local instance of a successful, almost a brilliant, career of a typical civil servant who hailed from Lancashire, and whose fame is not perhaps quite commensurate with his deserts. Anyhow, his name, John Winwick, will excite little response even in historical minds. My other two examples are those of better known men, for they are two men of letters, one of whom was the most famous Englishman of his day, and the other, though of obscurer and more doubtful reputation, was at least a faithful disciple of his distinguished compeer, and is in no wise unknown to those who are interested in fourteenth and fifteenth century by-ways. I chose those two frankly because their writings have given them an established position ; but I also chose them because both were examples of official careers run by men whose personality is better revealed to us than is the case of most of their comrades. The former is an instance of a varied and successful lay

career in the civil service, and the latter is the case of a discontented and dispirited government clerk who never got beyond the drudgery of a second rate office, but who beguiled his leisure with long-winded and dull poems, which, if an offence to the artist, are to the historian of the mediæval civil service an absolutely unique field. My great name is of course that of Geoffrey Chaucer: my minor celebrity is the poet Thomas Hoccleve. Let us take these three men one by one.

. John Winwick came not, as his name might suggest to the unwary, from Winwick, between Warrington and Wigan, but from the parish of Huyton, near Liverpool, where his father seems to have belonged to that numerous class of smaller landed gentry, poor in resources, strong in pride of race, and simpler and rougher in life and manners than a modern small farmer, a class which always furnished mediæval England with a large share of the men who rose to high posts in both church and state. John entered the royal service as a king's clerk and had the usual reward of a king's clerk in livings, pensions and grants. Among his ecclesiastical preferments the rich rectory of Wigan in his own district was one of the most important. It is not likely that Wigan saw much of him, though he was brought into its neighbourhood by the fact that he increased his otherwise ample resources by farming out in his non-official moments the administration of the estates of several rich Lancashire landowning families, including the Butlers of Warrington and the Hoghtons of Hoghton. Winwick's zeal for his kinsfolk comes out characteristically when his father, arraigned on a charge of homicide—a small matter to the mediæval mind—was, though acquitted of the charge, adjudged to have forfeited his chattels for some contempt of court. They were, however, restored in consideration of the long service which his son John had rendered to the king, especially in his expeditions abroad. Appointed a clerk of the privy seal, John Winwick became head of that office as keeper of the privy seal from 1355 to 1360 at a time when the keeper of the privy seal ranked next after chancellor and treasurer among the king's ministers. Dying in 1363, he left lands and estates to found a college at Oxford for students of civil and canon law, "desiring to enrich the English church with men of letters". Though his foundation received royal confirmation, the greediness of his heirs prevented the establishment of a Lancashire college in Oxford for clerks studying academic law, such as the would-be founder seems

to have contemplated. Altogether Winwick's was a prosperous, successful, public spirited though not particularly startling career of a good official who thrived in all his undertakings and made the best of his chances in both worlds. You will note in particular how, all through his career, he remained in the same office, and had his reward by getting to the head of it. It was no disparagement to his integrity, that, like early civil servants of the East India Company, he traded on his own account as well as doing his work as a public servant. His service to the church, I imagine, came in as a bad third.

Geoffrey Chaucer is one of the greatest names in English literature, but I have no concern here with the man of genius. I am only interested in the way in which the public service of Edward III opened up a safe way for the great poet to earn his living in an age when literature was no profession because there was no printing, no copyright, and therefore no literary profits. This aspect of his career is the easier to follow since enthusiasts for Chaucer the poet have meticulously collected the scattered references to Chaucer the civil servant. With their help we can easily reconstruct his official career in its various stages. We begin with his early service in the household of the king's son—Lionel, Duke of Clarence—culminating in a campaign in France and a short term of captivity as a prisoner of war. Next comes his transference to the king's household and his long years of labour there as king's yeoman or valet, and later in the higher rank of the king's esquire. Besides his daily work at court, he was sent on those embassies which gave him increased knowledge of the literature of France, whose "culture" he absorbed none the less because he was often engaged in killing Frenchmen. Other missions to Italy perhaps brought him into personal relations with the masters of Tuscan verse, whose influence is so strong in his more matured work. Later on came marriage and his transference from household to public service, his controllership of the customs and subsidies of London, and his dwelling house over Aldgate, handy for the shipping quarters on Thames side below London Bridge. Subsequently he was moved to other employments, such as the clerkship of works, that with some significant breaks marked his career until his death in 1400. We must not imagine that Chaucer owed these posts to his literary fame. It is more likely that he was promoted from one good job to another by reason of his subterranean connexions with the royal family, and notably through that close tie with John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, which perhaps made him

a sort of left-handed brother-in-law of the most active of the king's sons, and involved him also in the obscuration of his fortunes whenever the star of Lancaster sank low, and also secured the final rays of success that gilded the declining months of his life when the son of John of Gaunt became Henry IV. We must not, also, regard Chaucer's official labours as nominal. We have his own word for his absorption in business, and we know from his appointment as controller of the customs at London that the rolls of his office were to be written with his own hand, that he was to be "continually present," and to discharge personally all the duties of his office. But despite the words of the patent, he may have managed in the good mediæval fashion to have shifted the burden from his own to other less famous hands.

We may thank the leisurely methods of mediæval public service that they left Chaucer the civil servant the leisure to become Chaucer the poet, and we may in passing heave a sigh over the modern strenuousness of official life that bids fair in the next generation to make impossible the continued career of literature and state service of which we have had so many shining examples from the days of Chaucer to those of Lamb, the two Mills, and Matthew Arnold, not to quote some distinguished contemporary instances. It is more to our purpose to stress the career open to this London tradesman's son in the administration of Edward III and his grandson. The opportunity to men of the middle classes, instanced by the official record of Chaucer at court and in the public service, affords some lessons of social equality even to twentieth-century democracy.

Thomas Hoccleve was a friend and in a humble fashion a poetic follower of Chaucer, but while the broad sweep of the great poet's vision disregarded personal reminiscence and anecdotic triviality, the lowly muse of Hoccleve found its most congenial inspiration in the details of his private and official life. In all the great gallery of the Canterbury Pilgrims there was no public servant whose adventures and personality Chaucer deigned to sketch. On a different plane to his master as an artist, Hoccleve is immensely more useful to the historian of administration by reason of his habit of talking about himself. Professionally Hoccleve was, like John Winwick, a clerk of the privy seal. Though both began in the same way Hoccleve ended just where he began. In his official career he found no promotion, though he laboured at his desk for more than thirty years. He was equally unsuccessful in

his quest of a benefice, and at last cut himself off from all ecclesiastical preferment by an imprudent marriage, after which he was perforce transferred from his comfortable quarters in the household of the privy seal to a "humble cot" from which the only chance of escape was a debtor's prison. When at last his importunity won him a modest crown pension, he could never get it paid; and his unceasing clamour for instalments of his annuity is a constant theme of his pedestrian muse. On his own showing Hoccleve was a poor creature, slack, cowardly, weak of will, mean-spirited, a professional begging letter-writer, a haunter of taverns, cook shops and houses of ill fame. Extravagant in good fortune, depressed and lachrymose when ill-health, poverty, and ill-fortune dogged his declining years, Hoccleve was throughout a dissipated, drunken, disreputable fellow, whose mean vices might well have brought him under the ban of the austere criminal law of modern civilization. Yet we must not take too literally all that he says against himself. Anyhow there is a touch of humanity about him that makes it hard not to think of him with some sympathy, if not also with sneaking kindness. Above all we owe him our hearty gratitude for giving us material for studying the humbler mediæval civil servant at his job. For the rest we can laboriously make a skeleton of the facts and dates of their careers. A sort of mediæval "Who's Who in the Public Service" would not be an impossible task. I have myself made such a list of the clerks of the privy seal, and my old pupil, Miss L. B. Dibben, has nearly completed the much harder task of a classified list of the clerks of the Chancery. Perhaps when peace again allows austere books to be published our catalogues may see the light of day. But the material makes nothing more possible than the barest catalogue of dates, preferments, offices, and other dry details. Hoccleve's verse alone shows us the mediæval official groaning over his weary task, and exciting at once our compassion and our derision.

Hoccleve is at pains to tell us the hardships of the public clerk's life. Many men think, says he, that writing is not hard work, but a game. But the clerk's task is much more difficult than it seems. Those who have had no personal experience of it are no more qualified to pass judgment on it than is a blind man equipped to distinguish between colours. A scribe must work at the same time with mind, eye, and hand. If any one of these three fail, he has to do everything all over again. When bending over his work the poor writer can

neither talk to his friends, nor sing a song, nor play, nor jest. The craftsman, who can sing, talk, and play over his business, labours with gladness, but the clerk, stooping and staring on his sheepskins, must work in gloomy silence. From years of such odious toils come pains in the stomach, back, and eyes. After twenty-three years of such work Hoccleve's whole body was smarting with aches and pains and his eyesight was utterly ruined.

Yet even Hoccleve's tearful muse shows that there were brighter sides to the life of the privy seal clerk. There were the perquisites of his post, the modest gratuities that custom required from the man who went to the office to procure a letter of privy seal for his master or himself. 'There was too the comradeship and the merry common life with brother clerks and other boon companions. There was the Paul's Head Tavern, on the south side of the great cathedral, and the numerous and genial hostelries of Westminster, hard by the place where his working days were spent. There was no austere discipline preventing the festive clerk from sleeping off his overnight debauch and reproving him if he turned up late next morning at the office. When an instalment of the long-deferred pay or pension came to hand, the clerk with money in his purse could hire a boat from his lodging in the Strand, and be rowed up the river Thames to his desk at Westminster, where, office hours over, he could regale his friends with meat and drink. He might be a member, like Hoccleve, of a dining club, called the "court of good company," which included so great a personage as the Chancellor of the Exchequer—a civil servant not a politician in those days, but already a personage wealthy enough to entertain the whole staff to a May day banquet of sumptuous fare at the Temple. Nor was the office inconsiderate when serious trouble beset the underling. When poor Hoccleve was temporarily driven out of his wits, his annuity was regularly paid during his enforced absence from his work. When he came back cured, his fellow-clerks gave him a rousing welcome; his superiors allowed him to resume his work, and the whole staff united in maintaining his competence and sanity before a suspicious world. When further troubles finally drove Hoccleve from his desk, the long-coveted corrody enabled him to spend his declining years in peace so that, freed from his irksome labours, the old poet went on writing his painful verses for many years more.

With all his faults, Hoccleve's life was not spent in idleness.

Hundreds of writs of privy seal, drafted and signed by him, testify to his skill and method in official routine. Yet out of office hours he found time, not only for writing his voluminous poems but for the severe study of the literary models of which his poems were but too often the echo. He was well acquainted with three languages, Latin, French, and English, as every mediæval public servant had to be. He was versed not only in the *belles lettres* but in some of the more serious literature of his age. He was emphatically free from the reproach of neglecting his daily task for his personal pursuits, sometimes urged by anxious heads of departments against the modern literary official. A large and solid manuscript volume, still surviving in the British Museum, testifies eloquently to Hoccleve's official zeal. It is a sort of handbook for the tiro entering upon the career of a clerk of the privy seal. In it are set down in businesslike and orderly fashion the "common forms," the typical examples of every manner of document or writ emanating from the privy seal office. I do not claim Hoccleve as a model. I have not extenuated his many shortcomings. Yet looking at his career from our administrative standpoint, rather than from the literary point of view of those few who have previously taken the trouble to think or write about him, I cannot but record the impression that the business methods of this mediæval official were not much worse than those of more recent and more self-complacent days. Sordid and self-seeking as is much of mediæval official life, as it is revealed to us, we must not think that it necessarily excluded the higher ideals which, as we know, many men and women of those days cherished. Among the court officials of the corruptest court of the period, the court of Edward II, there worked for years that William Melton, afterwards archbishop of York, whose name is famous for his sanctity and high purpose, and of whom it was said that his long sojourn among the courtiers checked neither his piety nor his charity. Even apart from exceptions such as these, we have every reason to believe that even a modern government department might learn something from the wide knowledge, long service, corporate feeling, kindly indulgence, and sufficient devotion to the task in hand that are illustrated by the self-revelations of this obscure and unlucky public servant of the English state who died nearly five hundred years ago. Perhaps if we had lived in those days, and had the requisite influence, we might, as thrifty parents, decide then as now that the public service was a good enough career for our boys.