



Leeds Medieval Studies

Obituary: John Edward Tailby (18 April 1938–16 July 2022)

Irmgard Tailby, Peter Meredith and Alaric Hall

corresponding email: a.t.p.hall@leeds.ac.uk

Leeds Medieval Studies, 2 (2022), *pagination to be finalised

DOI: 10.57686/256204/23

ISSN: Print 2754-4575

ISSN: Online 2754-4583

© 2022 Irmgard Tailby, Peter Meredith and Alaric Hall

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication



For additional information about this article: <<https://ims.leeds.ac.uk/leeds-medieval-studies-journal/>>

Obituaries

John Edward Tailby (18 April 1938–16 July 2022)

John Tailby was a highly regarded and much loved member of the University of Leeds German Department and also, over his thirty-five years of service, of Leeds's changing medieval-studies institutions.

After attending Leeds Grammar School, John took his undergraduate degree at the University of St Andrews. St Andrews record that he was supported by the City of Leeds Educational Department's Senior City Scholarship (though the recollection of his wife Irmgard is rather that John's parents were unimpressed by the level of government support offered for his University studies). Matriculating in 1957, John graduated in 1961 with an MA in French and German, with second-class honours. He proceeded to postgraduate research at the same university under the supervision of Charles T. Carr, St Andrews's first Professor of German, that set the tone for a career-long interest in medieval and early modern German-language drama.

John's postgraduate research took him to Nuremberg for the academic years 1961–63. He spent the school year starting in September 1961 as a Foreign Language Assistant teaching English, especially conversation, at several Nuremberg grammar schools, and at the grammar school for boys in the neighbouring city of Fürth. His supervisor there was Hermann Offenwanger, a teacher of modern languages, who customarily invited the foreign assistants in his care to his home for the German custom of coffee and cakes (*Kaffee und Kuchen*). As a consequence John arrived at the Offenwanger home on a Sunday in Advent and met the daughter of the house, Irmgard, then a final-year student in English and German at Erlangen University. At that time John was also a guest student (*Gasthörer*) at Erlangen University, where he attended seminars in Old and Middle High German. It was in those surroundings that John and Irmgard furthered their acquaintance. Thus, in the coming decades, whenever she was asked how she met her English husband, Irmgard could truthfully say: 'My father brought him home'.

For the academic year starting in October 1962 John was asked to be an English Lektor at Erlangen University, teaching language classes and giving lectures about English customs that were different from German ones, like the education system. This was called 'Landeskunde' and the English Department was very keen on it. Then, in 1963, rather than returning to St Andrews, Tailby gained the position of Assistant Lecturer in German Language and Literature at the University of Leeds; John and Irmgard married, set up home, and eventually raised two children. John graduated from his St Andrews B.Phil. on 1 July 1966 with a thesis on

Obituaries

'The Peasant Figure in Fifteenth-Century German Shrovetide Plays'. In the same year Leeds promoted him to Lecturer; promotion to Senior Lecturer followed in 1995. John retired from the University in 2001.

Peter Meredith, who himself retired from Leeds in 1998, offers the following reminiscences.

We (the Meredith family: Peter, Greta and three children) returned from Adelaide, South Australia towards the end of October 1969. I was taking up a post in the School of English and it was all a bit overwhelming. Adelaide now seemed very relaxed and somewhat free and easy; Leeds seemed a bit hidebound and rather dauntingly stiff — except for the younger medievalists in the School: Chris Fell, Elizabeth Williams and Stanley Ellis. Which leads me to John Tailby, another young medievalist, albeit in the German department. The very first entry in our diary which relates to the University is '6.30 Medieval Group' on the 1st November. I would like to say that I remember meeting John on that evening in November. I'm sure I did, because I was new and he was the Secretary of the Medieval Group, but everyone was new and I can't remember any individuals.

Not long after that (or so it seems looking back) I became Treasurer of the Medieval Group — the 'green new chum', as I would have been labelled in Adelaide. I worked with John on the various joint meetings that we had at the time with the medievalists in Manchester and Liverpool, and we got to know each other a bit. But the real connection came with our joint interest in medieval drama — which draws in a new group of people: Lyne Muir in French (the commanding presence), Richard Rastall in Music, Margaret Sleeman in Spanish and Portuguese, Jane Oakshott in French, John in German, and later Raffaella Ferrari in Italian. I think it was Lyne whose foresight it was to see a need for a combination of all of Europe to give a true impression of drama in the Middle Ages.

The immediate result of this was that we all got to know each other through regular lunch meetings to discuss medieval drama, but the more remarkable result, through the determination of Lyne Muir, was that in September 1974 we organised the first European Medieval Drama colloquium. Looking at the list of participants now, it looks very English-drama based, but nevertheless it opened up the possibility of being less parochial. Besides the aim of bringing together those interested in medieval drama from all over Europe, an important concern of the colloquium was to emphasise the need to take performance seriously. Consequently we mounted plays on each of the two nights. John Tailby, not a seasoned performer, nevertheless played his part, the soldier in the Latin *Dulcitius* of Hrotsvitha. Apparently it was a great success and I wish I could comment on the play, but I was too busy preparing for the next, the Anglo-Norman *Adam*. The following night there was another Tailby and Meredith appearance, but this time it was the younger generation: Christine Tailby and Nicholas Meredith as angels in the York *Temptation of Christ*.

The colloquium turned out to be a break-through. Three years later it was followed by what was referred to as the Second Colloquium, even though the Leeds one had not been seen as the beginning of a series, and a European Medieval Drama society was set up: the Société Internationale pour l'étude du théâtre médiéval, SITM — still flourishing today.

What might seem a natural development from the colloquium, but what was actually the result of the persistent enthusiasm of Jane Oakshott, was the first production since the sixteenth century of a wagon-staged production of the York plays in the streets. It was felt that the pageant wagons needed a setting through which to wind their way and against which to perform. This was John's achievement. He organised a medieval fair, liaised with Leeds

City Council, since a licence was required, gathered together a wide variety of stalls — even an alchemist creating lead symbols ‘guaranteed’ to change into gold over time (I still have mine and am still waiting) — and oversaw the whole affair. In 1983 the Chester Plays were performed in a similar way, with John arranging the fair. (He sourced some of the market stalls himself and put them up, enthusiastically assisted by his young son, Robert.) But the weather took a rather drastic turn and the whole was never as successful as York—as far as the plays were concerned, at least. Some traders, however, rang up John for several years asking when the next medieval market would take place.

SITM was, every three years, an important event. For the second colloquium, John drove three of us via Caen to Alençon. We were to perform the Towneley Pharaoh pageant in a square in the town and John was to repeat his earlier stage role of a soldier, but this time under Pharaoh rather than Dulcinius. The emphasis which we had placed on performance in the first colloquium has borne fruit, in as much as every colloquium since has had a strong, sometimes immensely important, performance element. In many ways, however, more important for me at the Alençon colloquium was that John drove us to see the Bayeux tapestry. Visiting, seeing more of the country, was to be a feature of SITM colloquia. I would have seen so little of the churches of Denmark or the Netherlands, for example, had it not been for John — and for Irmgard, John’s wife. Later colloquia were often family affairs. I was elected President of SITM in 1995, but though a European by sympathy and desire I was not the right person: John was a true European and would have made a far more effective President. One of the enduring memories I have of him is his ease of moving smoothly in conversation from English to German to French.

John and I came closest in the preparation of what was the joint work of the ‘Wednesday lunchers’ (as Lyne Muir thought of our group). I can’t now remember why but John and I were given the task of editing a book of medieval drama material from all over Europe selected and translated by members of the group; what became *The Staging of Religious Drama in Europe in the later Middle Ages: Texts and Documents in English Translation*. One of the lasting benefits for me was being introduced by John to the remarkable sixteenth-century Lucerne plays. We spent a considerable amount of time devising a way of presenting the unique early-modern Lucerne plans for the staging of the plays and of understanding the significance of much that is shown on them. And we had a good time during the editing process discussing not only medieval drama but also interweaving John’s knowledge of the development of the German language and mine of Old English, mainly to my benefit.

Social gatherings became an important part of life too. Lyne Muir, the Rastalls (Jane Oakshott was now Jane Rastall), Elizabeth Williams and her sister Wendy, Barbara Douglas (a botanist but an honorary medievalist), the Tailbys and the Merediths gathered for board games, or cards, or entertainments of one kind or another on Boxing Day, or at the New Year, or on the Feast of St Peter’s Chair, or on someone’s birthday — any excuse.

John, like Irmgard, was also a committed Christian. He worked for years for Emmanuel Church, the church of the University of Leeds, and for that most worthy of Leeds causes, St George’s Crypt, helping to sustain its invaluable work amongst the most needy in the city.

But nothing lasts and in time John himself needed care, provided with loving dedication by Irmgard and his children. John died on 16 July 2022. He was a delightful companion and a great friend and he is sorely missed.

Publications

The following bibliography lists John's books and research articles. He also published a number of encyclopaedia entries and book reviews.

Monograph

Der Reimpaardichter Peter Schmieher: Texte und Untersuchungen, Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 241 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1978)

Edited collection

The Staging of Religious Drama in Europe in the Later Middle Ages, ed. by Peter Meredith and John E. Tailby, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series, 4 (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1983)

Articles

'Peasants in Fifteenth-century *Fastnachtspiele* from Nuremberg: The Problems of their Identification and the Significance of their Presentation', *Daphnis*, 4 (1975), 172–78

'The Origins and Beginning of the Nuremberg Shrovetide Plays', in *Le Théâtre au Moyen Âge: Actes du Deuxième Colloque de la Société Internationale pour l'Étude du Théâtre Médiéval, Alençon, 11–14 Juillet 1977*, ed. by Gari R. Muller (Montreal: Aurore/Univers, 1981), pp. 187–91

'Die Luzerner Passionsspielaufführung des Jahres 1583: zur Deutung der Bühnenpläne Renward Cysats', in *The Theatre in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Herman Braet, Johan Nowé and Gilbert Tournoy (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1985), pp. 352–61

'The Role of the Director in the Lucerne Passion Play', *Medieval English Theatre*, 9 (1987), 80–92

With Peter McDonald, Lynette Muir, Peter Meredith, Graham Runnalls, Elsa Strietman, and Penny Newman, 'Medieval Drama in Europe', in *Cambridge Guide to World Theatre*, ed. by Martin Banham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 630–53

'Die Zuschauertribünen auf dem Luzerner Weinmarkt: zum Osterspiel 1583', *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, 107 (1988), 106–16

'Die schriftlichen Zeugnisse zur Luzerner Osterspielaufführung des Jahres 1583 und ihr Verhältnis zu den Bühnenplänen Renward Cysats', *Daphnis*, 18 (1989), 223–49

'Zuschauer und Darsteller im Luzerner Passionspiel', in *Mittelalterliches Schauspiel: Festschrift für Hansjürgen Linke zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. by Ulrich Mehler and Anthonius H. Touber, *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik*, 38–39 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), pp. 321–28

'Schwierigkeiten der Dramenedition', in *Editionsberichte zur Mittelalterlichen Deutschen Literatur: Beiträge der Bamberger Tagung 'Methoden und Probleme der Edition mittelalterlicher deutscher Texte'*, 26–29. Juli 1991, ed. by Anton Schwob and others, *Litterae*, 117 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1994), pp. 251–54

'Zwischen Fastnachtspiel und Spruch: Schloßmuseum Gotha, Einblattdruck 40,38', in *Sô wold ich in fröiden singen: Festgabe für Anthonius H. Touber zum 65. Geburtstag*,

- ed. by Carla Dauven-van Knippenberg and Helmut Birkhan, *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik*, 43–44 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), 477–83
- ‘Hans Sachs and the Nuremberg *Fastnachtspiel* Tradition of the Fifteenth Century’, in *Hans Sachs and Folk Theatre in the Late Middle Ages: Studies in the History of Popular Culture*, ed. by Robert Aylett and Peter Skrine, Bristol Germanic Publications, 5 (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), pp. 187–95
- ‘Lucerne Revisited: Facts and Questions’, *Leeds Studies in English*, n. s. 29 (1998), 347–58
- ‘Drama and community in South Tyrol’, in *Drama and Community: People and Plays in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Alan Hindley, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe, 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), pp. 148–60
- ‘Arthurian Literature in Drama and *Meisterlieder*’, in *The Arthur of the Germans: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval German and Dutch Literature*, ed. by W. H. Jackson and S. A. Ranawake, Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, 3 (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), pp. 242–48
- ‘Berührungspunkte zwischen Passionsspiel und Heiligenspiel in Luzern am Ende des 16. Jahrhunderts’, *Leuvense bijdragen*, 90 (2001), 249–62
- ‘Bühnenanweisungen und Bewegungen im *Luzerner Wilhelmsspiel* von 1596’, in *Et respondeat: Studien zum deutschen Theater des Mittelalters: Festschrift für Prof. Dr. Johan Nowé anlässlich seiner Emeritierung*, ed. by Katja Scheel, Mediaevalia Lovaniensia, 32 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002), pp. 195–214
- ‘Die Kochszene im Luzerner Wilhelmsspiel (1596)’, in *Der komische Körper: Szenen – Figuren – Formen*, ed. by Eva Erdmann (Bielefeld: transcript, 2003), pp. 89–95
- ‘The German-speaking Area’, in *The Medieval European Stage, 500–1550*, ed. by William Tydeman and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 353–421
- ‘Ein vernachlässigter Luzerner Bühnenplan’, in *Ritual und Inszenierung: geistliches und weltliches Drama des Mittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. by Hans-Joachim Ziegler (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2004), pp. 255–60