François Louis Ganshof : Medieval Historian and Friend

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François Louis Ganshof

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Abstract

Bryce Lyon recalls his souvenirs of the famous Ghent mediaevalist François Louis Ganshof. They both shared the intellectual legacy of Henri Pirenne. Lyon translated some of Ganshofs articles and invited within him in the sixties to teach at Berkeley. Lyon's contribution is not meant to be a systematic biography but a series of more impressionistic glimpses of their contact whichh covered several decades.

Résumé

François Louis Ganshof : Médiéviste et ami.

Bryce Lyon évoque des souvenirs au fameux médiéviste gantois François Louis Ganshof. Les deux partageaient l'héritage intellectuel de Henri Pirenne. Lyon a été le traducteur de plusieurs articles de Ganshof et il l'a aussi invité à Berkeley pour donner des cours. La contribution de Lyon n'envisage pas d'être une biographie systématique mais plutôt de donner une série d'impressions des contacts qu'ils ont entretenus pendant plusieurs décennies.

François Louis Ganshof : Mediëvist en vriend.

Bryce Lyon roept herinneringen om aan de befaamde Gentse mediëvist François Louis Ganshof. Ze deelden de intellectuele erfenis van Henri Pirenne. Lyon vertaalde verscheidene artikelen van Ganshof en nodigde hem ook uit voor gastcolleges te Berkeley. De bijdrage van Lyon beoogt geen systematisch biografie te zijn maar wel een reeks impressionistische toetsen te geven van de contacten die ze gedurende tientallen jaren onderhielden.

François Louis Ganshof: Medieval Historian and Friend

by Bryce Lyon (†)

Editorial Note

by Ludo Milis

President

Professor Bryce Lyon, one of our most faithful collaborators, sent us some months ago an interesting article, containing personal memories of his contacts with the late professor François Louis Ganshof.

Since its foundation in 1834 the Royal Historical Commission was active in the field of the publication of sources related to the national history of Belgium. According to a strong tradition the majority of the books and articles published since that time were, and still are, dealing with the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period. Recently, however, the members of the Commission decided that its scope should be broadened. They are convinced that new or underestimated types of historical documents deserve increased attention. Very explicitly they insisted on paying full attention to memoirs of, and about, important people of our past. The coincidence was striking. We were thinking about new sources and professor Lyon was writing a note on the outstanding historian F.L. Ganshof. His project fully met our conditions. So the members decided to accept Bryce Lyon's text for publication in their Bulletin – Handelingen. In this way they gratefully fulfil their enormous debt towards their American colleague. Do we need to characterize this text? Probably we do. It is not at all a biography of the Ghent mediaevalist. Are they, then, memoirs? Yes, in the sense that they record the personal memories of Lyon. He evaluates the longstanding friendship that linked them, and their partners and family, and even the intellectual milieus they were working in. At the same time, however, the text defies definition since it does not intend to be complete, or systematic. Therefore, I prefer to call it a testimonial, very selective, very personal, and, moreover, touchingly emotional.

Ganshof was a brilliant historian, punctual in his discourse and methodology, erudite in his knowledge. Those who have known him share unconditionally, I am sure, these qualifications. But through the privileged witness Lyon they learn a lot about more hidden aspects of his personality. Ganshof

suddenly seems to be flesh and blood, whereas many of us just thought he was 'an institution', modelled through law and cast into the mould with which he described the past.

We are convinced that Lyon's text illustrates well that one needs information on an historian's personality, and his chronological and social setting, in order to evaluate his or her vision of history. It explains better how again and again every generation of scholars writes history as a different 'story'.¹

Of the numerous medieval historians I have known, one definitely stands out, François Louis Ganshof, whose acquaintance I made in 1951 and which grew into a friendship lasting until his death in 1980. When one delves into the ideas and contributions of medieval historians one mostly concentrate on what they have written and, if possible, learn more about them from those who have known them. My long friendship with Ganshof revealed to me that usually there is a difference between the printed scholar and the one you know. The printed scholar will never reveal his complexity or personality.

Before meeting Ganshof at his home on 12 Rue Jacques Jordaens in Brussels in 1951, I had read his well-known *Qu'est-ce que la féodalité?*² and some of his studies on medieval law and institutions. I had also witnessed a formidable performance of his at a historical meeting in Chicago. My Ph. D. director Carl Stephenson had talked about Ganshof because in the 1920's when he was in Belgium following the courses and seminars of Henri Pirenne, Ganshof had served as Pirenne's assistant. The interest of both in feudalism had also nourished a correspondence between them. A letter of Stephenson served as an introduction to Ganshof who agreed to talk to me about my research begun in the autumn of 1951 in Belgium. Formally greeting me, he immediately led me upstairs to his study, one such as I had never seen. Four sides from floor to ceiling were filled with books, all precisely arranged, even the hundreds of offprints. When Ganshof referred to a book, he knew its exact location. My initial reaction – his study was as precise as his scholarship. Later I learned it was no different in the seminar room at the University of Ghent. Collections such as the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* were so well-ordered that when he desired to refer to a Carolingian capitulary he could immediately procure the desired volume from the shelf.

¹ Several biographical notes were published after the death of Professor Ganshof in 1980. They were mostly written by former students. I specifically refer to R.C. VAN CAENEGEM, *In memoriam F.L. Ganshof (14 maart 1895-26 juli 1980)*, in: Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor wetenschappen, letteren en schone kunsten van België. Jaarboek 1980, pp. 231-251 (with Ganshof's bibliography); IDEM, *Ganshof, François Louis*, in: Nationaal Biografisch Woordenboek, XII, Brussels, 1987, cc. 262-273, and IDEM, *F.L. Ganshof: persoonlijke herinneringen*, in: Handelingen van de Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde van Gent, forthcoming.

² Brussels, 1944, ²1947, ³1957, ⁴1968.

For Ganshof wasted time was a mortal sin. When he travelled from Brussels to the University of Ghent he did so to teach, do research, and give oral examinations. One day when he arrived at his office to give a scheduled examination no student appeared. Frustrated, Ganshof stepped out into the hall where he spied a female student in his course. He summoned her to take the examination but the surprised student stated that her examination was scheduled for the following week. But Ganshof was not to waste his time and the student took her examination. Order and precision were Ganshof's trademarks. Later when my wife and I came to know Ganshof and his wife more intimately, we observed him as a host. He always arranged the seating of guests at the dinner table with his precisely written name cards. When the doorbell rang he would spring up and exclaim to his wife "*En position*" or "*Attention*".

For a considerable time it seemed to me that there was slight difference between the printed Ganshof and his behavior away from his work. In 1968 I summed up his ideas on the proper objectives of the historian in my Foreword to his *Frankish Institutions Under Charlemagne*³, a translation done by my wife and me of his contribution in French to Volume I of *Karl der Grosse: Persönlichkeit und Geschichte*⁴. I wrote as follows:

"It seems fitting to note here what have come to be recognized as the salient features in Professor Ganshof's historical research and writing. As a student of Henri Pirenne, who was probably the most distinguished medievalist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and of Ferdinand Lot, whose works epitomize exact and critical historical scholarship, Professor Ganshof was trained in a rigorous school of history whose approach to research stemmed from the methodology of such scholars as Ranke, Waitz, Monod, and Giry. Under Pirenne one learned to write history from the primary sources, being constantly admonished not to draw conclusions or to advance theses unsupported by the evidence. What distinguished Pirenne from his generation of historians, however, was his ability to discover theses and themes in the sources and to sense the importance of providing historical syntheses and advocating fresh but sound interpretations. Anyone familiar with the work of Professor Ganshof can recognize the influence of Pirenne. What Ganshof admired and what most impressed him was Pirenne's objectivity and impartiality. In a sensitive evaluation of Pirenne as master and historian he has written: "Pirenne was a man of great integrity; for him, devotion to scholarship was the historian's intellectual integrity, while objectivity was his moral integrity. (*Henri Pirenne: Le maître – l'historien*, Brussels, 1936, p. 27).

This respect for evidence and objectivity is apparent in the chapters that follow. Unlike Inama-Sternegg, Dopsch, Fichtenau, Lord Bryce, Dawson, or various intellectual historians with elaborate theories on

³ Providence R.I., 1968, pp. x; New York, ²1970, p. x.

⁴ Düsseldorf, 1965, pp. 349-419.

Charlemagne and his work, Professor Ganshof seldom speculates or theorizes. He selects with such care and describes with such clarity all that the pertinent records say about institutions under Charlemagne, that what results is a much firmer understanding of institutional development than can be obtained from books in which speculation prevails. For each observation and conclusion Professor Ganshof cites the evidence; so intimately does he know the sources contrary to most historians who have despaired of ever knowing the real Charlemagne or of determining his actual influence on the institutions and on the cultural and spiritual life of early medieval Europe, he indisputably shows the active role of Charlemagne and produces a realistic portrait of his accomplishments.

These pages, a distillation of Professor Ganshof's profound knowledge of the Carolingian period, distinguish him as a historian more in the tradition of Ranke and Waitz than in that which has emerged since World War I and includes such eminent scholars as Marc Bloch, Huizinga, and Dawson, historians primarily concerned with the mood and collective thought of society in different historical periods. Though this latter approach to history has been in vogue and has provided new insights into the Middle Ages, the reader of this book by Professor Ganshof will be reminded that there is no substitute for knowledge unembellished with intriguing and suggestive theory. So difficult and tantalizing are the Carolingian sources that speculation, if not speculated, must at least follow an attempt to know what the sources actually say. This is the primary task of the historian working in the Carolingian period, and in this respect Professor Ganshof has not forgotten words he wrote over thirty years ago: "Two dangers menace the discipline of history... the taste for easy work and the tendency to make history partisan (from *Henri Pirenne: Le maître-l'historien*, p. 27)".

Never did Ganshof waver in his support of positivistic history. He admired the publications of Marc Bloch whom he invited to lecture at the University of Ghent and he was amazed at Bloch's sense of direction in an area unknown to him. While Bloch was at Ghent, Ganshof secured a chauffeur to drive them about rural west Flanders. At one intersection Ganshof was uncertain which road to take so as to see a small village. Immediately Bloch pointed to the road that did lead to the village. It is well-known that their approach to feudalism was very different and Ganshof always remained suspicious of *Annales* history, never publishing an article in *Annales d'Histoire Économique et Sociale* edited by Bloch and Lucien Febvre. In a letter of Febvre to Pirenne in 1929 Febvre expressed surprise at Ganshof's negative views of the new journal. He wrote that Ganshof had reservations about the wide variety of articles in *Annales*⁵. Why, Ganshof had written, should articles on classical and medieval

⁵ *The Birth of Annales History: the Letters of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch to Henri Pirenne (1921-1935)*, ed. B. & M. Lyon, Brussels, 1991, pp. 114-115.

history, on industrial activity in Germany since World War I and on demographic problems in Soviet Russia appear in one number of *Annales*. To Pirenne Febvre wrote that he could not agree with Ganshof that history should be broken down into *divisions* and *périodes*⁶. Obviously Febvre was unaware of Ganshof's allegiance to preciseness and order.

During the academic year 1962-1963 when I was in Belgium for research I got to know Ganshof better. In 1962 universities and learned organizations celebrated the centenary of Pirenne's birth in December 1862. I served as Ganshof's chauffeur to exhibitions and ceremonies, of which one was a commemoration of Pirenne at the University of Ghent. As one of the speakers, Ganshof's address was very moving as he paid tribute to his master; tears occasionally streamed down his broad cheeks. In 1963 I learned that a medieval colleague of mine at the University of California in Berkeley would be on a sabbatical the following year and I arranged for Ganshof to be a visiting professor for the academic year 1963-1964. But he only accepted the invitation after I assured him that the University Library had most of the books he required for his courses and research. Even after accepting the appointment, he balked at the U.S. requirement that a physical examination was required to obtain a visa. But my wife and I did persuade him to have the physical examination.

Having rented a spacious residence in Berkeley not far from our house, the Ganshofs proceeded to have a gratifying stay. We guided them about the San Francisco Bay area, especially in San Francisco where they repeated visits to some of their favorite restaurants. They also came to our house for dinners, including one on Thanksgiving. My wife took a research seminar with Ganshof on the *polyptyque* of the abbey of Saint-Bertin (844-859) in which he insisted on exact readings of its chapters but also showed himself open to suggestions or interpretations different from his⁷.

When Ganshof's daughter Christiane came for a visit, she planned a trip to the Grand Canyon and invited her mother to join her. But Madame Ganshof hesitated because she feared leaving her husband alone and totally ignorant of what occurred in the kitchen. He had told us that the only times he entered the kitchen at their home in Brussels was to supervise the bottling of the Bordeaux wine purchased *en gros* from French wine merchants. My wife solved the problem by suggesting Ganshof could be taught to prepare his simple continental breakfast, have lunch at the university restaurant, and then take dinners with us. So off Madame Ganshof and her daughter departed for a week's stay at the Grand Canyon. We learned much about Ganshof during our dinner

⁶ *Ib.*

⁷ Ganshof dealt with this theme too in his Ghent seminars during the academic years 1959-1960 and 1960-1961. He published several articles on the subject before editing *Le polyptyque de l'abbaye de Saint-Bertin (844-859). Édition critique et commentaire*, ed. F.L. Ganshof, Fr. Godding-Ganshof & A. De Smet, Paris, 1975.

conversations. One evening he related in much detail the fate of the panels of the Mystic Lamb triptych by the Van Eycks in the cathedral of Ghent with special emphasis on the robbery of one of the panels in the 1930's by a former custodian of the cathedral.

Ganshof's ignorance of the cuisine and his considerable knowledge of wines were amply displayed during his Berkeley residence. A few weeks before he and his wife returned to Belgium, they decided to have a cocktail party for some of their neighbors who had been friendly and helpful. They asked for our assistance. Arriving a bit before the guests, we surmized that some explanations to the guests might be required. Asked to serve the drinks, I inquired about the choices. Ganshof's answer was "Scotch." When I replied that this was a slim choice, Ganshof replied that all Americans drank Scotch at cocktail parties. When I stated that this was not the case, he did produce a bottle of red Bordeaux. When the party began and some guests did partake of Scotch, I soon discovered there were not enough ice cubes. When I informed Ganshof he told me to go to the kitchen and quickly make more ice cubes. Needless to say, the Scotch served was accompanied by few or no ice cubes. With the party ended, my wife informed Ganshof that it required some time for an American refrigerator to produce ice cubes. Chagrined, he replied: "How stupid I am."

Knowing Ganshof's interest in wine, we took his wife and him for a tour of some of the Napa Valley wineries. We devoted considerable time to the Beringer winery which aged its wines in oaken casks in limestone caves and which had a German style house. Having seen the winery, we partook ourselves to the tasting room to sample some of the wines. As we did so at a table, Ganshof's impressions of the various wines echoed about the room. Soon all in the room were listening to his comments, especially when he held up a glass that met with his approval. Eventually a manager came to our table to thank Ganshof for his positive remarks. To our surprise, he then stated that courtesy of the Beringer winery, each couple could select six bottles of their choice. So Ganshof compensated for his less than stellar performance in the kitchen.

Our son became acquainted with Ganshof because he had weekly tutorials with Madame Ganshof in French. At the end of a tutorial, she would summon Ganshof from his study to join them for tea but only after he had recited some lines in French from Victor Hugo, Balzac, Molière, and other French authors. We also witnessed Ganshof's superb memory on a dinner occasion in Brussels with an American historian in attendance. Ganshof told the American historian that he was reasonably familiar with the poetry of Longfellow and proceeded to recite in English Longfellow's *The Belfry of Bruges*.

Ganshof had told us that he was interested in zoos; most of them in Europe he had visited, including the well-stocked one in Antwerp. So we took the Ganshofs for a visit to the San Francisco zoo. We had some memorable moments. It was difficult to lure Ganshof away from the

island with its numerous monkeys but finally we did so to watch and listen to the myna birds and their talking. So amazed was Ganshof that in his sonorous voice he said: "Well, well, well". To his surprise, one of the myna birds immediately repeated his words. Next we went to see a gorilla recently donated to the zoo by a gentleman on condition that he could visit and play with the gorilla. And this he did for us. The gorilla took a wallet from his pocket, ate a banana with him, and playfully wrestled with him. After this performance Ganshof admitted that this zoo was very special, an observation confirmed when he watched sea lions spring from the water to snatch fish thrown to them.

After Ganshof returned to Belgium, our correspondence became frequent and his letters expressed thoughts, emotions, and memories far different from his formal and precise historical prose. His letters were now addressed to "Dear Mary and Bryce" or to "Dear Friends." In a letter of 21 June 1964 he wrote:

"I write only a small note today in order to thank Mary for her letter, that I sincerely read with emotion. You both have, during the months we were in Berkeley, been part of our life and there is some sadness in being parted from you. We felt that when we took leave from you and we still feel it. I like the way Mary writes: it is life itself"⁸.

Writing of a recent stay in Paris, Ganshof said that while sitting alone in a good restaurant:

"I remembered the evening when you invited us at Ernie's in San Francisco, where food and wine were as good as in Paris and where we were together and enjoyed so much being with you. I confess that it made me a little melancholic in my Paris restaurant: Yours affectionately."

Later Ganshof reported the arrival of a trunk of books from Berkeley:

"When it was brought to our corridor, I saw in my memory Bryce bringing it through the 'patio' to our home in Berkeley and Mary following, both of you smiling as we so often saw you coming to us."

Not long after this letter Ganshof wrote a letter of condolence to Mary whose mother had recently died:

"Of course you write about the love you had for her, the admiration and gratitude for her that were yours. In the first week, this makes the pain even stronger; but afterwards it works in an appeasing, soothing way: father or mother, whom one has lost, becomes a being of dream one loves and admires in another way as when they were among us; I had that experience after my father's death, though the painful period has been long."

⁸ See annex.

And so letters from Ganshof continued until a year or so before his death in 1980. Because of his deteriorating health he no longer could write. But his wife loyally continued to inform us about his health. Our close association with Ganshof and his wife and a correspondence of almost thirty years opened up windows to this distinguished medieval historian that his publications never could. What a dichotomy there was between Ganshof the published historian and the Ganshof who became our friend. As the reproduction of the two accompanying photographs so clearly illustrates, this dichotomy also existed in his correspondence. Each envelope he addressed with the preciseness of the one here reproduced. But after the envelope was opened the preciseness and formality disappeared and there emerged the other dimension of Ganshof. As the other reproduction of his writing illustrates, within the envelope his precise writing continued but what he wrote did not, revealing him as a warm, sensitive, and emotional *personnage*.

ABSTRACT. – Bryce Lyon, *François Louis Ganshof: Medieval Historian and Friend*.

Bryce Lyon recalls his souvenirs of the famous Ghent mediaevalist François Louis Ganshof. They both shared the intellectual legacy of Henri Pirenne. Lyon translated some of Ganshof's articles and invited within him in the sixties to teach at Berkeley. Lyon's contribution is not meant to be a systematic biography but a series of more impressionistic glimpses of their contact whichh covered several decades.

SAMENVATTING. – *Bryce Lyon, François Louis Ganshof: Mediëvist en vriend*

Bryce Lyon roept herinneringen om aan de befaamde Gentse mediëvist François Louis Ganshof. Ze deelden de intellectuele erfenis van Henri Pirenne. Lyon vertaalde verscheidene artikelen van Ganshof en nodigde hem ook uit voor gast-colleges te Berkeley. De bijdrage van Lyon beoogt geen systematisch biografie te zijn maar wel een reeks impressionistische toetsen te geven van de contacten die ze gedurende tientallen jaren onderhielden.

RÉSUMÉ. – *Bryce Lyon, François Louis Ganshof: Médiéviste et ami*

Bryce Lyon évoque des souvenirs au fameux médiéviste gantois François Louis Ganshof. Les deux partageaient l'héritage intellectuel de Henri Pirenne. Lyon a été le traducteur de plusieurs articles de Ganshof et il l'a aussi invité à Berkeley pour donner des cours. La contribution de Lyon n'envisage pas d'être une biographie systématique mais plutôt de donner une série d'impressions des contacts qu'ils ont entretenus pendant plusieurs décennies.