

Robert Grossetête: A Notable English Churchman.

BY THE REV. S. R. CAMBIE,
Vicar of St. Saviour's, Brixton Hill, S.W.

THE village of Stradbroke claims, and apparently with some reason, the distinction of having been the birthplace of one of the most notable Churchmen of the thirteenth century. Here, born of humble parents, Robert Grossetête first saw the light, and, though of his early years little or nothing is known, we may venture to suppose that they were spent in this obscure Suffolk village.

It was an age of illustrious men and remarkable movements. It was the century of St. Francis of Assisi, of Bonaventura, of Thomas Aquinas. It was the century of the coming of the Friars, a movement which made much difference to the religious life of England. It was a century that included the long reign of Henry III., a monarch who has been well described as "utterly devoid of all elements of greatness," yet withal a man of wide culture, excellent taste, and possessed of a profound religious instinct. He has his finest and most lasting monument in the great Abbey Church at Westminster, the reconstruction of which he undertook and carried out in a spirit of true devotion and generosity. Those were the days of Archbishops Stephen Langton and Edmund Rich, both of them justly renowned for their piety. The latter occupied the chair of Canterbury from 1234 to 1240. He lacked the force and fire of Grossetête, but he was as much alive to the perils of the day as he. He, too, watched the growing boldness of papal demands, and resisted them quietly but firmly. As greatly esteemed for his accurate scholarship as for his saintliness, he gathered round him many students. He lived a life of the greatest simplicity, and his austerities and labours shattered his health. In 1240 he retired to Pontigny, in France, and soon after passed peacefully away.

Born in or about the year 1175, Robert Grossetête was

a student at Oxford when the next century dawned. The revival of classical literature had not yet begun, but the Franciscan school at Oxford had already become famous, and to this Grossetête attached himself. He distinguished himself in Greek, and addressed himself to the study of Hebrew, being determined to read the Bible in the original languages, at that time an unusual accomplishment. It was while he was at Oxford that he formed a friendship with Roger Bacon—destined to be the most forceful of the “Schoolmen”—who had the most profound admiration for his scholarship, character, and ability. Readers of Browning will remember that he has coupled together the names of these two worthies in “Hudibras”:

“Yet none a deeper knowledge boasted
Since old Hodge Bacon and Bob Grosted.”

From Oxford Grossetête migrated, after the fashion of the day, to the University of Paris, then one of the most renowned schools in Europe. Here for a while he continued his studies in Hebrew and Greek, and became, as might be expected, a proficient French scholar. On his return to England he was appointed to the Archdeaconry of Leicester and now his life-work began in real earnest. He soon displayed a faithfulness, a thoroughness, and a courage that won general admiration, and in 1235 he was nominated to the Bishopric of Lincoln, and the King confirmed the appointment. This see was then the most extensive in the country, reaching from Lincoln itself as far south as Oxford and Bedford, and thus offering a fine scope for his energies. The diocese soon discovered that it had a Bishop who possessed in a remarkable degree all the qualifications necessary in an overseer—a keen insight into human character and affairs, a genius for organization, and a prodigious capacity for work.

He took up his task in real earnest, commenced a most systematic and searching Visitation of the archdeaconries and rural deaneries, and proceeded to make himself familiar with the special needs of his vast diocese. Distressed by the growing wealth, luxury, and laxity of the monastic establishments, he

dealt with these with firm hand, regardless of the fact that they claimed exemption from his jurisdiction. Nothing seems to have escaped his vigilance—no irregularity passed unnoticed, and he insisted that the rules of the Order should in each case be observed. Of course, he made many enemies—that goes almost without saying. Certainly the Dean and Chapter of Lincoln must have bitterly repented their choice, for they became his sworn foes. The Convent of Canterbury, with more audacity than discretion, actually excommunicated him, but he treated the matter with contempt. He set to work to provide resident clergy in the most obscure places, and declined to institute men of discreditable reputation. Patrons complained of his actions in such matters, but he was unmoved by criticism or opposition.

But it is not so much his relations with his diocese as his resistance of the Pope that has made him famous. The Bishop of Rome, not content with filling posts of dignity in the Church of England with foreigners, most of whom were non-resident, began to bleed the Church in the most scandalous way. His rapacity was unbounded, and England was spoken of as “the Pope’s farm.” But Grossetête had become a power to be reckoned with. He would have none of it. He asserted the liberties of the Church of England, and boldly claimed exemption from the authority of any foreign prelate. In 1247 two Franciscans came over to extract money for the Pope. The Bishop of Lincoln, shown the papal Bull, respectfully but firmly declined to send the 6,000 marks demanded of his diocese. His most notable battle with the Pope, however, was fought in 1253, when he declined to admit Frederick of Lavagna—a nephew of Innocent, and a boy who could not speak English—to a canonry in Lincoln Cathedral. Grossetête refused. “Those are not apostolic commands,” he said, “which are not consonant with the doctrine of the Apostles, and the Master of the Apostles, Christ Jesus.” The Pope was furious. “Who is this old dotard,” he cried, “who presumes to judge our actions? By St. Peter and St. Paul, if I were not restrained by our

generosity, we would make him a fable, an astonishment, an example, and a warning to all the world!" Fortunately for Grossetête, and possibly for the Pope himself, the Cardinals remonstrated with him and persuaded him to leave the matter. "He is a holy man," urged his defenders, "more so than we ourselves are; a man of excellent genius and of the best morals; no prelate in Christendom is thought to excel him." This is certainly high praise, coming from an unexpected quarter! They further urged prudence in dealing with him because of the esteem in which he was held in England and France on account of his devotion to duty, his fine scholarship, and his personal integrity.

The continued system of exactions saddened him. When he lay on his dying bed he spoke to his physician and clergy of this, and his burning words of condemnation win for him our admiration and respect.

Of course he made friends as well as foes, and his influence grew almost daily and in all directions. Many of the leading men of the day trusted him implicitly and sought his advice. Even the King himself and the Archbishop turned to Robert of Lincoln for counsel. Perhaps his greatest friend was Simon de Montfort. For many years they were inseparables, and the great Earl took his opinion on a variety of subjects. Who can tell how far his ultimate policy was determined by the influence of Grossetête—a policy which greatly affected the future of this country. Perhaps we owe more to the village of Stradbroke than we suppose.

The good Bishop passed away in his palace at Buckden on October 9, 1253. Legends linger round the story of his death: it is said that music was heard in the air, that church bells tolled of their own accord, and miracles were wrought at his grave. The Pope rejoiced, and called upon "every true son of the Roman Church" to rejoice over the removal of his "great enemy." He wrote a letter to the King ordering the Bishop's bones to be cast out of the church and scattered; but the Cardinals who had courageously pleaded for him in his lifetime

persuaded him not to send the letter, and Grossetête was allowed to rest in peace.

It must be borne in mind that Grossetête was one with the Roman Church on doctrinal points. He is nevertheless worthy to rank with Colet, Erasmus, and More. He was the first conspicuous ecclesiastical reformer as distinct from the doctrinal reformers—Cranmer, Ridley, Latimer, and others. He was one who fought for that freedom which was finally won when it was once and for all declared that “the Bishop of Rome hath no jurisdiction in this realm of England.” In a dark age he possessed more light than many around him, and a courage which was all too rare.

His biographer, Matthew Paris—the last and greatest of the Monastic historians—has left us the pleasing portrait of an indefatigable worker, with a high sense of duty and responsibility. He was an able administrator and a strict disciplinarian, hating laziness of life and laxity of morals—a man who could stand before kings without fear. To quote the words of Paris: “He was an open confuter of the Pope and the King, the reprover of prelates, the corrector of monks, the supporter of scholars, the preacher to the people, the persecutor of the immoral, the unwearied student of the Scriptures, the harasser and despiser of Rome.”

His literary remains are by no means inconsiderable. He commenced a commentary on the Psalms, but did not live to complete it. Many of his sermons and letters remain in manuscript. They serve to show us something of the Church-life of the time, as well as his versatility and spirituality. His *magnum opus*, however, is his translation into Latin of “The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs,” a Jewish work dating back to the end of the first century, but containing, as it has come down to us, a number of Christian interpolations made at a later date. He also translated the works of John Damascene and of Dionysius the Areopagite. Every English Churchman may well cherish the memory of Grossetête, one of the greatest prelates who ever ruled an English see.