James McEvoy 1943-2010

Hugh Bredin

The Queen's University Belfast

James McEvoy was one of the outstanding medievalists, and the foremost Grosseteste scholar, of his generation. His magnum opus was *The Philosophy of Robert Grosseteste*, published in 1982 (reprinted 1986), by which time he had already published several papers on the Bishop of Lincoln. Subsequently there appeared many related articles, editions, edited collections and translations, as well as surveys of the state of Grosseteste studies. Much of his later work turned to theological and biblical aspects of Grosseteste's thinking, no doubt to counterbalance and complement a book that had been devoted primarily to philosophy.

McEvoy turned his attention also to other medieval thinkers, on whom he published many articles and edited collections—Aquinas, Bonaventure, Anselm, Thomas Gallus, Peter of Ireland, Eriugena—as well as studies of Augustinian and Neoplatonic influences, and several papers on general themes in medieval thought. His other main interest was the philosophy of friendship. Most of his numerous papers on friendship were studies of the idea and theory of friendship in a wide variety of ancient and medieval thinkers, and even, in one case, a comparison between Kantian *Freundschaft* and medieval *amicitia*. An anthology of his friendship studies, *Amor Amicitiae*, appeared in 2004, and two collections of ancient and medieval texts on friendship, in French translation, *Sagesses de l'amitié* (1997 and 2003), were edited by McEvoy with Jacques Follon.

James McEvoy was born in 1943 in Larne, Northern Ireland. He was awarded a first class honours in Scholastic Philosophy at the Queen's University of Belfast, and then transferred for theological studies to the Pontifical University of Maynooth. Here, between 1964 and 1968, he obtained a Bachelor of Divinity, while at the same time completing an MA

(on Grosseteste) at Queen's University and receiving a Teaching Diploma for violin at the Royal Irish Academy of Music. Whether any of these three institutions knew what McEvoy was up to in the other two he never made completely clear.

In 1968 he was ordained a Catholic priest for the Diocese of Down and Connor, a large Diocese which includes the troubled city of Belfast. His priesthood was and remained for him the central fact of his life, and he always combined his scholarly work and academic duties with an extraordinary amount of demanding pastoral work.

After ordination he spent three years (1968-1971) at the *Institut supérieur de philosophie* of the University of Louvain and a year (1972-73) at the *Grabmann-Institut* of the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich. Always a remarkable linguist, it was in these years that he perfected his knowledge of French and German, and went on to publish in both languages as well as in English. In 1974 he defended and was awarded a doctorate at Louvain *avec la plus grande distinction*. When his magisterial book on Grosseteste appeared in 1982 he presented it, along with fifty minor theses on philosophy, to the University of Louvain and was designated *Maître Agrégé en Philosophie de l'Ecole de Saint Thomas d'Aquin*.

In the meantime he was appointed in 1971 to a lectureship in the Department of Scholastic Philosophy in his old university in Belfast, and in 1975 was elevated to the Chair. In 1988 he moved to his other alma mater, now split into a Flemish-speaking university (Leuven) and a French-speaking university (Louvain-la-Neuve). He took a position at Louvain-La-Neuve, as Head of the Department of Scholastic Philosophy, where he remained until 1995. As an outsider in Belgium he was able to use his diplomatic skills to bring about, in 1990, the first joint colloquium in philosophy to involve the two linguistically distinct universities; its Acts were then jointly published by Vrin and Peeters in 1992.

In 1995 McEvoy moved back to Ireland, to take up the Chair of Philosophy in the National University of Ireland at Maynooth (NUIM). A year later he was elected Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy in NUIM, and a year later still was appointed Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences of the National University of Ireland. He was by now one of the most distinguished scholars in the country, and one of the most distinguished medievalists in Europe. He was elected to the Royal Irish Academy in 1982, and had an intimidating number of positions on

various editorial boards and learned societies. He finally recognized the toll this was taking on him when, at the age of sixty-one, he returned to Belfast to take up a part-time position as Professor of Scholastic Philosophy in the Queen's University. Here he continued to give some undergraduate lectures and to supervise the postgraduate theses left behind by retiring staff. When he reached retirement age in 2008 his friends and colleagues were relieved to see him finally freed from the burden of teaching as well as administration, and looked forward, as he did himself, to the years of scholarship and publication which seemingly lay ahead. What turned out to be his final illness had little effect upon his industry. Shortly before he died he was still working on editions of Grosseteste's *Commentaries* on the *Celestial Hierarchy* and *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* of the Pseudo-Dionysius. These will be revised and completed by his brilliant student and occasional colleague, Declan Lawell, and should appear within the next two years.

A man of extraordinary and diverse abilities, full of vigour, wit, and charm, with a host of friends, his death marks the passing of one of the outstanding priests and scholars of our time.