GLORIA K. FIERO


'If your hypothesis is right, if in other words we are [moving] in the right direction in our efforts to reconstruct the past, we are bound to find sooner or later some confirmation of it.' These words from one of L. M. J. Delaissé's last letters reflect the tenacity and optimism of one of this century's most imaginative scholars. Those who knew Bob Delaisse prior to his tragic death in January 1972 are the beneficiaries of his boundless enthusiasm and his passionate desire to set in clear perspective the evidence of history. For him, the hand-written and hand-illuminated manuscripts of the late Middle Ages were that period's most revealing historical documents. He compared their methods of production to those of the medieval cathedral, and in his own mind the manuscripts, though hardly monumental in size, were monumental as cultural resources. Delaisse's training and experience with these documents inspired the bulk of his writings on Flemish and Dutch manuscripts of the fifteenth century, and on the archeology of the medieval book.

Léon Marie-Joseph Delaisse was born in 1914 in Herseaux, a small town in southwest Belgium. His baccalaureate degree in romance languages was completed at Namur. He then entered a Jesuit seminary to train for the priesthood, but never completed ordination. The young Delaisse was attending the University of Louvain at the outbreak of the second World War, a war that occupied more than four years of his life and influenced his future drastically. After Dunkirk, Delaisse escaped to England, returning almost immediately to Belgium to join the resistance forces of the Belgian underground. In the underground Delaisse helped civilians and allied personnel through Belgium to France, Spain

1 Letter dated 18 May 1971, from All Souls College, Oxford. This statement was made in conjunction with Delaisse's observation that the anonymity of Dutch manuscripts, such as those I was studying at the time, provided only indirect evidence for my thesis; Delaisse pointed to similar problems presented by manuscripts like the Turin-Milan Hours, and concluded, 'I do think that for all those questions it is simply a question of time and patience ...'

2 'Les bibliothèques anglaises au Moyen Age et à la Renaissance', a review of The English library before 1700: studies in its history. F. Wormald & C. E. Wright, eds. (London 1958), in: Scriptorium, 16 (1962), p. 354. (This and other titles fully cited once will be referred to in abbreviated forms thereafter.)
or England. He was active in many covert and overt operations, including the invasion of Normandy. Captured by the Germans, he spent a year in Miranda Prison in Spain, escaping to England with the help of the Red Cross in 1943 but suffering from jaundice. On a reconnaissance mission with the British Tank Corps in August 1944, Delaisse was severely wounded, resulting in the loss of a leg; he spent the rest of his life physically handicapped. Despite these trials, as late as 1960 he described with obvious excitement his dedication to the Allied cause and his experiences in the French underground. From his life in the underground he took his code name, Bob Dujardin, the only name by which his friends knew him.

A year and a half after his last campaign in the army, in March 1946, he entered the Royal Library Albert I in Brussels and came into contact with two of its most prominent curators, Frédéric Lyna and François Masai. With them in the same year, Delaisse helped to establish Scriptorium, an international review of manuscript studies. Delaisse also continued his own education in literature and languages, completing a doctorate in philology at the University of Louvain. His doctoral dissertation on the Royal Library’s autograph copy of Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitatio Christi* was published in 1956, and was immediately recognized as a classic example of codicological expertise. Out of the research on this manuscript sprang the inquiries that would occupy the last fifteen years of Delaisse’s life: the archeology of the book and the relationship between the *Devotio moderna* (the spiritual movement that inspired the *Imitatio*), and Dutch art.

Delaisse spent thirteen years at the Royal Library examining that library’s magnificent holdings, particularly the collection of fifteenth-century Flemish illuminated manuscripts produced under the patronage of the Dukes of Burgundy. To *Scriptorium* and other European period-

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4 Dujardin was his mother’s family name. According to Mrs. Delaisse’s letter, ‘His mother died when he was 18 months old, at his brother’s birth. This brother was shot in the back by Germans in the last week of the war.’
