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**The Late Medieval and Renaissance
Italian City-State and Beyond**

Essays in Honour of M. E. Bratchel

*The Southern African Journal of Medieval
and Renaissance Studies*

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EDITED BY C. I. HAMILTON
AND
ANITA VIRGA

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David Scott-Macnab, University of Johannesburg

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M. E. Bratchel

M. E Bratchel: A Memoir

C. I. HAMILTON

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

TO LOOK BACK OVER A CAREER in an institution, at least in the case of Michael Bratchel's at the University of the Witwatersrand, is to survey forty years, since he arrived as a member of staff in the History Department at the end of 1972, a young Briton soon to have a freshly-minted Cambridge Ph.D., and he retired at the end of 2012. This is a long period, and, as is well known, the past is a different place, yet one we have to venture into. Unfortunately, memory can be suspect, being subject to various distortions, including its attachment to the obviously memorable, whether the good or the ill, hence the frequent allusion in memoirs to 'it was the best of times, it was the worst of times'. However, in the present case, perhaps Dickens's words are for once not too ill-applied, not just because we also have to deal with pre-revolutionary times, but also because surely in objective fact, as well as fond (and not-so-fond) memory, South African society and University life from the 1970s to the early 1990s were odd, paradoxical, contradictory (or perhaps just 'pre-revolutionary').

The 'best of times' can be easily justified. Here we should emphasise that the academics, administrators and secretaries at 'Wits' then were almost entirely white and middle class, and though probably in general politically liberal, not usually radical. So, though the University was the object of undoubted suspicion by the state, its members of staff were not regularly subject to the kind of humiliating supervision and even vicious physical oppression that those who lived in the townships suffered. And materially, of course, they were comfortable, which is our present topic. While imported goods could be expensive, prices of food, accommodation, and labour were comparatively low. Then there was travel, which had curious aspects. The preferred means of getting

down from Johannesburg to the Cape, for instance, were car or train. The former was much as now – except with much cheaper petrol, of course. But if one wished to avoid the leper's bell of a car registered in the Transvaal, and so turned to the train, there was the pleasure of the Trans-Karoo express; not only were standard-price tickets far cheaper in real terms than on the tourist-trap luxury trains of today (though the Trans-Karoo was still attractive, in a slightly seedy *Shanghai Express* sort of way), but rail travel was subsidised for both civil servants and university employees: once a year, a concessionary train-ticket could be requested, something that disappeared in mysterious circumstances around 1990, so that even its existence was widely forgotten. And if local delights palled, there was foreign travel. Given the Rand rate of at least the 1980s, and the lack of swingeing airport taxes, regular foreign travel was all too possible for the professional white community, and on visits to London at that time one regularly came across young South Africans engaged on what they called their 'world tour'.

We must not forget the advantages of weather, scenery, and flora and fauna all which of course remain today. Here one includes the generally pleasing Johannesburg climate for most of the year (or at least day), and the opportunities that gives to gardeners: one of the great surprises for the British expatriate on the high veld is that by watering in late winter, one can outrageously speed a garden through the (regrettably) brief spring into a long-lasting lush and abundant summer. Then there are the glories of tourism in the rest of the country, and just beyond, including invigorating highlands, game parks, the daisies in Namaqualand, or perhaps watching diamond dredging off Port Nolloth. For those who prefer more cultivated landscapes of leisure, or urban life, there is the trip down to Durban and the Indian Ocean coast, or of course – now commonly by air – one can go down to the Cape, where apart from what must be one of the most geographically fortunate cities in the world, there is stunning countryside, with long-established towns and wineries.

All this seems to be leading up to something very like Talleyrand's smug recollection of the *douceur de vivre* of pre-revolutionary France: where were the 'worst of times' in pre-revolutionary South Africa? It consisted not on the material side (one should reiterate that it is white, professional society that is in question) but elsewhere. It was behind the scenes on occasion, understood if not stated. The 'world tour', for instance, could be a facade, its reality for numbers of young

white South African males was skipping the country to avoid the draft, incidentally helping British publicans staff their bars: back in the 1980s, though here memory may well exaggerate, it seemed that all London bartenders were antipodean. But the major problems were to be seen not at all indirectly, but very much as an inescapable and blatant part of daily life, above all apartheid itself, to be encountered in shops, restaurants, lavatories, transport, and of course on campus, where the student body was very largely white, epitomised by the three bronze statues of students, then as now in front of Central Block, emblematic of questing youth, but evidently Caucasian youth. Walking off campus was at once to enter a significantly different world. Braamfontein was then still comfortably spruce and affluent, for instance it had several decent restaurants (including a particular Italian one, whose loss is now much regretted by the older generation), but was perceptibly an African world.

State policy then affected the University in all kinds of other ways beyond institutionalised racism. Here we should recall one positive aspect – a relatively high level of state subsidy. ‘Wits’ did not benefit as much as the more favoured kin of government; still, money was not the problem it was later to become, as one can gather by looking back to what was the very good general state of upkeep of gardens, water features, and buildings and equipment; even rooms on the upper stories of Central Block were in good order. But that again is a material matter: the more pertinent difficulties were found elsewhere. One might sum them up as ‘intellectual Autarky’, the consequence of conscious government policy. One aspect was a response to Apartheid in the shape of foreign sanctions, including the simple refusal to communicate, to be found at governmental, institutional, and private and personal levels. There were corresponding efforts on the South African side to limit engagement, again on various levels. Most ambitious was the assertion of a self-sufficient nationalist intellectual tradition, but it is difficult to see that this can have been taken with much seriousness, even within official circles, at least by the 1980s. By that time, more crude physical attempts to enforce conformity of thought, which had of course long existed, were still to be reckoned with, and even coming to the fore. One example directly affected the History Department in 1986–87, the arrest and attempted deportation of a member of staff who was active in the Trade Union movement. Fortunately, the attempt failed, but of course left scars. An even more blatant attempt to quiet political activism occurred in 1989, this time

the murder of a staff member of another department, carried out by a government death squad. That might well be seen in retrospect as an act of desperation by a system in decay, but naturally helped poison the academic atmosphere.

Otherwise, though, there were the daily, low-level impediments to academic life, and if not quite poisonous, could certainly be embittering, and again tending to restrict inquiry. One of these was 'snooping'. A lecture that was possibly sensitive politically – and again we are dealing with the 1980s – could attract a few additional listeners, never to be seen again. Perhaps they were simply students interested in the particular topic; but one tended to question the motives involved. I certainly recall being a little surprised when, for once giving dates in advance for the topics, I saw a couple of new faces at a lecture I gave that had been advertised under the simple title 'The Police', and the grins that developed when it became clear that the subject was essentially the Soviet secret police under Lenin and Stalin. The 'faces' never appeared again. Perhaps one had passed a test. Perhaps one was being paranoid. But it was certainly current rumour that snooping on the History Department, and delation to the authorities, were not only occurring but being organised from within another department, and were thought to contribute to the attempted deportation mentioned earlier. To use the jargon, even if this was all simply a matter of 'perception', one need hardly stress the destructive and long-lasting effects on inter-departmental relations.

Another and more general limitation on thought and discussion was censorship. Surprise and exasperation combined when one opened a copy of the (imported) *Guardian Weekly* to find whole articles had been scissored out, or when one saw the middle of a 1986 front cover of the *Economist* had been slathered in black ink to cover up the picture of a gold bar with the inscription 'To free Mandela, go for Gold'. Then there could be difficulty getting books. Anyone importing a library had to declare not just the numbers but titles of books; anyone returning from abroad might be asked at the airport whether he was bringing in 'propaganda' (meaning, of course, left-wing texts as well as the *Economist*). The problem was compounded on the other side by certain foreign booksellers who refused to correspond with a South African University, unless it was to try and score political points, as against doing something useful, like selling interesting books to a place that needed them. Videos were even more difficult to obtain, and had to go through a whole series of administrative hoops before

they could be imported. This writer well remembers how difficult it was in about 1987 to bring in a copy of a Marcel Carné film: who would have thought that supporters of the *Nouvelle Vague* were so deeply entrenched in Pretoria?

However, simply polarising the good and the bad gives an inaccurate impression. There was a middle-ground, including a middle ground of humour that helped make some of the absurdities bearable, if only because they were absurd and patently so. The censorship itself was absurd. For instance, one can scarcely think of a more effective way of drawing attention to the gold bar on the *Economist* cover than covering it up with paint. Or there were the famous confusions of mind of the censoring bureaucrats. Banning *Black Beauty* is a famous enough example, but I also recall being told by a local bookseller that an attempt to import a book on dogmatics was stopped because an official said 'we know what that is about, and it is nasty'. Nor did the censorship seem to be all that efficient even in cutting off supplies of politically radical volumes. The bookseller referred to above kept a shop in Braamfontein (alas, long gone), and a survey of the shelves suggested he was able to stock almost anything from classical leftist literature, even if current polemics on South African subjects were likely a different matter, at least for display purposes.

And South African universities themselves could be absurd. Doubtless they remain so in various ways, what with the occasional curious appointments that are made, or the endless academic spam, or the mind-numbing neologisms and illiterate business-speak of official memoranda, or the regular assertion that new research oversets everything written on the same topic before. However, such or at least similar sins are endemic in the nature of academic society in any country, and even any time; they were spoken about by J. B. Mencken in lectures at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and clearly were not new then.¹ But certain short-term developments or changes of emphasis can be discerned, and it strikes this writer that the monsters were more sacred in the 1980s and 1990s than now, in some ways the practices more peculiar and the language even more outrageous than at present. Here again one should see that isolation contributed. It was more possible then for someone to pretend to be a foreign academic

¹ Johann Burkhard Mencken, *The Charlatanry of the Learned*, trans. Francis E. Litz, notes and introduction by H. L. Mencken (New York, 1937). esp. pp. 103–04.

of some distinction, and get appointed to a department (not History, we should observe). Or for a member of staff to assert, without being immediately fired (though there were some private wry looks), that he had just been awarded a Ph.D. from Oxford. Isolation also helps explain some odd use of language that directly contravened Diderot's argument that everything must be examined: thus one came across oxymorons such as 'Christian higher-education' or 'progressive historians'.

However, there was a potent mitigation: the feeling that something could be done. Political radicals of course had their own take on that. But there was another one, more suitable to staid academic pursuits, and also one that will help lead us back to the subject of this volume. If the world – or much of it – wanted to have nothing to do with South Africa, at least academics in the latter might aspire to decent world standards, or strive to remain in contact with colleagues abroad, and in the process aim ultimately not just to have a political effect on the national society, but – perhaps of more immediate concern – also in the process aim at greater rigour in entrance requirements and marking. We must note that back in the 1970s academic standards in arts at 'Wits' were not particularly good, with a large leaven of rote students only just passing their degrees, and disappointing publication content and rates from many members of staff. *Plus ça change*, the cynic might say, except that there were determined and sensible attempts to alter matters. One way of doing that was though the University rejigging entrance requirements. Another was by appointing more staff, which would cut down on what had been fearsome marking loads, and give greater opportunities for research. And where possible, the staff were to have credit-worthy research expertise in the areas they were supposed to teach, and if that meant appointing those who had been to well-known foreign universities, or even were foreign nationals, so much the better. The History Department certainly benefitted from such changes.

We should look a little at the leadership of the department at the time. At the head was a gentleman and scholar, with a link, as it happened, to Cambridge. He was himself an experienced administrator, but had the great advantage of being paired with a highly effective chief of staff, perhaps 'bulldog' would be a better description, though if so a very scholarly one; together they were able to push what they wanted through Faculty, and gave continuity of direction to the department until the 1990s. Here it is particularly interesting to see the kind of

course it was then seen as possible to develop at first year level, a foundation in European History going back to the break-up of the Roman Empire in the West, putting great emphasis (again one points out that first year history is in question) on studying and understanding historical documents. Greater variety and choice were allowed at later stages, including offering South African and US courses, and also – another important innovation, based once more on the research expertise of the staff concerned – ones on African history. All in all, this constituted a significant development in both breadth and depth, with numerous aspects there is no time to investigate now, though one should perhaps mention a particularly curious one, the way that – at least for a while – third year students were encouraged to give research papers (including on European History) to a departmental audience, even though this did not continue to thrive. Much of this, of course, appears quite out of tune with present practice, even to the extent of appearing from a different age. If so, it pales beside a much more powerful contrast with the present day which must not be forgotten. The departmental staff in the 1970s and early 1980s was white and almost completely male. Improvement and reform, clearly, had strict limits.

So much for context, now for our subject, at least peripherally and in some cases deeply involved in much that has been mentioned. Both Susan and Michael Bratchel certainly enjoyed the natural advantages of the country, and continued to do so throughout their stay. Susan is a keen gardener, and during the last quarter-century of her stay in South Africa took the opportunity of not just late winter watering but the variety of plants available in nurseries, to turn what had been a large desert of a suburban garden, interspersed with scrap metal and amateur brick-work, into a verdant place of colour, elegance and ingenious nooks and crannies. Bratchel himself continues to deny any horticultural expertise, except the ability to identify both rose and *Bougainvillea*, or wave a consistent if negligent hand towards a certain palm he always identifies as ‘a Chinese thing’; but of course he revelled in what Susan had created. And both of them took a keen interest in enjoying the natural beauties of the land beyond Johannesburg. They regularly took their family down to the trimmed resorts of the coast; or stayed inland, showing a particular liking for game reserves and mountain treks. Though they generally remained faithful to an old, idiosyncratic, but curiously reliable Peugeot, they eventually bought a Landrover for some distant expeditions, and in particular one recalls

tales of trips into the chilly uplands of Lesotho, illustrated by Susan's handsome photographs, giving much vicarious pleasure to urbanite stay-at-homes with agoraphobia.

Back now to the department, where Bratchel's appointment was very much part of the attempt to improve standards, and even if it was not the first, it was at least part of the first batch. It took some time, however, for more staff to lead to reductions in the burden of work, and for some years – as a junior member of staff – Bratchel had a ferocious marking load, above all during the main examinations, when at one stage he collapsed, and had to be sent to hospital (though the fact he was then a smoker doubtless contributed).

We should give particular attention to Bratchel's work as a University teacher in South Africa. He found that even a medievalist, dealing with European history, could run into censorship difficulties. Not that Pretoria was noticeably concerned by the redolent parallel of the rise of the *popolo* in Italian cities in the fifteenth century; but, as suggested earlier, there was a problem about getting books from abroad. There were various aspects to that, including simple logistical ones (which of course remain today), but I also well remember Bratchel showing me a letter he was sent by a bookseller in the USA, who announced that he would be only too glad to sell books to an academic in South Africa, but wanted first to be assured in writing that the individual concerned opposed Apartheid and – in effect – was working to its end. Truly an example, to borrow the Tom Lehrer line, of doing well by doing good. Bratchel did reply, pointing out – very politely in the circumstances – that to demand such a *profession de foi* was scarcely in accord with desirable academic practice. He received no reply.

Standards were also much the topic when it came to the development and teaching of courses. Bratchel had taken part energetically in the creation of more demanding courses in the 1970s and 1980s, and naturally wished to maintain this work afterwards. Here we should look also at the 1990s, including after the change of regime, when numbers expanded, but there were difficulties at High School level, which had consequences that the Universities were somehow expected to deal with. Again an incident comes to mind, a lunch time meeting with some members of a history department from another institution. The Wits department already looked with some amusement at their colleagues for having transformed themselves into little better than teachers of Southern African history, and thus showed a certain intellectual reserve; still, that did not prepare us for one of those

colleagues speaking warmly about their slow and careful nurturing of M.A. students, teaching them the basics of historical inquiry, of narrative and analysis, and even of writing basic English. The majority of the Wits representatives present were a little embarrassed at the idea of leaving basic tuition in literacy and historical method to so late a stage in a student's career, though of course understood the central purpose – MA students, given the government subsidy formula, are particularly remunerative, as long as one can get them to pass. However, it was Bratchel who articulated the doubts, stating outright that one simply did not give professorial salaries for remedial teaching work. This was another case where he received no reply.

There are numerous other aspects to his work for the Department, though naturally not all can be dealt with. One thing perhaps to stress above all was his insistence at continuing to give choice to first year students by maintaining his introductory medieval course. This was a severe burden, carried alone or almost alone, but one he thought he ought to maintain. The course was, in the well-known code, 'challenging', but proved popular among the discerning, doubtless a little encouraged by the generously catered end-of year party Michael and Susan always provided for the students involved. He also continued to encourage medieval research at postgraduate levels, though again his courses made serious demands, since he insisted on competence in the language skills necessary to study the relevant documents. Students certainly found that a challenge, and perhaps might have wavered, had it not been for Bratchel's care and attention as a supervisor. The willing and able rapidly found that behind the sometimes brusque manner, and occasionally forbidding appearance, they had a supervisor who cared not just about the subject, but about them.

We also must consider his administrative work, which entailed not just long hours at a desk, but also attendance at various committees. By and large, even if important, University committee work is generally dull, enlivened only by personality clashes. Such clashes, regrettably, are not uncommon. More so than one composed of, say, British civil servants, any committee of academics will quite likely include at least one difficult or even impossible person, perhaps appointed to serve by his or her department as a means of distraction from more sensitive matters, in the same way as magicians command dangerous demons to make ropes out of sand. But Bratchel, one may say, had an admirable way of dealing with committees, as chairman hurrying along the business

with great despatch, or as an ordinary member guiding the discussion through offering well articulated and convincing summaries. As for the difficult, those he could deflect through patience, and also by not losing his temper, despite occasional dreadful provocation: perhaps he fumed subsequently, but not – the important point – at the time.

He also acted for long as head of department, again very demanding work, all the more so since it was commonly dull, requiring painstaking and extended efforts. Bratchel accepted it as a duty, to the detriment of his research work, but performed it consistently and well. What was particularly striking was that Bratchel's word could be fully relied on; not quite a universal rule in academic circles, in this writer's experience.

Finally we should turn to his own historical work. Here, given the nature of the present volume, it is only right to mention first his participation in the work of the Medieval Society of Southern Africa (later SASMARS), as an editor, organiser, and contributor. However, those efforts will be properly dealt with elsewhere, by someone better fitted to assess them. We should also note that distractions from research work were a difficulty, as suggested before. But these could be mitigated by hard work, and refusal to waste opportunities. Even in the hurry and scurry of term time, he was able to snatch time to look at microfilm copies of manuscripts. A regular memory is of coming into Bratchel's office to find him turning towards one, bleary-eyed, away from a monochrome screen of what appeared to be random cat-scratchings. And we must also acknowledge the insistence of the University that full year sabbaticals be awarded to warranted researchers, so even back in the 1970s Bratchel was able to get over to the archives and libraries in Italy, accumulating a store of information (and microfilms) for later inspection and evaluation.

He must have felt during his last few years at Wits that he was living into the age of Professor Hooper, and he was certainly not willing to be amused at the irony that political freedom could mean a narrowing of scholarly perspective. But all that is behind him. Based in a fine new home and garden in western England, in a well-gauged striking distance not just of family but of Senate House and the British Library in London, he has the opportunity to show that retirement is not at all just watching cricket and drinking possets, and has been able to turn to research with a greater concentration than before. Again he will doubtless be bleary-eyed at times from reading microfilm, to which he can now add digital copies, but he is also far closer to Italy than he

was when in Johannesburg, and thus nearer the Lucchese archives he lovingly outlined in the interview he gave in 2009.² He now has a far better chance than previously to prosper with the scheme of future work he also gave there. And we, his friends, former colleagues, and fellow researchers, the contributors to this volume, coming as we do not just from South Africa, but also Germany, the USA, the UK, Japan, and especially Italy, trust he will find further encouragement in the respect and affection of so widely based a scholarly community.

C. I. HAMILTON
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg

² 'Interview with Michael Bratchel', 23 September 2009: available URL: <<http://www.medievalists.net/2009/09/21/interview-with-michael-bratchel>>, accessed 4 July 2014.

M. E. Bratchel and SASMARS: The Historian at the Literary Club

MICHAEL BRATCHEL WAS ONE of the earliest members of the Medieval Society of Southern Africa, which held its inaugural conference in 1972, the year he was appointed to a lectureship in the History Department at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.¹ He remained a stalwart of the Society until his retirement in 2012 and it is with pleasure and gratitude that we devote this special issue of the Society's journal to his honour. It has not been an easy path for him to tread. As a medievalist, he found himself in an academic environment scrambling to re-invent itself and shed all euro-centric associations. As an Italianist, he was far from his sources and isolated from his peers – until the advent of e-mail. As an historian, he gave extraordinary time and energy to a Society dominated by literary scholars: even more so, when the Medieval Society became the Southern African Society of Medieval and Renaissance Studies and the Shakespeareans were at the gates.

The Society has always been multi-disciplinary. It was founded on the model of the Medieval Academy of America, and its rationale was to support medievalists (and then early modernists) in Southern Africa, keep them in contact with global scholarship, and encourage research and publication. Bratchel served for many years on the board of the journal. He ensured that history as a discipline was never forgotten, by inviting prominent historians to deliver the keynote addresses at the biennial conferences, notably Ed Muir, from Evanston, Illinois, to the Johannesburg conference of 2000 and Chris Wickham, then from Birmingham, to the conference at Mont Fleur, Stellenbosch, in 2004. Muir is well known for his study of the vendetta in Renaissance

¹ See my tribute to 'Eugenie R. Freed-Isserow, Founder Member, Medieval Society of Southern Africa', *Southern African Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 15 (2005): v–vii.

Italy, and Wickham for his work on the changes from the late Roman Empire in early medieval Italy.²

The records of the 2004 conference, on the theme ‘The Multicultural Middle Ages and Beyond’, make entertaining reading.³ Wickham, soon to be appointed to a fellowship at All Souls, Oxford, described his visit as one of his best, ‘amazingly stimulating, including intellectually’. He may have been referring to the bungled negotiations for a hired car, which left him hungry and late for a lunch-time lecture and prompted an acid letter from Bratchel to the DVC Research. Or to a visit to the University of Cape Town, where the historians ‘fiercely protested [his] claim that history wasn’t a theoretical discipline’: this prompted a comment from Bratchel that ‘It is amazing how little History – as you and I would understand the discipline – is being taught at any other South African University’. The conference at Mont Fleur was a rousing success, but there was further stimulus in store for two European delegates who lingered in Cape Town for a few days and had an adventure on Table Mountain. Missing the last cable car, they had to climb down in the dusk: ‘Sun sat down and the last 40 minutes we went in the dark just with a little bit of light in the illuminated centre of Cape Town reflecting in the mountains.’ This might aptly symbolize Bratchel’s sense of the state of medieval studies in Southern Africa.

Some years later Bratchel had a stint as Chairman of the Society, from 2008 to 2010, when he convened the 20th Biennial Conference, ‘Afterlives: Survival and Revival’.⁴ His own magnetism, and that of the keynote speaker, Alexandra F. Johnston, driving force behind the renowned series *Records of Early English Drama*, drew the largest contingent of foreign delegates since the 1994 joint conference with

² Edward Muir, *Mad Blood Stirring: Vendetta and Factions in Friuli during the Renaissance* (Baltimore, MD, 1998) ; Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2005).

³ Selected papers from the conference were published in *The Southern African Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 14 (2004), with articles by Chris Wickham (Oxford), Brian Lee (Cape Town), Katharine Leigh Geldenhuys (Free State), Jacomien Prins (Utrecht), Pier Paolo Frassinelli (Witwatersrand) and John Gouws (Rhodes).

⁴ Selected papers from this conference were published in *The Southern African Journal of Medieval & Renaissance Studies* 20 (2010) and 21 (2011), including articles by Alexandra F. Johnston (Toronto), Kees van der Ploeg (Groningen), Christopher Jones (St Andrews), Andrew Nicholson (Witwatersrand), James Plumtree (Budapest), Nancy Strangfeld (Johannesburg) and Catherine Addison (Zululand).

the (sadly now defunct) UNISA Medieval Society. But it also attracted one of Sandy Johnston's former students, John Cartwright, who treated us to a performance of poetry readings to the accompaniment of a double-bass. Cartwright, who studied in Oxford and Toronto, taught medieval literature for many years at the University of Cape Town, was for a time Dean of Arts there, and has subsequently been involved in community development projects. He is a fine actor and director. It was he who mooted the re-naming of the Society in 1990. In many ways, as a medievalist in Southern Africa, he is Bratchel's antithesis. Yet to see them together at the 2010 conference, the historian attending to and commenting brilliantly on the literary papers, the textual critic and political activist charming the delegates, was to be deeply moved by the range and inclusivity of the Society. For that, we owe a great debt to Michael Bratchel, teacher, scholar, host and friend.

VICTOR HOULISTON

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
St Bonaventure, 2014

M. E. Bratchel: A Bibliography

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