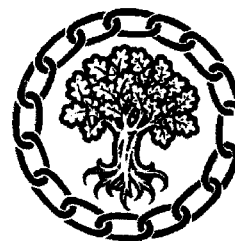


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As the third millennium approaches there is naturally some curiosity about events at the beginning of the second. Written genealogies were rare at that period and their reconstruction now occupies a number of academic minds. Several interesting articles have already been offered to the Magazine on early medieval subjects and it is proposed that the best of these should be published over the next couple of years.

Abelard and Heloise

Some notes towards a family tree

BRENDA M COOK

The story of Abelard and Heloise is possibly best recalled nowadays from the stage-drama of 1970 and it is perhaps inevitable that Diana Rigg stripping off for Keith Michell should be the most enduring image of this historic couple in some people's minds. The play was in fact a crude adaptation of the far better novel by Helen Waddell and contained, to our author's mind, a number of gross misunderstandings.

THE publication of a new biography of the mediaeval French philosopher, theologian and lover, Peter Abelard (1079-1142), has prompted this writer to see what can be reconstructed of his family tree.¹ Yet in a world where the majority of people were baptised, married and buried without any written record being made, how can such a task be attempted? There may be no parish, far less civil, registers in twelfth century France, but a remarkably wide range of material with a genealogical component does survive. The following reconstruction has been done solely from the available *published* sources - the author is not a palaeographer - and may prove a useful example to readers daunted by the thought of tackling genealogy in the middle ages.

These sources may be divided into three groups.

1. The writings of Abelard, Heloise and their circle.
2. Contemporary narratives: monastic chronicles &c.
3. Charters, and other legal documents.

We are fortunate that Abelard wrote his autobiography,² but it must be used with caution. Its usual title, *The history of my*

calamities, should sound a warning: the people whom Abelard chooses to mention will only be those who were connected with one of his many, mostly self-induced, disasters. In addition, the *History* appears to end around the year 1132 and so can provide no information about the last decade of Abelard's life. It must be augmented with information drawn from other documents reliably ascribed to Abelard, from the documents of the Convent of the Paraclete,³ from other people's memories of him, and finally from the impersonal witness of charters surviving in Abelard's home district, the *Comté* of Nantes in Brittany.

Four passages in the *History* contain genealogical information. In the first, Abelard tells us that he was 'born on the borders of Brittany, ... in a town called LePallet. ... My father had acquired some degree of literacy before he had knighthood conferred upon him, and later his enthusiasm for learning was such that he planned that all his sons should be educated in Latin before they were trained to arms. ... I was his eldest child, and ... I was so carried away by my love of learning that I ... relinquished my inheritance and birthright as the eldest son to my brothers ...'⁴

Abelard next recounts how he left Brittany for France and followed a stormy career in

