

James K. Farge

Why and How Gilson’s Institute of Mediaeval Studies Was Different from Other Medieval Programs

The existence of the Pontifical Institute began with the aspirations of two men: Father Henry Carr CSB¹ and Étienne Gilson.² As the local Superior of the Basilian Fathers at St. Michael’s College from 1915 to 1925, Father Carr was, practically speaking, both its President and Principal. One of his primary goals was to enhance the level of the philosophy staff at the college by importing a series of professors from the University of Louvain to teach at St. Michael’s—each for one year. More significantly, he hired Father Gerald B. Phelan, a Canadian doctoral graduate of Louvain, for a full-time position at St. Michael’s. Phelan was to become a major figure in the history of St. Michael’s and the Institute of Mediaeval Studies.

In the back of his mind, Father Carr was also searching for a way that St. Michael’s could respond to Pope Leo XIII’s 1879 encyclical

James K. Farge, CSB — Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
e-mail: james.farge@utoronto.ca • ORCID: no data

This is a revised version of a lecture delivered in a 2019 colloquium at St. Michael’s College on the history of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto. For a more detailed account of the first 40 years of the Institute, see Laurence K. Shook, “The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies (1929),” in Shook’s *Catholic Post-Secondary Education in English-Speaking Canada. A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 210–228.

¹ Edmund J. McCorkell, *Henry Carr – Revolutionary* (Toronto: Griffin House, 1969).

² Laurence K. Shook, *Étienne Gilson* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984).

Aeterni patris that urged Catholic universities to restore pride of place in Catholic philosophy and theology to Thomas Aquinas. That was why Father Carr had his eye on Étienne Gilson who, by 1926, was already working on a third revised edition of his book about Thomistic philosophy.³ After service in the First World War in the trenches at Verdun and two years in a German prisoner of war camp, Gilson had resumed his teaching post at the Catholic Université de Lille before being appointed to the Université de Strasbourg where, in conversations with two eminent historians—Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloc, who had formulated the innovative *Annales* approach to history—Gilson began to formulate his own innovative approach to studying and teaching the Middle Ages. In 1921 he was appointed to the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, the graduate division of the Université de Paris/Sorbonne.

Father Carr had taken no steps to contact Gilson when he was lecturing at Harvard and several other universities in 1926. But when he learned that Gilson had returned to Harvard in 1927, he sent two of St. Michael's priests to Boston to invite him to Toronto. In the ensuing conversations, Carr saw that Gilson had wider goals than simply the study of Thomas Aquinas,⁴ but he understood that what Gilson had in mind would benefit Catholic studies at St. Michael's. In brief, Gilson was convinced that no university, neither in Europe nor in North America, was training medievalists properly. They were instead producing specialists who knew a lot about a particular medieval author, actor, or incident, but their treatment of the wider milieu and culture of the Mid-

³ *Le Thomisme* (Strasbourg 1919; Paris 1922, 1927, 1944, 1947, 1965). A pre-publication English translation of the 1927 edition had appeared in 1925. Laurence K. Shook translated the 5th edition as *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House, 1956), and Armand A. Maurer translated the 6th and final edition as *Thomism: The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* (Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2002).

⁴ At that time Gilson was not so much a disciple of Aquinas as an avid researcher into the meaning of his philosophy.

dle Ages in which those persons lived lacked substance. He was convinced that, to study properly Abelard, Dante, Hildegard of Bingen, Gratian, Thomas Aquinas or any other medieval person one must also be familiar with the social and political events in the world in which their particular author or actor lived: the philosophy and theology in vogue where they were educated, the literature being written by others around them, the canon law and civil law that governed or restricted their lives, the liturgy they experienced in their worship of God, and the art and architecture of the places where they lived and travelled.

It became evident to Carr and the St. Michael's staff that Gilson's Catholic faith was a prominent element in his thought. For his part, Gilson was astonished to find that Father Carr and his staff listened with great interest to his proposal for a multidisciplinary approach to Medieval Studies. After returning to Toronto in 1927, Gilson wrote an article for the *University of Toronto Monthly* that is sufficiently important to quote here at some length:

As I left St. Michael's College in February 1927, my farewell words were the question, "Why not establish an Institute of Mediaeval Studies at the University of Toronto?" What a pleasure it was to ascertain, on my return in November of the same year, that the question "Why not?" had given place to the question, "How can it be done?"!

The central and dominant idea of the whole scheme is simply this: the *history of mediaeval thought is the key to the history of mediaeval civilization*,⁵ but there exists no scientific establishment in the whole world expressly devoted to the study of mediaeval thought and doctrine; therefore, one must be created. In their *Summae*, those vast edifices of learning, the thinkers of the Middle Ages deposited and set in order their religious beliefs, their philosophical ideas, their moral convictions, their scientific knowledge, and their political programs. Were it possible to gain a full understanding of these great works we should . . . reach the very heart of mediaeval civilization. Why, then, is the study of

⁵ My emphasis.

these doctrines not further advanced than it is in this age of ours? . . . It is simply because the research has not yet been organized to meet the exigencies of modern historical methods. To create this organization it is necessary . . . to set up an institute where the pioneer work . . . may be brought to a definite issue. The Institute of Mediaeval Studies in the University of Toronto [would aim] at providing that means of study; it is there that this pioneer work is to be undertaken.

Here, two or three men of goodwill are all that is required, provided they grasp the importance of the undertaking and make up their minds to see it through. . . . In St. Michael's College . . . I have met a group of philosophers whose high value is now well known to me: men brought up in [many of] the very traditions which they propose to study; eminently qualified therefore to find the true meaning of those traditions and to define their interpretations; men ready to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the success of the work . . . In writing these lines I am not influenced by any other considerations than the interests of those higher studies to which I have devoted my life. I make no plea either for my own university nor for my own country nor even for my own continent. I trust therefore that I shall be believed when I declare on my honour that I have never encountered either in Europe or America such a combination of favourable conditions to inspire me with confidence in the success of the undertaking [as I have at St. Michael's]. These are the reasons why, after having nurtured this idea during many long years, and having kept it to myself in more than one illustrious university of both the old world and the new, as soon as I grasped the spirit of St. Michael's I declared, "There is the spot! The Institute will be there or it will be nowhere."⁶

In that article Gilson went into some detail about the institute he envisioned as:

a model laboratory of the history of mediaeval civilization . . . [that] would consist of a library, surrounded by offices and classrooms where introductory courses and seminars to guide specialist research would take place. Courses would include fundamen-

⁶ Étienne Gilson, "St Michael's Establishes Institute of Mediaeval Studies," *The University of Toronto Monthly* XXVIII, no. 3 (December 1927): 119–120.

tals of Latin palaeography, medieval Latin, the study of historical sources, history, philosophical and theological doctrines, history of positive sciences, of political and social doctrines in the Middle Ages; study of the influence exerted by mediaeval systems of art, literature, and politics. Alongside these courses should develop a study of Jewish and Arabic thought and their relation to Western civilization.⁷

The article ends with this phrase: “Through the work of the Institute of Mediaeval Studies we shall be able to reach back to the sources of our spiritual traditions, to drink more deeply of their water, and to draw from them full life-giving strength.”⁸

Before leaving Toronto, Gilson wrote to his wife Thérèse: “The project interests me very much because it is the first time that my concept of the Middle Ages has taken form on a foundation that will make possible its surviving me.”⁹

The University of Toronto itself became directly involved in the project. In January 1928, its President, Sir Robert Falconer, wrote about it to Jacques Cavalier, director of higher education at the Ministry of Education in France. As a result, Gilson received permission to be absent from the Sorbonne every fall term in order to develop his work in Toronto—at least until he could be assured of its permanent establishment.¹⁰

Gilson resigned his post as visiting professor at Harvard but had no intention of leaving the Sorbonne. It was clearly understood on both sides of the Atlantic that, while the crux of Gilson’s work would be in Toronto, he would return every year to the Sorbonne for the spring semester. This had a double advantage: having one of its professors at the Sorbonne enhanced the status of St. Michael’s in Toronto while, at the

⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁹ Quoted in Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, 180.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

same time, it assured the reputation of the new Toronto Institute in Europe.

The official opening of the Institute of Mediaeval Studies took place on September 30, 1929. Gilson took the title of Director of Studies, a role that allowed him to focus on academic issues and leave administrative work to the President (Henry Carr). With Gerald Phelan as Librarian Gilson could devote time to creating a collection not only of printed sources but also of microfilming hundreds of manuscripts from European libraries that were essential to the wide-ranging curriculum of the Institute. The conviviality at St. Michael's College filled Gilson with enthusiasm. He wrote in a letter, "My work here is in a spirit of mutual affection that gives me great encouragement and pleasure."¹¹

History, however, quickly put Gilson's optimism to the test: just thirty days after the opening of the Institute, the disastrous stock market crash in November 1929 took place—with worldwide repercussions of the Great Depression. Although funds had been raised specifically to buy books, the resources to attract competent professors fell short. With the permission of the Basilian General Council, Gilson chose five promising young priests to study in Europe to strengthen the future cadre of the initial faculty.¹²

For its first seven years the Institute was housed in a large Victorian mansion on the campus of St. Michael's. By 1936, however, when

¹¹ Letter to Mme Thibaudeau (Montreal), 15 décembre 1929 (Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, 193). For a personal, informative reflection of a student at St. Michael's and the Institute in the late 1930s and early 1940s, see Armand Maurer, "Remembrance of Things Past," *Laudemus viros gloriosos: Essays in Honor of Armand Maurer, CSB*, ed. R. E. Houser (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 362–382.

¹² Vincent Kennedy was sent to Rome to study liturgy and ecclesiastical archaeology; Alex Denomy to Harvard for vernacular literature; Terence McLaughlin to Strasbourg for canon law; George Flahiff to the École des Chartes in Paris for diplomatics; and J. Reginald O'Donnell to Krakow for palaeography. When the Second World War was finished he sent five other Basilian priests to study in Cambridge and Paris, with three of them returning to complete their doctorates at universities in North America: Joseph Wey, Ambrose Raftis, Armand Maurer, Walter Principe, and Michael Sheehan.

the Institute was coming into full development, the north wing of a newly constructed student residence had been fitted out to Gilson's specifications. He wrote to one of his friends in Montreal that his dream had come true. Indeed, throughout the 1930s, the number of student registrations increased steadily despite (or perhaps because of) Gilson's stringent curriculum specifications. In addition to becoming proficient in medieval Latin and palaeography, candidates for the Licence in Mediaeval Studies were required to take introductory courses (and to pass exams) in philosophy, theology, history, archaeology, law, liturgy, vernacular literature, and the history of art. A great advantage for the students was that, while qualifying for the Institute's Licence, they could also apply their Institute course credits towards the M.A. and Ph.D. at the University of Toronto.

Gilson was also taking steps to have the Institute achieve pontifical status. He saw that this would not only raise the Institute in the eyes of Catholic academics but would also be an advantage for graduates finding positions in Catholic universities. With the support of every bishop in Canada and an influential cardinal in Rome, the unique pontifical status for an Institute of Mediaeval Studies was approved by Pope Pius XI and implemented by Pope Pius XII on October 18, 1939.

History again intervened. Just six weeks prior to its gaining pontifical status, Western European nations had responded to Adolf Hitler's invasion of Poland with a declaration of war against Germany. As a British dominion, Canada entered the alliance immediately, and the United States followed two years later in December 1941. The wartime draft in both Canada and the USA had dire consequences for enrollment at St. Michael's, which was at that time an all-male college; but the Institute's enrollment remained more steady because draft-exempt members of religious orders who would previously have been sent to study in European universities came instead to the Institute, a significant num-

ber of whom went on to teach and to hold administrative positions in North American universities.

During the war, Gilson remained in occupied Paris teaching at the Collège de France and continuing his rigorous pace of research and publication.¹³ Mail between occupied France and Canada had been impossible during the war; but, after the liberation of Paris in August 1944, Gilson wrote to Gerald Phelan, president of the Institute, of his desire to remain faithful to Toronto “as long as God [may] give me enough strength to do an honest job.”¹⁴ He continued to lecture and direct seminars all through the 1950s and into the 1960s. They are remembered as lively, brilliant, but demanding sessions that always started and ended exactly on the minute. In the late 1960s, however, Gilson’s advancing age limited his visits to Toronto to a few weeks each year, during which he gave public lectures. The last of these, three lectures “In Quest of Species,” was delivered in January 1972.¹⁵ Retired to his beloved province of Burgundy, he died in September 1978 at the age of ninety-four.

PIMS continued to flourish in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. It attracted outstanding lay professors like Anton Pegis, Gerhard Ladner, Peter Brieger, Michael Gough, Richard Schoeck, Jocelyn Hillgarth, James Reilly, Brian Stock, Sheila Campbell, Stephen Dumont, Roger Reynolds, Virginia Brown, Deborah Black, John Magee, and Mark Meyerson. Five diocesan priests—Gerald Phelan, Joseph Ryan, E-

¹³ His published books and articles number 935 (Margaret McGrath, *Étienne Gilson: A Bibliography / Une bibliographie* [Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1982]).

¹⁴ Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, 251.

¹⁵ In the summer of that year he composed three lectures “In Quest of Matter” to complement the lectures on Species, but he was unable to travel to deliver them in Toronto. All six lectures were eventually published together with an English translation of a talk given to students in Montréal in 1963, “The Education of a Philosopher,” as *Three Quests in Philosophy*, ed. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2008).

douard Jauneau, Edward Synan, and Christopher Ryan—taught at PIMS for a total between them of nearly a hundred years. The Institute continued to rely heavily, however, on members of religious orders: Frances Nims, a Loretto Sister; Ignatius Eschmann, James Weisheipl, Osmund Lewry, Leonard Boyle, and Lawrence Dewan, Dominicans; Joseph Owens, Redemptorist; Nikolaus Häring Palatine Father from Trier; Edmund Colledge, Augustinian, from Liverpool. But the largest contingent continued to be drawn from the Basilian Fathers: Joseph Muckle, George Flahiff, Joseph Wey, Reginald O'Donnell, Terence McLaughlin, Vincent Kennedy, Alexander Denomy, Laurence Shook, Armand Maurer, Ambrose Raftis, Walter Principe, Michael Sheehan, Robert Crooker, Robert Sinkewicz, John Quinn, and Martin Dimnik. Other Basilians and lay staff played important but less public roles as registrars, librarians, and editors in the Department of Publications.

For twenty-five years, Gilson's Pontifical Institute had been the only institution in the world devoted exclusively to the study of the Middle Ages.¹⁶ Starting in the 1950s, other universities began to create "centres" dealing with the Middle Ages; but none of them followed the Gilsonian multidisciplinary curriculum required at PIMS. In 1964 the University of Toronto founded its own Centre for Mediaeval Studies, relying for much of its instruction on Institute Fellows. Toronto's Centre held to the Institute's insistence on exceptional skill in Latin; but it has encouraged students to work primarily in a specific department rather than undertake the Gilsonian curriculum. For thirty years a close cooperation between PIMS and the Centre enhanced the reputation of Toronto and attracted the largest number of students in Mediaeval Studies in the world.

¹⁶ The nearest exception is the *École Nationale des Chartes* in Paris. Although it preceded PIMS by several decades, its purview extends into modern history.

In the 1980s, however, when the contingent of teaching Fellows reached twenty, financial difficulties at PIMS began to affect its possibility to continue as it had. The major cause of this was the decline in the recruitment of members of religious orders who had always worked for minimal salaries. The consequent need to find competitive salaries for the increasing number of lay faculty was too great a burden on the Institute's shrinking endowment. In an arrangement with the provost of the University of Toronto in 1994–1995, five lay Fellows of the Institute were absorbed into the University's departments. At that same time, the Director of the Centre for Medieval Studies took steps to withdraw U of T credit for the courses offered by the Institute. With that move Gilson's hope that his unique approach to training medievalists would survive him was relegated to history.

In 1996, the new administration of Father James McConica developed an important relationship with the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation of New York. It provided the initial funds for Fellowships that allow young postdoctoral scholars to participate in a program of research and seminars to enhance their academic profile. Father McConica's successor, Richard Alway, has significantly strengthened the Institute's endowment and has incorporated academics with pensions or salaries from other institutions to participate in PIMS programs as Associate Fellows or as full voting Fellows.

In 2005, because the Basilian Fathers had relinquished ownership and control of St. Michael's to a lay board of governors, a perceived canonical conflict ruled that the Apostolic Constitution *Sapientia christiana* under which the Pontifical Institute operated made it necessary to separate canonically from the University of St. Michael's College, which operated under the Constitution *Ex corde ecclesiae*. The President of St. Michael's and the Praeses of PIMS signed an agreement to continue to work as closely as possible, but the change severed the Institute's official ties with the University of Toronto that had existed

since 1929. (That infelicitous separation was remedied in 2019 when all three institutions—the University of Toronto, the University of St. Michael's College, and the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies—signed a new working Memorandum of Agreement.)

As another part of redefining its mission, the Institute has developed its summer Program in Manuscript Studies with instruction in palaeography, codicology, diplomatics, and text editing. The program, which alternates its venue between Toronto and Rome, is permanently endowed. The Institute also maintains the quality of its renowned library that continues to attract researchers from every province in Canada, from many American universities, and from Europe. The Department of Publications, known for its high standards of editing, publishes about ten books each year. Its scholarly journal, *Mediaeval Studies*, is now in its eighty-third year of publication.

In sum, Gilson's project of a multidisciplinary teaching curriculum survived him for only fifteen years; but creative innovations of the last two decades have allowed the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies to continue to play a major role in the medieval enterprise in Toronto and far beyond.



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Different from Other Medieval Programs**

SUMMARY

Etienne Gilson was convinced that a multi-disciplinary core curriculum was essential to educate scholars properly about the Middle Ages. Having failed to interest universities on both sides of the Atlantic in his vision, he was elated in 1927 to find that the priests at St. Michael's College in the University of Toronto were eager to implement his approach. Although enrollment was hindered by both the Great Depression of the 1930s and the subsequent Second World War, Gilson's Institute of Mediaeval Studies ("Pontifical" since 1939) produced a significant number of medievalists who had immersed

themselves in the full Gilsonian curriculum: palaeography, sources of history, philosophy, theology, medieval science, law, art, and literature. For three decades PIMS was the only institution devoted exclusively to mediaeval studies. In the post-War era, however, a number of universities founded centres for medieval studies, but they reverted to the pre-Gilsonian concentration on specialization in one discipline. The sheer number of those programs, together with financial difficulties at PIMS, relegated Gilson's dream of a multidisciplinary curriculum at PIMS to history. The Pontifical Institute has successfully implemented a smaller program of Manuscript Studies, and its library continues to attract scholars from both North America and Europe.

KEYWORDS

Étienne Gilson, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, PIMS, philosophical education, mediaeval studies.

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