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Robert M. Kingdon: A Legacy of Learning

Jeffrey R. Watt

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Robert McCune Kingdon, the preeminent American scholar on the French Reformation, passed away on December 3, 2010 in Madison, Wisconsin. Born in Chicago on December 29, 1927, Kingdon spent most of his childhood in Hawaii. After graduating from Oberlin College in 1949, he pursued graduate studies in European history at Columbia University where he worked under the direction of Garrett Mattingly and received his doctorate in 1955. After teaching at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and the University of Iowa, Kingdon accepted an appointment at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1965 and taught there until 1998, when he retired as Hildale Professor of History.

Throughout his academic career, Kingdon was interested in examining the interplay among religious, political, and social forces, and an important thread that runs throughout his scholarship is that the Reformation was a revolutionary movement. He was a pioneer among American historians of the Reformation by stressing the need of going to the archives. Shortly after completing his doctorate, Kingdon published a revised version of his dissertation, *Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion in France, 1555-1563* (Droz, 1956; 50th anniversary edition, 2007), through which he demonstrated the vitally important role that Geneva played in the French Wars of Religion and in the propagation of the Reformed faith. Writing during the Cold War, Kingdon likened sixteenth-century Geneva to Moscow of the 1950s, as both cities reput-

edly served as headquarters for revolutionary movements that inspired and assisted many distant congregations or cells. Although Kingdon himself later conceded that he may have overstated such analogies, this book nonetheless has been viewed for over a half century as a masterpiece, a truly path-breaking piece of scholarship. With this book, Kingdon was in the vanguard in putting “religion back into the Wars of Religion.” Prior to this book’s appearance, the relatively meager scholarship on these wars tended to be rather dismissive of the role played by religion, stressing instead political, dynastic, and social issues as the “true” origins of the conflicts. On the basis of meticulous archival research, Kingdon showed Geneva’s key role in spreading the Reformed faith by disseminating printed propaganda, providing loans and arms, and, most important, training and dispatching pastors to establish new congregations or to serve Reformed communities that already existed. He further explored these themes in another important monograph which covered the years after the death of Calvin, *Geneva and the Consolidation of the French Protestant Movement, 1564-1571* (Droz and Wisconsin, 1967). In these and other works, Kingdon argued that Geneva’s influence extended beyond France to places such as Scotland, the Netherlands, Bohemia, Hungary and parts of the Holy Roman Empire. More recent work has tended to temper the degree of Geneva’s influence in areas such as the Netherlands, but Kingdon’s role in stimulating research on international Calvinism cannot be exaggerated.

In stressing the revolutionary nature of the Reformation, Kingdon argued that Reformed Protestantism effected dramatic changes in the areas of worship,

church structure, and political theory. Among the questions that he considered were the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre's impact on resistance theory and the rejection of absolute monarchy, an interest that prompted him to publish editions of important works on political theory, such as Théodore de Bèze's *Du droit des magistrats* (Droz, 1971). He also authored the provocative *Myths about the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacres, 1572-1576* (Harvard, 1988), which examines Protestant polemical literature that publicized the martyrdom of countless Huguenots and called for political change.

Himself a liberal Protestant, Kingdon definitely exhibited a strong Calvinist work ethic in his own scholarship. He was a very prolific author who eventually published a total of seven monographs, thirteen edited volumes, and over a hundred scholarly articles and book chapters. A quarter century ago, I asked Professor Kingdon which of his publications he considered his greatest contribution. Without hesitation he replied that his various editions of primary sources were his most important scholarly legacy because they could serve as the basis of research for many other historians. Well aware of the goldmine of information available in the Genevan state archives, Kingdon was determined to make that material more readily available. He co-edited the first two volumes of the *Registres de la Compagnie des Pasteurs de Genève au temps de Calvin* (Droz, 1962-1964), sources which he had used so adroitly in his first monograph. Already in the 1960s, Kingdon also had a vision of transcribing and publishing editions of the volumes of the Genevan Consistory, an institution that was entrusted with the enforcement of morality in Geneva. The Consistory was created and dominated by Calvin and served as a model for similar institutions wherever Reformed Protestantism took hold. Kingdon was aware that the registers of the Consistory were of inestimable value to historians because of the light they could shed on, among other things, popular culture and everyday life, the Reformed faith and discipline, and Calvin as pastor (rather than as theologian). Though quite rich, these records had received scant attention because the handwritten texts are quite difficult to read. Sixteenth-

century French handwriting in general is not easy to decipher, but the Consistory records are particularly challenging because they were written in great haste during the weekly meetings; the scribe did not subsequently rewrite a clean copy. Fortunately for Reformation specialists, Kingdon secured funding, much of it from his own resources, and assembled a team of scholars, including most notably the principal editors, Isabella M. Watt and Thomas A. Lambert, to transcribe and prepare for publication these registers. The first six volumes of these registers, *Registres du Consistoire de Genève au temps de Calvin, 1542-1552* (Droz, 1996-2012), were published under Kingdon's direction, and the current editors of this project aspire to publish the remaining fifteen volumes of registers that date from Calvin's ministry.

In *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin's Geneva* (Harvard, 1995), Kingdon provided an excellent example of the effective use of the Consistory records. He examined in this work some of the more sensational cases of divorce at the time of Calvin—including that of his own brother, Antoine—and showed that the disciplinary and pastoral roles of the Consistory were tightly intertwined. In his last publication (with Thomas A. Lambert), *Reforming Geneva: Discipline, Faith and Anger in Calvin's Geneva*, published posthumously by Droz in 2012, Kingdon analyzed the key role that the Consistory played in introducing change in a variety of areas: the worship service, the religious education of the laity, the control of marriage and sexuality, and the settling of quarrels. He found that although the Consistory was a very intrusive institution, it at times resembled more a counseling service than a tribunal. To be sure, this was a *mandatory* counseling service endowed with teeth to enforce its recommendations, and, according to Kingdon, it enjoyed considerable success in bringing about changes in the behavior of Genevans.

The year that Robert Kingdon spent doing archival research for his dissertation (1951-1952) marked the beginning of his very strong ties to Geneva that endured for the rest of his life. While a dissertator in Geneva, Kingdon had the good fortune of meeting Eugénie Droz, an editor and founder of the *Librai-*

rie Droz. Although the Librairie was very highly regarded in the French-speaking world for its publication of *livres d'érudition*, at that time it was still largely unknown in North America. Eugénie Droz told Kingdon that she was interested in publishing his dissertation; she was of course quite impressed with the high quality of his scholarship, but she no doubt also hoped that American scholars would start considering Droz as a good venue for their publications. *Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion* was in fact the first monograph in English that Droz published, and subsequently Droz became a publisher of choice for many American scholars. As the years went by, the directorship of the Librairie passed from Eugénie Droz to Alain Dufour and then to Max Engammare, but Kingdon's close association with that press remained constant; it was most fitting that his last book, like his first, was published by Droz. Over the course of almost sixty years, Robert Kingdon formed lasting personal and professional connections with professors, archivists, and independent scholars in Geneva which helped forge close bonds between Swiss and American scholars. In May 1986, on the 450th anniversary of the city's conversion to Protestantism, the University of Geneva bestowed upon Robert Kingdon a Doctorate *Honoris Causa* in recognition of his brilliant contributions to scholarship on the Reformation in Geneva. I had the good fortune of attending that ceremony in the cathedral of Saint-Pierre and know that it absolutely meant the world to him; several days after receiving the honor, he described himself as still "floating on air."

During his long distinguished career, Robert Kingdon received numerous other awards and honors. He was awarded fellowships by the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Philosophical Society, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in Germany. At the University of Wisconsin, Kingdon served for a dozen years (1975-1987) as director of the Institute for Research in the Humanities, the oldest such institute at an American university. He served as president of both the Society for Ref-

ormation Research (1970-1971) and the American Society of Church History (1980). Kingdon was also instrumental in founding the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference and served for many years as editor of the journal affiliated with it, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*. He helped ensure that both the conference and the SCJ were important fora for the work of both well-established and budding scholars. Like many of my peers, I presented my first paper at the SCSC and published my first article in the SCJ, and I benefited enormously from the encouragement and constructive criticism from senior scholars associated with both the conference and the journal.

The legacy of Robert Kingdon extends through the scholarship of his many students. He was an exemplary mentor, and one of his most impressive accomplishments was directing a huge number of dissertations. From the 1960s through the late 1990s, Professor Kingdon directed to completion 37 dissertations, 5 at the University of Iowa and 32 at the University of Wisconsin. That almost certainly is the most ever directed by any scholar of the Reformation, and it is rare to find historians in any field who have directed so many dissertations. Even more remarkable than the sheer number of theses is the wide range of topics that his students chose to study. In an era of increasing specialization, Robert Kingdon's interests remained remarkably broad, a characteristic that is aptly seen in the work of his many protégés. While some historians are known to impose topics on their doctoral students, Professor Kingdon gave his students great latitude in the selection of dissertation topics. Some of his students, including me, chose topics that pertained to the Reformed movement in French-speaking Europe, the focus of so much of Kingdon's own research. Others, however, conducted research that was far removed from Calvin's Geneva. Amazingly, doctoral students who wrote under his direction conducted dissertation research in Switzerland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and England, and studied aspects of the Lutheran, Catholic, Radical, Anglican, and Calvinist and Zwinglian Reformations. Their various interests included intellectual, social, cultural, political, and women's

history; and several former Kingdon students identify themselves more broadly as specialists of early modern Europe rather than as Reformation scholars. Graduate studies with Robert Kingdon served as a very effective springboard to successful academic careers. Notwithstanding the very poor job market in North America since the early 1970s, his students enjoyed considerable success in finding employment in academia, ample testimony to the high standards that had to be met before Professor Kingdon put his signature on a dissertation. Collectively, his former students have authored a very large body of scholarship and have left their own mark on early modern history.

Robert Kingdon is survived by four siblings and ten nieces and nephews. He is deeply missed by them and by a legion of students, colleagues, and friends.