Prescott Dunbar

During my last year at Louisanna State University at Baton Rouge, I think in the early fall, a tall svelte blonde entered my office and introduced himself as Prestcott Dunbar the Third, who had gotten his Batchelor's degree at the University of the South of...and then earned a law degree at LSU, but he wasn't happy practicing law. He was from a very old family from Louisanna, one of the early Anglo settlers there who had also intermarried with some of the Spanish aristocrats, and he knew French very well but his Latin wasn't too strong. He said that he wanted to do a master's thesis with me in medieval history. He also introduced me to his father, his mother having been dead for some time, who was practicing law in Baton Rouge, and who didn't object to his son giving up law and trying to enter academe. I found his father very pleasant. I had dinner with him and liked him. So I told Scotty, look, I had wanted to study the history of the Normans in Sicily, ever since I was bewitched by them as a Freshman at Princeton by reading the works of Charles Homer-Haskins, "The Normans in European History" and Joseph Strayer, Haskins' best student, taught me medieval history at Princeton and assigned Haskins' book, and like Haskins, Strayer also worked on Normandy and also French royal taxation, all of which had intrigued me. So I left Princeton at the end of my sophomore year having skipped the Freshman year and the special program in humanities and the and went away to the army for three years. When I got out, I graduated from the University of Tennessee and then studied at Cornell with Mommsen, who of course got
me into the history of the investiture controversy and who sent me to Naples to study but when I got back Mommsen had committed suicide and I worked with Edward Whiting-Fox and began translating Mark Block’s “Feudal System” but then Karl Morrison, a fellow student, came back from Europe and pointed out that someone had already translated into English, so it had lain around for more than twenty years untranslated. I fell out with Mommsen’s successor Brian Tenny and was going to go to Hopkins but Tenny died after accepting me and so I went back to Princeton and when I did I called on Ernst Canolbridge, who’d become Mommsen’s bosom buddy when Mommsen had been at Princeton and Canolbridge said, “look Bill you mustn’t try to work in the Norman period because should have to learn Arabic which is very difficult, as well as Greek and since you say you want to get out of the PhD quickly why don’t you work on the Angevin period in Naples and Sicily because then you wouldn’t have to know Arabic or Greek and besides Count …or Prince…had just reassembled the Neapolitan archives which had been destroyed by the Nazis.” So I took Canolbridge’s advice and produced a thesis about the Sicilian Investiture and Taxation under Charles Anjou which LSU had wanted me to publish just at this time but I stupidly turned them down because Princeton had a vile head of their Press who promised three people she was going to publish their work and then published only one and eventually turned mine down, and it never came out as a book but it was published as articles. So I got Scotty to translate in the Monte Casinos …probably the main contemporary source for the Norman in South Italy and Sicily. The Latin original had been lost but it had been translated into old French early in the 14th century, so Scotty translated it and came back for his defense after he had moved to the University of Missouri. But then when I came to Boston Scotty got admitted to Harvard,
using not only my strong recommendations, but also this wonderful translation he had done, he’d been helped by the head of the French Department at LSU who was a friend of the family and him. He ended up working with John Constable who was the President of Radcliffe, working on the Enclosure movement in Great Britain from the 15th to the 19th century and as Giles told me, Scotty was doing very well until he married Sarah. Sarah was one of the three talented sisters and I went to their engagement and I didn’t go the big party at the Ritz because I didn’t have any tails but Johns Constable told me that Scotty, after he married Sarah, had really become too busy to continue his PhD work and he and Sarah have been married ever since with two lovely sons and they have a great mansion in the garden district of New Orleans, with an original by Sergeant beautifully done and a lovely place in Chatham, the most elegant town in Cape Cod, where they go back and forth, winter and summer, where they live a life of great interest and I guess he helps her manage her fortune. But when we became very friendly again, about ten years ago, when he was at Chatham visiting him, I said Scotty we should publish your book. So we got Donald Stone, the retired head of Romantic studies at Harvard to improve the translation and I tried to write an introduction and I arranged for Widenfellow-Nicholls to publish it and they found my introduction much too out of date and brief, they wanted a detailed thing and Scotty was unavailable all that summer when I was trying to work with it. I don’t know why he didn’t contact me it was very rude and it was very wasteful because I discovered I didn’t want to do the kind of scholarly introduction they wanted. So I left the project and Scotty and I parted waves. I was enraged that he hadn’t returned my calls for months and because I wasted a summer of my life but eventually it came out a year or two ago and it’s a wonderful book, with a nice and scholarly introduction by
some Englishman whom they got to replace me. I did resent that what had begun as a masters at LSU but didn’t mentioned my name but still, nevertheless, he’s one of my students. In the meantime he’d written a history of the New Orleans Delgado Art Museum and that LSU had published. So now he has two books to his credit but one he owed really to me and I thought that it wasn’t gracious that he hadn’t mentioned that I had planned the idea and got it going and helped later in getting a publisher and a person to improve his translation.