

Prof Patrick Collinson celebrated his eightieth birthday on 5 September 2009

PROFESSOR PATRICK COLLINSON

A courteous tradition of this society is the invitation from the Master which reaches any Fellow who manages to stay the right way up until the grand old age of eighty to write his own obituary: a kind of Desert Island Disks without the music and, a prolepsis of mortality, since those who go on to make it past ninety, the Tressillian Nicholases and Andrew Huxleys of this world, are exceptions to prove a morbid general rule. Peter Laslett, in what he had to say on such an occasion as this, suggested that these celebrations of longevity should nowadays be postponed to the ninetieth birthday, an event which Peter himself, for all his unrivalled knowledge of the processes of ageing, never lived to see. Undertakers, like ambulance-chasing lawyers, should be gathered at the door of the Combination Room on evenings such as this.

To quote the New Testament, I was a stranger and you took me in. (I just love the ambiguity of those words, as rendered in our English Bibles.) When I came back to Cambridge in 1988, after an absence of thirty-six years, I was not quite a stranger, since I had spent the years from 1949 to 1952 as an undergraduate at Pembroke. But I was a stranger to Trinity. When I found myself occupying one half of a seat on a train from King's Cross with my old captain of boats, James Crowden, by then Lord Lieutenant of the county, somewhat larger than life, requiring the other one-and-a-half seats, I confessed to being unable to go down to the river to cheer on First and Third. Of course, said James, you're one of us.

But Trinity is not like the villages in Derbyshire and Devonshire which I have inhabited for the past fifteen years, where, unless the churchyard is full of the bones of your ancestors, you will always be a stranger. From the beginning I have felt at home in Trinity, although I cannot adorn my memories with such names as Thomson, Butler, Kitson Clark, and Gallagher. The best that I can manage is to claim that my wife's grandmother was one of the sisters of the first wife of Leonard Huxley, so that Aldous and Julian Huxley were my father-in-law's first cousins, Andrew Huxley too a sort of cousin through Leonard Huxley's second marriage. And G.M. Trevelyan, Master and Regius Professor, was married to another cousin, the daughter of the novelist and antisuffragette, Mrs Humphrey Ward, my wife's great-aunt. Well, that's enough name-dropping, and these are my borrowed Holy and Undivided credentials, which I rather lamely explained to the second Lord Adrian when he kindly offered me a Fellowship at Pembroke, at a time when I was already committed to Trinity. No need to go on about it, wrote that son of the Lodge, there are certain advantages to being a Fellow of Trinity.

As indeed there are. At his inauguration, President John F. Kennedy famously said: ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country. By the same token, Andrew Huxley, at my admission to the Fellowship, might well have said, ask not what Trinity can do for you but what you can do for Trinity. Trinity has done a great deal for me. But as for what I have done for Trinity, that would make for a very short speech indeed.

But let me compress into a space which will not try your patience beyond endurance this 'History of a History Man,' the full story of which can be accessed on the College website, and between hard covers of a book which will presently arrive in the Wren Library. It is the somewhat picaresque chronicle of a wandering scholar in four continents. And when I reached my fortieth birthday I 1969 I became a professor,

so that I find I have been Professor Collinson for exactly half my lifespan. That is not something which I had expected. It's true that as a little boy I longed to be famous. As we drove out of North London towards Ipswich we would pass a small factory in Walthamstow which proudly proclaimed its product to be COLLINSONS SCREWS. So there were some Collinsons who had made it. But after some years the 'S' dropped off Collinsons, which left a message which was either flattering or defamatory. Soon the factory itself was demolished. I would never be famous.

My Scottish mother was a Fifer from the East Neuk, the eighth of the ten children of an Anstruther fishbuyer who took his own life when she was barely eight years old, leaving the family destitute. Thwarted in her ambition to go to university, which she later fulfilled vicariously through me, she worked for one of those banks-cum-legal-firms you find in Scotland, studied law books in the wee hours of the morning, and became the first woman lawyer in Scotland. That is a claim which Tony Weir contests in the name of his own mother, and which Aneurin Bevan, if still alive, might challenge on behalf of his wife, Jenny Lee. But whatever the rights and wrongs of that, instead of practising law, my mother became a missionary in Algeria, which soon led to marriage to my father, an evangelical Quaker who had given up his gents outfitter business in Bury St Edmunds to devote himself to missionary work. Daddy was a middle-aged widower with four children who needed a mother. I am not sure that he needed me. Do you know about stepmothers? I asked my mother in the bath, at the age of five. They're wicked. I don't know, said my mother, after all I'm your sister Hilda's stepmother. Oh, I said, I see. Those wicked stepmothers were the ones who didn't love the Lord Jesus. I grew up in an evangelical hothouse where the Second Coming was expected daily, from birth destined to become a missionary to the Muslim World, my parents' life work. Well, that didn't happen, although my life has often intersected with Islam, especially in my five years in the Sudan. I once addressed an entire secondary school, the largest in the country, students and teachers, all Muslims, gathered in a palm-tree fringed courtyard under a full moon, on, can you believe it, the existence of God. If only, the headmaster said, if only you had read the Holy Quran (well, I had) all the questions put to you tonight would have been answered.

A series of accidents, including a fatal car crash at Brough on the A66, which brought my father to new responsibilities in London, and then World War Two, sent me hither and thither: from my birthplace, Ipswich, to Islington; when my parents were overseas to a Suffolk farm, the happiest of my childhood places; on to boarding school in the Weald of Kent; back to London in good time for the Blitz; then as an evacuee to Huntingdon; and thence to the fens of Cambridgeshire and to the King's School, Ely. Wartime Ely did its best to give me some sort of education (but the only musical instrument you could learn was the piano, the only modern language French, the only sciences Chemistry and Physics, no Biology). I remain poorly educated. And yet, but for Ely, I would never have made it to Cambridge. And my history teachers were excellent, and influential.

However at that time my only and entirely self-induced ambition was to become a marine biologist, almost before there were such things. I may still know more about fishes and birds than about history. But my performance in Maths in the old School Certificate was so woeful that I was advised, and in those days you took such advice without question, that I should devote myself to subjects like History. I suppose I am not the only wholly innumerate Fellow of Trinity to have participated in the election of mathematical Title As, future Fields Medallists.

Reading History at Pembroke I was not very well taught, and I can't in all fairness attribute any enthusiasm I have for the subject to those responsible. My first supervisor, Sir John Hrothgar Habakkuk, left Cambridge for Oxford at the end of my first year and he was not immediately replaced. I shall never forget his helpful comment on the first paragraph of my very first essay. 'Well, that's all dead wood, isn't it.' (In later years, Habbakuk, was happy to have helped to nurture a future Regius.) To be honest, history took fourth place in my life. First was religion (I was a deeply committed member of CICCUC). Then came rowing, followed by climbing. Doing my two years National Service in the RAF I had discovered the hills for the first time, and there was no looking back. I can remember going to St John's in my first week in Cambridge to be enrolled in the CUMC by its then president, Chris Brasher. I used to climb with that notable mathematician Frank Adams of this College, and when I arrived here in 1988 we had a nostalgic conversation about the old days, a matter of weeks before Frank was so tragically killed, driving, not climbing.

At the end of my first year I rowed at Henley, but a year later chose to walk across Lapland from west to east rather than return for the Royal Regatta. At a post office in the middle of the tundra there awaited a fat envelope from home, full of cuttings from the *Daily Telegraph*. Pembroke had won one-third of all the then available trophies at Henley. I could only think that if I'd been stroking the eight it wouldn't have happened.

In my third year I began to take history more seriously. I shared a small Special Subject Class taught by Norman Sykes, then Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History and about to succeed my wife's uncle as Dean of Winchester. Other members of the class included David Shepherd, the cricketer and later Bishop of Liverpool, and John Elliott, like me destined to become a Regius.

Between, 1952 and 1988 a few things happened, as they are inclined to do. I decided to go on with history, did my Ph.D. research in London, and worked harder than at any other time, before or since. My subject was Elizabethan Puritanism and my supervisor the then ranking Elizabethan historian, J.E. Neale. Neale was a dreadful supervisor. He allowed me to submit a thesis of about half a million words, which led the University of London to introduce for the first time a limit of 80,000 words. I was Sir John Neale's blue-eyed boy, which didn't help when I was interviewed for assistant lectureships by half the universities in the country, for Neale was much hated. I didn't help myself very much. Asked by Liverpool, by Geoffrey Barraclough, at that time a leading medievalist and historian of Germany, what my method was, I didn't know what to say. Method was not a word much used in the severely empirical London Tudor school. So I said that my method was to look at everything which seemed to have any bearing on my subject. (I think that that would still be my answer.) So the University of Khartoum it had to be, the equivalent of 'Go out and govern New South Wales.' I think that Neale said that it had been nice knowing me. But he would prove very helpful in later years, assisting me in the publication of my first two books.

I got to Khartoum in September 1956, just in time for Suez, which was interesting. In Khartoum there was a nightclub, the Gordon Cabaret, where well-built Hungarian Women kicked up thighs sheathed in tight black boots. It was clear that they had reached the end of the line, and so, we thought, had we. After all, General Gordon had gone to Khartoum on a one-way ticket. At this juncture I offered myself for ordination in the Church of England, went through the hoops, and was due to start at Ridley Hall in 1960. But told that my role in life would probably be to teach church history in a

seminary, I decided to keep my collar the right way round. Ironically, my route back into English academic life was via a lectureship in Ecclesiastical History at King's College, London.

I brought back from the Sudan, and from Ethiopia, a country with which I had fallen deeply in love, many precious memories, and an even more precious wife, whom I had met and married in Khartoum, fifty years ago next year. For our honeymoon, I took Liz to Ethiopia, where our hairy travels coincided with an abortive rising against the Emperor Haile Selassie. At one point we found ourselves flying as the only passengers on a plane which had just delivered for burial the body of a murdered provincial governor, son of an earlier emperor who had been killed in battle by the Sudanese in 1884. Now such things don't happen to you in Birmingham, where I would have spent those years if I had not messed up another interview.

The years at King's were happy and fruitful. My students included a certain Desmond Tutu. (I can count two archbishops among my former students, Tutu of Cape Town and Peter Jenson of Sydney – chalk and cheese.) I published my first big book: the subject, of course, Puritanism. A.L. Rowse reviewed it in twelve lines of *The English Historical Review*: 'It is well known that Mr Collinson has been working for some time on this thoroughly rebarbative topic, and we must all be grateful that he has finally got it off his chest.' Fortunately Hugh Trevor-Roper was rather more enthusiastic, Christopher Hill too. In those London years we managed to generate four very remarkable children, three of them here tonight, with their partners, and with six representatives of our (so far) nine grandchildren.

It was time to move on, but again the universities which interviewed me for a chair were not impressed. You'll get no promotion this side of the ocean. So now it really was New South Wales, which was called upon to perform the role which Khartoum had played years before. My remarkable mother, now aged seventy-three, said, go to Australia and I'll come with you. It will be the solution to your problems and to mine. Well, all that happened. My wife claims she was not even consulted by her Taliban husband. So there I was, a professor, and, soon, head of department, one of the biggest and best history departments in the world, teaching some of the ablest students I would ever know, among them John Gascoigne, later an authority on our own Isaac Barrow.

But then it all went, as they say, pear-shaped, at least for me, and I fear, for a few years, for the cause of History at Sydney. Postmodernism was spreading like a fungus. My mother had died, otherwise we would have stayed. So 1976 found us back in England, at the University of Kent at Canterbury. At first it seemed to have been a bad mistake to have returned to Jim Callaghan's Crisis, What Crisis? Britain. We had left behind not only our comfortable Sydney life, but a weekend seaside cottage in Patonga, the most sublime place in all of New South Wales, which is almost to say, on earth. What birds! What fishing! My salary at Canterbury was less than half what it has been in Sydney, in real terms. But then I was invited to deliver the Ford Lectures in Oxford, which for any historian of these islands is an invitation to the top table. And that soon led to election to the Fellowship of the British Academy, a table where I have now sat for almost thirty years.

1980 and 1981 were years we won't soon forget. In 1980 I managed to jump out of a moving train and lost a foot, while gaining something like the price of a house in insurance money. (If my name were Dostoevsky, I might say that I sold my left foot to pay for my children's higher education.) And then in 1981 our elder son Andrew was found to be suffering from a little-known cancer, a rare non-Hodgkins lymphoma from which it was not certain he would recover. (But he did, and is now a consultant

paediatrician with three children of his own, all here tonight, with their mother.) We had discussed the problem with Andrew's oncologist at University College Hospital on our way to Cambridge, where I was to give the first of a course of Birkbeck Lectures. Not a comfortable day. We were put up in Trinity at the Lodge, and Alan Hodgkin, who knew about such things, could not have been more supportive. Chris Morley, as Senior Tutor, was helpful too. That was our first taste of Trinity kindness.

But then things went pear-shaped all over again, not just for me and for Canterbury but for most universities, in the wake of what were called Maggie Thatcher's 'savage cuts.' (We await David Cameron's no less savage cuts.) At Kent we had to lose a certain number of colleagues. One murder, two suicides, and a death from natural causes (well, from cigarettes actually) didn't quite meet our target. And so it was, to help the Thatcherite agenda, that I applied for the chair of Modern History at Sheffield, and, wonder of wonders, conducted an interview which landed the job. The Vice-Chancellor of Kent assured me that I would be doing my colleagues the greatest of favours by accepting and leaving, so that is what I did.

I was happy at Sheffield, for all that much of my time as head of department was spent in deciding whether we should hang on to Physics or to Earth Sciences, and how to dispose decently of our Ancient Historians. I had not escaped from Thatcherism. (When I arrived in Cambridge I was surprised to learn that you thought that you had problems.) I had some excellent colleagues, and some very good students. As hillwalkers we began to relish the Peak District, which lies just outside Sheffield's back door.

But then a fat envelope hit the doormat: a letter from 10 Downing Street inviting me to become the next Regius Professor of Modern History in this place. Mrs Thatcher had intervened again. I was stunned. If it had been then, as it is now, a matter of making an application, it would never have occurred to me to do so. I was not in that league. My immediate predecessor, Sir Geoffrey Elton, had referred to an earlier Regius, Charles Kingsley, as 'the last of the absurdities'. Was there not now to be another absurdity? My successor but one, Richard Evans, reminds us that of the earliest incumbents of George I's chair, 'most were utterly undistinguished'. Was I not their equal in the undistinguished stakes?

I think the only reason that I accepted the appointment was that I couldn't bear the thought of going through the rest of my life knowing that I had turned down the best history job in the world, but unable to tell anyone. So after a few days I said, yes, thank you, only to be told that nothing could now be done for six weeks, since Mrs T. had called a General Election. (This was 1987.) Downing Street professed to be worried, since they knew I had discussed the matter with my children, one of whom, Dr Sarah Collinson, was at that time an undergraduate in this very College.

But Mrs Thatcher won her election and I was duly appointed by the Crown. I was told that the first thing that the Prime Minister did on returning from Finchley that Friday morning was to sign the letter recommending my appointment, and that what the Queen did in response was the first of the formalities under the re-elected Conservative government. RISE OF LEFT-WINGER was one headline in the Peterborough column of the *Telegraph*; FEW SIGNS the other, that is, few signs in my earlier career of any future greatness. FATHER NAMED FOR TOP POST proclaimed the *Cambridge Evening News*. All very different from the national excitement over the Oxford chair back in the sixties: Trevor-Roper, A.J.P. Taylor, and all that.

So it wasn't the biggest story of the day. But it was certainly a big story for me. But where was I to hang up my hat, or rather my gown, at which College? No-one

told me how to conduct myself, and when I received the offer of a Fellowship from the President of New Hall I was unaware that only New Hall was entitled to make such an offer, since they were so far below the quota for Professorial Fellows as never to have had one. People assumed that I would go back to Pembroke, but Richard Adrian, who happened to be Vice-Chancellor at the time, was very scrupulous and no overture was made. By the time it became clear that Pembroke would like to have me back I was committed to this College. For that I have to thank John Lonsdale, who propositioned me as we went across to lunch in Manchester, where we were both serving as external examiners. But was the eminence grise behind what now transpired Boyd Hilton?

Well, as they say, the rest is history. I can no longer imagine life without Trinity, although the distance from south Devon and the gently declining health of both myself and Liz mean that my descents on Cambridge are less frequent than I would wish. I'm reminded of the nineteenth-century Regius Sir James Stephen, who chose for health reasons, while still in post, to live abroad, and who when required to report on his subject to a Royal Commission wrote: 'Of the actual state of affairs of historical studies in the University I know nothing and can report nothing.' Those were the days. But more to the point, I once found myself sitting at breakfast next to someone whom I knew I had met. Was he a Visiting Fellow? 'Are you here for long?' 'I'm the Senior Bursar.'

Memories as you approach eighty become so many gobbets, well-rounded pebbles rattling in your pocket. Well, here are a few. Anil Seal telling me over the table at lunch in the presence of guests that if I had been a Fellow of Trinity for rather longer I would know that nothing transacted in College Council could not be openly discussed. Andrew Huxley, chairing the Livings Committee, asking clerical candidates whether they considered Unitarians to be Christians, with John Bowker, then Dean of Chapel, following that up with 'What happens when I die?' Our beloved Chancellor blackballing President Mitterand of France for an honorary degree, well perhaps that was a wise decision, but wait for the reason. Because he could not so honour the head of a state which had cut off the head of its king. Later the Chancellor denied the same honour to Lord Harewood, 'for services to Opera,' on the ground that he could not confer a degree on a member of his own family who had been divorced – which seemed to severely restrict the number of royals who could be so honoured. I shouldn't mention such state secrets, but Anil Seal assures me that Trinity is all about candour.

You will gather from these stories that I was once not far from the heart of what goes on in this University. As a member of the Council of the Senate I was seconded to the search committee to find the first Vice-Chancellor to serve in the new dispensation as chief executive. I was paired with Lord Adrian of Pembroke. The search committee decided that there was no-one who could better fit the bill than Sir David Williams, twice Vice-Chancellor under the old system. We naively supposed that everyone would be of the same opinion, and we reported back in those terms to the Council of the Senate. Well, actually I so reported, since Richard Adrian had fallen off a ladder when pruning his wisteria and had broken his ankle. The Council of the Senate didn't like it. Not that they had anything against David Williams, but we were in duty bound to come up with two names, and to this day I don't know how it was that the late Stephen Fleet had let us do what we did. A certain Fellow of Caius promptly resigned, as he does from time to time. Sir David was duly appointed, but not without his own misgivings. He was aware that the only other Vice-Chancellor in

the history of the University to have served for three terms had chosen to hang himself on Easter Day 1632, the unfortunate Dr Henry Buttes of Corpus.

The early years of retirement were enjoyable and productive: many visits to the United States, either to lecture and teach, or to work in those treasure houses for Renaissance studies, the Folger Library in Washington, the Huntington in California. Rolling Stones, they say, gather no moss. Well this rolling stone has gathered a fair bit of moss, although as to what all these honours amount to, I am at one with Falstaff. There was a C.B.E., which of course came up with the rations, conferred on behalf of the Crown by my old friend James Crowden as Lord Lieutenant, here in the Private Supply Room (which John Lonsdale called 'a very English occasion'). Well, it was Private Supply. I had to pay for the champagne, which wouldn't have happened at Buckingham Palace. I have been honoured with four festschrifts, and with honorary degrees from seven universities, including, to my astonishment, Oxford. I processed through the streets of Oxford in pouring rain with the then President of Germany, who assured me that a shortfall in the German economy of several billion marks was nothing to worry about.

From a rather narrow base in the history of religion in post-Reformation England I have branched out in a number of directions, while only occasionally straying beyond the limits of what we call the early modern period. My Cambridge Inaugural Lecture celebrated the explosive diversity of History as it is now practised. I drew particular attention to a fifty-page article on the subject of earrings. As for myself, if my postgraduate students, who were and are my pride and my joy, were mostly working on religious topics, I explored with undergraduates the history of history writing. I became enmeshed in the complex interplay between History and Literature, inspired by Lisa Jardine and encouraged by Jeremy Maule, whom we still miss so badly: a tale of two disciplines (it was the best of times and the worst of times). And I launched a new approach to the political history of Elizabethan England which others have been kind enough to call 'ground-breaking.' My piece on Elizabeth I in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* turned out to be pretty well the longest of the many thousands of articles in that remarkable publication. But, having done that, I wanted nothing more to do with the woman, and I returned to Basil Blackwell the advance of £1000 which I had received in earnest against the full-blown biography I no longer wanted to write. I just wish that my friend Dr David Starkey would adopt a similar self-denying ordinance with respect to Elizabeth's father, our founder. I think that for the time being we may have heard quite enough about Henry VIII.

Looking back, I have by now written and published a great deal more than my mentors in the London school of Tudor History, Neale included. (I haven't matched Sir Geoffrey Elton's output, let alone his immense public service to the profession and practice of history.) Whether my work counts for more than what they in their time accomplished I doubt. Everything we historians write should be accompanied by a warning: 'Best before...' The shelf life is usually about twenty years. But I carry on writing, and encouraging the work of younger and abler scholars in my field, of whom there are fortunately plenty, if only because I don't know how otherwise to occupy my time. And to be able to do so as a Fellow of Trinity is for me the greatest privilege and the proudest boast of all. So thank you, Master, and thank you, all my friends in this place. And thanks too to my wife, children, children-in-law, and grandchildren, without whom I am nothing, and who represent the other half of a rich and satisfying life. And thank you all for being here, with my apologies to those who would much rather have been celebrating the centenary of the Girl Guides.