

Dr Brian Mitchell celebrated his eightieth birthday on 20 Sept 2009

DR BRIAN MITCHELL



A Frenchman named Chamfort, who should have known better, once said that chance was a nickname for Providence. It is one of those convenient, question-begging aphorisms coined to discredit the unpleasant truth that chance plays an important, if not predominant, part in human affairs.

No – I am not going to give a lecture on probability or on some esoteric aspect of moral philosophy. That is a quotation from the opening of one of the finest thrillers ever written, Eric Ambler's *The Mask of Dimitrios*, which I was re-reading a week or two ago; and I thought what a splendid preacher's text it would give for my speech tonight. Not that I propose to sermonise. At most I might ride the odd little hobby-horse. But as a text it is highly appropriate to what Andrew Maclachlan referred to the other day as 'your memoirs', and Pat Collinson, on a similar occasion last month, described as 'writing one's own obituary'; for chance – and onechance in particular – played a crucial part in my life. As I have said on more than one occasion, I am an accidental man in this environment.

Let me explain. At Easter 1948 I had failed in my last attempt to get a history scholarship to Oxford – as had the other two who had been with me in the history sixth for five terms after taking Higher School Certificate. We had not taken too well to the very loose rein which we had been given – in effect being treated like undergraduates: two essays and two supervisions a week, with every other teaching period in the bays of the school library doing just what we wanted. I acquired a large amount of miscellaneous knowledge – about American and British politics, about horse-racing form, about European literature – the whole of Balzac, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, and others (in translation, of course) – and even a certain amount of history; but more of the sort of things we were unlikely to meet in an exam than the standard topics – the American Civil War, or the machinations of Elisabeth Farnese rather than the ins-and-outs of Tudor and Stuart policies. So I was left with the promise of a place at Magdalen two years later, and the prospect of three years' articles after that and then joining my mother's cousin in what was the leading accountancy firm in still-prosperous Bradford. Had I done that I should have become a very rich man, for he and his two partners sold out to Price Waterhouse in the 1970s for a seven-figure sum. But I didn't, for then came the pivotal intervention of chance. I went for my national service medical, and one of the doctors decided that I might have tuberculosis and this needed to be investigated. It turned out to be a false alarm; but in the period of deferment, my oldest friend, who had gone to Aberdeen University two years before, persuaded me to join him there. After all, a degree from anywhere was all I needed to be excused two years of articles; and I did have a connection, if a rather remote one, with north-east Scotland, whence my father's family had migrated to Yorkshire three or four generations earlier. So I told Magdalen I wouldn't be taking up their offer in 1950, and went off northwards in October 1948, electing, when I got there, to read economics rather than history. There my career

plans were changed drastically. My exam results were rather better than the results of my last two years at school might have suggested and, more importantly, my interest and enthusiasm was fired by what was then called value theory – now microeconomics – and above all by economic history, in which I had a superb teacher, Ethel Hampson, who had been at Girton twenty years before. When it became clear, in my third year, that I was likely to get a First, she urged on me the merits of going to Cambridge to do research. She obviously was well-regarded by Munia Postan, who was then Professor of Economic History here, and she pointed me at Peterhouse, where Iain Macpherson had already gone two years before. I liked the idea, came up for interview, and had my first sight of Cambridge in February 1952. I was accepted and duly came into residence in October. It didn't take me long to decide that this was where I'd like to live out my days – Cambridge was a more attractive place to live then than it is now, though I know there are still people who feel the same way. So when I had completed my Ph D. and gone at last to do my national service, I determined, when I'd finished that, to find some way of returning. In fact, when the time came, the only post available was at the Department of Applied Economics – a two-year appointment to compile a volume of British historical statistics to accompany the great pioneering work of quantitative economic history being produced by Phyllis Deane and Max Cole. This also proved to be an intervention of chance which affected much of my subsequent life, but not immediately. After completing the historical statistics project – which was published in 1962, after a twelve-month delay because the press was busy with the *New English Bible* – I remained at the D.A.E. for three further two-year appointments, mostly working with Phyllis Deane and Charles Feinstein on making estimates of British capital formation in the long 19th century. The first bit I started on was the railways. This involved numerous journeys to the then British Transport Commission archives, which were held in a building overlooking the Paddington main line by Royal Oak tube station. After three or four visits, the staff got fed up with hauling out the huge volumes of reports and accounts – there were, after all, some eight hundred separate railway companies – and provided me with a desk in the stacks and a white overall and told me to do my own thing. The overall didn't stay white for long. Mouldering leather from the bindings and soot from the Paddington trains produced a grubby camouflage mixture. But the work got done a lot quicker, and eventually resulted in an article in the *Journal of Economic History* and a large contribution to Charles Feinstein's monumental work on British national accounts – something which he gave me full credit for, but which others have generally failed to appreciate. I should have gone on to investigate investment in public utilities after that but, again, chance intervened.

Les Fishman, visiting from the University of Colorado, received an SOS from back home: An economic historian was urgently needed for 1963–64, as the incumbent had gone off unexpectedly to Penn State. Noweconomist economic historians weren't all that many in Cambridge, so the barrel was scraped and I was offered a visiting professorship at Boulder, where I had a very enjoyable two semesters, and learned how to lecture. I must have been pretty awful to begin with. One of my auditors, whom I later met a few times on the ski slopes, asked after a few beers in the Nederland Tavern: 'Are all English lecturers so boring?' I'm sure he had a point; but I was learning, and when I went to teach summer school at Purdue my audience ratings were quite respectable.

Back in Cambridge, I resumed my work on capital formation, and, largely in my spare time, published a book on postwar election history, which led to my becoming involved in BBC election night programmes in the 1960s and 1970s. For the public utilities research I spent a large part of the next two years travelling the country, visiting borough treasurers' offices in most sizeable towns from Aberdeen to Plymouth. There were very few motorways, but no open-road speed limit, and I drove something like 40,000 miles in that time with only one untoward incident. That was going from Yorkshire over to Lancashire on a beautiful sunny autumn morning. On the first bend on the western slope of the Pennines, where the ice hadn't yet melted, I touched the brake and found myself going backwards downhill and eventually ended up straddling a narrow ditch. Clearly I needed to be towed out; so I got a lift down to Rochdale and came back with a breakdown lorry. As my car came into sight, the driver said cheerfully: 'Oh! you're that side of t' road are you? Most on 'em land on t' other.' I looked left and could just see the Denshaw reservoirs 300 feet below.

By the time the capital formation project was coming to an end, I decided that it was time I got out of two-year research posts and into something with the prospect of tenure. But economic history lectureships didn't normally come up all that frequently – I think there have only been five or six in the last forty years – and Phyllis Deane and Charles Feinstein had each been appointed quite recently; so I was extraordinarily lucky when another one was advertised in 1967 and I got it. Also, the evening that the appointment was announced, I had Denis Marrian, then Senior Tutor, on the telephone offering me a Fellowship here – and, naturally, I accepted. Actually, my very first connection with Trinity came through Denis a few years earlier, when he had invited me to play cricket for his President's XI against the College – a fixture which later became my responsibility. I had been teaching for a number of colleges whilst I was at the D.A.E., and among them had been Trinity. It began in 1960 when Maurice Dobb asked me to take the second-year economists for an optional paper which was rather absurdly called Economic History of the Modern World – later transformed into the more modest Comparative Economic Development. In 1964 I was asked to take some of the Part I men as well – I think Michal Vyvyan probably wanted to cut down the amount of teaching he did – and in 1965 I became a Lecturer and Director of Studies. I've always thought it was rather mean of the Education Committee to wait for five terms and until I had a prospectively-tenured position before offering a Fellowship. But then I've always thought the Education Committee has done some curious things – even when I was serving on it!

Since I was now free to choose my own research agenda, the question arose: what should I do? The obvious answer was to push my Ph D thesis on the British coal industry further, and expand on what I'd done on railway history. But before I did any of that I was asked by Carlo Cipolla to do a statistical appendix for the *Fontana Economic History of Europe*. That set the ball rolling. When I had nearly finished it, I had an approach from Macmillan to do a history of the railways; and whilst they were giving me a very nice lunch to discuss this, I happened to mention casually what I'd been doing for Cipolla. Railways were dropped immediately, and *European Historical Statistics* was commissioned. This led on to another two massive volumes of *International Historical Statistics*, and then, Macmillan being much more commercially-driven than CUP, second editions, then third editions. So most of the rest of my life until retirement – and, in fact, well beyond – was taken up with what at times I referred to as a work of academic prostitution, for though I didn't receive

poule de luxe rates, they were quite lucrative. Tony Wrigley, however, made me feel better about it when he pointed out how much work I was saving other scholars.

In the midst of all this delving into foreign statistical sources, mostly in the old state paper room at the British Museum, but also in their repository in Woolwich Arsenal, and in America and Japan, I did manage to tart up and finish my coal industry book; but railways were put on the back burner. Even when I finally said No to another edition of *Historical Statistics*, I got diverted for a year or two into pursuing my old psephological interests – and I've got some splendid equal-area constituency maps for every parliamentary revision back to 1885 as a result, though no one seems to want to publish them. However, at long last, a couple of years ago, I did get back to railways, largely prompted by an old pupil from forty years ago, Nick Crafts, and we have a joint paper, along with one of his former pupils, David Chambers, coming out soon. I can imagine the reactions of some of my acquaintance from twenty or thirty years ago when they see it – 'My God! Is he still alive?' and 'I bet he didn't do all that maths'.

So... I've been at Trinity for more than forty years and produced one monograph, two or three articles, and some much-cited reference books. That it wasn't more is partly owing to that trait I showed long ago in the history sixth – pursuing odd interests, like psephology, rather than concentrating on a main line; but it's also down to the amount of teaching I've done. All the economic historians who've stayed in the Cambridge Economics Faculty for any length of time have published less than they might have done because there have been so few of us to cover the teaching for twenty-plus colleges. I used to teach regularly for five or six, with another one or two thrown in when someone was on leave. That meant between forty and fifty pupils a year, and amounted to a regular seven to nine hours a week. Then, of course, I was involved in the usual stint on committees – as chairman of the Degree Committee; on the Faculty Board, where I was a Council of the Senate appointee to provide a semblance of a counterweight to the controlling Marxist faction. (When sitting on it I was often reminded of the saying that 'Academic economists write primarily to entertain fellow converts, not to refute opposing schools.' I was also reminded of what one is advised not to do against the wind!). Then there were College committees and appointments, beginning with being Emoluments Committee secretary – in which position I think I was the last to have to read out the names of those elected to scholarships from the steps of the Chapel. Once, at least, the snowflakes were swirling around me as I endeavoured to imitate Kitson Clark's booming voice. Then I had two stints on the Garden Committee and also on the Wine Committee, of which I was secretary for most of the 1990s and hence partly responsible for some of tonight's wines. Both of these were rewarding, though some merchants' offering of tastings with sixty different wines were hard work. Less enjoyable was the Education Committee, which has always seemed to me to display some of the less pleasant aspects of college politics. I also had eight plus years as Steward, a particularly taxing post in the late-70s to mid-80s when the impact of inflation was at its height. It was quite time-consuming, and I didn't even have the compensation of selecting menus, since at that time it was done by Tony Weir as Secretary of the (non-existent) High Table Meals Committee. Nor did I find any pleasure – as one of my predecessors certainly did – in malicious *placement* at feasts.

But it isn't as Steward, or even as secretary of the Wine Committee, that most people will remember me for serving the College, but as Treasurer of the Field Club. I succeeded Patrick Duff, who had held that office for forty years, in 1971, and retired from it after thirty-three years in 2004. This was not an official College position, but I think it's an important one nevertheless. Sporting activities have a part to play in keeping *mens sana* for a lot of people, though this view was rather out of fashion for much of my time. They also, I believe, contributed to keeping the student body less rebellious and generally awkward in a period when many other universities were plagued by militant unrest. So the Field Club Treasurer – who is, in effect, the administrator of all athletic activities which take place off the water – is of some significance in the smooth running of the College. I was fortunate in having one good groundsman for most of my time – though the tennis players were not always as enthusiastic as we cricketers, and I did sometimes have to placate certain Fellows. Another advantage I had was a wife who produces super puddings, which were a great attraction at the party we gave each year for all the various captains and other sporting luminaries of the College. I was also lucky – though I think I can take some of the credit to myself – that the Club's books balanced in most years, and, more importantly, over the long term.

Well, that's enough of this *apologia pro mea vita*. Let me end on a slightly different note. When I was sitting next to Chris Morley at Pat Collinson's celebration a month ago, he said that one must have things about the way the College runs that one would like to see changed, and why not take this sort of occasion to air them. Actually, I don't have too many hobby-horses of that sort which I'd like to ride. On the whole, I think College affairs have gone very satisfactorily for most of the last forty years. Unlike my late, much-lamented colleague Alister Sutherland, I've never felt much need to recast the College accounts or to set the Expenditure Committee on a different track. I welcomed the move to admissions by Directors of Studies rather than Tutors – though I suspect one or two men who turned out to be very good wouldn't have got in under the present system. On the other hand, there was formerly a much longer tail of academic dross, which was a bit of a pain to teach. But that tail didn't do any harm to our primary function – what is loosely called pushing back the frontiers of knowledge – and nor did it hamper the development of the clever young, who are the most important input to our secondary function as a finishing school – indeed it might have broadened some of their horizons. By the same token, I don't think we should be too much worried by government attempts at social engineering – provided always that we can identify and admit (and, if necessary, finance) the very best talent, no matter where it comes from. (A crucial proviso some would say – but I won't go into that now, except to remind you of the old saying, 'Put not your trust in princes'.) I also welcomed the admission of women to Trinity, though I actually voted against it, under the influence of a former Girtonian girl friend, who persuaded me how damaging it would be to women's colleges. Well, it certainly changed Girton, and we had our first male rugby blue from there within a decade; but change and damage don't always equate, though the so-called Law of Unintended Consequences is something that policy-makers at all levels need to bear in mind.

In general terms, I think that we've become a little too big for our own comfort; but that has been inevitable, and I'm sure that we can live with it. So, in the end, about the only thing I'd like to see changed is the ration of three bottles of port a year on private supply, which is much too mingy!