

AMERICAN COUNCIL OF LEARNED SOCIETIES

A MEMBER OF THE INTERNATIONAL UNION OF ACADEMIES



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THE CHARLES HOMER HASKINS LECTURE

Charles Homer Haskins (1870–1937), for whom the ACLS lecture series is named, was the first Chairman of the American Council of Learned Societies, 1920–26. He began his teaching career at the Johns Hopkins University, where he received the BA degree in 1887, and the PhD in 1890. He later taught at the University of Wisconsin and at Harvard, where he was Henry Charles Lea Professor of Medieval History at the time of his retirement in 1931, and Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences from 1908 to 1924. He served as president of the American Historical Association, 1922, and was a founder and the second president of the Medieval Academy of America, 1926.

A great American teacher, Charles Homer Haskins also did much to establish the reputation of American scholarship abroad. His distinction was recognized in honorary degrees from Strasbourg, Padua, Manchester, Paris, Louvain, Caen, Harvard, Wisconsin, and Allegheny College, where in 1883 he had begun his higher education at the age of thirteen.

A LIFE OF LEARNING

Lawrence Stone
*Dodge Professor of History
Princeton University*

I am, as you may well imagine, extremely flattered to have been invited by the ACLS to give the third Charles Homer Haskins Lecture. I feel particularly honored—or I *think* I do—to find that I am the first of the three speakers so far to be a working scholar and teacher, and not already emeritus. Why the Board saw fit to invite a relative juvenile like myself for this occasion I do not know. Further consideration of this question tempers my feeling of pride at being chosen at so youthful an age. Since the topic for the evening was described to me by President Ward as “reflections and reminiscences on a lifetime of work as a scholar”, his presumption presumably was that for me that life had come to an end—that I had run out of gas—which of course may well be the case.

To prepare for this lecture I asked to read what my two predecessors had said on this occasion, and was sent the first by Professor Maynard Mack. As I read it, my heart sank. There was no way that I could be as wise and as witty, as erudite and as amusing, all at the same time. It just

wasn't possible. At a later stage, after I had written a first draft, I was particularly upset by his report of the acerbic remarks of his wife when he showed her the first draft of *his* intellectual autobiography: "I suppose there is no fool like an old fool. Do as you like; but don't forget that what you've got here is at least an hour and ten minutes too long." I frantically counted the pages of my text, which came to 51. Reeling from this withering blast from Mrs. Mack, I very nearly threw in the sponge and told President Ward that I couldn't and wouldn't do it. But then I gritted my teeth and set to work, and here is the result.

This is the story of my intellectual Odyssey over the last 50-some years through an ocean full of storms, whirlpools and hidden rocks. We can, I think, safely omit the first eight years of life, which are anyway only of interest to dedicated Freudians convinced that the personality is fixed in concrete at this period—and sexual concrete at that. All that might be significant during these years is that this is when I first became a fanatical collector—a collector of anything: postage stamps, butterflies, fossils, cigarette cards. There is obviously a relationship between this early but unfocused collecting instinct, and the adult pursuit by the scholar in libraries and archives of facts and yet more facts to buttress his hypotheses and illustrate and give plausibility—it would be impertinent to say proof—to his arguments.

At eight I went off to an English Prep. school and there began to serve what was to prove an 8-year term as a slave in the intellectual salt-mines of intensive training in the classics. As a form of instruction, what I got was whimsically known at the time as "a liberal education". In reality it was an intensely narrow program, a perverted derivative from the educational curriculum worked out 400 years earlier by Vives and Erasmus. By the 1930s it consisted of a mechanical and dreary memorization of the vocabulary and grammar of two long-dead languages. The pronunciation of one of them—Latin—was then taught in England in a manner altogether unintelligible either to the ancient Romans or to the 20th century natives of any other country. Thus whereas my French father-in-law when in a concentration camp during the Second World War found it possible to communicate in Latin with Hungarian aristocrats and Polish intellectuals, the Latin I learnt—the so-called "old pronunciation"—could have served no such practical purpose.

What I did learn that was useful—though I learnt it the hard way, with blows as a punishment for error—were the rules of Latin grammar, which may perhaps have been helpful in improving my style in English later on. But I am even doubtful about that. Trained in this manner, it is easy to fall into the stately Ciceronian prose of rolling periods perfectly balanced one against the other. Much as I admire the prose of Gibbon

and Lord Chesterfield, the style just does not suit me, for by nature I am most at ease in a free-wheeling atmosphere. Let me make the point by analogy. Once, at the age of twelve, I was thought to be a promising cricketer—a batsman. So my school hired a kindly but unimaginative elderly ex-professional cricketer to teach me to hold a straight bat. He succeeded only too well. My bat was forever straight but I never played a successful game again, for he had managed to kill my natural instinct to swipe the ball in a thoroughly unorthodox but effective manner. There is perhaps something to be learnt about teaching in general from this sad little story—a tragedy for me since I used to dream about playing for England one day.

What I acquired—and let me stress that during those eight years from 8 to 16 I was taught little else—was a facility in translating a London *Times* editorial from English prose into Latin prose, from Latin prose into Latin verse, from Latin verse into Greek prose, and from Greek prose back into English prose. You will have guessed that I was not very good at it, partly from natural ineptitude, partly from lack of will. I could not for the life of me see the point of it at all, and I still don't. Even the Latin books we read were dull. Virgil and Livy were, to my perhaps philistine sensibility, a bore. We were never introduced to books that would both stimulate our interest and provide useful information about adult life, such as Tacitus on the court politics of tyranny, or Ovid on the art of heterosexual love.

Like most people, I would imagine, I was eventually taught to love scholarship by a handful of gifted teachers. I will not dwell upon my experiences at an English public school—in my case Charterhouse—because this is a topic that novelists and autobiographers have already made something of a bore. If at the time I had known anything about social anthropology or the political theory of totalitarianism, I could have understood a great deal more. It would have helped, for example, if I had realized that what I was experiencing was merely an extended male puberty rite, very similar to those of many other, more primitive, societies in the world: total segregation from the other sex; regular beatings to be endured in stoical silence; humiliation rituals; a complex formal hierarchy symbolized by elaborate dress codes; inadequate food; sexual initiation by older males; and the learning of a secret language, in this case Latin.

I obtained my freedom from enslavement to the classics thanks to the direct intervention of a new headmaster, Sir Robert Birley, who single-handedly changed my life. He took me under his personal tuition, and in one-and-a-half years of intensive coaching enabled me to obtain an open scholarship in history at Oxford. What made him so dazzlingly suc-

cessful as a history teacher was his endless fund of enthusiasm for whatever topic happened to be uppermost in his mind.

Birley did not merely pull off the remarkable coup of training me in 18 months to get a history scholarship to Oxford. He also changed the course of my intellectual development a second time: immediately after the examination, he dispatched me to Paris for six months' exposure to another European culture. There I first encountered (though not in the flesh) that remarkable phenomenon, the Paris mandarin intelligentsia, as well as the great *Annales* school of historians, then represented by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. It was the beginning of a lifelong admiring but critical relationship with French intellectual culture which has deeply influenced my life of learning.

Let me return for a moment to Sir Robert Birley. He was an eccentric figure—half loyal member of England's ruling elite and of the Church of England, and half reforming rebel and idealistic visionary. As a young master at Eton, for example, he openly expressed his sympathy with the strikers during the General Strike of 1926, a position for which some people never forgave him. He was headmaster first of Charterhouse, then of Eton, sandwiching in between a stint as Educational Adviser to the Deputy Military Governor of the British Zone of Germany after the war. Later he was Professor of Education at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. He was a conservative radical, whose nickname among the backwoods Etonian Tories was "Red Robert". He was not only a great teacher, but a great moral reformer. Before the war he had fought Nazism, and spent hours trying to argue me out of my incipient pacifist tendencies. After the war he worked to bring a new generation of liberal Germans back into a federation of Europe. Later still, in the 1960s, he fought to bring education to the blacks of South Africa, personally conducting classes in Soweto; and finally he did his best to humanize and civilize those great barbarian institutions, the English public schools of Charterhouse and Eton.

If Sir Robert Birley provided the inspiration for my scholarly interests, and deeply affected my moral and political attitudes, the second great influence upon me was an Oxford mediaeval history tutor, John Prestwich by name. He was—indeed, still is—one of those all too common Oxford figures, with a towering local reputation but no international visibility for lack of publications. I studied the Third Crusade under him, as a special subject. At first, I would read my weekly essay, which he would then systematically demolish, leaving me with little but a pile of rubble. I finally decided that my only hope of self-defence was to overwhelm him with data. Since the prescribed texts were entirely taken from the writings of the Christian crusaders, I sought out little-known

chronicles by Moslem Arabs, of which I found a fair number in French translation. Artfully, and with studied casualness, I inserted into my essays some recondite facts from these obscure and dubious sources, as a result of which I at least got Prestwich momentarily rattled. I never won the battle, my arguments were always effectively demolished, but even the minor victories improved my self-esteem. The experience taught me the importance of sheer factual information—erudition, if you like—in the cut-throat struggle for survival in the life of learning. I discovered that knowledge is power. It was the experience of that term with John Prestwich which made me decide me to be an historian, and an archive-based historian at that.

The third great influence upon my development as an historian was R. H. Tawney. Every one knows about Tawney, the Christian socialist, at once the *eminence grise* and the conscience of the English labor movement in the first half of the twentieth century, the eloquent preacher of equality, the stern denunciator of the evils of unbridled capitalism, the re-interpreter to the Anglo-Saxon world of Weber's ideas about the relation of Protestantism to Capitalism, and the great historian of "Tawney's Century", the period 1540–1640 in England. He was a saintly, if not altogether practical, figure, the only person I have ever met who had a genuine dislike of money. He simply hated the stuff, and tried, as far as humanly possible, to do without it. It was his impassioned book about the sufferings of the sixteenth century English peasantry from the enclosure of the land by ruthless capitalist landlords, and his equally impassioned denunciations of the evil and corrupt machinations of early modern merchants, entrepreneurs and money-lenders, which drew me to the sixteenth century, and stimulated two of my first forays into print.

I first met Tawney during the war, and I eagerly cultivated his company whenever I came back to London on leave from my ship. Although I was only an ignorant undergraduate from Oxford, and a sailor, he nevertheless always greeted me warmly. By then he had been bombed out of his house and was living in indescribable squalor in a leaky mews in Bloomsbury, surrounded by a chaos of books, papers, cats and left-over plates of food. Draft blue-prints for the Labor Party's program for a more egalitarian post-war Britain were jumbled up with notes on early seventeenth century English social history and tattered yellowing fragments of jottings about the Chinese peasantry. I had many long talks with Tawney, bundled up in overcoats in these unappetising surroundings, and I listened carefully to what he had to say, both about the state of the world and how it could be put right, and about seventeenth century England. Listening carefully, I should add, was not easy, since one had constantly to be on guard lest he set himself on fire. This often

happened when the long stalks of wild herbs, which he stuffed loosely into his pipe, caught fire and fell out on to his jacket or trousers, which as a result were always full of black burn holes.

What I learnt from Tawney was that the documents for early modern history were preserved in sufficient quantity to make it possible to enter into the very minds of the actors. This single fact converted me from a mediaevalist into an early modernist. Second, I learnt that in this period there had taken place in England nearly all the greatest transformations in the history of the West: the shifts from feudalism to capitalism, and from monolithic Catholicism to Christian pluralism, and later to secularism; the rise and fall of Puritanism; the aborted evolution of the all-powerful nation-state; the first radical revolution in Western history; the first large-scale establishment of a relatively liberal polity with diffused power, religious toleration, and a bill of rights; and the creation of a society ruled by a landed elite unique in Europe for its entrepreneurship, paternalism, and near-monopoly of political power. Finally I learnt from Tawney, as I had from Birley, that history can be a moral as well as a scholarly enterprise, and that it ought not, and indeed cannot, be disassociated from a vision of the contemporary world and how it should be ordered.

The fourth important teacher to influence my thinking was yet another eccentric, Sir Keith Hancock, whom I did not meet until immediately after the war. It was his scholarly career and conversation which first proved to me that there was something to be said for an interdisciplinary and trans-cultural approach to history. For in his person and his writings he demonstrated that it was possible, and indeed fruitful, to know about such apparently diverse matters as land tenure in Tuscany, the career in South Africa of General Smuts, the economic development of Australia, and the history of modern warfare.

I was very lucky to have been brought at an early stage into contact with four such remarkable men. As a result of them, I survive today as something of a dinosaur, the last of the Whigs, and in many ways still a child of the Enlightenment. I emerged from their tutelage with an abiding faith in reason, in the possibility of limited material and moral progress, in paternalist responsible leadership, and in the rule of laws not men. It is a fading, tattered faith these days, a survival from that older liberal world of the Victorian professional class from which both Tawney and Birley sprang, and the ethos of which the Australian Hancock had absorbed during his long stay at All Souls College, Oxford.

During World War II, I spent five years at sea with the Royal Navy. As anyone who has experienced it knows, war is 99.9% boredom and

discomfort and 0.1% sheer terror. In my case the discomfort was substantially mitigated by occupation of a cabin—admittedly shared—and plentiful and regular supplies of food and, above all, alcohol. If there has ever been a just war in history, then this was it, and I do not regret my 5-year diversion from the life of learning.

In fact the diversion was not complete, for I wrote my first historical article while navigator of a destroyer patrolling the South Atlantic. I may not have been a very good navigator of that destroyer—I confess I ran it aground twice—but at least I began my life of learning while on board. The subject of the article was the shameful treatment by the government of the English sailors who had taken part in the Armada Campaign of 1588. The topic was obviously related to my immediate experience, but what is of more interest is whence I got my data. The answer is from that characteristic mid-Victorian institution, the London Library, which right through World War II cheerfully and efficiently dispatched rare and valuable research books to the furthest ends of the earth, which often arrived some three to six months after they had been ordered. The contribution of that private library to the life of learning in Britain, especially during the war, can hardly be over-estimated.

The end of the war found me attached to the American Seventh Fleet off Japan. Immediately after the armistice, I was flown home from the Pacific, since for some unknown bureaucratic reason top priority for demobilization in Britain had been decreed for three classes of persons: coalminers, clergymen—and students. The flight was one of my most dangerous experiences during the war, since the pilot was a psychological and physical wreck, with trembling hands, as a result of flying fifty missions over Germany. But it got me back to Oxford in early November 1945, just in time to enroll for the year, and so to take the final examination and graduate as a B.A. in June 1946. By paying an extra five pounds I also got an M.A. degree on the same occasion, so that I was a B.A. for only about ten minutes, just time to change my gown and hood. I submit that this may be something of a record. I must also be one of the few people alive today to have bought a degree from a major university for hard cash and no work at all.

I did not proceed to embark on a doctoral dissertation, since in those days this was still something that a graduate of Oxford or Cambridge felt to be beneath his dignity—a peculiar academic *rite de passage* that foreigners went in for, like Germans, or French, or Americans. Instead, I settled down with a research grant, and began, all by myself, to write a book, quite unaware of any foolhardiness in so doing. It was, of course, a terrible mistake, for I badly needed the close discipline and advice that only a conscientious official supervisor can provide. As a result, I had to learn from my own mistakes—and I made plenty.

I chose to write a biography of a late sixteenth century entrepreneur, a financier of governments, an espionage agent, a diplomat engaged in the recruitment of mercenary armies, a world monopolist of alum (an essential raw material for the dyeing of cloth), and a business tycoon with a finger in many, usually unsavory, pies. This bizarre figure began life as a member of a distinguished Genoese merchant family and ended it as a Cambridgeshire country squire with a wealthy Dutch wife and an English knighthood conferred by Queen Elizabeth. Urbane and unscrupulous rogue that he was, in the end I found that I got to like him, although the book (*An Elizabethan: Sir Horatio Palavicino*) certainly served my original purpose of illuminating the seamier side of early international finance capitalism.

My next topic was inspired by the seminal articles of R. H. Tawney about the rise of the gentry in the century before the English Civil War—a theory which, if stripped of its Marxist ideology about the rise of the bourgeoisie and some of its dubious statistical props, has in fact turned out to be largely true. My first preliminary foray into this area was a disaster. I published an article claiming that most of the late Elizabethan aristocracy were hovering on the verge of financial ruin. Unfortunately the data were badly handled by me. It was my tutor, Hugh Trevor-Roper, who had first drawn my attention to them, but without pointing out the problems inherent in their interpretation. This mistake of mine provided him with the opportunity for an article of vituperative denunciation which connoisseurs of intellectual terrorism still cherish to this day. What I learnt from this episode—learnt the hard way—is that before plunging into a public archive, it is first essential to discover just why and how the records were kept, and what they signified to the clerks who made the entries.

Before describing how I reacted to this set-back, I must pause to explain a peculiar intellectual diversion: in 1946 I also began work on a large text-book on mediaeval English sculpture in a classic art history series edited by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner. This implausible venture into the field of professional art history came about in the following archetypical English way. First, that passion for collecting everything and anything, to which I have already referred, had somehow driven me in my middle teens to assemble photographs of English Romanesque sculpture. Equipped with a car—which cost all of three pounds—and a Kodak Box Brownie camera—which cost five shillings but happened by some miracle to have a near-perfect lens—I roamed the countryside during the holidays between 1936 and 1939, taking photographs of Romanesque sculpture in English churches. In 1938 I made contact with Sir Thomas Kendrick of the British Museum. He was then engaged on a national survey of Anglo-Saxon sculpture, and in his generous way took me—

then still a schoolboy and first-year undergraduate—on his photographic team for two summer expeditions in 1938 and 1939.

After the war, in early 1946, Kendrick had been invited by Nikolaus Pevsner to write the volume on English Mediaeval Sculpture in his Pelican History of Art Series. He declined, perhaps because he already had hopes of becoming Director of the British Museum, as happened soon after. Asked who could do the job instead, Kendrick, who was *not* a cautious man, named me. I was at that moment a history undergraduate at Oxford; I had never taken a course in art history or written a line about it in my life; and I had only just come back from five years at sea. Trained in the professional German school of art history, Pevsner was understandably horrified by Kendrick's irresponsible suggestion. But he felt he had to give me a contract, for reasons which he explained to me very frankly when we met: "Tom Kendrick won't do it", he said, "and there appears to be no one else in the country in the least interested in the subject. Kendrick says that I should give you a contract. I don't trust you at all, for you have absolutely no credentials for the job, but I don't see what else I can do. I would like to see a draft chapter as soon as possible." On this rather menacing note our interview ended, and a few days later I happily signed the contract. Secretly, I was as uneasy as Pevsner himself about the capacity to pull it off of this ignorant, ill-educated, amateur ex-sailor and now undergraduate. This bizarre episode could only have happened in a society like England, which had remained as profoundly imbued with the cult of the amateur as it had been in the eighteenth century heyday of the virtuoso. The episode was also only possible in a society which still operated on the eighteenth century patronage network system, in which a tiny entrenched elite distributed jobs and favors to their clients, friends, and proteges.

Before resuming the narrative, something should be said about the intellectual atmosphere at Oxford in those far-off days just after the Second World War. In the mode of teaching and in the prescribed curriculum for the examination in the School of Modern (as opposed to Ancient) History at Oxford, nothing much had changed since its foundation at the end of the nineteenth century. It was a curriculum stifling both in its national insularity and in its limited late Victorian conception of what subjects were embraced within the canon of historical scholarship. It was perfectly possible and indeed normal to graduate with first class honors without having studied the history of any continent save Europe and indeed with only minimal knowledge of any country but England—not even Scotland or hapless Ireland. It was also not unusual to have studied little or no social, economic, demographic, cultural, artistic, intellectual, educational or familial history, and to be wholly innocent of any contact with quantitative methodology or the history of

the working class. The social sciences were unknown, or if known were cordially despised. On the other hand, under the guidance of gifted and dedicated tutors, the undergraduate education offered by Oxford was unsurpassed in its capacity to teach swift and clear writing, to encourage careful analysis of the evidence, and to produce a mind open to varying interpretations of a single event or set of events. I consider myself extremely lucky to have had that remarkable experience.

In Britain, the post-war period was a time of boundless optimism and confidence—a fact which is hard to remember, much less to comprehend, in these depressed and disillusioned post-imperial times, when England has sunk to the level of a third-rate power in almost all fields of endeavor except those of the pure intellect. To us young men who returned from the war in 1945, the whole world seemed to be our oyster, and all problems of scholarship—to say nothing of those of suffering humanity—were thought to be soluble. Some of this confidence in the future may have been stimulated by close co-habitation with our American Allies during the war. At all events, this was an optimism shared by nuclear physicists, Oxford philosophers, social historians, and Keynesian economists, as well as politicians. I well remember a dinner conversation with Peter Strawson, today one of Oxford's most distinguished philosophers, during which he expressed his anxiety about what he would find to do in his late middle age, since it was clear from the way things were going that by then there would be no major philosophical problems left to solve. In history, some of us had much the same hubristic confidence in a wholly new approach. We were dedicated converts to the *Annales* school of history based in Paris, and we were certain that the most intractable problems of history would soon fall to the assaults of quantitative social and economic investigation. The political narrative mode of our elders—"L'histoire historisante" as it was derogatively called—was beneath our contempt. In time, we believed, such hitherto unsolved problems as the causes of the English or the French Revolutions, or the origins of capitalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie, would be solved by our new tools and new approaches. Bliss it was to be alive and a radical social historian in 1945. We waited breathlessly for each new issue of *Annales* or the *Economic History Review*, every one of which seemed to contain an article which opened up great new vistas of historical exploration and interpretation. I stress this atmosphere of self-confidence and heady excitement, since nothing could be more different from the self-doubt, uncertainty, caution, and scepticism about the very existence of truth or about ways to get at it, which afflicts all branches of the humanities today in 1985.

Inspired by the mood of optimism of the late 1940s about the possibilities of the new social history, and stung by Trevor-Roper's

onslaught on my scholarly credentials, I decided to undertake a large-scale investigation into the economic resources and management, social status and military and political power, life-style, values, education, and family structure, of the English aristocracy in the century before the outbreak of the English Revolution. My initial assumption had been that the English aristocracy in that period was the epitome of an incompetent, frivolous, and decadent ruling class about to be set aside by a rising bourgeoisie. Fifteen years of careful investigation, however, convinced me that this simplistic model failed to fit the facts. The Marxist interpretation of the role of the aristocracy in the English revolution, with which I had set out, had been shattered by close contact with the empirical evidence.

The solution to my dilemma came from my belated discovery of Max Weber, whose writings, as they slowly appeared in more or less intelligible English translations, have probably influenced me more than those of any other single scholar. Weber's subtle distinction between class and status, and his intense pre-occupation with the relationship of ideas and ideology to social and political reality have guided my thinking and inspired my research from the mid-1950s to the present day.

But the influence of neither Marx nor Weber explains why I have chosen to spend most of my life of learning studying the acts, behavior and thoughts of a ruling elite, rather than of the masses. One justification for such concentration upon so tiny a minority is that this is the only group whose lives and thoughts and passions are recorded in sufficient detail to make possible investigation in full social and psychological depth. Only this handful were fully literate, in the sense that they wrote continually to each other and about each other, and their writings have been preserved. If one wishes to discover the quirks and quiddities of personality, the intimacies of love and hate and lust, the revelations of financial speculation or rascality, the backstairs intrigues of power and status, one is inexorably forced to concentrate one's attention upon the elite, since the evidence about individuals in the past much below this high social level only rarely exists. Although I have relied heavily upon quantification—most of my books and articles contain graphs and tables—I have always been primarily concerned with people, following the maxim of Marc Bloch: "*Ma proie, c'est l'homme.*" In this pursuit I have been inexorably drawn to the elite.

The other justification for concentration on the elite is that it was from this group that for centuries were drawn the political rulers of the country, and the patrons and principal consumers of its high culture. An Englishman, far more than the resident in any other Western country, does not have to read Pareto to learn about the dominance of elites.

From his earliest childhood he is made acutely aware of the horizontal layering of the society in which he lives. This elaborate stratification is displayed even today at every moment by such external features as accent, vocabulary, clothes, table manners, and even physical size and shape. I have therefore spent the best part of my life following the trails left in the records by that English landed elite which for so many centuries largely monopolized so much of the three great Weberian entities of wealth, status, and power.

As it happened, I could not have chosen a better moment than the late 1940s in which to plunge into the private archives of the English aristocracy, which for the first time had become accessible, thanks to the financial plight of their owners. For fifteen years I enjoyed the dizzy excitement of turning over and reading in archive rooms, cellars, and attics great masses of papers which no one had ever examined before. The most dramatic moment always came on first sight of a private archive, which could range from the supremely orderly to the supremely chaotic. At one great house, the late duke had spent a lifetime sorting, cataloguing, and filing his huge collection of family papers, and in his last illness was said to have asked to be taken down to the archive room and laid on the work table in order to die amid his beloved papers. His son was a playboy, too busy chasing girls to bother answering the importunate letters of scholars. But by sheer luck, a telephone call was answered by his aged nanny, who graciously agreed to let me into what turned out to be an amazing and amazingly well-ordered archive, filling several rooms. I believe I was the first person to sit at that table since the removal of the late duke's corpse.

At another great seat I scribbled away in the depth of winter huddled up in an overcoat and blankets at one end of a long freezing room, while at the other end two aged servants sat beside a small flickering coal fire, leisurely polishing the seventeenth century armor for the benefit of next summer's tourists, and gossiping endlessly—and maliciously—about their master and mistress. When my fingers became too cold to hold the pen, I would join them round the fire for a few moments. It was a scene which could well have occurred in the seventeenth century.

Another house had been gutted by a fire some thirty years earlier, but the contents of the archive room had been saved and thrown pell-mell into a room above the old stables, now the garage. Squeezing past his huge Rolls-Royce, the owner led the way up the creaking stairs, turned the key in the rusty lock and pushed the door. Nothing happened. Further forceful pushing nudged it partly open, revealing a great sea of paper and parchment covering the whole floor to the height of one to three feet. The only way to enter was to step on this pile, and, as I trod

gingerly, seals of all ages from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century cracked and crunched under my feet. Rarely have I felt so guilty, but the guilt was later assuaged by being instrumental in getting the great archive deposited in the local record office for safe-keeping and cataloguing.

Occasionally the owner of the papers would invite me to lunch. The experience was nearly always the same: a spectacularly elegant dining-room with millions of dollars worth of pictures on the wall; exquisite wine; execrable food, so unappetising that it was often very hard to swallow; and erratic service provided by a bedraggled and sometimes rather drunken butler. Such were the pleasures and pains of the life of learning, as I wrote my book on *The Crisis of the Aristocracy*.

During the late '50s, the expansion of my interests, which first began with the discovery of Weber, was further stimulated by two events. The first was that in 1958 I joined the Editorial Board of *Past and Present*, which in my—admittedly prejudiced—opinion is one of the two best historical journals in the world (*Annales: Economies, Civilisations, Societes* being the other). At that time the Board was equally divided between Marxists (many of them long-term members of the Communist Party who had only recently resigned after the Russian invasion of Hungary), and liberals like myself. But although it is a very active and contentious board there has never been an occasion, so far as I can recall, in which the division of opinion has been on ideological lines of Marxists versus liberals. This is a small fact about English intellectual history, which is, I believe, worth recording, although I have no explanation to offer for it.

The second event which turned out to have a major influence on my life as a scholar was the shift from Oxford to Princeton in 1963. This move—the most sensible thing I ever did in my life apart from getting married—was made partly as the result of push—I was tired of the insurmountable disciplinary ring-fence erected at Oxford around the core of English political and constitutional history, and also of the crushing burden of many hours of monotonous tutorial teaching; and partly as a result of pull—the open-mindedness to new ideas and new disciplines and new areas of the world which I had observed at Princeton on a visit two years before to the Institute for Advanced Study. At Princeton, I discovered two things. The first was a world of historical scholarship, embracing not only all of Europe, but also America (of whose history at the time of my arrival I knew nothing) as well as the Near East, and East Asia. One of the earliest results of this totally new world view was a joint article, written with my colleague and friend Marius Jansen, comparing education and the modernizing process in England and Japan.

Another area of scholarship which for a few years in the 1960s greatly influenced my interpretation of historical development was the work then being done by American political theorists on the problems of “modernization” and revolution. In retrospect, I think that my enthusiasm for their model-building was probably exaggerated, but at least they provided me with two valuable tools with which to break open the tough nut of *The Causes of the English Revolution* of the mid-seventeenth century, a book I published in 1972. The first was the somewhat arbitrary but useful division of causes of such an explosion into long-term, medium-term, and short-term. The second was the concept of “relative deprivation” which allowed me to break free from the fallacious necessity of relating observed behavior to objective conditions of life. But in doing so, I fell into a small puddle of jargon, freely using words like “pre-conditions”, “precipitants”, “triggers”, “multiple dysfunction”, “J curve” and so on. All this and relative deprivation theory annoyed my English critics, who enjoyed themselves making a mockery of my enthusiasm for these new-fangled transatlantic words and concepts from the social sciences. If had I write the book today, I would use jargon more discriminately.

Another great discovery made at Princeton was the scope and range of computerized quantitative historical studies then in progress in the United States. In my enthusiasm for this brave new world, I first conceived and then obtained funds for a massive statistical investigation of social mobility in the higher reaches of English society from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The tasks of directing the researchers, encoding the data, negotiating with the computer programmer and making summary tables from vast stacks of green print-out were fortunately undertaken by my wife, who spent 15 years working on this project. My own work was interrupted, for reasons I will explain in a moment, and the results were only published last year in our book *An Open Elite? England 1540–1880*.

Political theory and computerized quantification are far from being the only novelties I found on arrival at Princeton. Another influence on my intellectual evolution at that time was the writings of the sociologist R. K. Merton, from whom I learnt, amongst other things, the importance of medium-range generalization. This search for the Aristotelian mean in terms of problems to be solved, is, in my view, the best safeguard against shipwreck on the Scylla of unverifiable global speculation, or the Charybdis of empirical research so narrow in scope and positivistic in attitude that it is of little concern to anyone except one or two fellow-specialists, as practised by so many young scholars today.

Although we were colleagues at Oxford, it was only after arrival at Princeton that I first discovered the work of the great anthropologist

Evans-Pritchard, and more recently still that I came under the influence of the newer school of symbolic anthropologists whose most eminent and most elegant practitioner is my friend Clifford Geertz. Above all, the contribution of the anthropologists has been to alert historians to the power of “thick description”—that is, how a close and well-informed look at seemingly trivial acts, events, symbols, gestures, patterns of speech or behavior can be made to reveal whole systems of thought; and to draw our attention to problems of kinship, lineage, or community structures, whose significance would have eluded us without their guidance.

Finally, interest in the history of the family and sexual relations inevitably drew me to psychology. Here I found Freud less than helpful, partly because his time-bound late nineteenth century mid-European values cannot be projected back onto the past, and partly because of the fundamentally ahistorical cast of his thought which assumes that the human personality is more or less fixed for life in the first few months or years. The developmental models evolved by more recent ego-psychologists, such as Erik Erikson or Jerome Kagan, are much more useful to the working historian interested in the continuous interplay of nature and nurture, of innate drives and over-riding cultural conditioning. Freud certainly admits to such cultural configurations in his *Civilization and its Discontents* but only in a negative and pessimistic way.

Before summing up. I must explain why it was that I interrupted my quantitative project on elite mobility for some five years to write a large book on *Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800*. It is a work based almost entirely on non-quantitative printed literary materials mainly from the elite class, and it lays as much stress on emotional as on structural developments. It came about this way. I had long been tinkering with a lecture on the family, when in 1973 I suffered a mild heart attack and was hospitalized for six weeks without telephone, visitors or other contacts with the outside world. I felt perfectly fit and, allowing eight hours a day for sleep, there stretched before me the prospect of being able to read without interruption by anyone for 16 hours a day for 42 days. If my mathematics are correct—which some think they rarely are—this adds up to a total of 672 hours of reading. I therefore instructed my wife to remove from the University library shelves all English collections of family letters, autobiographies, advice books, journals, etc. from the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and bring them to my bedside, along with a substantial supply of paper. Thus armed, I read and read and read, and emerged six weeks later with almost enough material to write a book. Hence the diversion from the computerized project on social mobility, to which I returned five years later in 1977.

Throughout my time at Oxford and Princeton, I have never wavered in my (always qualified) admiration for the *Annales* school of historians in Paris. But it is a reflection of the change of time and mood that today, while retaining my deep admiration for the *Annales* group as the most talented, innovative, and influential historians in the world, I nonetheless have developed certain reservations about their basic principles and methods, which were expressed in my notorious article on “The Revival of Narrative”, published in 1979. I am unconvinced that their favorite methodological division between static “*structure*” and dynamic “*conjuncture*” is always the best approach. Even less do I accept their three-tiered model of causal factors in history, rising from the economic and demographic base through the middle layer of the social structure to the derivative superstructure of ideology, religion, political beliefs, and *mentalité*. This wedding-cake mode of analysis presupposes the predominance of material factors over cultural ones—which I reject—and also precludes the possibility, so well brought out by Max Weber, that the three levels are in a constant state of dynamic interaction, rather than in a hierarchy of domination and dependence.

Finally, there is a strong positivist materialism behind the thirst of the *Annales* school for quantifiable data about the physical world, which even in the immediate post-war period I found impossible to accept without reservations. For example, despite its enormous length, the most brilliant pioneer work of this School, Fernand Braudel’s *The Mediterranean in the Time of Philip II*, barely mentions religion, either Christianity or Islam.

My 1979 article on the revival of narrative was explicitly intended as a statement of observed fact about the way the profession of history was going, and not at all as a prescriptive sign-post for the future. It was designed to bring out into the open a subterranean drift back to something I loosely—and I now think misleadingly—defined as “narrative”. The paper was taken in many quarters, however, as a programmatic call to arms against social science quantification and analytical history. Agitated defenders, fearful for their turf and their grants, criticized my alleged betrayal of the good old cause in almost every journal in the profession. More in sorrow than in anger, my old friend Robert Fogel, in his Presidential address to the Social Science History Association, solemnly excommunicated me from that church. In some quarters I became an instant pariah. And yet in the subsequent few years my prophecy has, I believe, been fully vindicated. Except in economic history, where it still reigns supreme, old-style grandiose cliometric social science history now has its back to the wall. More humanistic and more narrative approaches to history are indeed growing, micro-history of a single individual or an event is becoming a fashionable genre, and a new

kind of political history, now firmly anchored in the social and ideological matrix, is reviving. Even intellectual history—no longer that dreary “History of Ideas” paper-chase that always ended up with either Plato or Aristotle—has undergone an astonishing transformation and resurgence.

All my work has been based on two fundamental hypotheses about how the historical process works. The first is that great events must have important causes, and not merely trivial ones. The second is that all great events must have multiple causes. This eclectic approach towards causation has given rise to a certain amount of negative criticism. Many scholars whose judgement I respect have described the assemblage of a multiplicity of causes for any given phenomenon as “a shopping list”, the mere unweighted enumeration of a whole series of variables of widely different types and significance. This is true, but an argument for multiple causation can be made on the grounds used by Max Weber. They are convincing, provided that they form a set of “elective affinities”, held together not by mere random chance but by a system of logical integration that points them all in the same direction and makes them mutually reinforcing. Despite the criticism, therefore, I still adhere to a feed-back model of mutually reinforcing trends, rather than a linearly ordered hierarchy of causal factors. I do admit, however, that sometimes I have neglected to show just how this glue of “elective affinities” has in practice worked.

Looking back on it, it is clear that what is peculiar about my intellectual career is that I have never stayed long in one place. Most historians select a single fairly narrow field as their own intellectual territory, and spend a lifetime cultivating that same ground with more and more tender loving care. The advantage of such a procedure is that one becomes the world expert on that patch of turf, building a framework of knowledge, expertise and experience which is cumulative over a life-time. I have deliberately followed a different course, preferring to roam unusually freely across the historical prairie, although I have confined myself to a single culture, namely that of England, and mostly to a single class, the landed elite. But first, I have ranged over time from the middle ages to the nineteenth century. Second, I have jumped from topic to topic, from biography to economic history to art history to social history to cultural history to educational history to family history. Third, conscious from an early age of the provisional nature of historical wisdom, I have moved in a restless quest for theories, concepts, approaches, and models more satisfying than the old, and in methodological inspiration from Marx to Weber to some of the modern American social scientists, first sociologists, then political theorists, and more recently anthropologists.

This drift from century to century, this flitting from topic to topic, and these changes in inspiration have inevitably brought their dangers and defects. First, they have meant working very fast, a process which can lead to mistakes, often minor but sometimes serious. Second, the level of my scholarly expertise in any single topic in any single century in any part of England is inevitably less than that of one who has spent a lifetime tilling that particular field. Third, the desire to bring order and shape to a complex problem, such as the causes of the English Revolution or the evolution of the family, has inevitably given rise to overschematization and generalizations which need more qualification. After all, there are no generalizations, in history or any other discipline, which do not need more qualification. And fourth, the fact that my range of expertise is primarily concentrated upon the elite at the top of the social pyramid has sometimes led to rash and ill-informed assertions about the behavior of the lower classes. These are the reasons why so many more cautious academic reviewers, on receiving a new book of mine, instinctively reach for their pens and write: "There he goes again". On the other hand, I have been saved—if saved is the right word—from Parsonian functionalism, French structuralism, and linguistic deconstruction, partly by my inability to understand what they are all about, but mainly by a gut feeling that they are too simplistic and must be wrong.

I have always been concerned with public affairs, the effect of which upon the life of learning has taken two forms. First, I have tried to save myself from being trapped in an academic ivory tower by reaching out for a larger audience. This has meant reviewing—often rather critically—a wide range of books for journals with a large national readership. This is of course a high-risk policy that usually brings its punishment, for many of my victims sooner or later find their revenge by savaging a book of mine. In addition to reviewing in national journals, I have tried to make my books accessible to the general public, by following the production of a large-scale academic study in hard-covers with that of a cheap paper-back abridged version.

One result of this concern with the world outside academia has been more profound in its consequences. Although it was not clear to me at the time, it is obvious upon reflection that the subject matter of my historical interest in the past has tended to shift in reaction to current events and current values. My first article, on the life of seamen in the Elizabethan navy, was written in 1942 on board a destroyer in the South Atlantic Ocean. My next enterprise, a book about a crooked international financier, was largely written in the socialist euphoria of the early days of the first British Labor government after the War. The third, on the aristocracy of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was researched at a time when that class was in full financial crisis, and when

great country houses were being abandoned and allowed to tumble down by the score. My work on students and faculty at universities began in the 1960s during one of the eras of greatest expansion, and of greatest optimism about higher education, that have ever existed. At that time, I was particularly intrigued by the causes of a similar educational boom between 1560 and 1680. My interest continued, in a more pessimistic vein, after the student troubles of 1968–70, and after the period of heady expansion and affluence had come to an abrupt end. My attention thereafter has been focussed on the causes of the dramatic decline of enrollments in grammar schools, universities, and Inns of Court between 1680 and 1770. My book on the family, sexuality and marriage was conceived and written in the 1970s, at a time of heightened anxiety about just these issues, provoked by rocketing divorce rates, sharply declining marital fertility, much greater sexual promiscuity, changes in sex-roles caused by the women's liberation movement, and the abrupt rise in the proportion of married women in the labor force.

An Open Elite was written at a time when the demise of the great landed families, and their role in both the rise and the fall of British greatness was reaching a crescendo of public interest, for example in the phenomenal success of the television version of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* or of Mark Girouard's book, *The English Country House*. It was begun when the elite who lived in these houses was thought to be in its death-throes, and when critics were blaming English contemporary decline on the absorption of the sons of Victorian entrepreneurs into the idle life-style and amateurish value system of the entrenched landed elite.

Although I was not aware of it at the time, I seem to have been constantly stimulated by current events into diving back into the past to discover whether similar trends and problems have occurred before, and if so how they were handled. Whether this makes for better or worse history, I do not know. A serious danger in such a present-minded inspiration for historical inquiry, however unconscious, is that the past will be seen through the perspective of the future and not in its own terms. There is a clear risk of Whiggish teleological distortion if the main question uppermost in the mind of the historian is how we got from there to here. On the other hand, it is just this explanation of the present which is the prime justification for an interest in history. The main safeguard from teleological distortion is to keep firmly in mind that people in the past were different from ourselves, and that this difference must always be investigated and explicated. The further safeguard is always to bear in mind that there is a contingency factor in history, a recognition that at all times there were alternative possibilities open,

which might have occurred but in fact did not: the Cleopatra's nose principle, if you will.

This then, for the time being, is the end of my chequered Odyssey through the life of learning. I have constantly been under attack from ogres, dragons, and sea-serpents; I have several times been seduced by attractive-seeming sirens; I have made mistakes of navigation, which at least once brought me close to shipwreck. Although I have survived and sailed on, I have not yet set eyes upon the shores of Ithaca. But the story is not, I hope, yet over.