

John Morrill

Doctor of Letters

Durham Cathedral, 26 June 2018

Nearly 40 years ago I had the privilege of being introduced to the study of early modern British history by John Morrill. One gloomy November day he gave me a supervision on an essay on English politics in the 1650s, the republican decade following the execution of Charles I. He indulged my immature musings for almost three hours. I emerged all too aware of the deep flaws in my essay but also inspired with confidence that I could say something interesting.

This moment tells us a lot about John. Often neglected in the discussion of his research is the fact that he is a quite outstanding teacher – of undergraduates as much as of more than 100 research students. He is immensely generous with his time to scholars from across the world; he had been the catalyst in the development of dozens of research projects. He is an exemplar for our obligation, as academics, to engage with the wider public – among his many roles are the Presidencies of the Cromwell Association and the Cambridge Branch of the Historical Association. And he is fiercely committed to History as a continuing discussion, believing in the value of engaging with people and opinions with which he disagrees. No one embodies more than Christopher Hill the view of the seventeenth century which John has spent his career replacing, yet he is warm in his tribute to Hill as a major influence on his own intellectual development.

Since his retirement as Professor of British and Irish History at Cambridge University, we at Durham have benefited from his almost evangelical enthusiasm for the discipline. He is a regular visitor to the History Department, offering seminars and master classes, advising colleagues on the development of their research projects and postgraduate students on their dissertations and career development, and even, as a few of today's graduands will remember, dropping in on the occasional undergraduate seminar.

John's commitment to teaching and engagement as essential parts of academic life were engrained in his own education. At Altrincham Grammar School, the inspiring

teaching of Norman Dore persuaded him to abandon Geography and apply to Trinity College, Oxford, to study History. There it wasn't Christopher Hill or Hugh Trevor-Roper, then almost household names, who turned him into a 17th-century historian, but rather J.P. Cooper, another outstanding teacher. After a research fellowship at Trinity, John moved to the University of Stirling, an experience which had a lasting impact, despite remaining there for only a year, before being lured in 1975 to Selwyn College, Cambridge.

John's life is defined as much by his family and his vocation as a deacon in the Roman Catholic church – and perhaps his love of whisky – as by his academic career. Even so, the range of his activities is exhausting. He served as Vice-Master and acting Master of Selwyn College, as Vice-President of the British Academy, and as a member of the Arts and Humanities Research Board, helping to mould its early development and identity. He was Consultant Editor for the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, with responsibility for some 6,000 17th-century lives. He instigated the updating of the Royal Historical Society's Bibliography of British and Irish History, co-ordinating the work of nearly 200 scholars from around the world, and, in a way that was almost visionary in the 1990s, committing to its publication in electronic format. The result is a resource for historians of Britain that is the envy of the rest of the world.

But what of John as a scholar? First, he shifted attention in the debate about the causes and nature of the civil wars from national issues and a social-determinist interpretation to focus on local tensions and preoccupations. This intervention led to him being identified as one of the leading figures in the movement called 'revisionism', the common points of which were the rejection of a loosely Marxist narrative of the civil wars as the consequence of a long-term process of change, as part of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, in favour of an emphasis on letting 'the past speak in its own terms' and on the contingency of events.

One not entirely unfair criticism of revisionism was that it explained why the civil war didn't happen. John next turned his attention to explaining what divided people and led them to fight, insisting that historians should take seriously what early modern people said about their own beliefs. In retrospect, this might seem to be pushing at an open door, but portraying the conflict as a 'war of religion' was immensely controversial in the 1980s.

From 'religion' he moved on to another major source of tension in the early modern body politic, the relationships between, and challenges of governing, the three kingdoms that made up the British Isles: England, Scotland and Ireland. In so doing, he became one of the key figures in the development of the 'new' British history.

Individuals have always featured prominently in John's writing, so it is entirely appropriate that his latest project, now nearing completion, is the general editorship of a new edition of the writings of Oliver Cromwell. At last we shall have a replacement for the nineteenth-century edition of Thomas Carlyle. Few of us have the privilege of walking in the footsteps of one of the giants of our profession; fewer still can hope, as John surely can, to emerge from the comparison with their reputation enhanced.

Chancellor, I present John Morrill to receive the degree of Doctor of Letters *honoris causa*.

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