

My father, Jim Holt

Ned Holt

Private Scholar

My father, Sir James, J.C., or most commonly Jim Holt, was a lover of classical music, a fisherman, a mountaineer, a cricketer, and, he would have wanted added, a Yorkshireman. Above all however, he was an active medieval historian from the aftermath of the Second World War until almost the moment of his death nearly seventy years later. Indeed, the extent to which he ceased to be one was more the product of physical infirmity in his final years, than of any diminishing interest. Medievalists who visited him during those months would have no difficulty in confirming that his response to their ideas could be just as trenchant as it would have been decades earlier. For myself, when asked by his friends how his memory was holding up, I took to answering 'It's perfect for anything before 1250 AD.'

Like anyone else he was a product of a number of factors. Despite being the son of Lancastrian parents, he would have placed his county of origin firmly amongst them, though he might have endorsed the comment that 'Yorkshire isn't a place, it's a state of mind'. He remained grateful for his education at Bradford Grammar School, to its History teachers above all. Though he could be both combative and critical in his analyses, in his academic career he had no great enthusiasm for trashing the previous generation, indeed his respect for some of them bordered on reverence. Thus, from his time at Oxford John Prestwich and Vivian Galbraith retained his regard and affection for life. The link with the Stentons helped to influence him in his move from Nottingham to the University of Reading, and he was proud to own a copy of Pollock and Maitland's *The History of English Law* which had previously belonged to Helen Cam.

For anyone of his generation the 1939-45 war was of course a massively significant experience. He was always a practical man as well as an academic. An uncle who was a carpenter spent much time with him and taught him a broad range of skills he could always rely on.

The Royal Artillery no doubt taught him more, and his research students recall that when dealing with twelfth-century Normandy he would link places with his own experiences of artillery emplacement in 1944. I visited Normandy with him in my teens. It was a strange mixture of visiting the great Norman and Angevin sites and personal reminiscence; thus, when searching for a place to stay late one afternoon ‘Oh God, I think I shelled this village’. Even without these experiences however his natural response to a practical problem was never ‘to get someone in’, but to sort it out. When a pipe broke behind a nearby house in the harsh winter of 1963, he organised all the neighbouring householders in digging a deep and lengthy trench to the nearest adequate drain. Unlike the rest of his team, he clearly relished the task. It livened up Boxing Day.

A significant body of his war time letters home have survived, and they reveal a political position that might surprise friends and colleagues from the second half of his life, for they are littered with comments which express his confirmed Marxism and his admiration at the time for the Soviet Union, and indeed Stalin. Like his fellow Bradfordian Denis Healey, and his closest Oxford friend Edmund Dell, his judgements of the politics and economics of the 1930s had led him into the Communist Party, though with all three this was not of long duration. In his case his membership ended in 1948, perhaps because of post war events, but also of frustration with attitudes of fellow party members. Quite possibly his marriage to a zoologist who was fully aware of the Lysenko fiasco and its consequences in Soviet Science may have been an influence too. Whatever the cause, he was never again tolerant of political dogma of any kind. He was, in any case, always something of a social conservative, as the final chapter of his official history of the University of Reading perhaps makes obvious. It produced in the Reading Chronicle perhaps the only genuinely critical review he ever received. The critic felt that he was unsympathetic to the social changes of the sixties. That was certainly true and did not change. His most common remark when confronted with novelty was ‘this won’t last five minutes’. In my earliest memory of hearing it, it was being applied to the Beatles. In one of the last it was his reaction to my attempt to explain the Internet.

His own father had sung in choirs accompanying the Halle in the great concert halls of Lancashire and Yorkshire, and planted in him musical tastes which were unchallenged thereafter. The Germanic classical and romantic tradition was at their heart, but with the logical addition of Elgar, and also of Sibelius. Outside that he made few distinctions; the word ‘pop’ he decided could be applied not just to all parts of the popular canon, but to folk ballads and even Italian opera. Oddly the one exception he made to this catch-all was for jazz, perhaps encountered in the forces. This he usually referred to as ‘honky-tonk’. I don’t think he was aware of the term’s origins.

For the last two decades of his life he was a widower. The absence of my mother freed him to walk the hills further than care of his knees should have allowed, and to purchase flashier cars than she would have accepted, but it was a heavy loss. Some places they had shared he shunned thereafter, and in general her memory remained a theoretical control over his actions which I could never match. I quickly resorted instead to saying ‘Mum would have said...’. It is worth noting the expression of gratitude to her in several books, but particularly in his history of the University of Reading: ‘The book is the briefer and the clearer for her criticism.’

Maintaining academic work lasted long into retirement, but in his final years there was inevitably a decline in overall commitment. One of the first things to go was a willingness to engage in correspondence about Robin Hood, a matter on which he had written at length, though he occasionally referred to this area of his research as ‘slumming it’. So the letters from amateur enthusiasts for the outlaw, often from distant parts of the globe, lay unanswered. Other things followed. Many, however, he continued to care about deeply. These never left him. They included the research and on-going careers of those postgraduate students he had encountered at Cambridge; it was the opportunity for this sort of involvement which had most attracted him to the Chair there. Without doubt they also included the *Acta* project which has come to fruition in this volume.

Cambridge gained his regard with the years he spent there (though the word ‘home’ was never applied to anywhere outside the West Riding of Yorkshire). Despite its status, the University had to work hard to do so, for he had a deep affection for Reading. In this

process of settling, the role of the Cambridge History Faculty and its medievalists was matched by that of Fitzwilliam College, where he became Master. Nevertheless, the move was not an automatic one, or one he sought. A few years before the Cambridge appointment, the medieval chair at Oxford, his own University to which he had a strong loyalty, became vacant. After some thought, he decided not to apply. Nothing could more clearly indicate how positively he felt about the University of Reading. However, in 1978 he received a long and persuasive letter from Geoffrey Elton, asking him to accept a soon to be made direct offer of the Cambridge Medieval Chair. It was an offer he thought hard about, but did not in the end regret accepting.

As for the *Acta*, I am no medievalist, and would not wish to pass any judgement, save to say that attending the launch in 2019 was enough for it to be clear that the project had been worth the efforts. He would have been delighted. In his last months, increasingly I managed and read to him his correspondence. Some things raised little interest, but the minutes of the *Acta* Project's meetings never ceased to receive attention. It was a project he believed to be important, in the hands of historians he trusted to get things right. They clearly have.