

Jim Holt: A Very Personal Memoir¹

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I have attempted to explain the importance of Jim Holt as a medieval historian in the memoir I wrote for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, and in the introduction, co-authored with John Hudson, to the third, posthumous edition of his *Magna Carta*. What follows are personal memories and reflections which would have been out of place in either of those more formal settings, but which may help to complement the picture painted there, and Ned Holt's and Janet Whalley's pieces printed above.

In Jim's first year in Cambridge, 1978-9, he offered to run classes in medieval English history for those who were attempting to prepare for Part I of the Tripos that summer. The idea was to spruce up a paper usually studied during one's first term. I enlisted. Amongst others who did so was Giles Brown, son of R. Allen Brown of King's College, London, a distinguished specialist on medieval English and Norman history.

The classes were held in the History Faculty. The first one was on the subject of feudal military service. We were taken through the evidence on which would be based Jim's paper, 'The Introduction of Knight Service into England', eventually published in 1986, and subsequently reprinted in his *Colonial England*. The class was very satisfying in an intellectual sense – rigorous, and incontrovertible in its conclusions. I still use for teaching purposes a slightly updated version of the work sheet with which Jim supplied us. Unaware that Allen Brown's son was in the class, Jim was very dismissive of his various publications on the subject. Later in the term, when Giles was for some reason not present, Jim asked us why on earth no-one had alerted him to the connection. But there was no reason for him to have worried: Giles had certainly not taken offence on his father's behalf.

Eventually, we got onto the subject of inheritance, and the material which would form the basis for Jim's Presidential Addresses to the Royal Historical Society in the 1980s, also reprinted in *Colonial England*. He told us that the most important thing to master was Milsom. None of us had ever heard of Milsom. Jim professed astonishment. He said that Milsom's *The Legal Framework of English Feudalism*, published two years before, had been justifiably described as the most important book on medieval English history since Maitland's *Domesday Book and Beyond* (1897). We should all have been required to read it. There was no time to lose. He ordered someone to go downstairs to the Seeley Library to borrow a copy. Not only was no copy available, the book was not in the library catalogue. For Jim, this beggared belief, *a fortiori* because Milsom was a Professor in Cambridge, albeit in the Law Faculty. Jim went off to his office, came back with his own copy, and instructed two of us to make photocopies for the class on the Faculty's xerox machine. Interestingly antinomian, I thought, even at the time; but desperate needs obviously merited desperate and speedy remedies. The following weekend I did nothing other than struggle through a book which is only some 200 pages long, but requires ferocious concentration. Thereafter my understanding of the subject was permanently transformed.

In my third year I opted for the Specified Subject on the Norman Conquest, and asked my Director of Studies if he could persuade Jim to supervise me. My DoS was sceptical - Jim was as a statutory professor under no obligation to give supervisions to any undergraduate, and under arcane Cambridge regulations was not allowed to be paid for any he chose to do. Jim nevertheless agreed to teach me. For the Michaelmas Term 1979 I went each week to Emmanuel College, walking with excited trepidation past the duck pond in the Paddock as I anticipated the exacting hour ahead. The first essay was about Duke William's claim to the English throne. I spent an intense week trying to make sense of all the conflicting accounts. Then, in a moment of revelation, I realised that there were two irreconcilable accounts, one English and pre-Conquest, and one Norman and post-Conquest. I presented this solution to Jim. He responded, 'That's exactly what Galbraith thought.' Galbraith - 'the Old Man' - thereafter featured frequently in our discussions - on

Domesday Book, for instance, a subject on which Jim unravelled the knots in which I had entangled myself. He was direct, clear, challenging, uncompromising, and in total command of all the source material. He had already worked out most of the argument which would become '1086', presented to the scholarly world during the novo-centenary celebrations. He indulged my interests in political thought by setting me a final essay on the Norman Anonymous - 'a medieval Enoch Powell', he pronounced, a perfect characterisation which I have occasionally quoted since.

He commanded respect, even obedience. On one occasion he was trying to lecture when builders were very noisily engaged in the endless losing battle to shore up the Faculty building. Jim pointed at one of them through the window, and shouted 'No!' The noise stopped. Instantly. He even intimidated the Cambridge medievalists, and the research students, who referred to him as 'Boncruncher'. He did so effortlessly, with a brisk self-confidence. His views were generally evident on his face. After fighting his way across northern Europe in 1944-45, all subsequent problems were kept in perspective.

For my first two and a half years as a research student, my supervisor was Walter Ullmann. The more work I did, the more I concentrated on English evidence, and therefore continued to talk to Jim about my research from time to time. When it became clear that Walter was dying, I asked Jim if he would take over as supervisor afterwards, and was relieved and delighted that he agreed. By then he had been elected as Master of Fitzwilliam College. Our meetings thenceforth were arranged by his kind and chasteningly efficient secretary, Janet Whalley, and invariably took place in his study there. The main bookcase, I recall, juxtaposed an impressive series of *Wisdens* with the publications of the Pipe Roll Society. It was presided over by photographic portraits of Sir Frank and Lady Stenton.

At a medievalists' garden party in Selwyn College, Jim was having yet another conversation with me about my failure to finish my thesis - a potential problem about which he displayed exemplary patience. I always found him calm, measured, indeed unflappable, with a ready remedy to hand. He advised me to enter the Alexander Prize. He pointed out that there were any number of PhDs, but at most only one

Alexander Prize per year. Winning it set one apart. So I entered. I think it was on the same occasion that conversation turned again to Galbraith. I said how much I wished I had met him. 'He would have loved you', said Jim.

His foresightedness manifested itself in other ways. When he became John Hudson's temporary supervisor, he told me to invite John to lunch when John was visiting him in Cambridge, because he thought it very important for the future that we should get to know each other. So I did that too. The rest is history.

On the day before my interview for a job in Oxford, he had me in for lunch in Fitzwilliam, to prepare me. He ruminated on what we knew of the shortlist, which also included John Hudson. Jim observed, 'The ladies of St Hugh's may go for John, because John is a very charming young man, whereas you....', and his voice just tailed away. I think it was the only time I ever knew him to be lost for words.

Inevitably I saw less of him once I had moved to Oxford, but not long afterwards John and I arranged a *Festschrift* for him. We held a dinner in Fitzwilliam to present him with a copy, signed by all the contributors. In a post-prandial speech, his characteristic succinctness deserted him: he said a lot about his former pupil and colleague Anne Pallister, who had killed herself in the 1980s. A decade after the event, he was still scarred by it. I was confirmed in my view that the bluff, non-sense exterior did not entirely conceal deep emotions – something also suggested by the sudden onset of serious asthma when his sister died unexpectedly. It was only at that point that someone who had for decades looked a vigorous twenty or thirty years younger than he was, abruptly began to age.

In 2001 I persuaded him to speak, together with Toby Milsom, in Westminster Abbey at a ceremony to unveil a memorial tablet to Maitland in Poets' Corner. Toby had taken exception to the fact that the tablet characterised Maitland as an historian. He was emphatic that Maitland had been such an exceptional legal historian because he had been a lawyer first and last. Jim stressed that Maitland had made it into Poets' Corner on the basis of his singular gifts as an historian – 'I bet Toby has never read *Domesday Book and Beyond*', he later observed to me in private. The antinomianism was still in evidence on that very grand occasion: he was determined to exploit the opportunity to

inspect the royal tombs, clambering over barriers in cheery disregard for the authority of the Abbey staff. Medieval architecture was a passion: one of the many things for which I remain grateful to him was his urging me to visit the church at Thaon, set beside a stream in a remote glade about 10 kms outside Caen. It is one of my favourite spots on earth.

He continued to read and criticise everything I wrote. I still have typescripts with his small, blunt, terse comments in biro down the margins. ‘This will really annoy a lot of people’ was high praise indeed, delivered orally over fish & chips in the King’s Arms, on a rare visit to Oxford. But praise was not his default mode. ‘Too Mahlerian. Aim instead for Sibelius: spare, disciplined, effective’ – this of part of the book which I eventually dedicated jointly to him and Walter. He might have been rather critical of the draft, but he was visibly affected at the book launch. He insisted on attending my lecture to the Selden Society in Lincoln’s Inn in 2010, possibly the last time he was able to leave Cambridge. He plonked himself in the middle of the front row, and gave every impression of being in charge. It was an air which came naturally. He was not capable of coming out to celebrate afterwards, and went straight home by taxi – an extraordinary manifestation of attachment from a Yorkshireman. I was all the more moved by his determination to be present despite his by then obvious infirmity.

I went to visit him three or four times a year after he became housebound and later bedridden. He reminisced about the War (though not the grim aspects) and his undergraduate days, about John and Menna Prestwich, and Galbraith. He remained capable of very sharp comments about anything to do with medieval history, however much the rest of his mind began to cloud over. When it was suggested to him that Samson, abbot of Bury St Edmunds might have been the true author of *Glanvill*, he was so provoked that he not only declared the suggestion to be ‘bloody rubbish’, but also almost managed to rise from his sickbed.

On one occasion I took my other half with me. He was noticeably perkier than usual, and there was quite a lot of joshing of me. As we left, she observed that he was probably the oldest and certainly the most infirm man ever to flirt with her. Every time I went, there was a

different agency nurse. Some he got on with, some he didn't. I had an unusually long conversation with one who was very decidedly in the former camp. She wanted to know what he had done in life. I explained, and concluded, 'He's a great man, you know.' She answered: 'Yes, if we could ask God to spare people like him, we would.'

At his funeral, excerpts were played from Elgar's First Symphony and Beethoven's Grosse Fugue. The combination of rigorous intellectualism and deep emotion seemed to express the counterpoint of his personality.

There was a coda that would have appealed to one of those medieval chroniclers about the reliability of whom Jim tended to be sceptical. The inscribed copy of the book which I had presented to him at the launch party was mislaid when his house was being cleared, and disappeared. It must have been included in one of the job lots of modern scholarly monographs sold at the auction of most of his library. I thought I would never see it again, and regretted its loss keenly. Not long afterwards, all my own copies of the book were destroyed in a flood in my College room. But then Jim's inscribed copy just happened to come up for sale on Amazon. So it found its way back to me, and is now my sole copy.

Notes

- 1 I should like to thank John Gillingham, Ned Holt, John Hudson, Magnus Ryan, and Matthew Strickland for commenting on drafts of this piece