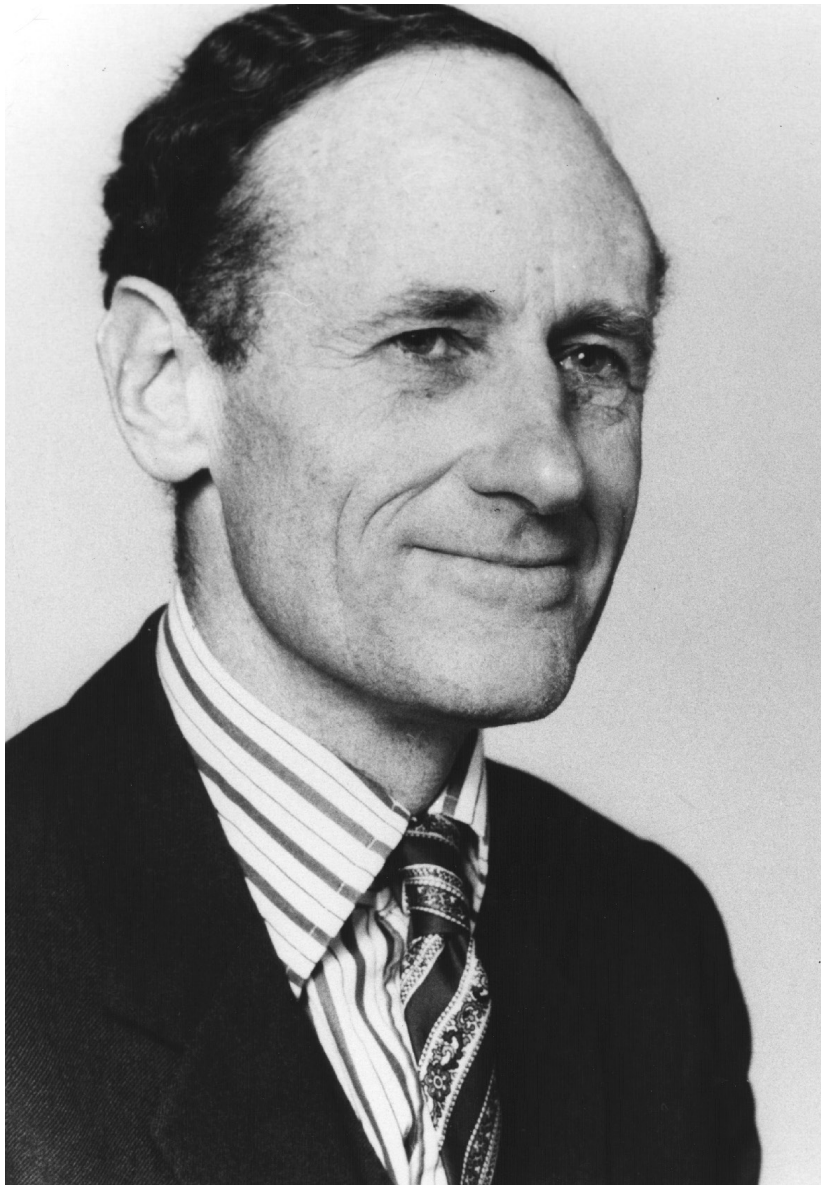

PIERS GERALD MACKESY

Piers Gerald Mackesy
1924–2014

Piers Mackesy was born on 15 September 1924, the son of Lieutenant Colonel Pierse Joseph (Pat) Mackesy RE, DSO, MC and Leonora Dorothy Rivers Cook. It is perhaps unsurprising that he became a military historian. His paternal grandfather was a lieutenant general who fought in the Crimea, the Indian Mutiny and Afghanistan, and while his maternal grandfather James Cook was from an Aberdeen shipping family, his maternal grandmother Norah O'Sullivan had an Indian medical service father and other family members had fought with distinction in India.

Piers was born at the house of his maternal grandparents, Enfield, Cults, Aberdeenshire, and, with his parents frequently moving to new postings as his father's military career progressed, he regarded Cults as his 'one firm base'. After experiencing India as an infant, while his father was Chief Instructor at the Staff College at Quetta (1927–30) and where his love of hunting began (led on a donkey in pursuit of a jackal!), he and his younger brother Anthony returned to Cults for eighteen months when he was four until his parents came home, and thereafter he spent many holidays there, entranced by the Aberdeenshire countryside, walking the hills in all seasons, and fascinated also by the tales of empire that his grandmother fed him. He dedicated his second, and most significant, book, *The War for America*, to his grandmother, and it was to Aberdeenshire that he returned when he retired and where he died.

His father had surveyed the Gold Coast and the wilds of Nigeria before the First World War and the young Piers was equally entranced by his 'tales of puff-adders, dug-out canoes in pools swarming with hippos, and the pursuit of wounded leopards'. 'Pat' Mackesy served in the invasion

Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy, XV, 299–324.
Posted 15 September 2016.

of German Togoland and the Cameroons, and his gallantry medals were won on the Western Front, after which he was a staff officer with the British expedition to Murmansk during the Russian Civil War and then in the military mission to the White General Denikin in southern Russia. After Quetta he was appointed commanding officer of the RE Depot Battalion at Chatham, then a staff appointment at the War Office, followed by command of the 3rd Infantry brigade at Bordon Camp in Hampshire from 1935–7. His son considered school holidays at Bordon the happiest time of his childhood and formative of his understanding as a military historian. Besides his father's infantry brigade, the camp garrison also included two horsed field artillery brigades. The mechanisation of the army had barely begun and horses were everywhere. Every morning he rode out past army waggons drawn by pairs of horses or mules and soldiers exercising chargers and gun-horses. He later observed that 'In spirit the British army of the 'thirties was not far removed from the deeds which won the Empire, and it required no great step of imagination to move back further in time to the eighteenth century about which I was later to write.'[1]

His formal education came at the then tough Cargilfield Preparatory School in Edinburgh, followed in 1938 by Wellington College in Berkshire. Sir Michael Howard, entering two years before Piers, described his fellow Wellingtonians as mostly boys 'with army backgrounds, mainly from the gunners and Royal Engineers: cheerful, noisy extroverts, but friendly and remarkably tolerant'.[2] All of this fits Piers exactly except that he was the opposite of a noisy extrovert. He recalled a wandering early life with the army, a 'fairly isolated nursery life with few friends among the neighbouring children' and his walks in the Aberdeenshire hills were usually alone, so that the shyness and natural diffidence that struck so many of those who knew him later may well have been there from the start. Nevertheless, after Cargifield, Wellington seemed to Piers a haven of civilisation, with separate cubicle rooms giving privacy and time to read: he eagerly devoured Fortescue's *History of the British Army*. In the sixth form, like Howard before him, he fell under the spell of two charismatic teachers: Robin Gordon-Walker, who developed his love of English literature, and the Tudor and Stuart historian Max Reese—'not only an exciting historian with a passion for literature, but a good stylist and a punctilious corrector of written work: no careless punctuation, slack phrasing, redundant verbiage or lapse of taste escaped the red ink of his pen'.[3] The lessons

[1] PGM Notes (see *Note* at the end of this memoir for the key to initials).
[2] Michael Howard, *Captain Professor: a Life in War and Peace* (London, 2006), p. 31.
[3] PGM Notes.

stuck, as all those subsequently taught by Piers will readily testify. Michael Howard dedicated his breakthrough book, *The Franco-Prussian War* (London, 1961) to Reese, and when the latter departed to the Second World War he was replaced by Raymond Carr—'a wild and exciting young man just down from Oxford'! Like Howard before him, Piers was inspired to pursue his academic studies beyond Wellington and in his last term in 1942 secured a scholarship to Christ Church, Oxford.[4] At Wellington Piers developed his enjoyment of writing, influenced by the example of his mother who in the 1930s began writing articles and then novels under the pseudonym Leonora Starr, based on her experiences of army life.[5]

Christ Church and writing had to wait, however, as two things happened which were directly formative of the history he was later to write. Events near the start of the Second World War destroyed his father's career and reputation. His nemesis was Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty and ever restless for ways to seize the initiative against the enemy. Churchill lighted upon the occupation of the neutral Norwegian port of Narvik to shut the route of the iron-ore traffic from Sweden to Germany. 'Pat' Mackesy, by then a major general, was given command of a small hastily improvised force for the land operation. Before it could be launched, however, the Germans invaded Norway and seized Narvik themselves. The Navy crushed the German destroyer flotilla at the port and Churchill agitated through Lord Cork and Orrery, an aggressive naval commander brought from retirement for this expedition, for Mackesy to oust the German garrison from the town by an immediate frontal assault. Mackesy, however, judged that his force, intended for peaceful occupation—not frontal assault—was too small and ill-equipped for the task and proposed to delay until reinforced and adequately equipped. Churchill raged at the delay, had Lord Cork put in overall command and finally procured Mackesy's recall when he still resisted. Narvik finally fell six weeks later to the flanking approach originally planned by Mackesy, but then had to be evacuated on the fall of France.

Churchill admitted that the Norwegian campaign was a fiasco, but with the burden of an earlier debacle at Gallipoli to his name, he sought to put responsibility this time on Mackesy: recalled, shunted into a staff

[4] They both repaid their debt to the college on its centenary in 1959 by joining with three other distinguished Wellingtonians, Giles St Aubyn, Sir Harold Nicholson and Michael Brock, to write a series of articles edited by Howard as *Wellingtonian Studies*, *Essays on the First Duke of Wellington by Five Old Wellingtonian Historians* (Crowthorne and Aldershot, 1959). Piers' contribution was on 'Wellington the General'.

[5] *Hear the Bugle* (London, 1937), *Colonel's Lady* (London, 1937).

post for a few months and then retired from the service. His son Piers was fifteen years old at the time and felt the disgrace and its unfairness deeply. With a military pension reduced by government cuts in the depression years and never raised in his lifetime, the family was left in straitened financial circumstances. For a short while his father strove to make a living as military correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* but its proprietor was a friend of Churchill and his employment was short, so that it was Piers' mother who kept the family finances afloat, to meet the school fees for Piers and his brother, by writing over thirty romantic novels for Herbert Jenkins or Mills & Boon in the next fifteen years under the pen names of Leonora Starr and Dorothy Rivers.

Worse was to follow as his father was publicly humiliated in 1948 when the first volume of Churchill's war memoirs, *The Gathering Storm*, was published and subjected Mackesy to particularly scathing criticism: 'The Narvik attack, so brilliantly opened by the Navy, was paralysed by the refusal of the military commander to run what was admittedly a desperate risk.'[6] To Churchill desperate risks were there to be run, and Mackesy's obstructiveness was contrasted to 'the absolutely reckless gambling in lives and ships and the almost frenzied vigour … which had gained the Germans their most brilliant success.' In this difference, he added 'the disadvantages under which we lay in waging this campaign are obvious'.[7] Piers remained permanently resentful of the treatment of his father and it took many years before he could speak of Churchill with equanimity. One unwitting American postgraduate who let slip his admiration for Churchill 'launched him on a tirade about the Norwegian campaign and how he despised the man for what he had done to his father'. 'Great men sometimes have dirty behinds' was his verdict on another occasion.[8]

Once embarked on his academic career, he dedicated his first book to the memory of his father (who died in 1956) and he wrote two articles in defence of his conduct at Narvik which served to put a stop to the

[6] Even General Sir Henry Pownall, a leading member of the 'Syndicate' which assisted Churchill with his writing, warned that 'With all the facts we now have, many people will think Mackesy was right.' D. Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London, 2005), p. 124.

[7] W. S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 1: *The Gathering Storm* (London, 1948), pp. 488–9, 511.

[8] JH to MD 21/10/2014; PA to MD 19/2/2016. It was as well that he does not seem to have been aware that in 1943 MI5 was intercepting and reading the general's correspondence for fear that he might let slip information from well-placed friends to others who were opponents of Churchill. A. Danchev and D. Todman (eds.), *War Diaries 1939–1945: Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke* (London, 2001), pp. 326, 456.

repetition of some of Churchill's more egregious misrepresentations.[9] His father's portrait as a major general hung prominently in his study presiding over generations of students whom he taught. He later wrote that the whole unhappy episode produced in him 'a sense of alienation from what was later called the Establishment'. It certainly influenced his approach to history. It gave him reason to critically examine established views, to deconstruct the claims and statements of the great, and to be cautious of accepting the scapegoating of others (Lord George Germain, Henry Dundas) without close scrutiny of the evidence against them. Further, his meticulous research into the Narvik operation, during which he interviewed leading participants on both sides, led him to an understanding of all the complexities and uncertainties of amphibious operations (so many of which were conspicuous at Narvik) far in excess of his academic contemporaries and gave him a unique insight and expertise on the British way of warfare.

In January 1943 Piers suspended thoughts of Oxford and enlisted. Soon he had the further advantage of being able to write on warfare from direct experience. In July 1944 he was commissioned into the Royal Scots Greys and at the end of August he landed in Normandy just after the Allied breakout,[10] catching up with his regiment at the Somme. He commanded a Sherman tank in the pursuit to the Maas as part of the 4th Armoured Brigade, which was used for all kinds of operations from supporting infantry attacks to exploitation and pursuit in small regimental groups. Soon he was brought into Regimental Headquarters as troop leader and liaison officer and did a short spell as Regimental Intelligence Officer. The Scots Greys served on the 'island' south of Arnhem after the airborne forces withdrew and then took part in the final advance from the Rhine to the Baltic. He retained an abiding memory of the last day of the war when his regiment was sent on a dash from the Elbe through Mecklenburg to Wismar on the Baltic, with infantry of the 6th Airborne Division riding on the back of their tanks, racing across the rear of the retreating German eastern front army to get there before the Russians and forcing their way through long traffic jams of German troops who, though still officially at war, grimly and silently watched them go by.

[9] P. G. Mackesy, 'Churchill on Narvik', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution*, 115: 660 (1970), 28–33, updated in P. G. Mackesy, 'Churchill as chronicler: the Narvik Episode 1940', *History Today*, 35 (1985), 14–20.

[10] About which he wrote, P. G. Mackesy, 'Saint-Lo – Falaise 1944', in C. Falls (ed.), *Great Military Battles* (London, 1964).

Piers Mackesy was in that last generation of historians who experienced warfare as participants. Surviving unharmed, he thought he had a fortunate war and that what he saw of the atmosphere of operations and life in the field among regimental companions assisted his imagination when he came to write about wars of the past. 'Gibbon would have put it better', he added in his typically self-effacing way! A year with the army of occupation and the horses it had acquired followed, but his hopes of early release to go up to Christ Church in 1946 were dashed when he was seconded to the War Graves Service, creating a large military cemetery in the Reichswald. He described it as a curious life, surrounded by the deprivation of post-war Germany, macabre and isolated, but also very free as his own master with a small British unit and a large German labour force. After demobilisation he did not lose his attachment to the army: in 1950 he joined the Territorial Army, serving as a captain.

He was at last able to take up his scholarship to study history at Oxford in October 1947. Like many war-deferred entrants, he found it hard to adjust, and it took him eighteen months to get into his academic stride with the support of his principal tutor, Charles Stuart. Unsurprisingly, given his background, he took the military history special subject with set books of Clausewitz's *On War* and Hamley's *Operations of War* and the study of the Peninsular War which was being examined for the last time when he took Finals in 1950.[11] Piers had obtained a job with Shell before he found he had been awarded a First and saw the opportunity to continue his studies at Oxford in pursuit of an academic career. Seeking a subject for his doctorate he was tempted by the Italian Renaissance, but his military background and education prevailed. He began to research General Gage and the opening of the American War of Independence, but dining at All Souls as a Fellowship candidate he was alerted by the Warden to John R. Alden's *General Gage in America*, which had been recently published in the United States.[12] This fortunate encounter led him to turn instead to the Peninsular War period of his undergraduate special subject, and he took up a suggestion via Charles Stuart from the military historian C. T. Atkinson 'that the Mediterranean theatre in the Napoleonic Wars had not been "done"'.[13] It was a decision that would make his academic career.

[11] J. B. Hattendorf, 'The study of war history at Oxford, 1862–1990', in J. B. Hattendorf and M. H. Murfett (eds.), *The Limitations of Military Power: Essays Presented to Professor Norman Gibbs on his Eightieth Birthday* (Basingstoke, 1990), pp. 22–3.

[12] J. R. Alden, *General Gage in America, Being Principally a History of his Role in the American Revolution* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1948).

[13] PGM Notes.

Piers later recognised that the subject proved to be perfect for him. Churchill's 'perverse account' of his father's Narvik operations had 'shocked me into a broader view of military history than the operational and regimental history on which I had been fed as a child. I discovered the importance of grand strategy and ministerial direction, and the difficulties of relations between statesmen and their military and naval leaders.'[14] His study of the war in the Mediterranean after 1803 enabled him to apply his new insight to develop that wider view of war history. For a start, the lack of significant military operations forced him away from the traditional campaign history that he had studied in his undergraduate course and it led him into a detailed consideration of the role of the navy throughout the war and of the nature of sea power—at a time when the struggle at sea was still written in terms of battles and consequently as though it ended at Trafalgar. He was led to consider the strategic impact of sea power and why such vast resources were poured into a theatre that could never be decisive. He concluded that:

> In such a theatre the development of the war can no more be described in purely military terms than could the grand strategy of the cabinet. The history of a war, as opposed to purely military history, must be a synthesis of naval and military affairs, of resources and of foreign policy. These are the threads which I have tried to weave into the history of the war in the Mediterranean.[15]

Two further insights followed from this. One was an appreciation of the role of the naval theatre commander from 1805–10, Admiral Lord Collingwood. Hitherto simply regarded as Nelson's friend and second in command at Trafalgar, Piers showed him as in direct contact with so many foreign powers and two to four weeks away from direction from London that he had to make policy for himself effectively as a floating secretary of state, harmonising many considerations in a frequently changing situation. He expressed the hope that 'If, in examining the round of tasks of Collingwood's fleet and placing them in their wider setting as a major contribution to the great struggle with the grand Empire, I have done anything to reveal the real stature of Collingwood as a commander, I shall feel well rewarded.'[16] He helped revive naval history which since Corbett and Richmond had degenerated into popular histories of battles by presenting a wider appreciation of the role of sea power as revealed through a detailed scrutiny of primary sources.

[14] Ibid.
[15] P. G. Mackesy, *The War in the Mediterranean, 1803–1810* (London and Cambridge, MA, 1957), p. x.
[16] Ibid., p. xi.

His other insight, which became the basis of most of his subsequent books, was that 'The despatch of an expedition … was not only a beginning, but also an end—not merely the beginning of a campaign, but the end of much planning and divining of the future; of the weighing of hopes and fears, the reconciling of conflicting proposals, and finally the choice of one course from many possibilities.'[17] From start to end of his long career he was fascinated by how decisions were made.

Piers later recalled that at the time he submitted his thesis in 1953 'the study of war as an academic subject was not only unfashionable but perhaps even morally questionable, as I sensed from reaction to my own choice of subject as a graduate student'.[18] He generously attributed the subsequent transformation to the appointment of Norman Gibbs to the Chichele Chair of the History of War at Oxford, as usual downplaying the significance of his own contribution. He began his doctorate at Christ Church but then was awarded the Robinson Postgraduate Scholarship at Oriel in 1951. An essay 'The Royal Navy in the Mediterranean from Trafalgar to the Revolt of Spain, 1805–1808', based on his thesis, won London University's Julian Corbett Prize Essay competition in 1952,[19] and in the same year he published a short article on the logistical limitations of the 1805 Naples expedition.[20] It was enough to win him a Harkness Fellowship at Harvard in 1953–4, though apparently not enough to win him an assistant lectureship at Manchester—fortunately! He later confided to a former student that 'Looking back on life, some of the benign turning points have been failures to get what one applied for. A lectureship under Namier at Manchester would have destroyed me!'[21] In 1954 he was awarded a DPhil for his thesis 'British Strategy in the Mediterranean, 1803–1810' and published a further related article.[22] While at Harvard he applied for a vacant Fellowship at Pembroke College, Oxford, and his references were impressive enough for the appointment panel to pay for him to be flown home for the interview (he understood this was a first for a history appointment at Oxford) and he was elected a Fellow at Pembroke in 1954, the position he held for the rest of his academic career.

[17] Ibid., p. vii.
[18] P. G. Mackesy, 'Foreword', in Hattendorf and Murfett (eds.), *The Limitations of Military Power*, p. x.
[19] A summary was published in the *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 27 (1954), 98–101
[20] P. G. Mackesy, 'The provision of horses for the Naples expedition 1805', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, 30 (1952), 31–3.
[21] PGM to JH 12/6/2002.
[22] P. G. Mackesy, 'To rescue His Holiness – the mission of the *Alceste* in 1808', *Mariner's Mirror: The Journal of the Society for Nautical Research*, 40 (1954), 206–11.

He was already working up a new research subject, but sought to wrap up the former one with a two-part article in 1955 and his first book, based on his DPhil thesis,[23] *The War in the Mediterranean, 1803–1810*, published in 1957.[24] Piers described it as 'an attempt to cut a vertical shaft into the mass of material on the war, and in a limited field and period to search out some of the data on which a unified history of the war must be based'.[25] For his next book he sought to extend this search from a single theatre to the whole war. *The War for America 1775–1783* was published in 1964 and it won him a lasting international reputation.[26] Don Higginbotham in the *American Historical Review* hailed it as 'an important book that no serious student of the War of Independence can afford to neglect' and J. R. Western in the *English Historical Review* considered it 'a military equivalent to the rewriting of British political history undertaken in the volumes of *England in the Age of the American Revolution* inaugurated by Sir Lewis Namier, and elsewhere'.[27] In a lecture in 1974, John Shy saw it as giving 'a radically new perspective on the Revolutionary War by putting it into a global context and making us see it from London …' and in his Introduction to the 1993 reprint Shy hailed it 'truly a classic' as a historical study of strategy.[28]

The War for America took Piers ten years to complete. He had made good use of his Harkness Fellowship at Harvard where he began it. Arriving from depressed and devastated Europe, the experience of bright and booming America was something he always recalled with pleasure and it energised his research, completing his book during a Visiting Fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton in 1961–2.[29] It was based on thorough exploration of the available archives, from the eighteenth-century manuscript acquisitions of American universities to the private papers of participants in British country houses and palaces as well as the British Museum and National Maritime Museum, and he thor-

[23] P. G. Mackesy, 'Collingwood and Ganteaume: the French offensive in the Mediterranean, January to April 1808' (in two parts), *Mariner's Mirror*, 41 (1955), 3–14, 137–48.

[24] In 1981 it was reprinted by Greenwood Publishing, Westport, CT.

[25] Mackesy, *War in the Mediterranean*, p. vii.

[26] P. G. Mackesy, *The War for America 1775–1783* (London and Cambridge, MA, 1964). Reprinted with an Introduction by J. W. Shy (Lincoln, NE, Bison Books edition, 1993).

[27] D. Higginbotham, *American Historical Review*, 70 (1965), 475–6; J. R. Western, *English Historical Review*, 81 (1965), 115–18.

[28] J. W. Shy, 'The American Revolution today', Harmon Memorial Lecture Series, US Air Force Academy, p. 2. Available at <http://www.usafa.edu/df/dfh/docs/Harmon17.pdf> (accessed 29 March 2016); J. W. Shy, 'Introduction', in Mackesy, *The War for America* (Lincoln, NE, 1993), p. xxi.

[29] While at Princeton he gave a trial run of his argument which was published as P. G. Mackesy, 'British strategy in the War of American Independence', *The Yale Review*, 52 (1963), 539–57.

oughly immersed himself in the Admiralty, Colonial Office, State Papers and War Office Papers at the Public Record Office. Reviewers acknowledged the vast range of his research that enabled him to write so authoritatively. Serendipitous timing added to impeccable scholarship. He had returned to the subject that he had originally intended for his doctorate but with a vision transformed by his work on the Mediterranean. The history of the War of Independence, which had become stuck in the rut of studies of field operations in America for a hundred years, was starting to come to life again as a result of the impact of war in the middle of the twentieth century and its continuation in the Cold War, Korean War and frequent insurgencies. Piers explained that:

> I consciously avoided the well-explored American perspective, in order to see the struggle through the eyes of the British government as a global war in which the American colonies constituted only one of many theatres of war. It was a fortunate subject; first because this was a major war of international interest, already heavily-researched but in a lop-sided fashion and now needing to be stood on its head; and also by chance, because the book's publication in 1964 coincided with the hotting-up of the Vietnam war, with which my analysis of the British government's military problems in America furnished suggestive parallels. In a sense the book expanded with this, as reverses in Vietnam prompted Americans to ask questions about revolutionary warfare and national policy.[30]

John Shy concurred: American readers in the mid-1960s saw the book as:

> … a brilliantly developed historical case of how a great imperial power had stumbled from military victory into a disastrous military and political quagmire. Especially for American academics who disliked and opposed the war in Vietnam, Britain's resort to force in America following the spectacular but unsettling British victory of 1763, and the course of the United States in Southeast Asia since 1945, offered parallels that leapt off the pages of this new book.[31]

Together with the bicentenary celebrations, Piers became much in demand as a speaker in America, and a series of lectures and visiting fellowships followed: Visiting Professor at the California Institute of Technology (1966), Visiting Fellow at the Huntington Library (1966–7), Member of the Council of the Institute for Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg (1970–3) and commentator at the symposium on the American Revolution at Williamsburg (1971), Bland Lee Lecturer at Clark University, Bicentennial Lecturer at the National Historical Society,

[30] PGM Notes.
[31] Shy, 'Introduction', p. xx.

National War College and Peabody Museum in 1975 and at Northeastern University, Boston (1976), Introductory Lecturer in the Bicentennial Symposium at the Naval War College, Newport, RI, and Commentator at the Bicentennial Symposium at the US Military Academy, West Point (1976), Rockefeller Foundation Visiting Fellowship at the Bellagio Study Center (1980), and speaker at the fourth annual symposium on the American Revolution of the United States Capitol Historical Society (1981).[32] And it has not stopped there. In *The War for America* Piers showed Britain's military effort:

> was based on a better reasoned concept than mere reconquest and policing by her few regular troops. She relied, as General Robertson has said, on helping the good Americans to overcome the bad: the British army would break the power of the rebels, and organise and support the loyalists who would police the country.[33]

It was a sophisticated counter-insurgent strategy as adopted by the United States, not just in Vietnam but subsequently in Iraq and Afghanistan, so that this 'brilliant, classic history of the American Revolution' is still being seen as relevant to Americans into the twenty-first century.[34]

This was, however, an unintended by-product of the book and Piers Mackesy's objects were more fundamental. He explained that 'The first purpose of this book is to examine the making and execution of strategy in one of England's greatest eighteenth-century wars, and to create a detailed model of the machine at work; the second, to judge a war Ministry in the light of circumstances rather than results.' The book was 'not a history of the War of Independence, but a study of British strategy and leadership in a world war …'. He felt that while strategy had gained its rightful place in the history of the twentieth century, 'the direction of war before 1914 is a little known area of British history'. It fell between two kinds of traditional history. To political historians it was a marginal activity of government which occasionally erupted to disturb the course of diplomacy, debate and electioneering. To military historians it was simply

[32] A number of these lectures were subsequently published. See P. G. Mackesy, 'Could the British Have Won the War of Independence?', Bland-Lee Lecture, 1975 (Worcester, MA, 1976); P. G. Mackesy, 'The Redcoat revived', in W. M. Fowler and W. Coyle (eds.), *The American Revolution: Changing Perspectives* (Boston, MA, 1979), pp. 169–88; P. G. Mackesy, 'What the British Army learned', in R. Hoffman and P. J. Albert (eds.), *Arms and Independence: the Military Character of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville, VA, 1984).

[33] Mackesy, *The War for America*, p. 511.

[34] 'Then and now', Thomas E. Ricks (senior military correspondent), *Washington Post Book World*, Sunday 16 March 2008.

background to operations in the field or at sea—their focus was on operations and government decisions were too often seen through the distant and partially informed eyes of theatre commanders. Thus the focus of the thirteen volumes of Sir John Fortescue's magisterial *History of the British Army* was too narrow and his judgements warped: 'For him the appalling problems of the government which waged war for America were reduced to "the folly and ignorance of Germain".' Piers held that 'To understand the war, one must view it with sympathy for the Ministers in their difficulties, and not with the arrogant assumption that because they were defeated they were incompetent, and that all their actions proceeded from folly.'[35]

To this end he sought to show the war through their eyes, deliberately keeping his account to one side of the hill and even causing irritation in America by terming the revolutionaries as rebels—which was how Ministers saw them! While sympathising with the Ministry his close scrutiny of the documents led him to redeem the reputation in particular of Lord George Germain, Secretary of State for the Colonies and main director of the war. He found Germain's writings to be shrewd, knowledgeable and open-minded: 'With straitened resources and against physical difficulties Germain had waged war beyond the Atlantic with courage, imagination and perhaps even a trace of wisdom.' He had evolved operational plans for dealing with the new problem of a people in arms, yet he had not allowed the struggle in America to hypnotise him but in a world war against the great maritime nations of Europe he had maintained a balanced sense of priorities.[36] Controversially he argued that had the political nerve of the British people held out for only another year, the French and Spanish may well have abandoned the fight. They were losing command of the sea and unable to recover it because of financial exhaustion. This would then have released sufficient troops to enable Germain to provide security for the 'good Americans' and outlast and demoralise the financially exhausted 'bad' ones into a compromise settlement, albeit perhaps of only temporary duration.[37] Above all, *The War for America* for the first time provided an analytical narrative of how strategic decisions were reached amid many, often conflicting, pressures. It provided clear, rational explanation of what the directors of Britain's war effort were try-

[35] Mackesy, *The War for America*, pp. xv, xii.
[36] P. G. Mackesy, *The Coward of Minden: the Affair of Lord George Sackville* (London, 1979), p. 14.
[37] Mackesy, 'Could the British Have Won the War of Independence?', pp. 23–8.

ing to achieve—and why—in a war where the problems to be overcome mounted as it escalated from a localised into a global conflict.

It has to be said that Piers took to writing with greater facility than he did to teaching. The obstacles of natural shyness, modesty and diffidence, commented upon by colleagues and students alike, had to be overcome. The Oxford college system required him to provide tutorials on English history from 1485 to 1939 as well as on political thought, and he later recalled that the great increase in historical publication from the 1950s left him guiltily conscious of not being up to date on all the broad range of bread-and-butter essay topics to which he had to listen. It made for some awkward silences in tutorials!

His conscientiousness however carried him through. He seized upon a remark by Henry Pelling of Queen's College that 'at Oxford one teaches the man, not the subject', and so he 'tried to instil attitudes to history, the nature of truth, and the complex working of human affairs, rather than information or novel interpretations'. From his own student days at Christ Church, where he found Charles Stuart an inspiring tutor and role model, he 'learned the virtues of treating undergraduates as adults, and allowing them a long rein to make their own choices and carry some of their own responsibilities for this'.[38]

One former student has commented that 'Piers was not someone who would press his enthusiasms on you, although he was always happy to allow one to wax lyrical to him, and to respond with questions which showed he'd listened. This was very much his teaching technique …'. Another considered that 'one reason why he was such a good tutor was that he contrived to seem to take the jejune 18-year-old's theories seriously. Only in the second half of the tutorial would he, apparently rather hesitantly, as between equals, introduce evidence which pointed in another direction.' To another:

> As tutor, Piers was courteous and patient with his pupils. I don't recall him saying very much in tutorials. He seldom pressed his own point of view, preferring to get us to develop our own and was rarely directly critical, except on the subject of punctuation.... He was however (and remained all his life) unfailingly quick to identify and challenge woolly thinking, especially ill-understood or un-evidenced arguments obviously derived from hasty reading of some dubious secondary source. The challenge was always in the politest terms but no less penetrating and embarrassing for that.[39]

[38] PGM Notes; JH to MD 22/10/2014.
[39] JC to MD 29/10/2014; JK to MD 18/2/2016; RC to MD 16/1/2015.

'Tutorials were civilised,' remembered Bernard Capp, 'though Piers would cut through waffle when he detected it.' 'He had a quiet but deep hatred of humbug', explained John Charmley.[40] Another student noted that the only time he ever saw Piers angry in a tutorial was when his classmate compared the Boy Scout Movement to the Hitler Youth! Paul Addison noticed on his study mantelpiece a cutting of a glowing tribute by A. J. P. Taylor to Churchill's *History of the English Speaking Peoples* and when he asked why Piers kept it there the latter replied that it was because the quotation was so obviously bogus.[41]

Every student tutored by Piers will remember the immense pains he took to '"correct" essays for style, structure and correct punctuation and grammar'. He remembered gratefully the training he had received from Max Reese at Wellington which helped distinguish his own writing and saw how poor was the previous training most of his pupils had received in these respects. At his farewell dinner he was relieved to find how much this had been gratefully appreciated, but he disowned tributes to his tutoring with characteristic self-deprecation and dry humour by saying 'The only thing I take credit for as a tutor is in paying attention to written language. I've had pupils who've gone on to write very distinguished books, which in their ideas and content owe nothing to me. But I'd like to think that somewhere in their volumes there is a comma, perhaps even a semi-colon, which bears my influence'![42]

At the end of a tutorial would come the offer of refreshment. It is a common remark among former students that he treated his pupils with an old-world courtesy which was naturally unpretentious. It 'made one feel effortlessly at ease; unlike some, Piers never needed to act the gentleman—he was one'. Though his offer of snuff to a tutorial group made one fresher feel that he was in the presence of someone from another world, another thought that when he served neat gin in a silver bowl filled with ice 'one felt very sophisticated and grown up'. For a postgraduate 'Tea in the afternoon was Earl Grey (which I had not had before) and later appointments were oiled with generous helpings of college sherry.' A future notable academic considered that 'Socially his shyness added to his charm when he would entertain pupils with a glass of sherry at the end of a tutorial, or struggle with a coffee machine'![43]

[40] BC to MD 16/2/2016; JC to MD 29/10/2014.
[41] WM 7/2/2015; PA to MD 19/2/2016.
[42] PGM Notes; BW to MD 5/1/2015.
[43] JC to MD 29/10/2014; BC to MD 1/3/2016; JK to MD 18/2/2016; JC to MD 29/10/2014; PS to MD 19/5/2015; PA to MD 19/2/2016.

Refreshment over, he would discuss what to do next, delighting students with his sometimes irreverent attitude to the syllabus: 'Oh Lord, not Thomas Cromwell again!' he groaned at one student's essay choice, or 'Rousseau next week, gentlemen, you won't like it but it has got to be done'! Having settled on a subject 'He would then suggest a few books, adding that "articles and the like can be found in footnotes". There were those who found this approach somewhat languid, but to me it spoke of a confidence that if one were up at Pembroke to read history, one ought to actually go away and read lots of books.' Another too found his hints about further reading brilliantly judged—'the way he appeared to assume that one would of course have considered a particular source or authority, when he must have known one hadn't, left me determined to go and have a look'.[44]

Piers was a tutor at a time when teaching styles underwent considerable changes. As one student admirer described it: 'Trendier dons would invite us to their homes on a Friday night to talk about revolution and anarchy. Piers invited one for a spot of sherry after the tutorial. Trendier dons wanted to be our friend and would invite and exchange confidences about personal matters, Piers was our tutor. Some at the start found the contrast to his disadvantage, but most came to the conclusion that we liked his rather paternal concern for us.' The writer of this memoir found him to be a conscientious and caring tutor, generous with his time, and along with many others witnessed many individual acts of his kindness. While he never invited confidences, students quickly discovered that he was a friend in need if ever one was wanted. When his successor sent him the Finals results the year after his retirement, he received back a reply full of perceptive comments 'typifying a tutor of the old school who knew his students better than they ever thought he did'.[45] His interest in his students' careers continued long after they graduated, and luncheon invitations to Pembroke were extended to those he saw were visiting Oxford, or to his London club, the Naval and Military in St James's Square, or more latterly at The New Club in Edinburgh, and he had a warm welcome for those who visited him in retirement.[46] Paul Addison summed up that 'It was the combination of his shyness and modesty, his commitment to teaching and scholarship, his courtesy and kindness towards his pupils,

[44] BW to MD 5/1/2015; JC to MD 29/10/2014; JK to MD 18/2/2016.
[45] JC to MD 29/10/2014; DE to MD 24/10/2014.
[46] JH to MD 21'10/2014; BC to MD 16/2/2016; JK to MD 18/2/2016; RC to MD 16/1/2016.

the occasional waspishness (as in his references to Taylor and Churchill), that made him such a loveable character.'[47]

Nevertheless, he himself recognised that he probably needed to be teamed with a different style of tutor and considered himself fortunate to find himself in happy tandem with the medievalists Colin Morris for his first sixteen years at Pembroke and Paul Hyams for his last nineteen—themselves different from one another in their styles.[48] Students struggled to define him. A postgraduate who thought him 'a cold fish at the start' and sought to change tutors later came to be grateful that he didn't do so. To one student he was an eighteenth-century figure, to another he was 'a rather more effective version of Jane Austen's Mr Bennett' and to a third, perhaps thinking of *Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Gentleman*, he was a Siegfried Sassoon-like figure. A Pembroke toilet carried the graffiti 'Piers Mackesy is a bloody country-gentleman'.[49] There were elements of truth in all these, and perhaps John Charmley gets closest when he says that his first and lasting impression was that 'here was a gentleman and a scholar of the sort which must once have been common in Oxford, but was now rather rare'.[50]

In the meantime his life expanded in several directions. In 1957 he married Sarah (Sally) Davies, daughter of Judge Sir David Davies QC and the novelist Margaret Kennedy. It was an alliance of two writing families—Piers and his mother, and Sally's sister (Julia Birley) and mother, and one product of the marriage, Serena, has become a successful journalist and novelist under the name of Alex Marwood. Piers moved out of college and set up home at Wootton by Woodstock where three children, William, Catherine and Serena, were born in quick succession. In the Cotswolds, father, mother and children could indulge their love of horse riding. Piers took up hunting again, first with the Bicester and then the Heythrop, and was believed to be one of the last Oxford history dons to ride to hounds.[51] He admitted that looking after his own horses and ponies for the first time was both a pleasure and a labour. He took particular pride in his children's success at Pony Club competitions. At Pembroke Monday was known to be his riding day. Blair Worden, in his last Michaelmas term, was one of a group of students collected in his shooting brake from

[47] PA to MD 19/2/2016.
[48] PGM Notes.
[49] PS to MD 19/5/2015; BC to MD 1/3/2016; JC to MD 29/10/2014;.BW to MD 5/1/2015; WM 7/2/2015.
[50] JC to MD 29/10/2014.
[51] PGM Notes; PH to MD 18/12/2014.

Oxford and taken out to Wootton for lunch and a walk across the autumn landscape and 'warmed greatly to his total absence of academic pretension, and to the sense he conveyed that there was a world beyond the academic one that might put it into perspective'.[52]

A further development, he admitted, took him rather by surprise. Having avoided college business in his earlier years he became more active in the late 1960s and found administration less disagreeable than he had supposed, and less taxing than writing! However he soon found he had jumped into the deep end as the era of student troubles broke out and he was twice Acting Master for a term in 1970 and 1972 while the Master underwent surgery. He described the period as uncomfortable and unhappy but nevertheless enjoyed the experience, treading a delicate line between the doves and hawks in the Pembroke Fellowship as he outwitted or circumvented various organisers of trouble while avoiding confrontation.[53]

What suffered in this period was his writing. After *The War for America*, the pace of his publications slowed for a while. He found the usual family illnesses and demands of childhood exacting and depressing for a time. Having undertaken to write a volume on Europe from the outbreak of the French Revolution to the revolutions of 1848 for the Oxford History of Modern Europe he found he couldn't break into it. He found writing a general textbook uncongenial and 'missed the opportunity for writing extended narrative and putting the microscope on individuals under stress'. Consequently he abandoned it in about 1968.[54]

Further misfortune followed. He dedicated his next book, *Statesmen at War: the Strategy of Overthrow, 1798–1799* to 'S.K.M.' and he gratefully acknowledged Sally's 'valuable suggestions' in *The Coward of Minden: the Affair of Lord George Sackville* in 1979, but despite much happiness in the things they had in common, temperamental incompatibilities brought their marriage under strain and in the late 1970s it broke up. The parting was difficult for all concerned.[55] Perhaps he was brought back to writing by way of emotional release, for another book followed soon after: *War without Victory: the Downfall of Pitt, 1799–1802* in 1984.

Statesmen at War and *War without Victory*, and a final book, *British Victory in Egypt*, in 1995 were a direct result of his teaching on the Oxford

[52] BW to MD 5/1/2015.
[53] PGM Notes.
[54] Ibid.
[55] WM 30/10/2014 and WM to MD 7/3/2016.

Military History Special Subject. In 1951 this had been changed from the Peninsular War to Britain in the Mediterranean 1797–1802 and subsequently to the War of the Second Coalition, a subject which allowed for wider political and strategic commentary. With the Chichele Professor of the History of War, Norman Gibbs, focusing on the theoretical side of war through Clausewitz and Corbett, and increasingly occupied with schemes of Service education, the detailed lectures and tutorials on the campaigns fell first to A. B. Rodger until his death in 1961 and thereafter to Piers.[56] He wrote *Statesmen at War* therefore after over a decade of study and meticulous research. As one of his students noted, he 'insisted that every archive of relevance should be visited – something he passed on to me and others. It was, he would say to me, "all very well having interesting ideas, but will they stand in the face of the evidence?"'[57] *Statesmen at War* scoured French and American as well as a vast range of British archives. His one lament was that he was unable to get access to the private manuscripts of the Foreign Secretary, Lord Grenville, which had passed a few years previously into the hands of the British Museum—'a fate for a manuscript worse than falling into chancery for a litigant'—where they were still immured at the time of writing.[58]

It would be easy to read *Statesmen at War*, an account of the planning, conduct and failure of the Anglo-Russian invasion of North Holland in 1799, as a reprise of the author's views of the Narvik campaign. Like Churchill's project it was 'a story of great conceptions and disappointed hopes', with Lord Grenville as the restless visionary with a plan to win the war, intolerant of military obstacles and pressing the British commander, Sir Ralph Abercromby, to act despite his small and ill-equipped force, and it is hard not to see 'Pat' Mackesy as well as Abercromby in his assertion that 'there is a place in war for caution, and pessimism is sometimes better called realism'.[59] But this is to ignore the depth of the author's research in a close study of a limited period of time. He explained that 'In writing the history of warfare much is lost by skating over a wide field, and I follow the maxim of the French naval historian Admiral Castex: *peu de surface, beaucoup de profondeur*' which he turned on its head to translate as 'The wider the surface, the shallower the perception.' He had tested his ideas in

[56] Hattendorf and Murfett (eds.), *Limitations of Military Power*, pp. 36–7, 40–1.
[57] JC to MD 29/10/2014.
[58] P. G. Mackesy, *Statesmen at War: the Strategy of Overthrow, 1798–1799* (London, 1974), p. x. He had to use the small part already printed by the Historical Manuscripts Commission as *The Dropmore Papers* instead.
[59] Mackesy, *Statesmen at War*, pp. ix, 314.

the face of the evidence, as he constantly advocated, and his conclusions are in striking contrast to his attitude to Churchill:

> My purpose … is to show men under the pressure of blind events, labouring to interpret a bombardment of partial information and act on it; seeking to reconcile the irreconcilable. Of course the men were sometimes inadequate. But amusement at their pride, impatience at their jealousies and wonder at their errors must all give way to pity at the sight of men floundering in the seas of circumstance, as the endless waves of events rolled in upon them in crests of foaming confusion.[60]

Deftly he traced the development of policy and its impact on operations through complex and ever-evolving circumstances. His reviewers applauded. Stephen Ross declared that he 'avoids the danger of oversimplification without leaving the reader mired in a welter of trivia'. It was, wrote Pat Crimmin, 'a readable, scholarly and compassionate account of a depressing episode'. James Sack thought it a 'brilliant account', impressive, insightful and revisionistic, and it led Isabel de Madariaga to recognise that he had 'made a corner for himself in the study of the interaction of policy and war in the Age of Democratic Revolution'.[61]

His next book, *The Coward of Minden*, was a prequel to *The War for America*, and it was one that he much enjoyed writing, further redeeming as it did the reputation of the scapegoat of the American war, Lord George Germain. As Lord George Sackville he had been court-martialled and dismissed from the army for failing to obey orders to charge with the cavalry and turn the French defeat at Minden in 1759 into a rout. While conceding the problems caused by Sackville's personality failings, Piers showed it as the result of obscure orders received in a part of the battlefield where he could not see the actual situation and where he refused to advance until he had clarification. A skilfully argued defence of his subject was neatly rounded off by reminding his readers of what happened in similar conditions at Balaclava in 1854 when the Light Brigade did charge.

John Shy hailed the first six chapters as 'a brilliant reconstruction of an eighteenth-century army on campaign, revealing Mackesy's grasp of what warfare was like in an age so different from our own'.[62] Perhaps only someone with Piers' experience of a horse-drawn army and appreciation of the limitations of the manoeuvring ability of cavalry horses from his own love

[60] Ibid., pp. ix–x.

[61] Reviews in: S. Ross, *American Historical Review*, 81 (1976), 136–7; P. Crimmin, *History*, 60 (1975), 476; J. Sack, *Albion*, 17 (1985), 90–1; I. de Madariaga, *English Historical Review*, 90 (1975), 858–61.

[62] Shy, 'Introduction', p. xix.

of riding could have written with such depth of understanding. The second half of the book covers Sackville's politically motivated court martial, completing the setting of eighteenth-century warfare in its full social, political and legal context. The one regret expressed by reviewers was that, uncharacteristically for one so careful with his evidence, which is so widely quoted in the text and a full list of manuscript sources provided at the end, the book is without footnotes.[63] The reason given is to save space and responsibility attaches to the publisher.

Minden accomplished, he turned back to the War of the Second Coalition. What he had originally intended to be a single 'short, incisive and analytical book on the British conduct of the war' eventually became three volumes which explored the war in all its dimensions. In the Introduction to *War without Victory: the Downfall of Pitt, 1799–1802* he explained most clearly the themes and principles behind his writing. His books were about 'men under stress, exercising their judgement on difficult options'. In *War without Victory* he showed how 'the intractable problems of war organisation; the restricted options in British strategy; conflict over the purpose of the struggle; and stresses endured by statesmen at war' tore apart Pitt's ministry, paralysed its will and destroyed the health and mental strength of the Prime Minister.[64] He made a powerful case against the traditional view that the Catholic Question was the fundamental cause of Pitt's resignation in 1801; rather it was the occasion, and it was the stress of a losing war that left him unable to form an effective policy to get Catholic Emancipation past the King.

Piers declared his guiding principle throughout his books to have been:

> … to renounce the hasty and didactic judgements which characterise so much historical writing on war: to prefer explanation to denunciation. Only when the restricted options and resistant medium of war have been defined is one entitled to judge the actors. This has led me to avoid the all-seeing historian's Olympian overview of past events, which confuses historical truth because it provides knowledge not available to the participants.

He 'held to the belief that to see both sides of the hill consistently is to distort the perspective of those who planned the strategy and directed the

[63] W. K. Hackman, *American Historical Review*, 85 (1980), 392; H. C. Tomlinson, *English Historical Review*, 96 (1981), 450–1.
[64] Mackesy, *War without Victory*, pp. vi–vii.

operations. They took their decisions in the fog of war, and it would be wrong to disperse the drifting smoke.'[65]

With the Grenville Manuscripts at last made available at the British Museum he could take a more charitable view of the foreign secretary's belief that final victory over the French could only come through cooperation with the European powers, but operating to his guiding principle his declared hero of *War without Victory* was the more pragmatic and much-maligned Scottish Secretary of State for War, Henry Dundas, who created a strategy for survival in a losing peace and forced it through in the face of a divided cabinet and hostile king.

Piers' last book was *British Victory in Egypt, 1801: the End of Napoleon's Conquest*, which he described as 'an enjoyable narrative to write' though he complained about the 'drab title' chosen by the publisher.[66] It completed the War of the Second Coalition trilogy and also marked the culmination of his lifelong study of the strengths and weaknesses of Britain's main instrument of war in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—amphibious warfare. He had analysed its operating problems when he gave the Lees-Knowles Lectures at Cambridge in 1973 on 'Problems of an amphibious power 1795–1808', following these with a number of articles before showing how the secret to successful amphibious operations was at last rediscovered in 1801.[67] For this he paid tribute to a largely forgotten hero, another fellow Scot and regimental colonel of his beloved Scots Greys, Lieutenant General Sir Ralph Abercromby, who welded into cohesion an assembly of disparate and ill-provided battalions carrying a tradition of failure from America through to Holland in 1799 and to an aborted attack on Cadiz in 1800, and with good planning and training led them to victory and his own death in Egypt. In contrast to the standard view that the British army had to wait until the Peninsular War to show an improvement, he held that Abercromby's army 'became the model for the victorious British Army of the Peninsular War'.[68]

[65] Ibid., pp. viii–ix.

[66] PGM Notes; P. G. Mackesy, *British Victory in Egypt, 1801: the End of Napoleon's Conquest* (London and New York, 1995).

[67] P. G. Mackesy, 'Problems of an amphibious power: Britain against France, 1793–1815.' *Naval War College Review*, 30 (1978), 16–25; P. G. Mackesy, 'Strategic problems of the British war effort', in H. T. Dickinson (ed.), *Britain and the French Revolution* (London, 1989), pp. 147–64; P. G. Mackesy, '"Most Sadly Bitched": the British Cadiz Expedition of 1800', in E. Freeman (ed.), *Les empires en guerre et paix 1793–1860* (Vincennes, 1990), pp. 41–57.

[68] Mackesy, *British Victory in Egypt*, p. x.

Reviewers were unanimous in hailing 'a fine example of classic military history based upon high scholarship and fine discussion'.[69] Hew Strachan thought it 'a model of military history – clear, humorous, scholarly, yet extraordinarily deft in the application of its erudition', and illuminating themes that went far beyond its stated subject matter. To Brendon Simms it crowned a distinguished career.[70]

Alongside the literary success, however, there were also academic disappointments. The Chichele Chair in the History of War became vacant on the retirement of Norman Gibbs in 1977. Gibbs had been very supportive of Piers, who had carried the main burden of teaching the special subject for nearly twenty years, and was thought to have been grooming him as his successor. Ultimately the competition came down to between two candidates, Piers Mackesy and Michael Howard. However, it was the latter who was offered the chair. Howard conceded that Piers was the better scholar, but understood that his interests were considered too narrowly eighteenth-century in contrast to Howard's interests in modern strategic studies, Service education and successful management of the King's College London Department of War Studies. Piers, with characteristic modesty, thought Howard (two years his senior at Wellington, the army and Christ Church) was rightly chosen and the choice seemed justified when three years later Howard was elevated to the Regius Chair of History. However, Piers' prospects of succeeding him were dashed when first the Chichele Chair was frozen as a result of financial cuts to the University, and when it was revived in 1985 it was through a deal with the Social Studies Board with an emphasis on contemporary strategic studies. Again Piers was interviewed, but again he was passed over, this time in favour of Robert O'Neill, Director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies.[71]

At the same time he also lost out on another prize. He proved a capable administrator as Senior Tutor of Pembroke from 1972 to 1979, served another term as Acting Master in 1980 and was Vice Regent thereafter. When the Mastership became vacant in 1985 he was run as an internal candidate, but his hopes of a needful change of duties and new challenges were disappointed when it became apparent that the Governing Body

[69] D. Chandler, *International History Review*, 18 (1996), 405–7; also E. Spiers, *History*, 82 (1997), 338–9; and J. Morgan, *Journal of Military History*, 61 (1997), 162–3.
[70] H. Strachan, *English Historical Review*, 112 (1997), 497–8; B. Sims, *Historical Journal*, 41 (1998), 897.
[71] Hattendorf and Murfett (eds.), *Limitations of Military Power*, pp. 50–3; PGM Notes; Howard, *Captain Professor*, pp. 205–6.

were looking for an outside candidate and he withdrew before the election which chose Dr Roger Bannister as Master.[72]

In fact his sense of disappointment did not last long and, as he later philosophically declared, he found he had been fortunate in his failures. The Mastership seemed a less rewarding task when serious problems subsequently beset the college, and the Chichele Chair had so far changed from its original form that he would not have been at ease with the new Strategic Studies direction. The academic world was changing rapidly and he was not a great believer in schemes of progress. Moreover a new happiness had entered his life through meeting and in 1982 marrying Patricia (Peta) Timlin, in whose company he noticeably relaxed. While remaining as courteous to his students as ever, he found that after a third of a century as a tutorial Fellow he had lost his enthusiasm for tutorials. On the other hand he still enjoyed writing. He was already advancing with *British Victory in Egypt* and had begun research for a life of his godfather, Major-General Sir John Kennedy (Director of Military Operations and Assistant-Chief of the Imperial General Staff 1940–5 and Governor of Southern Rhodesia 1946–54) who had entrusted his papers to Piers' care, and so he decided to take early retirement in December 1987 at the age of 63, intending to concentrate on the aspect of history he most enjoyed.[73]

As he later said, without regret, 'It didn't turn out like that!' In 1989 he moved with Peta to his native Aberdeenshire, to a Georgian manse at Leochel Cushnie in remote Donside. He still had enough local kinsmen and friends to develop a relaxed and enjoyable social life, with many visits from families and grandchildren and from former pupils. Despite his shyness he had always enjoyed people and loved conversation and parties, where his dry humour came across well. He also enjoyed riding the hills on his elderly horse and 'walking with our spirited pug'. Other duties appeared: in the late 1980s and early 1990s he served on the council of the Society for Army Historical Research, he was a Trustee of the National Army Museum and he was 'conscripted' as Chairman of the North of Scotland branch of the regimental association of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards (into which the Royal Scots Greys had been amalgamated in 1971). Above all his son described him as having a second career as Curator's Assistant for a series of beautiful gardens. He hated the labour but loved the results, and when *Victory in Egypt* was finally published in

[72] PGM Notes.
[73] Ibid., DE to MD 24/10/2014.

1995 he playfully dedicated it 'with her approval to Patricia without whom this book would have been finished years ago'![74]

At that stage he still intended further writing. His interest in Kennedy was now waning and he told his former postgraduate John Hattendorf that 'I have done a few scraps of work on John Kennedy's papers, which I'm about to hand over to the Liddell Hart Centre [at KCL]. Then perhaps Narvik and my father, if I can find enough uninterrupted time.'[75] But his energy was on the ebb and his available time limited. Health warnings led to an inspired downsizing move in 1999 to Westerton above Dess near Aboyne on Deeside, where they created a delightful and manageable home for their old age from a very run-down old steading, and after 'several years of hard toil and barrowing of stones' a beautiful and imaginative new garden emerged, designed by Peta, from rock and scrub.[76]

In 2012 Piers explained that:

> I had planned to revise and bring up to date the account I had drafted more than thirty years earlier of my father's Narvik operations. By now I would probably have given it a different balance and flavour. Since the death of Churchill my rancour had softened and my perspective had gradually changed. The archives had opened and new work had been done on the policy and strategy of the Norwegian campaign and of the war at large. So I had it in mind to lighten the strategic background while still drawing out Churchill's role in the fiasco, and to set the focus more clearly on my father's dilemmas. But with the *Egypt* book off my hands I felt that it would be less frustrating to abandon the creative work of writing than to struggle on against the tide.[77]

He donated his father's Norway papers to the Imperial War Museum. Any prospect of changing his mind was ended by the onset of the ailments of old age. Piers Mackesy died on 30 June 2014 aged 89.

Piers Mackesy was a gentleman, scholar and consummate professional historian. Perhaps the best illustration lies in his suppression of the scar he bore for over seventy years at Churchill's treatment of his father over Narvik. He put the feelings of Churchill's innocent family before his own wish to set the record straight, telling Lord Kerr that he didn't think it right to publish while Mary Soames [Churchill's daughter] was still alive.[78] He only unveiled the depth of his feelings privately and occasionally. He

[74] PGM Notes; WM 30/10/2014.
[75] JH to MD 22/10/2014. The 'few scraps' were P. G. Mackesy, 'Overlord and the Mediterranean strategy: a note on the Anglo-American debate, autumn 1943', *War in History*, 3 (1996), 102–6, and P. G. Mackesy, 'Sir John Kennedy at the War Office 1940–1944', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, 76 (1998), 43–51.
[76] PGM Notes, November 2012; WM to MD 7/3/2016.
[77] PGM Notes, November 2012.
[78] JK to MD 18/2/2016. She died only one month before him.

abstained from intemperate public polemic, submitting himself to the discipline he advocated of testing all ideas against hard evidence.[79]

As a college tutor at Pembroke for thirty-four years he had earned almost universal affection among colleagues and students alike. His old-world courtesy, his conscientiousness, his care and kindness did not change, but Oxford and government demands on universities did. As early as the mid-1970s he was saying that he would never have got an academic post in the modern world![80] Yet unlike many of the Oxford gentleman scholars when he began his career, he continued to express his scholarship through publication, although, as John Charmley has remarked, in his values he was as far away from the RAE generation as can be imagined. David Eastwood, reflecting on the changes in methods and approaches, felt that his taking over from Piers at Pembroke 'was emphatically the moment when the players replaced the gentlemen'.[81]

He was distinguished from many of the gentlemen scholars of his generation by the number of his publications and the quality of his scholarship. Not only was there the massive depth of research behind his writing, but also the style. 'Written with the urbane elegance we have come to expect from its author,' wrote Tim Blanning of *War without Victory*. 'A superb craftsman, not only in his culling and interpretation of his sources, but also in his capacity to write clear, skilful and modulated prose, ensuring all the while that the story remained strong,' thought Hew Strachan.[82] It was in the written word that this low-key, self-effacing scholar 'became totally alive … his narrative style was vigorous, colourful and utterly readable'.[83] He himself said that Hobbes's *Leviathan* was stylistically the book in the English language he would most like to have written.[84] Admirers praised his talent for memorable pen-portraits of the personalities he discussed, and his ability through his use of eye-witness accounts and brilliant characterisation to recreate both the atmosphere of the cabinet room and, in a manner reminiscent of Tolstoy, the atmosphere of the battlefield.[85] It was a style of deep research and writing that won him the Corbett Prize for naval history at the start of his career, and the Templar Medal Book Prize for army historical research at the end of it. It gained him the award

[79] See his Narvik articles (note 9) and his self-controlled review of J. R. M. Butler's *Grand Strategy*, vol. 2: *Sept.1939-June 1940* in *Historical Journal*, 1 (1958), 92–3.
[80] BC to MD 25/2/2016.
[81] JC to MD 29/10/2014; DE to MD 24/10/2014.
[82] Blanning, *History* 70 (1985), 523; HS 30/10/2014.
[83] PS to MD19/5/2015.
[84] BW to MD 5/1/2015.
[85] Tomlinson, *English Historical Review* 96 (1981), 480–1.

of a DLitt by Oxford University in 1978 and was crowned by election to the Fellowship of the British Academy ten years later.

Perhaps his greatest achievement through his research and writing was to elevate the status of military history in the eyes of the academic world by his emphasis on all the contextual factors that were involved in strategic decision making and execution—domestic politics, logistics, foreign policy, topography and combat operations. No one has connected these together better than he did to give a total view of eighteenth-century warfare. Some complained that it was a very one-sided view, but he persisted in his belief that judging decisions made by the information available to the makers rather than by post facto knowledge of the results is the only way to really understand how they handled the complexities of war they faced. John Shy points out that his approach was firmly grounded in his deep understanding of how war was pursued in the age of smoothbore muskets, sailing ships, horse waggons and very bad roads, and Brian Ranft has added to this one thing more, 'often ignored by historians who have neither the experience nor imagination to comprehend it: the physical and mental stress of directing a great war'.[86] This was where he excelled. This was a new, comprehensive military history, one that by extension is capable of application to other periods, and subsequent military historians have followed in his footsteps.

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Note. My thanks are due to the many former students and colleagues of Piers who volunteered information for this memoir, especially Dr Paul Addison (PA), Prof Bernard Capp (BC), Prof John Charmley (JC), Sir Robert Crawford (RC), Prof Sir David Eastwood (DE), Prof John Hattendorf (JH), Prof Paul Hyams (PH), Lord Kerr of Kinlochard (JK), Dr Peter Stoddart (PS), Prof Blair Worden (BW). William Mackesy (WM) and Prof Hew Strachan (HS) generously provided copies of their addresses at Piers' Memorial Service at Pembroke College on 30 October 2014, as well as additional comments. Above all my thanks are due to Piers himself who provided a full, frank and typically modest account of himself to the British Academy when elected in 1988 and updated it in 2012, prefacing it by saying 'I would be horrified if I were asked to write an obituary and hope that the following may ease the task of whoever may be burdened with mine.' Cited as PGM Notes, it has resonated throughout this memoir.

[86] Shy, 'Introduction', p. xix; Ranft, *English Historical Review*, 101 (1986), 185–6.