IAN CHRISTIE *Theodore Greville*

Ian Ralph Christie
1919–1998

IAN CHRISTIE was one of the leading late twentieth-century historians of a critical period in the development of British politics and society. The long reign of George III (1760–1820) absorbed most of his scholarly attention; and within those sixty years the last two decades of the eighteenth century were the focus of the scrutiny he brought to bear in an impressive series of publications. The scope of his work broadened and his concerns varied; but here at the outset it is important to emphasise the adjective 'British'. 'Professor of Modern *British* History' was the title conferred when, in 1966, Christie was promoted from his London University readership. Thirteen years later, when he succeeded Joel Hurstfield as Astor Professor at University College London, he was the first occupant of that distinguished chair to have British rather than English history as his avowed concern. This avowal may require closer examination later. The point here is to draw attention to the Anglo-Scottish character of Christie's background and heredity. 'It has always been for me a matter of modest pride' (he observed in his autobiographical account of his early life) 'that I am neither "English" nor "Scottish" but "British".'[1]

Ian Ralph Christie was born in Preston on 11 May 1919, the only son and elder child of John Reid Christie (1881–1948) and Gladys Lilian

[1] I. R. Christie, 'The Shaping of a Life in Peace and War: Chapters of Autobiography 1919–1948' [hereafter 'Autobiography'], p. 4. Typescript copies of this are deposited in the libraries of University College London and Worcester Royal Grammar School.

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Whatley (1891–1987). His father's family had been farmers in the south-west of Scotland; and Christie saw his Covenanting ancestry as one possible source of what he called 'an element of Puritan feeling in my make-up ('Autobiography', p. 5).[2] For the Covenanters' religious beliefs he would indeed have had no sympathy; but there may have been some affinity in respect of an austerely rigorous morality. In the late eighteenth century the Christies moved from the country to the town of Paisley, from farming to weaving and, later, engineering. Ian's grandfather, John Christie (1856–1927) also taught technical subjects in Paisley, where—in a predictable political alignment for someone of his background in Edwardian Scotland—he belonged to the Paisley Liberal Club when H. H. Asquith was the local MP.

Within this 'upwardly mobile' family, Ian Christie's father evidently experienced some frustration when his formal education was foreclosed in his middle teens. John Reid Christie was apprenticed as an engineer in 1898 and qualified as a draughtsman in 1903. He found little satisfaction in the work, and by strenuous self-education equipped himself for a teaching career in technical subjects which began in 1909. In 1915 (being unfit for military service) he became a recognised teacher of mathematics and applied science. His son thus grew up in a milieu where work, reading, and self-improvement would be taken with the utmost seriousness. Religion, however, was not a formative influence: Christie notes ('Autobiography', p. 67) his father's 'repudiation of Calvinist . . . dogma'. His own rejection of religious belief would not entail shedding major elements in his upbringing.

John Reid Christie did not marry till his late thirties—and then made an improbable marriage. Gladys Lilian Whatley, ten years her husband's junior, came from a family background in what may be called, both geographically and socially, 'middle England'. The earlier generations in her family lived in Wiltshire—in Christie's words 'one of the Tory heartlands of the early eighteenth century'. Charles Whatley (b. 1756) was so named in accordance with the family's Jacobite sympathies; but 'in 1783 he named his only son George, after "the best of kings"'.[3] In the nineteenth century the relevant branch of the family had moved to the west Midlands—where, indeed, their social position was not unlike that of the

[2] Later, however, Christie acknowledges 'a puritan spirit' in both his parents (cf. 'Autobiography', p. 217).

[3] I. R. Christie, *Stress and Stability in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain: Reflections on the British Avoidance of Revolution* (Oxford, 1984), p. 37 and n. 17.

Christies. Here too was a family seeking educational advancement in an increasingly urban and industrial environment. Gladys Whatley went from school to the Kidderminster School of Science and Art and then to teacher training in Tottenham. Though she taught in Church of England schools she was moving away from 'inherited' religious belief and practice: her children would not be brought up in any dogmatic faith.

It was through the efforts of one of Gladys Whatley's friends, who met John Christie after her own marriage had brought her to Scotland, that the couple corresponded, met, and finally, in 1917, married. Despite family doubts—'I never thought,' one Whatley uncle remarked, 'you would marry a foreigner' ('Autobiography', p. 160)—the marriage was generally happy and harmonious; and Ian Christie's family was, throughout, an essential element in his life. His early years, however, were plagued by ill-health. A glandular infection from untreated milk during a Cumberland holiday, compounded by poor diagnosis and inept surgery, was 'a baleful influence'; and there was 'chronic bronchial trouble' ('Autobiography', pp. 114, 117). As a result, most of Christie's early education was received at home—from his mother and, later, visiting teachers. When the question of formal schooling became inescapable, the answer tilted the balance of his Anglo-Scottish formation decisively to the English side. Avoiding the hostile climate and atmospheric pollution of the Glasgow region, he was to live near Worcester with 'the aunt who for some years provided me with a second home' ('Autobiography', preface) and attend Worcester Royal Grammar School. Holidays were of course spent with his parents (and his sister, born in 1926); but even then much of the time was spent away from Glasgow in healthier surroundings. It is worth emphasising the point that Ian Christie had virtually no experience of the Scottish educational system; and a Scots postgraduate student in later years saw no trace of his supervisor's Scottish background.

The Worcester years from 1931 to 1938 were plainly formative in ways of which only a few can be noticed here. Christie's schooldays seem to have passed without traumas comparable with his earlier ill-health—of which, indeed, the after-effects had, from his viewpoint, beneficial consequences. He recalled with evident satisfaction having been 'excused from games on medical grounds'. His father 'was something of a philistine' in regard to sport 'and his attitude had rubbed off on me' ('Autobiography', pp. 145, 166–7).[4] Yet despite this alienation from a normally crucial

[4] Out of school Ian Christie took up tennis, a game he played until he was in his fifties.

aspect of school life Christie became senior prefect in his last year. Plainly he had distinguished himself away from the playing-fields of Worcester. Considering his parents' outlook and his own avid reading from childhood onwards, that distinction was predictably academic; but the direction to be given to his evident talents was less predictable. His sixth-form subjects seem to have been chosen with an eye to maximising the prospects of success rather than defining a territory for sustained intellectual exploration. His mother had had dreams of an academic career for her unborn son;[5] but there could be no presumption that such dreams would be realised. A Civil Service career seems to have been envisaged for him—and indeed by him—then and for much of the ensuing ten years. History and English Literature, at all events, were the chosen subjects.

For a time it might have seemed that literature was to prevail. As an adolescent (and indeed well into his twenties) Christie by his own account was absorbed, both as reader and as writer, by poetry. His taste and style were resolutely Romantic: no poet more recent than Tennyson seems to have 'spoken to his condition' or inspired his verse. What he wrote in that form—some printed in the school magazine, some reproduced in his autobiography—does not suggest that literature was a serious loser by his eventual decision to abandon such efforts.

Another preoccupation had more lasting significance. Political awareness dawned for Ian Christie in the mid-1930s; and if his position was to be consistently conservative, it is important to bear in mind the diversity of which conservatism is susceptible. Christie was impressed, when representing his school at the 1937 Empire Rally, by Baldwin's oratory; but he was resolutely against appeasement. He regarded National Socialism as barbaric and left-wing opposition to rearmament as contemptible. A lifelong detestation of totalitarianism began in his late teens.

It was then too that Ian Christie first felt drawn to the subject to which most of his adult life would be devoted. 'History . . . had little attraction for me . . . in junior school' ('Autobiography', p. 149); and he remained sceptical as to whether anything worth calling history could be taught at that level. Yet he would have dissented from his UCL colleague Hurstfield's view that to study history at university level was largely a matter of unlearning what had been taught at school. His own sixth-form work gave him 'such a firm grounding in the essential events from

[5] On her son's birth, one of Gladys Christie's friends offered 'Congratulations on the arrival of the future Oxford don' ('Autobiography', p. 105).

the Reformation to the death of Louis XIV that . . . it provided a solid bedrock for . . . my best paper in the Oxford Finals' ('Autobiography', p. 162). The period is biographically interesting; for the spectacle of bigotry and intolerance in early-modern Europe undoubtedly intensified the alienation from religion which led Christie from adolescent agnosticism to adult atheism. Yet it is hard to accept what he reportedly told a later colleague—'that he had become a historian because he wanted to understand why for centuries intelligent people had believed in Christianity.'[6] If so, his eventual specialisation seems an unpromising route to the supposed destination; and there is in fact a different story to be told later.

There was in any case no doubt in Christie's mind as to the direction of his university studies. He went up to Oxford at Michaelmas 1938 with a state scholarship and an open demyship in modern history at Magdalen. The uncertainty of the immediate future arose, not from academic factors, but from public events. Christie like many others saw the recent Munich agreement as merely the precarious postponement of an inevitable conflict. Questions posed by the National Service Act before the end of his first Oxford year were complicated and sharpened by the outbreak of war. Christie was now twenty. His medical history made it unlikely that he would be passed fit for combatant service, but his studies, like those of his contemporaries, were overshadowed by an inescapable sense of impermanence.

Meanwhile, however, Oxford life went on. With rooms on the ground floor of New Building, Christie resumed school friendships and made new friends. Friendships did not for him need the Ciceronian foundation of *idem sentire de re publica*. The Yorkshireman Mitchell Shackleton, for instance—a lifelong friend—took a pacifist position which Christie could not share but which the two could discuss without impairing their friendship. More generally, Christie's account of those crowded terms evokes a world of talk expanding Parkinson-wise to fill the available time. The academic aspect of Christie's Oxford career will be best considered in the perspective of its post-war completion. One early disappointment, however, is worth noting here: 'I was surprised' (he wrote later: 'Autobiography', p. 213) 'that we were presented with no formal discussion of our subject, its nature, method, purpose and limitations'. Such surprise may seem naive to some—who, if they knew the mature Christie, may themselves be surprised at his having had such methodological concerns.

[6] Negley Harte, *The Independent*, 5 Dec. 1998.

Very different concerns predominated in the Oxford of 1939–40. The question was not whether, but when and how the demands of war would prevail over those of the academic curriculum. By the summer of 1940, amid 'the breaking of nations' in a war he regarded as both just and necessary, Christie resolved to make, so far as possible, his own decision as to his part in the conflict. Instead of awaiting call-up, he volunteered for essential non-combatant duties in the Royal Air Force, was accepted for the equipment branch, and served from August 1940 until April 1946.

This was in several ways a turning-point. Christie regarded his war service as the most important thing he had done in his life. This reflects a straightforward—perhaps rather old-fashioned—patriotism which it is important to understand and not to misconstrue. It was not a matter of king-and-country flag-waving or narrow nationalism. It was bound up with Christie's anti-fascism and compatible with his later endorsement—recalled by a colleague of the 1950s—of European integration. In 1940 it meant his determination to play as active a role as possible in the struggle for civilisation against barbarity; and if that meant nothing more heroic than securing the supply of essential weapons, its necessity vindicated for Christie the importance he ascribed to it. For five and a half years—first, briefly, in the ranks, then as a commissioned officer—the conscientious discharge of these administrative responsibilities dominated his life.

Christie's war service was also important in more personal terms. It took him, for the first time, out of the family environment for a substantial period; and it involved what was perhaps his first serious difference with his parents. They had clearly hoped that his medical record would keep him out of the forces. He had volunteered without consulting them and was acutely embarrassed to find that his father had written to Magdalen in the vain hope that college influence could somehow reverse his acceptance by the RAF. There was no long-term estrangement; but the episode must surely be seen as an assertion of adult independence.

Despite Christie's copious autobiographical account of war service which included extended periods in West Africa and India, the picture of those years remains curiously vague. There is, for one thing, little impression of how Christie (or his fellow-officers) reacted to the course of the war itself—no indication, for instance, of his view of the transformation of the conflict in 1941 by the involvement of the Soviet Union and the United States. Certainly he had in no way modified his view of the justice and necessity of the war. His rejection of pacifism was reiterated in correspondence with Mitchell Shackleton. Decades later he could still be

roused by 'revisionist' questioning of the necessity for war in 1939. When Maurice Cowling developed that theme in a *Sunday Telegraph* article on 20 August 1989, Christie wrote a long (but unpublished) letter to the editor, of which a copy, with an even longer covering letter, was sent to Cowling himself. Notably, he not only insisted on the necessity for war in defence of 'civilisation and the life and prosperity of the country', but passionately denounced the 'atrocity' of the Holocaust.[7]

In other respects too the convictions formed in Christie's late teens were confirmed and deepened in his twenties. In letters to his parents he expressed gratitude for their not having instilled 'the tradition of the anthropomorphic god'—belief in whom he dismissed as essentially 'emotional'.[8] He devoted 'much contemplation' to these matters; and much time—in the periods of inactivity that were inevitable in the circumstances of service life—was naturally spent in reading. Much of this was in political theory—a subject of which Christie's academic experience neither had been nor would be very encouraging. Studying it under the guidance of C. S. Lewis in 1940, he 'did not make as much of this experience as I might have done' ('Autobiography', p. 227); and resuming it after the war under the very different guidance of J. L. Austin was unlikely to improve matters. In his own wartime reading Christie sensed the importance of the issues discussed in such books as Russell's *Power* and Collingwood's *New Leviathan*. He wrote in 1942 of 'political philosophy' as '*the* problem of the century, of the present war, of Fascism, Socialism, Communism and everything else.'[9]

Returning from West Africa in the spring of 1944, Christie spent the last year of the European war in Scotland and at Coastal Command headquarters near London. Demobilisation was no longer a remote prospect, and it seemed at first that his service would end without undue delay in a forces education post. In fact, frustratingly, he spent a further six months overseas; and his headquarters posting in India did not even begin until after VJ Day. It lasted till March 1946 and by late April he was able to resume his undergraduate career.

The Oxford to which Ian Christie returned was very different from the place he had left almost six years before. Undergraduates were more numerous than ever, their average age several years higher, the experiences

[7] IRC to M. Cowling, 5 Sept. 1989. The unpublished letter to the editor of the *Sunday Telegraph* had been written on 21 Aug.
[8] IRC to his parents, 22 Aug. 1943.
[9] IRC to his father, Aug. 1942.

of returning veterans inconceivably different from those of the sixth-formers they now outnumbered. Proctorial discipline had had to be relaxed. Post-war austerity forbade lavishness or luxury: Christie like others recalled the welcome dietary supplement afforded by the 'British Restaurant' at The Plain. No longer living in college, he found lodgings both convenient and congenial. And he returned to his studies with a determination to succeed fully equal to that which he had brought from Worcester to Oxford in 1938. Poetry and dreams of a half-blue for chess were forgotten; and his Union membership had less to do with debating than with access to another library when books were in acutely short supply.

Whatever else was lacking, there was no shortage of competition to stimulate effort. Christie found himself among a formidably talented group of historians in a college where the subject was in the hands of two outstanding tutors. K. B. McFarlane and A. J. P. Taylor were both important for Christie, though his relations with the latter were to be chequered. In his last term before war service, he had 'greatly enjoyed . . . tutorials with A. J. P. Taylor', who revealed to him a vein of 'iconoclastic thinking in a period of later modern British history which greatly interested me' ('Autobiography', p. 237). While still in the RAF he read Taylor's *The Course of German History*, which he later described as 'polemical' and 'of little use' ('Autobiography', p. 283). Yet Taylor provided an essential pointer to the eventual focus of Christie's own research, and there is no evidence that the seeds of later estrangement were sown in the Magdalen years. As a 'modernist', Christie had less to do with McFarlane; but the latter clearly fostered in all who came his way a profound commitment to the seriousness of the historical enterprise. Such professionalism—so much more than mastery of scholarly techniques—was part of the very fabric of Ian Christie's life and work. 'History, to me,' he wrote when reflecting on his Oxford years, 'was . . . a bedrock of civilised existence' ('Autobiography', p. 419).

Not all history, however, and certainly not all historians, met the rigorous demands of such a view. Apart from those he met in tutorials, in the lecture-room, and in their books, Christie had other encounters. He was active in the revival of the University History Society, addressed by various eminent historians. One was the Regius Professor, F. M. Powicke—who, obviously, posed no problems as to scholarly *gravitas*, but was still problematic: 'Powicke's address was fascinating, but extremely hard to follow' ('Autobiography', p. 417). The biggest such occasion—Christie, with some trepidation, took the chair—was the visit of Arnold Toynbee.

Even the larger room belatedly secured for the meeting was packed; but, though he was daunted by his responsibilities as chairman, Christie remained sceptical: 'My cast of mind did not readily submit to fascination by gurus' ('Autobiography', p. 427). The study of history (one may say) did not, for this historian, properly lead to *A Study of History*.

Already Christie's sceptical and secular 'cast of mind' was drawing him towards a particular period and a particular view of the historical process. In eighteenth-century Britain and in L. B. Namier's interpretation of its politics he found 'reality as I understood it'—characterised by 'the fallibility of conscious purpose, the quicksands of fallacy in which intentions were often formed' ('Autobiography', p. 420). Even in the first phase of his Oxford studies he had 'tried to steer clear' of aspects of history involving 'the to me wearisome wranglings of past generations over religious issues' ('Autobiography', p. 225). So much, then, for the notion that Christie the historian was concerned to understand the religious delusions of mankind. He turned, rather, to an age and a society where such 'wranglings' were at least apt to be treated with well-deserved contempt. That was not, indeed, the end of the matter, even for Christie; but at this stage, and for many years, it was decisive.

Christie's final undergraduate year was shadowed by the illness and death of his father, who had been in poor health for some years and died on 19 January 1948. Consequential family concerns must have disturbed even the rigorous concentration his fellow-students recall in the Christie they knew. One image—perhaps from the extraordinary summer of 1947—is of Christie 'stripped to the waist and bolt upright in a punt on the Cherwell during a heatwave, moored in the shade, with books and notebooks around him'.[10] There was no assumption here of 'effortless superiority'. Indeed overwork and excessive concentration may have denied effort its full reward at this stage: from the schools in Trinity term 1948 Christie emerged with second-class honours.

Despite the disappointment of missing a first, Christie experienced no delay in launching his academic career. The universities were expanding and what was to become the normal pattern of entry to the profession was not yet established. For a recent graduate without research experience to be appointed to a teaching post—albeit a probationary assistant lectureship—was not then particularly unusual. Yet Christie's 1948 appointment at University College London does indicate that his

[10] G. L. Harriss to the present writer, 24 Oct. 1999.

scholarly potential had been recognised by those whose recommendations carried weight. The key figure was McFarlane, to whom Sir John Neale wrote about candidates for a vacancy in the UCL history department. 'McFarlane sent in my name' (Christie recorded). 'Early in June I was summoned to London and underwent a cordial grilling before Neale and the two colleagues who were his chief henchmen . . . Professor R. A. Humphreys and S. T. Bindoff . . . . A few days later I was delighted to receive from Neale a letter offering me the appointment' ('Autobiography', p. 430).

The UCL department was a place of some distinction. Formidably presided over by Neale since 1927, it was—and long remained—notably top-heavy in structure. Christie joined, in the lower ranks, three other assistant lecturers and a solitary lecturer, while five professors and three readers offered specialisms including French, Dutch, American, and Latin American history. Years later, in his valedictory speech, Christie caused a certain *frisson* among his colleagues by remarking that there had been great men in the department when he joined and that 'one day there would be again'.[11] The second clause was perhaps less than tactful; but Christie's remark no doubt echoed the feelings of the young man who found himself the newest member of a team which, with Neale as captain, fielded such players as A. H. M. Jones, G. J. Renier, and H. Hale Bellot, together with Humphreys, Bindoff, and Alfred Cobban. In such a department, it hardly need be said, research counted for at least as much as teaching, both internal and intercollegiate, for the London BA in history (and the B.Sc. Econ.). It was in Neale's eyes a serious misdemeanour for one of his younger colleagues to be found in the department except on days when lectures were given and 'essay-classes' held. On Wednesdays and Fridays—and, of course, during the vacations—their duty lay in the Public Record Office or some other archive, in the British Museum Library or the Institute of Historical Research. It was a regime wholly to Ian Christie's taste.

Christie approached the period and the kind of history he wished to investigate with an introduction from Alan Taylor to the historian who might in other circumstances have been his postgraduate supervisor and who was certainly his acknowledged mentor, Sir Lewis Namier. It was as

[11] Geoffrey Barrow recalls that, in these words, Christie was echoing what Neale had said on *his* retirement in 1956.

a 'Namierite' that Christie first worked on the subjects of most of his scholarly activity for the next half-century. His debt was always fully acknowledged. *The End of North's Ministry 1780–1782* (1958) appeared in Namier's series *England in the Age of the American Revolution*; and Christie wrote in the preface:

> To Sir Lewis Namier I owe many thanks: first, when I had only met him in his books, for prompting in me a strong desire to know whether his picture of politics and party structure at the accession of George III was still valid twenty years later, when the political system was under strain as a result of defeat in the American War of Independence; and, since this study began, for his guidance and encouragement.

Later, after Namier's death, he wrote of

> the care and patience with which he looked through drafts of mine, at a time when I was feeling my way in research very much in isolation in London . . . and although I had no claim upon him whatever . . . .[12]

This debt to Namier led indirectly to an estrangement between Christie and Taylor long before the final breach occasioned by more dramatic events to be considered in their place. It was in that later context that Christie recalled that *The End of North's Ministry*

> appeared about a year after Taylor quarrelled with Namier over the Regius Chair [of Modern History at Oxford]. Taylor reviewed it . . . and stated that Namier's conclusions about C18 politics had been proved wrong by one of his leading pupils and associates.

Christie felt that this—apart from being inaccurate and showing 'utter ignorance of the whole general thrust of my book'—might be damaging to him 'if Namier took against me'. He added that, 'being young and diffident', he 'let the matter go', but was never sure thereafter that Namier did not have 'slight reservations about my loyalty to him'.[13]

Christie was soon at work on a second book—*Wilkes, Wyvill and Reform: The Parliamentary Reform Movement in British Politics, 1760–1785* (1962). The title yielded, some years later, a moment of wry amusement—though Christie himself may have been more irritated than amused when he found the authors of an American textbook stating that 'Wilkes, Wyvill and reform!' had been a radical slogan at the time. He

[12] IRC to Lady Namier, 18 May 1971.
[13] IRC to A. L. Rowse, 12 Feb. 1996 (after reading Rowse's *Historians I have known*). Taylor's review of Christie's book has not been located.

observed that he had been present when the phrase was coined 'in a London publisher's office'.[14] The direction his work was now taking had led to his only transatlantic experience—contributing to a Williamsburg seminar in September 1960 a paper on 'Radicalism in Britain in the age of the American Revolution'. This widening scope was confirmed by a third book: *Crisis of Empire: Great Britain and the American Colonies 1754–1783* (1966)—a short study of a major theme which has been described as 'admirable for getting the issues in perspective'.[15] A volume of collected papers running to almost 400 pages followed in 1970.[16]

This record of assiduous scholarship had led to professional advancement. Christie was appointed to his London readership in 1960; his professorial title was conferred in 1966. Meanwhile several unrealised possibilities might have greatly altered the pattern of his later life. An engagement to marry was contracted but broken off. Since 1948 Christie had lived at Croxley Green in Hertfordshire with his mother (and, till her marriage in 1952, his sister). This was to be his home for half a century; and UCL was to remain his academic base throughout. In the 1960s, however such *stabilitas* (a monastic term Christie might not have relished) was not predictable. His UCL colleagues were on the move: Ralph Davis to Birmingham, Arthur Taylor to Leeds, Geoffrey Barrow to Newcastle. University expansion was once more on the agenda. Christie was interviewed in the spring of 1963 for a chair at the new University of East Anglia; and at much the same time he applied for the history chair at Bristol. Two years later he was asked to be a candidate for the new second chair of history at Manchester, but declined in view of his imminent professorial promotion in London. There, besides his teaching duties, he served as an examiner from 1957 and as secretary of the Board of Studies in History from 1961 to 1963. In 1964, he and Geoffrey Barrow began a six-year term as joint literary directors of the Royal Historical Society.

Christie was also—naturally for a 'Namierite'—much involved in the *History of Parliament*. He conributed dozens of biographies to *The House of Commons 1754–1790* and was invited in 1969 to accept editorial responsibility for the volumes covering the years 1790–1820. He was unable to accept, having agreed to serve first as vice-dean and then, from 1971 to 1973, as dean of the UCL arts faculty. He did, however, join the

[14] Review of G. M. and L. O. Straka, *A Certainty in the Succession, American Historical Review*, 79 (1974), 404.
[15] J. R. Pole to the present writer, 24 Oct. 1999.
[16] *Myth and Reality in Late Eighteenth Century British Politics* (1970).

editorial board of the History of Parliament Trust in 1973 and remained a member until 1996. He provided many corrections for the CD-ROM republication of volumes in the *History*, and regretted that this facility had not been available for work on what proved to be his last book—dedicated in memory of Namier: *British 'non-élite' MPs 1715–20* (1995).

Back in the 1960s Ian Christie had become involved in a very different scholarly enterprise. Since 1959 UCL had been the centre for editing *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham*; and Christie was persuaded to edit the third volume of Bentham's correspondence, covering the years 1781–8. He brought to the task his unrivalled knowledge of a period when Bentham first had significant contacts with the world of high politics. It was also, however, a time when Bentham looked further afield for means of putting into practice his ideas for systematic legislation: in the mid-1780s he travelled to Russia in the hope that the Empress Catherine might be the requisite enlightened legislator. Editing Bentham's correspondence for those years presented problems quite different from those Christie had so far encountered in his scholarly work. His reponse was typically vigorous. Most notably, perhaps, it involved his learning Russian—which included reciting irregular verbs while walking his dog in the Hertfordshire countryside. Those who have tried—and failed—to acquire a new language in middle age will appreciate the heroic character of Christie's undertaking. The substantial volume he edited (1971) was of pivotal importance for the wider Bentham project. It also added an enduring new dimension to his own scholarly interests. Not alone in finding Jeremy Bentham's shipbuilder brother Samuel at least as interesting as the 'legislator of the world', Christie wrote in his retirement *The Benthams in Russia 1780–1791* (1993).

None of this diverted the main stream of Christie's work from the world of British politics in the central decades of George III's reign; and major aspects of that work have still to be considered. First, however, some eddies must be negotiated. For one of these, indeed, Christie himself might have claimed mainstream importance. Familiar now to many in Alan Bennett's *The Madness of George III*, the diagnosis of the king's malady as porphyria had for Christie what sometimes seemed disproportionate significance. He evidently saw the two medical historians whose work he did much to bring to more general attention as having somehow

[17] There was no contact or correspondence between Alan Bennett and Christie, who resolutely refused to see the play. He did, however, see the film (*The Madness of King George*) in 1995—'and was quite impressed' (Mrs Ann Christie to the present writer, 30 Nov. 1999).

cleared the king's name of a stigma by showing that he was not 'really mad' but the victim of an inherited physical affliction.[17]

A more puzzling preoccupation with the medical aspect of history—this time contemporary history—was manifested when Christie was convinced (or at least strongly persuaded) by the theory (based allegedly on medical evidence) that the prisoner in Spandau under the name Rudolf Hess was not the Nazi war criminal at all but a substitute who had taken (or been put in) his place. If the reasons for such a substitution were unclear, the grounds of Ian Christie's concern were even more obscure. Certainly his interest in the case did not reflect any sympathy for Hess or for the movement in which he had played so prominent a part. The episode contributed to the impression Christie sometimes gave of an eccentricity paradoxical in one who, otherwise, could seem almost excessively conventional.

There was, at all events, nothing eccentric, though much that was controversial, in another *cause célèbre* in which Christie took a resolute stance. His scholarly standing was recognised by his election to the Academy in 1977. Much as he valued that distinction, however, he was brought quite soon to the verge of resigning his fellowship over the deeply divisive issue precipitated by the revelation of Anthony Blunt's treason. To Christie the matter was, however painful, straightforward: such treachery was incompatible with membership of the Academy, and if Blunt did not resign he should be expelled. Had he not been removed in one way or the other, Christie would have resigned himself. To others, what Christie saw as incompatibility was irrelevance: the criteria for membership of the Academy were purely intellectual and the integrity of those criteria should not be compromised. One of those who took that view most strongly was A. J. P. Taylor—who in the event resigned from the Academy in protest against what he saw as Blunt's constructive expulsion. This led to Christie's final alienation from his former Magdalen tutor. Some years after Taylor's death he wrote of how they

> broke altogether . . . over the business of Blunt and the Academy when I did my best to help get Blunt out. For Taylor's argument that only scholarship mattered and that he would resign if Blunt was expelled I had no respect. . . . to me treasonable spying was totally unacceptable.[18]

Yet Christie must have known that people he did respect—including

[18] IRC to A. L. Rowse, 12 Feb. 1996.

his friend and former colleague Geoffrey Barrow—might share his view of 'treasonable spying' and yet take the contrary view on Academy membership.[19]

In other respects Ian Christie enjoyed, as he neared sixty, 'calm sea and prosperous voyage'. His four years as head of the UCL history department (1975–9) came when the stridencies of student protest (never, in any case, as clamorous in Gower Street as, for example, at LSE) were largely stilled, and before the different pressures of the 1980s had begun. His Academy fellowship might have been followed by the presidency of the Royal Historical Society, had he not felt obliged to decline nomination because of his commitment to his mother, now almost ninety.[20] His 1979 apointment to the Astor chair was followed by the invitation in 1980 to deliver the Ford Lectures in Oxford in 1983–4, of which the published version was dedicated 'To the memory of my father, John Reid Christie'.

That book, together with two others written in the decade before Christie's retirement from his chair, provides an apt basis for a general review of his achievement as a historian.[21] The first of these books took him back to his earlier work on the American revolution. *Empire or Independence* was a work of transatlantic collaboration, written jointly with Benjamin W. Labaree. Described by Christie himself as 'an attempt to pull together some of the most recent scholarhip', it was the subject of a substantial *TLS* article (6 August 1976) by Jack P. Greene, who rated 'Professor Christie's account of the British side' as 'the best available'. Greene thought, however, that Christie and Labaree had been less effective in handling 'the relationship between social and political tensions'; and this raises a more general question about the range of Christie's historical vision. It had already been suggested five years earlier that in his 'patient advance' in the field of eighteenth-century history he was being outmanoeuvred: 'the battle has shifted, and there is some danger that, by the time he reaches the *rendezvous*, the bridgehead will have gone.'[22] That may have implied a somewhat premature obituary on the historiography

[19] G. W. S. Barrow to the present writer, 29 Sept. 1999: 'I took the AJPT line . . . It seemed (and seems) to me that election to the Academy . . . must be merely a recognition of eminence in a scholarly/scientific discipline, unaffected by social, political or even criminal behaviour.'

[20] Besides his service as joint literary director, Christie had been a member of the Society's council from 1970 to 1974.

[21] For *Stress and Stability* (the Ford Lectures), see n. 3 above. The other books to be discussed are: I. R. Christie and B. W. Labaree, *Empire or Independence, 1760–1776* (New York, 1976); I. R. Christie, *Wars and Revolutions: Britain 1760–1815* (1982).

[22] J. A. Cannon, reviewing *Myth and Reality: History*, NS 56 (1971), 455–6.

inspired by Namier; but the ground was indeed shifting, and Christie for his part was not unaware of the change. Nor did he fail to appreciate the value of approaches other than his own.[23] He did not, to be sure, think it either necessary or possible to 'reinvent himself' as a historian; but there were, in the late 1970s and early eighties, to be opportunities to modify the perspectives of his work.

Wars and Revolutions was Christie's response to one of these opportunities. It entailed covering a longer period (1760–1815) than anything else he wrote—and doing so in a more comprehensive way than could ever have been relevant in a 'Namierite' study of high politics. And, paradoxical as it may appear, this volume in a *New History of England* challenged more sharply than anything he had previously written his assertion of his own 'British' identity and his insistence on his professional concern with British—not simply English—history.[24] It cannot be said that this challenge was very effectively met. The book conveys little sense of the complex polity created by the Union of 1707 or of the plurality of the Anglo-Scottish society that underlay it. References to Ireland are more than twice as numerous as, and far more copious than, those to Scotland. The book opens with a chapter on 'The Nation and its Wealth', but there is no mention, there or elsewhere, of either *The Wealth of Nations* or its author. There is a passing reference to 'the mid-century Scottish Enlightenment', but neither description nor discussion of the phenomenon so designated. Edinburgh appears briefly, the *Edinburgh Review* not at all. Henry Dundas is probably—apart from Lord Bute—the Scot referred to most frequently; but most of the references are to his activities outside Scotland. His 'ascendancy' there is mentioned, but without analysis.

Yet if this is still an essentially English view of British history, and admitting that the history is predominantly political, it is clear that Christie was seriously concerned to broaden his view. The opening chapter on economic factors is followed by a somewhat longer chapter on 'State and Church'; and this, in the present context, may be the most interesting feature of the book. It is apposite at this point to recall an observation made by Christie in his 1989 letter to Maurice Cowling. Elaborating on the point that Cowling had not, in Christie's view, 'established a full empathy with the people of the late 1930s', he described the

[23] His UCL colleague Stephen Conway recalls, for example, the warmth with which Christie spoke of John Brewer's *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (1976).
[24] The last four volumes in the 10-volume *New History of England* all have 'Britain' in their subtitles.

achievement of such empathy as 'the most difficult element in the historian's task.' And he went on:

> how difficult I don't think I realised until, late in my career, I was dealing in my Ford Lectures with the interconnections between religion and social stability. I am—I make no bones about it—an atheist; but it was clear to me—that I must get inside the minds of people like Wesley, and I think I managed it.[25]

Leaving aside for the moment the question of how the subject is 'managed' in *Stress and Stability*, it is to be noted that the problem was already in Christie's mind as he wrote *Wars and Revolutions*. We may presume that he was consulted as to the four portraits chosen for the endpapers of the book: George III, William Pitt, and Wellington are joined there by Nathaniel Hone's 1766 portrait of John Wesley. Wesley, to be sure, is scarcely treated *in extenso*; but within the narrow limits prescribed by the plan of the book, Wesleyan Methodism and other religious movements of the period receive serious attention. Even the fissiparous complexities of Scottish Presbyterianism are lucidly dealt with.[26] How much 'empathy' had been achieved may be doubtful. Both Evangelicalism and Methodism seem to be attributed to

> a minority, whose psychological make-up sought satisfaction in a sense of immediate communion with a transcendent deity, and for whom the experience of believing in—to the point of 'knowing' with a deep inward emotional fervour and certainty—the Christian doctrine of redemption through Christ afforded a sense of personal salvation.[27]

This is not the place to discuss—let alone to determine—the adequacy of that 'diagnosis'; but it is at any rate the view of a historian who recognises the existence and efficacy of human motives he cannot share.

In other (though not unrelated) ways too, the writing of *Wars and Revolutions* confronted Ian Christie with historical issues different in kind from those with which his work had so far been largely concerned. 'At times,' he wrote in the introduction to the book,

> men feared revolution, but revolution did not come. . . . Somehow the tensile strength of British society resisted the forces making for disintegration. . . . But

[25] IRC to M. Cowling, 5 Sept. 1989.

[26] For 'the Church'—or rather the churches—see *Wars and Revolutions*, pp. 33–44. In the Scottish connection, it may be worth noting that some of Christie's ancestors—the descendants of the 17th-century Covenanters already mentioned—are likely to have been 'Seceders' of one kind or another.

[27] *Wars and Revolutions*, p. 35.

> it has been borne in upon the author during the preparation of this book, that there is much about this process of survival that as yet remains unexplained. Historians have hardly begun to ask the right questions, which will lead to the proper elucidation of it.[28]

In his Ford Lectures Christie attempted to ask—and to answer—'the right questions' as to what the subtitle of *Stress and Stability* calls 'the British avoidance of revolution'.

The attempt began with a lecture (which became, 'substantially as delivered', the opening chapter) entitled 'An Age of Revolution?'. The question-mark is crucial; for Christie wished to challenge the notion that the late eighteenth century should be seen as a period when the established order in the Atlantic world was under a revolutionary attack of which particular revolutions were instances or aspects. His target here was of course—and not for the first time—'that splendid *tour de force* by Professor R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*'. Perhaps the best that could be said for this view in Christie's opinion was that it was less 'abstracted from reality' than the still more general theories of revolution he found in works of political and social science. He was prepared to see *The Anatomy of Revolution* by Crane Brinton (a 'historian turned political scientist') as 'a book which commands respect as opening a new modern stage of debate in this field'. Yet the attempt 'to apply a general pattern to four revolutions' ended, for Christie, in failure; and he saw such general theories as 'of only minimal help to a historical enquiry'. Thus, 'in the main, the situation in Britain needs to be treated as unique'.[29]

Christie's own treatment of that situation began with a lecture on 'Britain under Strain'. He accepts—even insists—that strain is an inevitable element in the human social condition; and he goes on to analyse the specific instances of this at various levels in late eighteenth-century Britain. The tendency of the analysis may fairly be described as minimising if not minimalist. Despite endemic 'popular turbulence', this was a country where 'oligarchical government stood foursquare on its foundations in the tacit consent of the people'. As for what Bentham called 'the ruling few', Christie argued that 'British politics had not become polarized in a conflict between king and aristocracy'. Butterfield's

[28] *Wars and Revolutions*, p. 2.

[29] *Stress and Stability*, pp. 4, 7, 9, 25–6. Christie had been critical of Palmer's ideas twenty years earlier, in *Wilkes, Wyvill and Reform*.

view that the parliamentary reform movement of 1780 was 'the revolution that we escaped' is firmly rejected. Again, 'popular radicalism' in the decade after 1789 'was deliberately directed to seeking its objectives by peaceful and constitutional means'. That 'the brand [of potential revolution] was smouldering' is nonetheless admitted; and in his chapter on 'Factors of Social Cohesion' Christie offers 'some possible explanations why the stubble did not take fire'.[30]

The argument in that chapter, considerably expanded in the published text, together with two chapters developed from the final lecture and devoted to 'The Intellectual Repulse of Revolution' and 'The Churches and Good Order', is pivotal for an understanding of Christie's mature interpretation of the society to whose politics he had directed so much scholarly effort.[31] In bald outline his argument is as follows. Politically, despite the limited franchise, 'the king's subjects claimed and exercised their rights as members of the community, including the right to be as outspoken as they liked about those responsible for the conduct of public affairs'. The social structure was marked by 'numerous, narrow, often imperceptible gradations' rather than by impenetrable barriers of privilege. There was, further, 'good ground for arguing that one of the chief factors making for stability . . . was the country's buoyant economy and growing prosperity'. In these conditions 'there was no danger of revolution in Britain in the 1790s'.[32]

'Revolutions . . .' (Christie went on to argue) 'require a renegade minority of the élite and a discontented mass . . . and . . . neither . . . was present in sufficient force' in Britain. This leads to a discussion of the ideological situation in the years around 1789: Paley and Burke are examined and the controversy between Burke and Paine is analysed. That confrontation, however, was such that by its very nature it could not 'articulate the ideological gulf which yawned between the [French] Revolution and British conservatism'. The argument was won, not by 'conservative metaphysics' but by a 'more compelling theme'—'a deep-rooted pragmatism', of which the roots lay above all in 'the slow evolution of the English common law'.[33] That, incidentally, serves to draw attention to a curious hiatus in Christie's work—the more surprising in

[30] *Stress and Stability*, pp. 33, 35, 45, 47, 51, 53.

[31] The intervening chapters—substantially Lectures 4 and 5—deal with the Poor Law and with working-men's organisations.

[32] *Stress and Stability*, pp. 59, 61, 70, 93.

[33] *Stress and Stability*, pp. 156, 177, 181.

view of his contribution to Bentham scholarship. Law, lawyers, and law reform hardly figure in his writings. Blackstone and Mansfield rate no more than passing references in *War and Revolutions*; and while Mansfield and Camden make rather more of an appearance in the pages of *Myth and Reality*, they are cast there more as politicians than as judges.

Another earlier gap, however, Christie was now resolved to fill. The religion whose tenets he rejected must be accorded its due place in historical analysis; and the final chapter in *Stress and Stability* deals with 'The Churches and Good Order'. That heading may, to be sure, call into question the degree of 'empathy' Christie had 'managed' in respect of a figure like Wesley. He stops perhaps just short of despairing of any attempt by heirs of 'the intellectual revolution represented by Lyell and Darwin and by modern biblical criticism' to understand minds 'in the grip' of a world-view derived from biblical cosmology and chronology. And whatever empathy may or may not be achieved, Christie is evidently in greater sympathy with Parson Woodforde than with 'the obsessive religion of those who were beginning to react against the Church's apparent complacency'. There is a genuine effort to explain why religion was one of the 'factors of social cohesion', not just because it was so commonly apt 'to shun political radicalism', but also because it offered a social and religious package highly attractive to thousands of people'. Yet Christie's final verdict is tepid: in its various forms, 'evangelicalism . . . may, at least for some, have averted a potentially dangerous build-up of frustration and political discontent'.[34]

Christie's Ford Lectures and the book he made of them were variously received. He ended with the resounding lines of John of Gaunt's 'sceptred isle' speech; and his theme of a 'deeply-shared sense of national identity' may well have been 'an unwelcome message to some of his audience'.[35] Reviews of *Stress and Stability* were in general favourable—referring, for instance, to 'the convincing synthesis' it offered and 'the prodigious learning' it displayed.[36] The second of the reviewers just quoted, however, also drew attention to Christie's failure to take 'a look at the universities, especially the Scottish universities' and noted more generally the virtual

[34] *Stress and Stability*, pp. 184, 195, 200, 209, 213–14. It may be worth noting that Christie made no reference on this occasion to the churches in Scotland.

[35] J. C. D. Clark in an unpublished obituary notice. In a letter (16 Oct. 1999) to the present writer, Professor Clark recalls the reaction of the Ford Lectures audience as 'often extremely cool'.

[36] P. D. G. Thomas, *History*, NS 71 (1986), 104; W. Thomas, *TLS*, 19 April 1985.

neglect of the Scottish dimension. That point was also made when *Stress and Stability* was discussed, along with other works, by Frank O'Gorman in a major review-article on 'The Recent Historiography of the Hanoverian Regime.'[37] From this it is clear enough that, as with any scholar who is active over half a lifetime, Ian Christie's work was being overtaken and challenged by other approaches to his subject. That in no way lessens the contribution he had made, summed up in a book that seemed to one reviewer to achieve a 'fine balance of brilliance and common sense'.[38]

Ian Christie's years in retirement were not, as we have seen, years of inertia, but of continuing intellectual activity. There were major changes in his personal circumstances. His mother died in 1987. Five years later he married Ann Hastings—a marriage which brought great happiness to the closing years of a life of which, perhaps, integrity—both intellectual and personal—was the most impressive characteristic. Reserve and formal courtesy did not for those who came to know him disguise an essential humanity and generosity of spirit. There must be many who would share the view that 'his kindness was not a matter of surface civility, but a more genuine commitment to younger scholars'.[39] That commitment bears witness to the values that guided Christie's life.

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[37] *Historical Journal*, 29 (1986), 1005–20.
[38] C. B. Ritcheson, *American Historical Review*, 90 (1985), 1096.
[39] D. Lieberman to the present writer, 8 Dec. 1999.