JOHN BURROW

John Wyon Burrow
1935–2009

THE TERM 'INTELLECTUAL HISTORY' has had a curious history of its own in recent decades. In the middle of the twentieth century, when John Burrow was beginning his academic career, the phrase could still seem a little wilful, even *outré*, its questionable or perhaps mildly comic status reinforced by the traditional English resistance to anything that presumed to describe itself as 'intellectual'. Certainly, it was not the title of a recognised subdiscipline of History, on a par with 'political history', 'economic history', and so on. Over half a century later, usage has been quite transformed. The label has become ubiquitous, applied with little discrimination to almost any engagement with past ideas, no matter how indifferent that engagement may be to respecting the historicity of those ideas. At the same time, it has also established itself alongside its older siblings as a respectable member of History's family: there are now chairs and courses and journals that bear the title, usually with a happy ignorance of what, until recently, seemed the mark of a dubious arriviste status.

John Burrow had characteristically mixed feelings about this development: it is always vexing, having struggled against the condescension of one's elders, to be taken by one's juniors to be merely surfing the wave of fashion, and he found the promiscuous use of the label irritating. But it is no simple matter to try to disentangle the story of the development and influence of his own work from this larger transformation. By the time of his death in 2009, he was recognised as a scholar and writer of exceptional and distinctive gifts: few intellectual historians in Britain were as widely admired by colleagues from other branches of history and from other disciplines—admired for the originality and penetration of his analyses no

Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy, XI, 81–111.

less than for the richness and grace of his prose. Yet he felt himself to be, once again, out of step with dominant academic trends. He had never cared for the paraphernalia of professionalism, and the recent industrialisation of production and work-patterns in British universities was anathema to him. In addition, the effect on the writing of history of that disparate cluster of approaches known as 'literary theory' seemed to him, on the whole, malign. The new fashion, almost mania, for appropriating the term 'intellectual history' to describe much of the work done under these two (partly complicit) impulses was prone to arouse in him feelings akin to those expressed in Dr Johnson's sardonic definition of 'patron'.[1]

Moreover, although the standing of John's own contribution to intellectual history was widely acknowledged, his career and his position in the field did not correspond to the most familiar patterns of academic success. He could certainly not be said to have founded any kind of 'school': he had admirers in plenty, but no followers—it is surely striking that such a distinguished scholar should have had only a small handful of research students, very few of whom have gone on to successful academic careers of their own. For the most part, he eschewed methodological manifestos, preferring to embody his reflective intuitions in good practice rather than attempting to legislate by means of programmatic abstraction.[2] Nor did he cultivate the conventional academic mediums of professional advancement: he abhorred conferences, he rarely wrote articles in learned journals, and it was only with great reluctance that he allowed himself to be pressed into service on academic bodies or professional associations (his well-merited reputation for not being a natural administrator anyway discouraged such invitations).

And yet, despite all this, the future historian of British academic culture in the late twentieth century will surely be forced to conclude that the sheer unignorable quality of John Burrow's books and the winning character of his personal performances made an important contribution to the process by which intellectual history came to enjoy recognition and respect from scholars in neighbouring fields. Although Cambridge was his

[1] 'Is not a Patron, my Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help?' Samuel Johnson, *Letter to Lord Chesterfield* (1755).

[2] Perhaps the only significant exception to this was his John Coffin Memorial Lecture given at the University of London in 1987 and subsequently printed as a pamphlet: J. W. Burrow, *The Languages of the Past and the Languages of the Historian: the History of Ideas in Theory and Practice* (London, 1987). Some further thoughts were included in a paper he delivered on several occasions, but did not publish, entitled 'The poverty of methodology' (a copy of which is in the John Burrow papers in Sussex University library).

alma mater and always retained a strong hold on his loyalties, and although he greatly enjoyed the five years at the end of his career that he spent in Oxford, there can be no question but that his achievements were principally associated with the University of Sussex where he taught for over twenty-five years. There he helped found the first degree course in intellectual history at a British university as well as coming to occupy the first chair in the subject. Despite his own form of reticence (he could enjoy showing off but recoiled from any assertion of rank or precedence), he was increasingly recognised as an exceptionally impressive, while wholly individual, practitioner of this form of history, with a growing number of like-minded colleagues but few peers. It was not without a certain quiet pride that, on his election as a Fellow of the Academy at the age of 51 in 1986, he could, unpolemically but also undefensively, describe his professional identity as 'intellectual historian'.

I

John Wyon Burrow ('Wyon' was a family name from his father's side) was born in Southsea, Hampshire, on 4 June 1935, the only child of Charles and Alice Burrow (*n*ée Vosper). Shortly after his birth, the family returned to Devon, which was to be John's home for the first twenty years of his life, aside from brief periods spent at his maternal grandparents' house on the Cornish side of Plymouth Sound. His father was a commercial traveller for Shredded Wheat, supplying the small grocers of the south Devon coast; his mother had briefly been a shorthand typist before her marriage. His parents came from relatively straitened backgrounds, and never rose to financial prosperity; they each had to leave school to work before they could acquire much formal secondary education, but they shared, and imparted to their son, an enjoyment of English literature, English music, and English churches. For the final ten years of his working life, John's father found more congenial employment as a verger in Eton College chapel, and this role is nicely emblematic of the mixture of genuine cultivation, precarious or unpromising financial circumstances, and a certain genteel snobbery that characterised the son's childhood and youth, a mixture that, filtered through John's precocious intellect and responsive sensibilities, was to leave recognisable traces in his own life and character.

Much of our knowledge of his early life comes from what might be called 'the oral tradition'—knowing John involved a lot of oral tradition—but some comes from the delightful memoir of his childhood that he wrote

late in life (discussed below), including the magnificently unrepentant declaration: 'I learned to talk early.'[3] During the war years John attended Bramdean preparatory school in Exeter as a day boy (his paternal grandfather paid the fees). From his childhood, he was unusually aware of the layering of historical residues in the world around him, whether culturally, architecturally, or in other terms, and he later recalled that his prep school carried 'with it into the mid-twentieth century much of the *mores* of the pre-1914 England in which it had been founded'.[4] Certainly, his own years there seem more evocative of *Stalky and Co* than of the ethos of public education at the time of the 1944 Education Act. 'The Empire was not merely taken for granted at Bramdean,' he recalled, 'but consciously celebrated. And Empire meant, above all, India; it seems to me now not inappropriate that I left Bramdean in the year the British left India.'[5] His own imaginative life was a mixture of the typical and the distinctive. He later recalled that he had, at around the age of ten, conceived the ambition to be a professional footballer, a role for which nature had conspicuously failed to endow him with any of the requisite qualities, until this was displaced by the ambition to be a stand-up comedian, a role for which he had abundant natural gifts and for which, his friends could sometimes feel, he continued to rehearse throughout his life.

In the autumn of 1947, John entered Exeter School, which at the time enjoyed, as did several others, the dual status of being a 'Direct-Grant Grammar School' and a member of the Headmasters' Conference. The grammar-school culture of the period suited John perfectly: intellectually serious yet not prematurely professional; cultured, but not precious; encouraging personal development without being egregiously experimental or simply indulgent. Apart from his deep attachment to his family and his West-country roots, one of the things the later memoir brings out most strikingly is the precocious range and sophistication, as well as the sheer quantity, of John's reading during his childhood and youth. 'I bought the Penguin classics in translation, more or less as they came out,' he records—not, he makes clear, a selection of them, but every one. In fact, his account of his teenage years largely takes the form of an annotated bibliography, and evidence of the future intellectual historian is not far to seek. 'I read Hume', he reports, adding with confident discrimination, 'especially Book Three of the Treatise, which seemed the most interesting.' No doubt there

[3] John Burrow, *Memories Migrating: an Autobiography* (privately printed, 2009), p. 2.
[4] *Memories Migrating*, p. 42.
[5] *Memories Migrating*, p. 55. Perhaps a little poetic licence was indulged here, since he elsewhere states, with some plausibility, that he left the school in 1946.

have been quite a few fifteen-year-olds who disliked the muddy military escapades associated with being in the school corps, but how many, one wonders, could have said as truthfully as John that he preferred 'to stay at home … and read Baudelaire'? And a special charm attaches to the picture of the bookish schoolboy, crouched by the family radio earnestly taking notes from a series of talks on 'Freedom and its Betrayal' by a speaker he had not previously heard of called Isaiah Berlin.[6] Decades later these two eminent historians of ideas were to recognise a certain kinship between them, perhaps not least in the humanity which they brought to their understanding of past thinkers and the volubility with which they expressed the results of those encounters.

In October 1954 John entered Christ's College, Cambridge with an open scholarship in History. Here, his Director of Studies was that talent-spotter *extraordinaire*, J. H. ('Jack') Plumb, and John became part of that galaxy of historians whose careers (and, to a much lesser extent, practice of history) were shaped by this inspiring, demanding, seductive, irascible man.[7] It was one of the marks of Plumb's gifts as a nurturer of young historical minds that he did not try to replicate himself—forming only political and social historians of the eighteenth century—but instead encouraged his protegés to follow their own bent and to cultivate some of the less well-populated fields of historical enquiry. John found the self-consciously hard-headed positivism of much political and economic history unattractive; more to his taste were the papers in the History Tripos on the history of political thought. For his work on the Part II paper on 'Theories of the Modern State' (essentially a course in the big names in political thought from Rousseau and Bentham onwards) he was supervised by Duncan Forbes, who for many years gave a celebrated course of lectures on Hegel (then little studied or little rated in the English-speaking world) and Marx (rated by many who did not study him and, as a result, studied by some who did not rate him). At this stage of his life, John was drawn to philosophical and theoretical subjects, and the history of political thought provided him (as it provided several others who have gone on to make notable contributions to intellectual history) with a way to marry his historical and conceptual interests. He obtained Firsts in both parts of the Tripos, and after graduating in 1957 he embarked on research for a Ph.D.

[6] *Memories Migrating*, pp. 105, 106, 96, 107. He had already invoked this last vignette in his Oxford Inaugural Lecture; see below, n. 37.

[7] For a perceptive account of Plumb's personality and career, see David Cannadine, 'John Harold Plumb 1911–2001', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 124, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows*, III (2004), 269–309.

This did not begin well, as it so often doesn't. Having expressed an interest in things Victorian, John was assigned G. R. S. Kitson Clark as his supervisor; having declared that he wanted to work on 'public opinion', he was directed by 'Kitson', as he was generally known, to study an election (that of 1886). As John later put it: 'I can think of virtually no task to which my talents are less suited.'[8] The need to keep an orderly card index recording his findings was not the least of the ways in which the talents did not match the task. But casting around to familiarise himself with Victorian ideas more generally he was led to read *On the Origin of Species*, and then, via Darwin, to Herbert Spencer, and thus, fatefully, he began to ponder the importance of 'evolutionary' thinking in nineteenth-century Britain. Kitson Clark, to his credit, accepted this change of tack and continued to provide supervision, though the topic was now far from his own chief interests. Coached by Plumb, John successfully submitted a dissertation for a Research Fellowship at Christ's, which he took up in October 1959. In 1961 he was awarded the Ph.D. for a dissertation entitled 'The concept of evolution in English social theory from Spencer to Hobhouse'; his examiners were, unusually for a doctorate in History, the anthropologist Meyer Fortes and the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott.

To revisit that dissertation is to be reminded of the unusual degree of intellectual autonomy exhibited in Burrow's early work. With hindsight, one might have expected Duncan Forbes to have played a larger role. In later life John admired Forbes as an exemplary intellectual historian, but it is hard not to feel that there was a somewhat mysteriously missed connection between the two men in the late 1950s and early 1960s.[9] Instead, John pursued his own interests in contemporary political philosophy and social theory, in part because these enquiries seemed at the time to promise to provide a progressive or broadly left-wing set of answers to questions about contemporary society and politics. Peter Laslett, an encouraging presence for many in Cambridge with these interests, had started his influential series *Politics, Philosophy, Society* while John was an undergraduate; Noel Annan published his Hobhouse Lecture on 'The curious strength of positivism in English political thought' in 1959; and W. G. Runciman gave the lectures that became his *Social Science and Political Theory* while

[8] *Memories Migrating*, p. 160.

[9] On Forbes, see Burrow's introduction to Duncan Forbes, 'Aesthetic thoughts on doing the history of ideas', *History of European Ideas*, 27 (2001), 101–13; and the reminiscences in *Memories Migrating*, pp. 149–52. See also the unpublished obituary by Donald Winch largely reproduced in the notice on Forbes in *The Clare Association Annual* (1994–5), 78–82.

John was a research student.[10] Stimulated by such sources, John began to ask what it was that social science, especially sociology and anthropology, attempted to explain that political philosophy and economic theory could not, and out of these concerns he fashioned an unusual set of questions with which to address the prevalence of social evolutionary thinking in Victorian culture.

While an undergraduate John met Diane Dunnington, who was studying philosophy at University College London; they married in October 1958. Their first child, Laurence, was born in 1961, to be followed by Francesca in 1969. John greatly enjoyed the role of father, and, many years later when Francesca produced two children, positively adored that of grandfather. Indeed, one of the historical identities in which it was easiest to imagine him was that of the Victorian paterfamilias—less remote, certainly, than some instances of the type, but relishing his central place, indulged and indulgent, in a noisy multigenerational household revolving around meals, music, and mess.

The responsibilities of fatherhood made it more imperative than ever that Burrow obtain a permanent academic appointment. At the end of his research fellowship he took up a college teaching fellowship at Downing College. Such posts, relatively ill-paid and without security of tenure, were often regarded at the time as a kind of antechamber to a permanent lectureship in the relevant faculty. During his time at Downing, John twice applied for such posts in the History Faculty and was twice unsuccessful. In later life, he could recur to these setbacks with an understandable sense of resentment, but it may not be too pollyanaish to think this local failure helped pave the way for much greater later success, and that removal to pastures new, though initially disagreeable, enabled him to pursue his own bent more freely than might have been easily possible in a junior role within the self-consciously hierarchical and sometimes intellectually intolerant community that was the Cambridge History Faculty in the early 1960s. In any event, he moved, spurred by financial need as well as local rejection, to a lectureship at the University of East Anglia in 1965, where he was promoted to Reader in 1968.

By that point he had published the book which secured his reputation and with which, in some quarters, his name is still most readily associated. *Evolution and Society: a Study in Victorian Social Theory*, an extended

[10] Peter Laslett, *Philosophy, Politics, and Society* (Oxford, 1956); Noel Annan, *The Curious Strength of Positivism in English Social Thought* (L. T. Hobhouse Memorial Lecture no. 28: Oxford, 1959); W. G. Runciman, *Social Science and Political Theory* (Cambridge, 1963).

version of his Ph.D., finally appeared, after several delays, in 1966, to numerous admiring reviews. For a first book, it was a remarkable *tour de force*: instead of cleaving closely to an intensively mined body of original sources as most first monographs do, it addressed a large question and ranged across a wide area with assurance and panache. The explicit topic on which John's doctorate had focused was the prevalence of social evolutionism in Victorian thought, but, as already indicated, he brought to this question a mind stirred by the theoretical debates in political theory and social science in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These debates had led him to meditate on the distinctive category of 'the social', and this in turn led him to read Talcott Parsons' classic work from 1937, *The Structure of Social Action*. The extent to which Parsons provided, indirectly, much of the theoretical scaffolding for the book's argument may not now be immediately obvious, though the seven direct citations of his work, once one is alerted to them, come to assume a strategic importance. In essence, Parsons had portrayed the sociology of Durkheim, Weber, and Pareto as a series of responses to the incapacity of what he, somewhat confusingly, called 'positivism' to account for 'non-rational' action. British thinkers played only a small part in Parsons' story, aside from Alfred Marshall's use of the category of 'residues' to accommodate aspects of social behaviour that did not fit the categories of neoclassical economic theory. But in emphasising the revolution in social thought which the leading Continental thinkers had effected in the early twentieth century, Parsons began his work by quoting the rhetorical question: 'Who now reads Spencer?'[11]

John Burrow read Spencer, intrigued by his fall into near-oblivion after having been such a dominating presence in Victorian thought, and he came to think that the work of Spencer and his fellow social evolutionists Henry Maine and E. B. Tylor had provided contemporaries with a way of understanding the variety of social action without abandoning their broadly positivistic commitment to rational modes of explanation. And he also came to think that the principal reason why they needed to adopt this social-evolutionary perspective from the 1850s and 1860s onwards was because Utilitarianism, the dominant rational-action model of the first half of the century, had proved incapable of fully accounting for the diversity of forms of life revealed by better knowledge both of the past and of so-called 'primitive' societies in the present. (Parsonian echoes

[11] Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action: a Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of Recent European Writers* (New York, 1937), p. 3. The question was a quotation from Crane Brinton, *English Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, first published in 1933.

are also audible in his treatment of Utilitarianism as a kind of 'science of social relations'.) Thus, although *Evolution and Society* ranged far beyond the standard canon in the history of political thought, the briefest formulaic characterisation of its intellectual origins might be: Theories of the Modern State meets *The Structure of Social Action*.

This bald emphasis on the conceptual underpinning of the book may seem at odds with Burrow's mature reputation as a fiercely anti-whiggish intellectual historian, intent on recovering the thoughts of past actors in their own terms. Indeed, in the second edition he was already apologising for what 'I now find tiresomely cumbersome and nagging about the constant contrasting of Spencer, Maine, and Tylor with more recent sociology and social anthropology'.[12] But at a more local level the book already displayed that ear for the intellectual quiddity of past thinkers that became such a hallmark of his later work. In addition to the book's treatment of its three principal figures, there are perceptive brief discussions of writers such as T. H. Buckle and J. S. Mill, and there is an exceptionally acute analysis of James Mill's intellectual relations to Scottish conjectural history, a topic which was not then the minor scholarly industry it has since become.[13] He also showed how the disintegration of the intellectual confidence that had underwritten Utilitarianism in the first half of the nineteenth century led to the rise of what became known as 'social anthropology' in the second half, complete with its later discarded baggage of degenerationism and of polygenism versus monogenism.

What, above all, the book was more widely thought to have established was that the prevalence of social-evolutionary thinking could not be attributed to the influence of Darwin. This was certainly part of the polemical thrust of the book, though its author trod a little more warily here than did some of its admirers. The science which, alongside philology and legal history, did help shape the redirection of English social thinking in an evolutionary direction was geology, though Burrow was, of course, well aware that this was something of a common inspiration for Darwin as well as for 'gradualist' historians and social thinkers. That his argument in the book certainly did not indicate any ignorance of Darwin or underestimation of his importance was emphatically demonstrated by his Pelican edition of *The Origin of Species* in 1968. Although he had no background in any of the relevant biological sciences, John's introduction

[12] J. W. Burrow, *Evolution and Society: a Study in Victorian Social Theory* (Cambridge, 2nd edn., 1970), p. xxi.

[13] See especially the discussion of Scottish 'conjectural history' and its fate in the early nineteenth century; *Evolution and Society*, pp. 54–64.

nonetheless gave an effortlessly lucid and authoritative exposition of Darwin's theory and its wider significance, enlivened with many characteristic touches (for example, on how 'natural history became an approved clerical hobby' with the unintended consequence that 'bug-hunting was the Trojan horse of Victorian agnosticism').[14] John always found a pleasing irony in the fact that it was as a result of writing a book that dislodged Darwin from his conventional position as the inspiration for nineteenth-century social evolution that he had been invited to edit what became for a while the most widely used version of Darwin's masterpiece.

It is important to remember, given Burrow's later reputation as an intellectual historian of Victorian England, that at this point in his career his interests were at least as much European as British.[15] At the University of East Anglia he primarily taught European history; he was to serve for several years as a co-editor of the *Journal of European Studies*; and his own statement of his current research interests when invited to Sussex towards the end of the decade emphasised projects (never completed) on Feuerbach and the young Hegelians. One expression of these interests that did reach publication was his edition of Wilhelm von Humboldt's *The Limits of State Action* (1969). John's introduction displayed an impressive familiarity with German thought of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, deftly situating Humboldt's celebration of human diversity within the aesthetic as well as social thought of German Romanticism, especially Schiller, and its later absorption into the more formalised notion of *Bildung*.[16]

II

The success of *Evolution and Society* determined the next stages of John's life in several ways. In the mid-1960s, Donald Winch was teaching at Sussex as, primarily, an historian of economic thought, and he played a

[14] Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, ed. with an introduction by J. W. Burrow (Harmondsworth, 1968), pp. 18–19.

[15] For a sympathetic exploration of the European, and especially German, dimension of John's work, backed by extensive scholarship, see B. W. Young, 'J. W. Burrow: a personal history', *History of European Ideas*, 37 (2011), 7–15.

[16] Wilhelm Von Humbodt, *The Limits of State Action*, ed. with introduction and notes by J. W. Burrow (Cambridge, 1969). Characteristic touches are not far to seek here, either: for example, his observation when discussing Humboldt's ministerial career, that 'many men have looked forward to the withering away of the State but few ministers have looked forward as Humboldt did to the withering away of their own department' (p. ix, n. 3).

prominent part in establishing an ambitious course there, to be taken by all final-year students in the School of Social Studies (later Social Sciences), 'Concepts, Methods and Values in the Social Sciences', thereafter known to generations of its teachers and students as CMV. Having read John's book with admiration (and having also been working on James Mill at much the same time), Winch invited him to come to deliver a guest lecture for the historical part of this course; the two men got on, found themselves largely of one mind on the failings of the triumphalist or ahistorical accounts that often passed for the history of the social scientific disciplines, and laid the foundations for a long and close friendship. In 1969 Winch masterminded John's move to a Readership at Sussex, with a primary responsibility for teaching CMV.

In curricular terms, Sussex was perhaps the most innovative of the new 'plate-glass' universities of the 1960s. In place of the conventional departmental organisation, it instituted a structure in which both staff and students possessed dual allegiances or identities. Administratively, the chief units to which both belonged were schools of study, some of which, in the Arts area, represented geographical groupings (the School of European Studies, the School of African and Asian Studies) and other groupings by theme or method (the School of Cultural and Community Studies, the School of Social Sciences). But within and across these units were clusters, known as 'subject-groups', defined largely in traditional disciplinary terms. Thus, there were subject-groups in English, History, Philosophy, and so on, with staff members in more than one School. Students took courses in their 'major' (provided by members of the subject group), but also 'contextual courses' in their School (provided by staff in that School who could be members of various subject-groups). John's appointment was somewhat unusual, in that his was a School post, tied to the needs of CMV, not a History subject-group post that was assigned to the School of Social Sciences. But he was not unusual in having intellectual-historical interests that did not always sit comfortably with the dominant character of the subject group that one was nominally attached to: Peter Burke in History, Michael Moran in Philosophy, James Shiel in Classical Studies, similarly felt themselves to be a little uncomfortably placed (as, in a different way, did Helmut Pappé, Reader in the History of Social Thought within Sociology), and so they came together to start a new major in Intellectual History, which in time led to the formation of a separate subject-group. Though smaller than the big battalions such as English or History, Intellectual History was by no means the smallest subject-group at Sussex at a time when Religious Studies, Russian, and so

on had even fewer members. Before long, the new group was able, in those expansionist days, to obtain an additional lectureship, to be held in the School of European Studies, and so it was that in 1972 Larry Siedentop was appointed to the first post in a British university to be advertised as a Lectureship in Intellectual History. (Siedentop returned to Oxford the following year, and I was appointed to the post in 1974.) Meanwhile, John, once the subject-group was established and admitting students to its major, transferred from Social Sciences to the School of English and American Studies, and that remained the disposition of forces until the mid-1980s, with sympathetic colleagues such as Donald Winch from Economics and Norman Vance from English having what, in the local patois, was known as 'secondary allegiance' to the Intellectual History Subject-Group.

Sussex, especially in the period from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, suited John intellectually and allowed him to extend the range and style of both his teaching and writing. In particular, it enabled him to move still further away from the history of political thought, not just into the history of the social sciences but also into the whole range of the intellectual life of a past period, including literary, philosophical, theological, and scientific thought. The degrees in Intellectual History at undergraduate and Master's level that he helped to establish and consolidate there were the first, and for some time the only, such courses in British universities. The interdisciplinary structures and joint teaching arrangements characteristic of Sussex at that time encouraged collaboration. John enjoyed co-teaching contextual courses with colleagues from English such as Larry Lerner and Norman Vance, and offshoots of this activity can be found in his essays on 'The sense of the past' and 'Faith, doubt, and unbelief' that he contributed to the collaborative volume on *The Victorians*, edited by Lerner, published in 1978 in the Methuen 'Literature in Context' series.[17] A more substantial expression of this collaborative ethos was *That Noble Science of Politics,* which John, Donald Winch and I wrote together (which is discussed more fully below).

John and I often taught seminars jointly, an experience from which, as anyone who knew him might imagine, I derived a good part of my education. He could, on occasion, be a brilliant teacher: he only required that the students be willing and curious, however ignorant initially—this was perhaps one reason why he later so much enjoyed his teaching in the USA

[17] Laurence Lerner (ed.), *The Victorians* (London, 1978), pp. 120–38 and 155–73. Other colleagues in English with whom he shared interests included Tony Nuttall and Stephen Prickett.

at Berkeley and at Williams College. What he hated was that strand of sullen resentment which, alas, when couched in the idiom of fashionable radicalism, was not unknown among Sussex students in the 1970s. But as long as the students were disposed to be interested, John had several natural gifts as a teacher—an extraordinary quickness of mind, the effortless finding of an apt simile or metaphor with which to illuminate otherwise opaque ideas, a quite exceptional cultural range. He also had human qualities to which, if disenchantment hadn't set in prematurely, students responded, including an utter lack of pomposity or any standing upon status, and an infectious vitality. Perhaps his command of the procedures and instruments of pedagogy was not always quite up to the highest QAA standards, but those students who were really listening—listening by the students was, in practice, the dominant mode in John's seminars—got an incomparably rich guided tour through the relevant books and ideas.

Curiously, for such a naturally eloquent speaker, he was not always so successful as a lecturer. In a class or tutorial he could respond to contributions by students in ways that deftly helped them out of their ignorance or confusion, but he rarely managed to work any such implicitly dialogic element into his lectures and the students could become restive. Although it doesn't deserve to be called a paradox, it may be mildly surprising that someone who was so unstoppably a performer in conversational settings, and visibly enjoyed being so, was not more of a success on the podium. A certain physical modesty or reticence may have played a part, as may his use of a fully written script that was not always immediately easy for the audience to follow—or, I might add, easy even for him to decipher.

The mixture of intellectual impulses that had led to the writing of *Evolution and Society* was still detectable in the work that he began at the end of the 1960s but which did not come to full fruition till the beginning of the 1980s. Always alert to the sheer variety of forms through which human beings represent and interpret their collective pasts, John became more and more interested in the ways in which certain kinds of history functioned for nineteenth-century Englishmen as a form of covert political thought. The first published fruit of this interest was an essay, entitled 'The village community and the uses of history in late nineteenth-century England', published in a Festschrift for Plumb in 1974.[18] This piece probed the ways in which accounts of the earliest forms of communal organisation

[18] J. W. Burrow, '"The village community" and the uses of history in late nineteenth-century England', in Neil McKendrick (ed.), *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Thought and Society in Honour of J. H. Plumb* (London, 1974), pp. 255–84.

were taken to be pregnant with implications for political debate in Victorian Britain, whether in E. A. Freeman's characteristically emphatic assertion that 'our ancient history is the possession of the liberal' or F. W. Maitland's more nuanced reflections upon the ways the history of the notion of 'a trust' might underwrite a broadly Pluralist political theory. In the course of the 1970s, John began to broaden this enquiry, asking, for example (in a paper he gave several times but never published in this form), 'what kind of Whig historian was Macaulay?' Initially, one might have imagined this interest being developed into a book resembling *Evolution and Society*, a book driven by quasi-theoretical interests, in this case about the conceptualisation of 'community' and 'the state' in nineteenth-century English legal and historical thought. But, partly stirred by the interdisciplinary ethos of Sussex, especially his greater contact with literary scholars, and partly as a result of the ripening of John's own sensibility, the work took another turn. He had long been interested in and responsive to the reworkings of the past in other areas of Victorian culture, including its art and architecture, but he now extended this concern to larger questions about narrative form, questions which might involve pondering geological metaphors in Stubbs alongside evolutionary images in George Eliot, or illuminating Froude's 'plaintive threnody for lost childhood faith' by invoking Frazer's *Golden Bough* and Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*. John was also becoming more drawn to intellectual portraiture and correspondingly less charmed by theory-driven conceptual reconstruction.

The chief fruit of this expanded receptiveness was *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past*, published in 1981 (and awarded the Wolfson Literary Prize for History in that year). This is, in my judgement, the most fully achieved of John's books. Its structure exhibits a deceptive simplicity: each of its four parts is devoted to one of the authors of the four most significant multivolume narratives of major periods of English history written in the Victorian period. The themes are signalled by the parts' subtitles: 'Macaulay and the Whig tradition', 'Stubbs and the Ancient Constitution', 'Freeman and the unity of history', and 'Froude's Protestant island'. But although these do provide magisterial analyses of the character of the four authors' histories of England, understood not just as commanding examples of historiography but also as literary accomplishments and cultural events, the rich texture of John's own prose serves as the carrier for a much wider range of reflections about Victorian thought and sensibility. Although there is no showy parade of generalities, the book taken as a whole offers a compelling meditation on the ways in which a complex culture understands and represents its place in history.

A Liberal Descent is, without question, a learned book—John had absorbed the work of J. G. A. Pocock as well as of Duncan Forbes on varieties of eighteenth-century whiggism, just as he was familiar with the main lines of European scholarship on the early history of the *Mark* and the *Mir*—and it is, in its uninsistent, companionable way, an analytical book. But it also has qualities that are much rarer in academic scholarship, notably the engaged imaginative sympathy with which it enters into the identifications and antipathies of his chosen subjects. This is no exercise in *Ideologiekritik*, no forensic process of unmasking assumptions judged unacceptable by later standards of cultural rectitude. Perhaps few historical subjects present easier targets for that process than Freeman, a compendium of those views which a later century regards as bigoted, all expressed with an artless vigour that leaves little for prosecuting counsel to do. Yet it is one of the singular achievements of *A Liberal Descent* not just to restore an intelligibility to Freeman's combination of manic liberalism and romantic Teutonism, but to do so without condescending to the unbuttoned zest and antiquarian zeal which give his writing its distinctive character.

As several reviewers admiringly remarked, Burrow's own prose exhibited a richness and command of register that enabled him to capture and do justice to the qualities of each of his (very different) main figures. We can, for example, hear it swelling appropriately in the long passage in which he characterises the connoisseurship about parliamentary oratory among Macaulay's circle at Holland House ('a notable orator "up" and going well was like a *diva* in fine voice'), just as he brings his analysis of Freeman's style to an appropriately rueful conclusion ('Nouns and repeated pronouns fall on the ear like successive blows of Thor's hammer; the result is predictably sometimes a headache').[19] But perhaps a better brief illustration of how the writing is the perfect medium for the temper of the book, just yet appreciative, is provided by this paragraph from his discussion of Stubbs's *Constitutional History*:

> No general account or anthology of quotations can at all convey the cautious yet precise richness of Stubbs' analyses or the fine, educated sensitivity to the tremors of social and institutional change, in names and procedural forms, in administrative, fiscal and judicial devices, in franchises, suits, fines, exactions, the growth and waning of privileges, the assumption and desuetude of functions. It is because Stubbs' own poise and control hardly falter, despite revisions; because each detail is illustrative and placed, and the steady authorial voice

[19] J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 88, 213.

> moves with unforced assurance from confident assertion to admitted conjecture, from bold suggestiveness to tentative generalisation and occasional admissions of defeat, that this mass of discriminated complexity is felt as exhilarating rather than overwhelming.[20]

If the phrase 'this mass of discriminated complexity' seems perfect for Stubbs, it is not quite right for Burrow—his writing contains relatively little technical detail and never any sense of Stubbsian accumulation—yet it surely does point to something characteristic of his work as a whole. 'Discriminating complexity', whether understood as a verbal or adjectival phrase, constituted his *forte* as an intellectual historian.

For all John's precocious intellectual development, one can detect a maturing of his intellectual style across the years in these respects. In the work of his middle and later years, theoretical scaffolding of any kind falls away and there is a richer—I am tempted to say more fully historical—engagement with the various dimensions of the mind and sensibility of past figures. Burrow was the least Procrustean of intellectual historians: he responded sympathetically and flexibly to the individuality of past thinking rather than slicing it up in any of the approved present-minded ways. And in the search for understanding, his mature work is hermeneutically generous, seeing a piece of writing as an attempt to render and make sense of a distinctive experience of life, whether in historical narratives or in philosophical theories, whether in epigrammatic fragments or in a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

This quality connects with another emphasis in Burrow's work that became more insistent as he moved into the middle phase of his career, namely a marked hostility to those kinds of whiggish or teleological histories of past thinking which in effect selected earlier figures for attention, and praised their 'contribution', according to their success in 'anticipating' some approved state of enlightened thinking in the present. The histories of the various academic disciplines were (and in some quarters still are) particularly prone to be written in this vein, and part of what united John, Donald Winch, and me in our teaching of the history of the social sciences at Sussex was a desire to replace these complacently triumphalist narratives with less present-minded and more genuinely historical accounts. Slowly, our collective grumbling transmuted into literary ambition, and we set out to demonstrate the ways in which a preoccupation with 'things political' in nineteenth-century Britain encompassed several forms of enquiry that have subsequently been appropriated by modern disciplines

[20] *Liberal Descent*, p. 137.

such as economics, sociology, political science, and so on. Perhaps one source of the interest aroused by the book which issued from these preoccupations in 1983, *That Noble Science of Politics: a Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History*, lay in the fact that it was presented as a single work collaboratively written by three authors, rather than as a collection of individually authored essays—that the authorial troika were colloquially dubbed 'Burrinchini' (initially by themselves) only heightened this effect.[21] Actually although the book was the outcome of several years of close discussion and circulation of drafts among the three authors, no secret was made of the primary authorship of its various elements: John wrote the first drafts of the chapters on the historians and on Walter Bagehot (the latter singled out by some reviewers as the jewel in the crown of the volume), and he wrote the greater part of the chapter on the Comparative Method. But much more attention was focused on the unclassifiability of the book and the distinctiveness of the methodological approach it was taken to exemplify. Though it clearly repudiated the still-prevailing forms of disciplinary history, it did not correspond to any of the methodological templates for doing intellectual history that had been propounded in recent decades, such as *Annaliste* '*mentalités*', Pocockian 'languages', Skinnerian 'intentions', Foucauldian '*epistemes*', and so on. As one reviewer sympathetically put it: 'This is going to be a perplexing book for many. Librarians will wonder how to classify it. Specialists in politics and economics will be embarrassed at its demonstration of how what they thought sewn up can be unstitched. Tutors will wonder what passages their pupils can be trusted not to misunderstand.'[22] Further reflections on the book and its reception can be found in the preface written for the Japanese translation in 1996, and the English edition was reissued in 2008, twenty-five years after its initial publication.[23]

The first half of the 1980s formed a particularly fertile and successful period in Burrow's career. *A Liberal Descent* had appeared in 1981; in 1982 he was made Professor of Intellectual History at Sussex; *That Noble Science* came out the following year. 1985 saw the appearance of his little

[21] Stefan Collini, Donald Winch, and John Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics: a Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History* (Cambridge, 1983).

[22] Wiiliam Thomas, 'Review of *That Noble Science of Politics*', *English Historical Review* (1986), 702–4.

[23] The Japanese edition was eventually published in 2002; the new preface (largely written by me, with assistance from Winch) has never been published in English, though some sentences from it are quoted in my 'General introduction', in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, and Brian Young (eds.), *History, Religion, and Culture: British Intellectual History 1750–1950* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 10.

book on Gibbon, in the Oxford University Press 'Past Masters' series, a commissioning editor's dream match between author and subject. John had long enjoyed and admired Gibbon without being intimidated by him; in 1976, on the bicentenary of the publication of the first volumes of the *Decline and Fall*, he had given a scintillating public lecture at Sussex, which included a passage of adroit parody.[24] Even within the constraining format of the 'Past Masters'—the book is well under the limit of 30,000 words—John ranged far beyond the predictable topics (the Augustan periods, the footnotes), situating Gibbon's work in relation to his predecessors (mainly European) and contemporaries (mainly Scottish).[25]

These years also saw a notable rise in the number of international invitations Burrow received. A semester spent at Berkeley in 1981 was followed by a Fellowship at the History of Ideas Unit of the Australian National University in Canberra in 1983 and a British Council lecture tour in Austria in 1984. This period of notable success was rounded off by the invitation to deliver the Carlyle lectures on political thought in Oxford in 1985 (which brought with it membership of All Souls for a term, an experience John unabashedly relished), and then by election to the British Academy in 1986. (Further invitations and honours of this sort still to come included the Gauss Seminars at Princeton and the Prothero Lecture of the Royal Historical Society, as well as an honorary degree from the University of Bologna, all in 1988.) These achievements and forms of recognition were, naturally, very good for his morale, even though nationally the picture for universities was beginning to darken.

In these years John was in his prime and his prime was spent at Sussex. His personal star was rising, his children were intensely rewarding, and the institutional setting was stimulating and congenial. In addition, he enjoyed the raffish charm of Brighton (while living just over the border in genteel Hove), and he loved the Sussex countryside. But the final decade of his Sussex years marked a much less happy period in his life, during which he became discouraged about the treatment of Intellectual History at the university by both the (much larger and unsympathetic) History Subject Group and the central administration; he was also beset by financial burdens and other family worries, and generally prey to an enveloping cultural pessimism. Government cuts to public spending on higher education in the 1980s hit universities such as Sussex very hard, leading to the

[24] J. W. Burrow, 'Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire': A Bicentenary Lecture delivered at the University of Sussex, 4 Nov. 1976; this lecture remains unpublished.
[25] J. W. Burrow, *Gibbon* (Oxford, 1985).

early retirement of some of John's closest colleagues. These reductions, compounded by my departure in 1986, constrained and eventually undermined the position of Intellectual History. The appointment of Richard Whatmore and Brian Young to lectureships in the subject in 1993 promised to revive its fortunes, but John's disenchantment with the university was by then nearing its terminal phase, not helped by his encounters with the new managerialism while serving a term of office as Director of Graduate Studies in Arts and Social Sciences.

His Carlyle Lectures eventually appeared in 1988 as a slim volume entitled *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought*, but it was not praised as widely or enthusiastically as his earlier works had been and it was the only one of his books that John felt, with a slight sense of grievance, was always under-appreciated. His introduction to the book acknowledged that it involved revisiting figures about whom he had already written (and even in places reworking earlier material), but he hoped that this might be taken to indicate 'a long-standing interest in the impact of historicist ways of thinking on European, and above all British, culture in the post-Romantic period'.[26] The book explored continuities and transmutations in the relations between eighteenth-century Whiggism and nineteenth-century Liberalism, but it repudiated the ahistorical essentialism that often dominated discussion of 'isms', especially the all-purpose polemical construct 'liberal individualism'. Such constructions can have their uses, he readily conceded, but

> as a way of rendering something more like the vigour and activity of past intellectual life, with its complex ways of accommodating, combining, and manipulating, under various kinds of pressure, the rival theoretical languages which a rich political culture contains, [they are] severely limited and may even be misleading.[27]

Because we now tend to think in terms of the great divide between individualism and collectivism, he observed in a concluding reflection, 'we are sometimes tempted to assume that these are also the categories through which we should try to understand the political thought of the past. These lectures have been intended as a modest protest against that assumption.'[28]

[26] J. W. Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought* (Oxford, 1988), p. viii.
[27] Ibid., p. 5.
[28] Ibid., p. 153.

III

Whigs and Liberals apart, Burrow published relatively little of substance in the fifteen years between 1985 and 2000, and in the late 1980s and the early 1990s his increasingly all-encompassing pessimism about the world clearly infected his energy and resolve as a writer. But then the world intervened in an unpredictable way. Having accumulated some sabbatical entitlement, he was already committed to two terms as a Visiting Fellow at All Souls in Oxford in 1994 when he was invited to apply for, and elected to, the newly established Flick Professorship in European Thought, with a Professorial Fellowship at Balliol, where he was warmly welcomed into the fellowship (it was a sign of his popularity that he was quite soon elected to the office of Steward of Common Room). He and Diane moved to a house in Witney, with their daughter and grandchildren soon coming to live nearby.

There is no doubt that the move to Oxford in 1995 revived him in more ways than one, and it was on the whole a happy final phase of his career. The duties of his Oxford chair had encouraged a return to his wider European interests, and he lectured principally on European social and political thought in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As part of this revived identity, he took on the editorship of the journal *History of European Ideas* when it was relaunched in 1996. Although perhaps not in the absolute forefront of international scholarship, the journal maintained a more than respectable intellectual level, and John was particularly pleased that, under his benign editorship, it provided a home for articles by young and unknown scholars struggling to break into the world of academic publication.

But the move to Oxford also brought a wholly unforeseen complication, resulting in an episode that John found depressing and immensely distasteful. Elements in the national press began to raise questions about the propriety of Oxford's having accepted a donation from Gert-Rudolf Flick on the grounds that his fortune derived indirectly from the profits the family firm had made under his grandfather during the Third Reich, in part by using slave labour from the concentration camps. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the issue, the media coverage became sufficiently uncomfortable for Flick to agree with Oxford to withdraw his donation, since its continuance threatened to harm the university's good name. This meant that the university would be forced to provide John's salary from its own resources, but in the event a Midlands industrialist, Bob Johnson, stepped in and generously guaranteed its continuance for the remainder

of his tenure. Among the aspects of this episode that John regretted was that it ensured that he would be the last as well as the first occupant of the chair, which was suppressed on his retirement in 2000.[29]

His tenure of the chair was capped by the publication in that year of *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought 1848–1914*, which partly grew out of his Oxford lectures. In the early 1990s, he had become one of the general editors of Yale University Press's new series 'The Yale Intellectual History of the West', and he agreed to write for it the volume focused on the later nineteenth century. The book was deliberately not addressed to a narrowly specialist readership, not that any of Burrow's writing had ever been inaccessible to interested readers or had failed to find them. A striking indication of the book's success in this respect was the notably warm review it elicited in the pages of the *New York Review of Books* from the Irish novelist John Banville, who pronounced: 'Burrow's superb study of a profoundly significant and formative period is a model of its kind.'[30]

It would, however, not be easy to say precisely what that 'kind' is, since the book can seem a curious hybrid in generic terms, falling somewhere between being an idiosyncratic though always interesting interpretation of certain central themes in the social and cultural thought of Britain, France and Germany (the countries to which it was in practice confined), a synthesis of familiar (and not always very recent) scholarship on European intellectual history of the period, and a series of bravura essays on an impressive range of figures—there are, for example, wonderfully illuminating meditations on figures as diverse as Wagner or Taine, and some really quite brilliant pages on Nietzsche. Students in search of a crib would be likely to find it a frustrating and resistant book, but anyone disposed to accept John's conversational rhythm and not to resent being treated as though they have long been familiar with the books and ideas he knew so well will find it a rewarding experience. The 'Prologue', in particular, is a *tour de force*, beginning with its opening conceit of seizing on the presence of both Bakunin and Wagner in the Dresden uprising of 1848–9 as a way of introducing the Promethean theme in European Romanticism that was to receive its comeuppance in the following sixty years. Yet the 'Epilogue', with its broad-brush panorama of European Modernism across the arts in the years before the First World War, matches

[29] There is an extensive collection of materials relating to this episode, including newspaper cuttings and private correspondence, in the John Burrow papers at Sussex university library.
[30] John Banville, 'Fathers and sons' [review of J. W. Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason*], *New York Review of Books*, 4 Oct. 2001, 38–40.

it for energy and command. Whatever the book may lack in usability it more than makes up for in virtuosity.

Although John had largely enjoyed his Oxford years, it is worth remembering that after his retirement he and Diane intended to move back to Sussex, and perhaps only the falling-through at the last moment of a house sale deflected them. During this period John was happy to have the honorary title of Research Professor at Sussex, happy to continue as editor-in-chief of *History of European Ideas*, where he exercised what one might call his light-touch editorial style—at least his junior editors Richard Whatmore and Brian Young might be inclined to call it that—and he always longed for the soothing balm of the Sussex Downs on a fine summer's day. But financial difficulties constrained his options, not for the first time, and the fact that his daughter and grandchildren seemed settled in Witney encouraged him to stay put (not that John usually needed much encouragement to stay put).

Stuart Proffitt, editorial director at HarperCollins and latterly at Penguin, had long recognised John's potential as a writer of books for a non-specialist market, and he now played an important part in enticing John to attempt a 'trade' book, in persuading him to undertake it on the very grandest scale, and in sustaining him through the inevitable troughs and failures of confidence. The project was to be nothing less than a history of historical writing from Herodotus to the present. This enabled John to pursue what had always been his preferred 'research strategy': to curl up in an armchair with a pile of Penguin Classics, in this case the original texts of the great (and not so great) historians. As ever, he did more reading in secondary works than was immediately visible in the eventual book, but essentially *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century* represents the fruits of first-hand encounters between his cultivated intelligence and the works of Europe's greatest historians of the past two-and-a-half millennia. Published in 2007, the book immediately enjoyed considerable critical acclaim and commercial success (sales in the first four years, hardback and paperback combined, topped 35,000, with several translations in train). It falls to few academic historians to be the author of the most widely reviewed book of the week, as John Burrow was (according to *The Bookseller*) in early December 2007.[31] In the course of a highly positive as well as generous review in *The Guardian*, Keith Thomas struck a note which many others echoed: 'Burrow is so successful

[31] *The Bookseller*, 5312 (21 Dec. 2007), p. 39.

in this book because, in his freshness of response to many of his authors, he resembles the general, non-specialist reader for whom his work is intended.'[32]

In this respect, the book also represented a further evolution of John's style. Just as the confident question-and-answer logic of *Evolution and Society* had softened into the lusher and more richly ornamented prose of *A Liberal Descent*, so now that manner in turn was distilled and clarified into a more direct, limpid prose. Disciplined by the needs of the intended reader and stirred by what was in many cases his own first encounter with his chosen authors, John restrained his habitual riot of parenthetical qualifications, allowing the literary characters of his large cast to come through in all their vivid variousness. Reviewers responded by delightedly identifying new favourites to whom the book had introduced them, pride of place perhaps going to Gregory of Tours who, as John reported, 'begins his work with the memorable, and entirely accurate, reflection that "A great many things keep happening, some of them good, some of them bad".'[33]

But despite the catholicity of the book's embrace of past historical writing, a subdued polemic is occasionally audible in its pages. Its very architecture carries an animus against the claims of modern academic history to any monopoly of 'seriousness': John deliberately devoted half the book to ancient and medieval historians, while giving the professionalised legions of the twentieth century reprovingly short shrift. He was particularly severe on the foundation-myth of modern scholarly history, which represented 'real' history as only emerging from the primeval slime with the rise of critical archive-based scholarship in early and mid-nineteenth century Germany: 'The notion of a nineteenth-century "Copernican revolution" reinforced an enduringly distorted version of the history of historiography, slanted towards the nineteenth century and Germany, which the present book has attempted to correct.'[34] It may have been an indirect consequence of this purpose as well as an expression of John's personal tastes that the final chapter on 'The Twentieth Century' seems, despite its analytical clarity, slightly more dutiful and less engaged than its predecessors. But that may only be to register from another angle what an astonishing feat it was to write with such knowledge, insight, and sympathy about Arrian as well as Appian, Geoffrey of Monmouth as well as William of Malmesbury, Machiavelli as well as Guiccardini, Carlyle

[32] Keith Thomas, 'Review of *a History of Histories*', *The Guardian Review*, 15 Dec. 2007.
[33] John Burrow, *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century* (London, 2007), p. 202.
[34] Ibid., p. 466.

and Michelet as well as Prescott and Henry Adams, and many others. *A History of Histories* is a fitting testament to John's enduring fascination with—to use the phrase from Burckhardt that he liked to cite—'history as the record of what one age finds of interest in another'.[35]

One final piece of John's writing, briefly mentioned earlier, deserves fuller discussion. In the early 1990s, he had composed a shortish memoir of his childhood and adolescence. He said that it was in the first instance addressed to his grandson, Julian, to explain to him a little about the corner of that far-off world in which his grandfather had grown up. The typescript had been shown to his family and a small number of close friends and then put aside. But when at the beginning of 2008 John was diagnosed with the cancer on his jaw from which he was to die within two years, he resolved to resume his narrative from the point at which he had gone up to Cambridge. Thus, the latter parts of the memoir were written in the Spring of 2008 when John was living alone while teaching as a visiting professor at Williams College (his family had stayed in England) and already displaying remarkable fortitude and uncomplaining grace in the face of increasing pain and disfigurement. Shortly before his death, a few friends, with Patricia Williams in the lead, arranged to have a small number of copies of the completed memoir privately printed and bound, so that John could give copies to a wider circle, a thought that gave him great pleasure. In what proved to be a moving occasion, those friends were able to gather at John's bedside in Witney to celebrate the 'publication' of the memoir, together with that of the selection from Macaulay's *History* for which he had written an introduction. He died 48 hours later, on 3 November 2009, aged 74.

The history of the memoir's composition goes some way to account for the different character of its two sections. The chapters dealing with his childhood and youth are among the most engaging things he ever wrote, recapturing the child's eye-view of the world with an affectionate light irony. There are vivid, fondly exaggerated portraits of older members of his family and their lives in interwar Devon; his exceptionally close bond with his mother, with whom he endured the war in his father's absence, shines through the early pages. More generally, the warm, indulgent, straitened life of his wider family is recalled with a beautifully judged mixture of gratitude for their love and amusement at their foibles. Editorial

[35] For some time John had been contracted to write, again for Stuart Proffitt, an 'Intellectual History of England', and he intended to return to this project once he had finished *A History of Histories*, but he only managed to complete a synopsis and tentative outline of chapters.

embellishment becomes a little more noticeable in the chapters on his school years, and particularly on his precocious reading, but the writing remains evocative and playful.

Although there are some literary gems scattered through the second half of the book, most readers have registered a certain falling-off in charm and attractiveness. This may be a pattern common to most autobiographies, but it may also reflect two further features of the later chapters, quite apart from the circumstances of their composition. The first is that the 'comedy of manners' genre, invoked in the book's introduction, comes to seem a little more contrived or staged in recollections of his adult life. Favourite bons mots and anecdotes are given a further polish while there is a noticeable absence of any really probing self-analysis. And the second is that the later chapters indulge a certain amount of grumpiness about the times being out of joint: a few old scores are settled, some familiar hobby-horses are taken out for a final canter, the presence of an author concerned to leave his side of the story on record is felt. Nonetheless, taken as a whole, the memoir provides a deliciously enjoyable slice of informal social history, as well as exhibiting further dimensions of John's rich literary gifts.

IV

There are, as readers of British Academy memoirs will scarcely need to be reminded, various types of successful academic—the empire-builder, the discipline-definer, the methodology-giver, the source-discoverer, and so on. John Burrow was none of these types. There is no scholarly coven of Burrovians: although his writing had been widely enjoyed and admired even before the broader public success of *A History of Histories*, that book's qualities underlined that his achievements were highly individual and practically inimitable. In recording the careers of scholars in the humanities, it is also often said that in addition to their books they produced 'a stream of articles and reviews'. This could not truthfully be said of Burrow: his standing rested, to a greater extent than has become common, on his books, and this illuminates the distinctiveness of his career from another angle. He published very little in scholarly journals: a tiny handful of articles, mostly in the earliest phase of his career, and a smattering of reviews. It is true that in the 1960s and 1970s he did a certain amount of reviewing for *The Times*, chiefly through the good offices of his undergraduate contemporary Michael Ratcliffe, then the paper's literary editor, and in the 1970s and 1980s he wrote a number of pieces for the

Times Literary Supplement and later two for the *London Review of Books*.[36] His cultural range, his readability, and his light touch might have seemed to make him a natural for the genre, especially in the longer review-essay form favoured by the literary periodicals. But from the mid-1980s onwards he pretty much gave up this kind of writing altogether. When surprise at this state of affairs came up in conversation, as it did from time to time over the years, John would explain that *starting* to write something was such an agony that he couldn't bring himself to do it very often and so he particularly hated to have deadlines hanging over him. He preferred to concentrate, and dispose of, all the agonies in one go by launching into a chapter of a book when he felt the time was ripe. This is a reminder that, for all the apparently effortless ease of his writing on the page, John suffered at least the usual agonies of composition, perhaps more, reinforcing him in his frequently repeated (but not, in truth, always consistently observed) golden rule where requests to write something were concerned: 'always say no'.

Although, as noted earlier, John found most of the manifestations of academic professionalism disagreeable, and none more so than the usual type of conference, there was one rather different kind of event that he came greatly to enjoy later in his career, and this was the series of gatherings organised by the Liberty Fund. Here, a group of largely congenial people talked in depth and in a more or less conversational manner about a particular theme or book, and this arrangement spoke to John's taste for, and flourishing in, a convivial setting that blended intellectual, social, and culinary pleasures (and strengthened his always-strong conviction of the superiority of being paid to talk rather than to write).

No one who heard him at these or other gatherings could fail to be impressed by John's intellectual and cultural range. Certainly, no one who heard his inaugural lecture as Professor of European Thought (reprinted in the journal *History of European Ideas* to mark the end of his general editorship of that journal in 2005[37]) could think of him as parochial, in terms either of geography or genre. But that range was neither limitless nor promiscuous, and in a sense it was not purely personal, either. What we might ambiguously call 'John's culture'—both his own level of self-cultivation and the cultural world he acknowledged and studied—was bounded, traditional, almost, I am tempted to say, given. Though there

[36] For full details, see the bibliography of his writings on the website of the Sussex Centre for Intellectual History. <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/cih/people/burrow>.

[37] J. W. Burrow, 'A common culture? Nationalist ideas in 19th-century European thought', *History of European Ideas*, 32 (2006), 333–44.

could be one or two additions and deletions at the edges, John implicitly took European high culture as it had taken itself in its heyday from the Enlightenment to Modernism. His own scholarly enthusiasms gather pace as the eighteenth century advances; they come to their full, voluptuous consecration in the nineteenth century; and they begin perceptibly to chill and lose interest as the twentieth century moves forward. And, as remarked above, his address to this cultural past exhibited none of the principled suspiciousness or urge to unmasking that characterises so much recently fashionable work, and nor was he concerned to rescue the once-marginalised or call attention to the systematically occluded. The great roll-call of names of European thought and literature he treated as an established possession—to be explored, certainly, even in some measure to be celebrated, but not to be dissolved or repudiated. It was another of the ways in which John exhibited some of the characteristics of the nineteenth-century gentleman-scholar rather than those of the twenty-first century professional academic. For him there was no great disjunction between the books he read so voraciously as a youth and young man and the books he later wrote about. 'I wanted', as he put it at one point, 'to learn my way around a good second-hand book shop—and I suppose that's what I've done.'

John's own aesthetic and literary tastes were of a piece with the intellectual range and focus of his work. Although he admired Augustan elegance, whether in Gibbon's periods or Georgian terraces, there was something in him that responded imaginatively to the exuberance and untidyness of Romanticism, and quite a lot of his personal as well as professional dealings with the nineteenth century involved understanding the ways in which that century extended and modified the legacy of late Romanticism. And this partly accounts, I think, for that noticeable cooling of his enthusiasms as we move through the twentieth century. He responded to Impressionism, but not, by and large, to Abstraction; to Mahleresque lushness, but scarcely at all to Schoenbergian austerity; to Nietzschean playfulness, but less so to Surrealist wilfulness; to Jamesian delicacy, but not Beckettian bleakness. Though he was immensely well read, the poetry and fiction of the past half-century scarcely touched him. I remember once enthusing to him about the merits of recent novels by Philip Roth and J. M. Coetzee. He wrinkled his nose: 'I think I'd prefer to reread Stendhal.' If he was more often to be found in galleries than in concert halls, and if perhaps he enjoyed looking at buildings even more than he did looking at paintings, it was usually with an eye to how European high culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries negotiated its cultural

inheritance. Incidentally, apart from writing, he practised none of the arts—they belonged, in that respect, in the company of things he had learned at school that he was unteachably bad at, such as woodwork, maths, and marching.

Pondering his cultural tastes, one is reminded that, unlike many students and young academics of his generation, John's formation did not include much exposure to or engagement with the United States. The semester he spent teaching there in 1981, when he was already 46, was his first direct experience of that country—one that he hugely enjoyed, communicating his enjoyment to friends in vivid letters that were evocative of the first European landfall in Australia or Darwin's ingenuous response to the Tierra del Fuegans. But although John developed a traveller's delight in new worlds, what really quickened the blood was Old Europe and old European culture.

The epigraph to *A Liberal Descent*, from which the book takes its title, is a passage from Burke, an author whom John held in high regard though always well this side of idolatry. The passage reads:

> Always acting as if in the presence of canonised forefathers, the spirit of freedom, leading in itself to misrule and excess, is tempered with an awful gravity. This idea of a liberal descent inspires us with a sense of habitual native dignity, which prevents that upstart insolence almost inevitably adhering to and disgracing those who are the first acquirers of any distinction.[38]

The passage is perfectly suited to the theme of the book, the elaborations and modifications of, broadly speaking, the Whig interpretation of English history. But it is a passage which also expresses an important truth about John's own sensibility and relation to the past. One of the reasons he could be irritated by intellectual fashions which trumpeted their own novelty was that he had such a strong distaste for the 'upstart insolence' of those whose claims to originality too often rested on an ignorance of, or disregard for, the achievements of the generations that had gone before them. John did not wish to 'canonise' any of those who might be regarded as our 'forefathers'—his relation to the past was neither pious nor antiquarian—but we may say that he did write with 'a sense of habitual native dignity' in part because he was so magnificently alive to that 'liberal descent' that is our common intellectual inheritance. That nice eighteenth-century phrase 'fullness of mind' sits well with John. It was more than mere learning, though he was very learned; it was more than wide culture, though

[38] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), quoted in *A Liberal Descent*, p. vi.

he was a deeply cultivated man. It had something to do with richness, something with scale and reach, and even more, perhaps, with the ready availability to him of the resources of his mind, whether in conversation or on the page.

From one point of view, it is remarkable that any of John's writings ever saw the light of day. His preferred, indeed his only, mode of composition was sitting in an armchair, with a pad of scruffy paper perched on his knee, an incontinent ball-point in his hand. The layered hieroglyphs which this produced would rival Linear B. One of the moments I would have greatest difficulty keeping a straight face was when he would explain that the sheaf of scrofulous scribbling in his hand was the 'fair copy' he had made for the typist, a role occupied by a succession of unusually talented paleographers. These technological barriers to the production of legible typescript may have strengthened John's resistance to making the changes that his friends might suggest when reading his work in draft. He tended to look favourably on comments that could be accommodated with Tippex, but to regard anything that might call for retyping as a grave failure of critical judgement.

It is notoriously hard to convey to others what it was that one so treasured and admired about a close friend. No matter how many abstract nouns one strings together, the net can never capture the butterfly. Anyone who knew John at all well will recall times when he reduced them to helpless laughter by turning some personal misfortune into high farce. It was, of course, a way of coping. He had his pride, though it was usually well hidden, and exercising his wit and inventiveness on circumstances or setbacks in life which were sometimes depressing or embarrassing for him to contemplate or admit was a way of mastering them—was, in Nietzschean vein, an assertion of the will to power, a search for the medium through which he could flourish and even dominate. Just occasionally, this rich capacity to convert embarrassing or distressing experience into hilarious narrative would assume full literary form, a rough draft having first been sketched and polished in conversation.[39]

Those who only met John on social occasions might have had little inkling of the melancholy, verging on despair, that was sometimes manifested to his close friends. On the whole, it was not John's way to take up arms against his sea of troubles; his was not what might be called an activist's temperament. He instinctively preferred the pleasures of comprehensive

[39] Some examples of these, mostly comic, flights of fancy are available on the website of the Sussex Centre for Intellectual History.

complaint to the labour of piecemeal reform. This went along with a strong streak of cultural pessimism, a characteristic that became more marked with age—a development he thought not simply justified by the facts of the world but also entirely proper to a man of advancing years. When his blood was up, the list of things which a never-exactly-identified 'they' had destroyed could be long: town centres, secondary education, red Burgundy, newspapers, literary criticism, rugby, more or less all tourist destinations, and—a note of especially passionate keening could enter the lament here—traditional hearty cooking. He reserved a particularly well-heated spot in one of the inner circles of hell for the inventors of 'nouvelle cuisine', but, then, for John anything that had 'nouvelle' in its title already had two strikes against it. It could be hard to separate genuine conviction from knowing self-satire in some of these performances. I remember sitting with him on the evening of his fortieth birthday when he declared: 'I wasn't very good at being a young man, but'—he paused to achieve the appropriately crusty effect—'I intend to be jolly good at being an old man.' He could stage the performance of being an old man brilliantly, though it should be said that it owed more to P. G. Wodehouse or Evelyn Waugh than to *King Lear*.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that throughout his years at East Anglia and Sussex John felt himself to be, in some profound if unrealistic sense, in exile from Cambridge. His years as a Research Fellow at Christ's were probably the happiest of his life in institutional terms, though becoming a Fellow of Balliol for the final five years of his employed career gave him great pleasure and allowed him once again to enjoy that conviviality of college life that he had long craved. Yet it is also only a slight exaggeration to say that throughout the last fourteen years of his life he felt himself to be, in some more superficial yet also more practical sense, in exile from Sussex (the county, not the university). Yearning for a lost Eden formed a deep part of his emotional negotiation with the unsatisfactoriness of ordinary existence.

In a famous passage, William Empson reflected that 'the waste even in a fortunate life, the isolation even of a life rich in intimacy, cannot but be felt deeply'.[40] John Burrow's was, in many respects, a fortunate life and certainly one rich in intimacy, but waste and isolation are also unignorable parts of his history. That history is, above all, a matter of deep feeling—the deep, expressive, often frustrated feelings that were central to the character of this passionate man, as well as the powerful feelings of love and

[40] William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (Harmondsworth, 1966 (1st edn., 1935)), p. 12.

admiration he evoked from those who were fortunate enough to be part of that rich intimacy. One should not rush to identify the 'waste': idleness, not a rare part of John's existence, may be the fertiliser of creativity; moodiness and depression, however stylised and camped up, may be inseparable from the trials of attempting to write less badly. But there was at times a poignancy about John that went beyond these common ailments of the writerly condition: a poignancy about a life so constantly shadowed by lack of money and lack of some of the elementary forms of orderliness; a poignancy about a short, shabby, shambolic man who had some of the gifts to be a cross between Wilde and Proust; a poignancy about an individual whose habitual self-centredness so often got in the way of that love from others that he so hungrily yearned for. Much of John is in his books, and the best of those books show an intellectual dextrousness, a delicacy of sensibility, and an exuberant but skilfully directed literary vitality that call for comparison with some of the great historians about whom he wrote so memorably. Readers of those books obtain a strong impression of their author, yet necessarily only a partial one. A wide circle of acquaintances will long recall some of his other vivid attributes, including his zest and his speed of mind. And a few close friends will always be grateful for having known an utterly exceptional individual, showered with gifts by the gods, more beset than most by the commoner plagues of human existence, yet soaring above his sometimes unpromising circumstances to reveal a richly creative, achingly vulnerable, and, above all, intensely lovable man.

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Note. Unless otherwise stated, information in this memoir comes from personal knowledge. John Burrow's autobiography, *Memories Migrating*, was privately printed in 2009; it is available in electronic form on the website of the Sussex Centre for Intellectual History, along with a range of other material by and about him, including a complete bibliography of his published writings. His papers have been deposited in Special Collections at the University of Sussex library, and a thorough handlist has been compiled by Peter Price. For advice and information in writing this memoir, I am grateful to Ruth Morse, Stuart Proffitt, Simon Skinner, Helen Small, Dorothy Thompson, John Thompson, Donald Winch, and Brian Young. A few paragraphs have been adapted from the address I gave at the memorial service in Balliol, a shortened version of which appeared in *The Balliol Record* for 2010.