



NORMAN HAMPSON

Norman Hampson

1922–2011

‘NORMAN WAS ALWAYS LUCKY’, said his father when he married Jacqueline Gardin in 1948.¹ Norman Hampson never doubted it, knowing that the happiest events in his life came about by chance. They left him profoundly convinced that history, too, develops by chances that historians habitually underestimate, and his deepest instincts left him sceptical of all forms of historical determinism.

He did not consciously set out to be a professional historian, much less a historian of France. He was born on 8 April 1922 in Leyland and grew up in industrial Lancashire. His mother, Elizabeth Fazackerley, bore a very ancient Lancashire name. His father, Frank Hampson, was clerk to the Education Authority. Neither came from an educated background, but their efforts to compensate through their two sons won them entry to the most prestigious school in the north, Manchester Grammar School. Here Norman at first followed his much revered elder brother (who went on to become a consultant surgeon) on the science side, though all the while developing a passion for all forms of literature, from the classics, at which he excelled, down to modern English poetry. Only in the sixth form did he finally abandon science. Throughout his life he could quote pages of Shakespeare by heart, and in the sixth form he and Norman Swallow, later a pioneering television producer, established a literary magazine, *Phoenix*, which carried on with the help of his father some years after he had left school. Haunting Manchester bookshops on his way home, he also began to write his own poems, and even a short novel. The dream of

¹Personal letter to William Doyle, 14 April 2003.

creative writing never left him. Ironically, at school his French was much weaker than his Latin. Latin, however, fed into a passion for medieval history and buildings, which he would explore and sketch at every opportunity. By the time he went up to University College, Oxford in 1940 to read history, he was hoping for an academic career specialising in the Middle Ages.

It was the darkest moment of the Second World War, and the university was on a war footing. All undergraduates had to undertake military training. Norman was an instinctive pacifist, yet he had been convinced since the Munich crisis of 1938 that Fascism must be opposed. His confused feelings are recorded in his war memoirs, *Not Really What You'd Call a War*. A youthful, if distant, interest in ships eventually led him to volunteer for the Navy. After a brief obligatory period of service as an ordinary seaman, he was selected for a commission. He spent the entire war in small ships on convoy escort duty and calculated that he was only in contact with the enemy for fourteen days: hence the title of his memoirs. Nevertheless it was the formative experience of his life. Service in the Royal Navy gave him an instinctive suspicion of formal authority, or anything that was 'pusser' as it was known on the lower deck: 'Once you had absorbed anti-pusserdom it was with you for life. Looking back on forty years as a university teacher, it sometimes seems to me that, for better or worse, it has been my constant guide. A pusser-detector, which I conceive as a sort of metaphysical Geiger counter, is a very useful instrument for identifying those who lose track of the ends in their obsessional preoccupation with the propriety of the means.'² The professional rigidities of regular naval officers were shockingly displayed to him when in 1943 his captain proposed leaving the crew of a sinking Italian submarine to drown. Fortunately the order was countermanded by a (volunteer) superior; but the experience of nearly being complicit in a war-crime confirmed Norman in an increasingly desperate longing to find a more congenial berth. Now chance intervened. He was advised that the best way to escape a ship one disliked was to volunteer to be a liaison officer on an allied vessel. Despite rudimentary French, Norman requested a posting to the Free French Naval Forces. It took some months, with many uncertainties, but in August 1943 he found himself aboard the sloop *La Moqueuse*.

'*Everything*', he later wrote, 'about my new situation was so totally transformed that the experience of the previous six months felt like a bad

²Norman Hampson, *Not Really What You'd Call a War* (Latheronwheel, Caithness, 2001), p. 16.

dream.³ The little ship was manned by sailors who had chosen to defy the Vichy regime. They shared a cheerful, egalitarian comradeship: 'They knew they had made the right choice, at a time when it had seemed a desperate one.'⁴ Norman was inspired by their memory for the rest of his life, and it infused much of his approach to the Revolution which he would spend so much of it writing about. Within six months he had become proficient in the language, and during his two years on *La Moqueuse* he absorbed French ways of thinking and doing things at their most generous and exuberant. Half that time was spent in the eastern Mediterranean, which gave Norman opportunities during shore-leave to visit many of the great sites of antiquity of which he had dreamed as a schoolboy. Then in the summer of 1944 his ship was involved when the allies invaded southern France. He now set foot on French soil for the first time since a school visit to Paris in 1937, speculating that the atmosphere of liberated Toulon felt much as it must have done during the Revolution, about which he was thinking more and more. The first months of 1945 were spent on shore in France, but when *La Moqueuse* put to sea again she was joined by a new officer from the Free French naval forces, Jean-Claude Gardin. After the first months of peace cruising in the western Mediterranean, in September 1945 Norman was recalled to England. His shipmates gave him an emotional farewell, and Gardin suggested that on his way home he should spend a few days in Paris at the family flat where his sister Jacqueline had lived throughout the war, after some harrowing brushes in 1940 with the Gestapo. Those few days in Paris changed Norman's life yet again, and Jacqueline's too. 'It had not really been what you'd call a war', he reflected, 'but it had given me a wife and a vocation, together with a lifetime's immunization against pussedom, for all of which I have never stopped being deeply grateful.'⁵

On demobilisation Norman returned to Oxford to complete his degree. Now fluent in French, and no doubt thinking of the lively French girl he had met (and remained in touch with) on his passage home through Paris, he was inevitably drawn in his final year to the French Revolution special subject, designed and largely taught by J. M. Thompson. 'Thompie' had by then retired from his college tutorship at Magdalen, but held a lectureship at University College when Norman returned there. During the war Thompson wrote a sort of *summa* of his years teaching the subject, which,

³Ibid., pp. 70–1.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 132.

however idiosyncratic, was the best survey in English of the French Revolution until Albert Goodwin's briefer treatment of 1953.⁶ Thompson's special subject, which survived him on the Oxford syllabus for decades, provided the grounding for most of the British scholars who came to specialise in the Revolution in the twentieth century, and Norman was always grateful to have taken it. Thompson's essential advice to his students perhaps lay at the root of what Norman taught his own, and exemplified in his later biographical works on leading revolutionaries: 'Think what it would have been like, if you had been there; ask yourself what you would have done, if you had been in Louis' place, or Robespierre's. They were men, not monsters; but men faced with a difficult and dangerous task . . . Try to understand them, before you either condemn them or excuse them.'⁷

The search for a job on graduation took Norman back to his native Lancashire. In 1948 he was appointed lecturer in the Extra-Mural Department of the University of Manchester, teaching history, French and a wide range of other subjects to classes of the Workers' Educational Association. He persuaded Jacqueline to come to England, and, despite a lack of recognised qualifications, she found freelance work in Lancashire as a translator and finally as a teaching *assistante*. Three years after their first meeting in postwar Paris, they married. He would always jokingly talk later of bringing her to Lancashire as *butin de guerre*. As a couple they were certainly a perfect advertisement for the *entente cordiale*. They set up house in Bolton, where their daughters, Michèle and Françoise, were born. When in 1956 Norman transferred from the extra-mural department to a lectureship jointly held in the university's departments of History and French, the family moved to Didsbury, where Manchester academics tended to congregate. Here the girls grew up in a happy bicultural household whose only drawback, they agreed when teenagers, was that their parents were always so *reasonable* that there was too little to rebel against.

Over his time at Manchester Norman established the profile of his interdepartmental post so strongly that after he left it attracted distinguished successors.⁸ A full university lectureship required (notionally at least) involvement in research as well as teaching, but Norman had already found a project. At Oxford he had discussed the possibility of research

⁶J. M. Thompson, *The French Revolution* (Oxford, 1943); A. Goodwin, *The French Revolution* (London, 1953).

⁷Thompson, *The French Revolution*, Preface, p. x.

⁸Notably Sir Colin Lucas and Professor Alan Forrest.

with Thompson, and after his service at sea, most of it under a French flag, they had agreed that the revolutionary navy offered the most obvious area for him to investigate.⁹ With a welcoming family base in Paris, he could spend vacations from Manchester in the *Archives nationales* freed of many of the worries and difficulties of research abroad in the 1950s. He registered for a *doctorat d'université* at the Sorbonne, and chose as his subject the Atlantic fleet of 1794. This was the fleet which, at the battle remembered by the British as the 'Glorious First of June', and by the French as the combat of 13 prairial, Year II, had won the respect of Earl Howe and his captains by the ferocity of its resistance to ultimately superior technique and firepower. Throughout Norman's subsequent teaching career, a demonstration of how that battle was fought, with the aid of handmade model ships, was one of his famous party-pieces. His point was that this battle, the first full fleet action the two navies had fought since 1782, was very close-run; and that in strategic terms it was actually a French success, since the convoy which the fleet had been sent out to protect got through unmolested. Having spent most of his own war in convoy protection, Norman appreciated the importance of such an outcome. In his research, however, he was not primarily interested in the action at sea. His subject was the organisational effort that underpinned French showing on the fateful day. The work was completed far more expeditiously than the average French thesis of those days, and was published as a book in 1959,¹⁰ with the rare support, for a foreigner, of the *Centre national de la Recherche scientifique*. Dedicated to the shipmates of the Free French Naval Forces, it demonstrated how the fleet operating out of Brest, Lorient and Rochefort was wrenched out of the decay and chaos into which it had fallen by the time war broke out against the traditional enemy, by the vigour and determination of the Jacobin regime. Norman chose not to consider the Toulon Fleet, which actually surrendered itself and its home port to the British in August 1793, except insofar as its loss impinged on the situation of the Atlantic ports. But the shock certainly galvanised the efforts of the new republic to rebuild French seapower, and Norman was clearly impressed by its achievement in building new ships, maintaining old ones, keeping the shipyards supplied, and not least manning a navy whose traditional recruitment system had broken down and whose complement of officers had been decimated by emigration. The effort was

⁹ Personal letter to Hilary Mantel, 2 Oct. 1992.

¹⁰ Norman Hampson, *La Marine de l'An II. Mobilisation de la flotte de l'Océan, 1793-4* (Paris, 1959).

ruthless, but Norman was emphatic that it did not require extensive terror. The patriotism of the sailors and dockyard workers merely needed firm and purposeful direction. Weaknesses remained: the health of British seamen was far better, and the navigational and gunnery skills of French officers hurriedly recruited from commerce still had some way to go. Nevertheless, he argued, given a few more months the French Ocean fleet would have been a match for its opponent. The benefits of all the improvement were, however, thrown away by the Committee of Public Safety, which hazarded the fleet too soon, and undermined its full potential strength by preparations for an unrealistic invasion of England by 'fifty thousand liberty caps'.

Written in fluent and lucid French, this was an impressive first book. Norman's credentials as a research historian were instantly established. Publication in France recognised his standing there, where during his visits to the archives he had come to know the leading authorities in the field, including Georges Lefebvre, whose advice he acknowledged in the book's preface. During that time too he encountered Richard Cobb, on the eve of his meteoric progress over seven years from supporting research in France on the proceeds of occasional language teaching to a fellowship at Balliol. Like Norman, Cobb had been taught by Thompson at Oxford. His character was almost as different from Norman's as it was possible to be, and perhaps for that reason alone they got on well. During the early 1960s Cobb was Senior Simon Fellow at Manchester, and while Norman was preparing his second book shared many unpublished materials with him. Cobb, he later declared, 'has given me more insights into the period than either of us could enumerate'. His biography of Danton, two decades later, was dedicated to Cobb 'with affection and gratitude'. The admiration was mutual. While in later years at York Norman would lecture on Cobb's increasingly idiosyncratic writings, Cobb always wrote warm and supportive reviews of his books. Meanwhile Manchester itself now acknowledged his reputation by promoting him senior lecturer in French History and Institutions. These were relatively harmonious years at Manchester, when as a member of two departments he enjoyed the support of Albert Goodwin, himself an authority on the French Revolution and now Professor of Modern History, and the friendship of Eugène Vinaver, Professor of French. He also found much in common with Gerald Aylmer, a British historian four years his junior who had shared naval experience. Both had left the service with an instinctive suspicion of hierarchy and entrenched authority, but these features were deeply rooted in Manchester academic culture. They shared a perception of Manchester

that Norman once described to Cobb as ‘HMS Manchester, an immense battle-cruiser steaming away into the mist in no certain direction, and with a score of admirals on the bridge’.¹¹ After they left, both devoted professorial careers to nourishing the academic freedom and intellectual adventure which they felt Manchester had ultimately stifled. And certainly Norman’s best opportunity at Manchester did not come from on high. Harold Perkin, lecturer in social history, was launching a new series of Studies in Social History, and invited Norman to contribute a volume on the Revolution. ‘The chance’, Norman wrote to me many years later, ‘was too good to miss, but I really wanted to write a political history so I tried to dress up what I wanted to say in the indispensable minimum of social cosmetics.’¹²

There was more than a touch here of characteristic self-deprecation; the social content in *A Social History of the French Revolution* (London, 1963) was far greater than in any previous general survey in English. Nevertheless it is true that it was not social history by the much more rigorous standards that were soon to develop, and some great areas of later emphasis, such as women or colonial slavery, received little or no attention. It was indeed primarily a political narrative, but as such it rapidly became the general textbook of choice for anyone teaching or studying the French Revolution in English, and it has never yet gone out of print. It was also translated into three languages. Dedicated to the memory of Thompson, who had died in 1956, it was full of quotations from the set texts which the latter had chosen for the Oxford special subject. But the range of secondary sources cited in the copious footnotes included the very latest research, appearing as Norman was writing between 1959 and 1962. The tone was lucid but sober, with few of the ironic observations or informal asides that marked his later work. The main innovations in content, apart from unprecedented attention to social issues, were the detail devoted to events and movements outside Paris, so often neglected by the great French masters; and taking the story of the Revolution beyond Thermidor 1794, where Thompson and Goodwin after him had left it. Following the towering French authority of Mathiez, they had both chosen to conclude with the fall of Robespierre, implicitly accepting that everything after that was a retreat from Revolution. Nobody thought this at the time, Norman argued, in a point he was often to repeat: we need to look at historical events in the same way as we perceive those of our own

¹¹ Email, Ursula Aylmer to William Doyle, 7 Jan. 2012.

¹² 14 April 2003.

lives and times. It seemed to him more satisfactory to end with the closure of the Convention, in October 1795. And, in contrast to the very abrupt termination of previous (and some subsequent) surveys, he added a final overview with an epigraph from a contemporary pamphlet: *tout le monde est pardonnable quand tout le monde a besoin de pardon*. Unlike so many chroniclers of the Revolution, he was not interested in distributing blame. And the chapter began with an appraisal of Alfred Cobban's inaugural lecture, *The Myth of the French Revolution* (London, 1956), that first blast of the 'revisionist' trumpet. Norman had been among those invited to join the expert audience during the Wiles Lectures at Queen's University, Belfast in 1962, where Cobban expanded his attack on what he called the orthodoxy which dominated the field. These lectures were published two years later, but Norman's was the first general work on the Revolution to flag up the importance of Cobban's arguments. He was therefore involved from the start in the revisionism which blew apart the hitherto consensual world of French Revolution scholarship over the late twentieth century.

Yet he never considered himself a revisionist. It was a word he came to detest, 'since it implies deviation from orthodoxy—any history that's not revising something is plagiarism'.¹³ He appreciated the deft malice with which Cobban dissected the confident certainties of French left-wing historians, and was largely convinced by the destructive results. He was far less sure about Cobban's attempts to substitute something more positive. His own scepticism about what he would later call 'the somewhat musty orthodoxy of French Revolutionary studies'¹⁴ could be found more gently expressed throughout the pages of the *Social History*. He doubted that the frustrations of the pre-revolutionary bourgeoisie were primarily economic (pp. 20–1), that the sacrifices of 4 August 1789 were simply self-interested (pp. 84–5), that the Jacobins sincerely wanted to redistribute wealth (pp. 228–9), or that, on a grander scale, the Revolution represented the triumph of capitalists over landowners (pp. 251–5). And he disagreed most emphatically with Cobban over the role of ideas, not to say ideals. Cobban admired the Enlightenment, but was anxious to detach it from the violent Revolution which had so often been attributed to its influence. Norman found the inspiration of the Enlightenment everywhere in the Revolution. He had always been an idealist himself. He had volunteered in 1941 convinced that it was essential to confront Fascism. Then when he joined *La Moqueuse* he found himself among men who had risked their

¹³Personal letter to William Doyle, 25 Aug. 1989.

¹⁴Norman Hampson, *The First European Revolution, 1776–1815* (London, 1969), pp. 7–8.

lives and careers to do the same, and saw themselves as upholding the ideals of 1789. He found something of that, too, in the sailors and dockyard workers of the Year II. And if evidence was needed of the pervasive influence of the writers of the Enlightenment on the revolutionaries, it lay to hand in Manchester. In 1929 the John Rylands Library had acquired the Crawford Collection of printed sources on the Revolution, one of the most extensive outside France. Norman had even found useful information there on the navy when writing his first book. While preparing his second, he had gone on to scour the twenty-eight volumes of the *Recueil de pièces intéressantes pour servir à l'histoire de la Révolution en France*, and, with that book out of the way, he devoted an obscure but very significant article to this collection as a source.¹⁵ Discussing the light which the pamphlets in this collection threw on the pre-revolutionary crisis, behind their consensual hostility to despotism he found much social and political confusion among the pamphleteers. The difficulty of perceiving clearly what is going on and what is at stake in troubled times would be a constant theme in Norman's accounts of revolutionary motivations. But he was impressed, at the very moment when in Germany, unknown to him, Jürgen Habermas was conceptualising the 'public sphere' in terms which two decades later would sweep the world of Enlightenment and Revolutionary historiography, by the scale and vigour of the public debate. Above all he was struck by its intellectualism. He found pamphlets written from all perspectives steeped in the writings of the Enlightenment, and particularly in Montesquieu and Rousseau. Often their authors seemed unaware of the contrasts between the two writers; and their key ideas, such as Rousseau's general will, were often used with scant regard for the context in which they had been formulated. But the language heard in these pre-revolutionary debates would echo throughout all the subsequent upheavals. Moderates, then and later, tended to adopt perspectives derived from Montesquieu: radicals found more inspiration in Rousseau. The question of how revolutionary circumstances impacted on men so imbued with the ideas of these writers during their 'intellectual apprenticeship'¹⁶ was to fascinate Norman for much of his later career. It would form the basic problematic of two of his later books.¹⁷

¹⁵ Norman Hampson, 'The *Recueil des pièces intéressantes pour servir à l'histoire de la Révolution en France* and the origins of the French Revolution' *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 46 (1964), 385–410.

¹⁶ Norman Hampson, *Will and Circumstance. Montesquieu, Rousseau and the French Revolution* (London, 1983), p. viii.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* and Norman Hampson, *Prelude to Terror. The Constituent Assembly and the Failure of Consensus, 1789–91* (Oxford, 1988).

Meanwhile the warm reception which greeted the *Social History* brought a perfect opportunity to explore issues of this sort on a much wider canvas. Penguin books were launching a multivolume History of European Thought under the advisory editorship of J. H. Plumb. An eighteenth-century historian himself, Plumb had been impressed by the freshness of Norman's approach, and invited him to contribute a volume on the Enlightenment. Norman did not hesitate; and, with the help of a year's leave of absence from the university, he spent the mid-1960s writing what would perhaps be his most successful and widely read book.¹⁸ In it, a much more personal and ironic voice began to be heard. Norman confessed on the very first page that perhaps his subject did not exist: 'At most, it can only be regarded as a significant statistical concentration, not as an event.' Readers were invited to form their own viewpoint from 'the rich anarchy of the evidence', rather than accept the author's. Norman's aim was to set eighteenth-century ideas and attitudes of mind within clearly outlined social and political contexts, both before and after 1789. Now he unashamedly proclaimed his approval of both the Enlightenment and the Revolution. He thrilled to the 'optimism as superb as it was disinterested' (pp. 232–3) of writers who 'had some justification for exclaiming with Diderot, "I love that philosophy which raises up humanity" . . . it was not their principles but the denial of them that was to darken the future' (p. 233). Norman could scarcely conceal his contempt for the French Revolution's intellectual enemies, all of whom more or less blamed the Enlightenment for the bloody and godless chaos that followed it. He discussed Barruel, de Maistre, and Chateaubriand at length, but only to allow them to hang themselves with their own rope. Nor was it any surprise that the close reader of the John Rylands pamphlets found the greatest of the *philosophes* to be Montesquieu and Rousseau. Opposites though they were in many ways, Norman did not hide his admiration for both. He loved Montesquieu's paradoxes, his delight in the complexity of things, and what he would later call his 'quiet reasonableness'.¹⁹ He was determined to defend him against superficial accusations of determinism. And while he was repelled by Rousseau's idolisation of Sparta, he responded to Jean-Jacques's 'inner voice' and the moral imperatives which it conveyed: 'one can only say that the reader who does not *feel* the point can never understand it' (p. 189). Here spoke the would-be poet; and it is clear that in writing about the Enlightenment Norman enjoyed the 'banquet' (p. 13)

¹⁸ Norman Hampson, *The Enlightenment* (London, 1968).

¹⁹ Hampson, *Will and Circumstance*, p. 55.

of its imaginative literature far more than its philosophy or political theory. He ranged far beyond France, though translating passages from French with rare elegance. Perhaps because he was writing for an English-speaking readership, he was ever ready with British examples—Sterne, Fielding, Wordsworth and (more surprisingly) Chesterfield. From Sterne he would even borrow a title for a subsequent book, while its form seemed to be derived from a common Enlightenment style of argument, the dialogue.²⁰ Norman would never wander so far from the French Revolution again as he did in *The Enlightenment*, but exploring the intellectual context only left him more sceptical than ever of attempts to explain the Revolution mainly in terms of material interests and social conflict. He had nothing but scorn for the idea that the Enlightenment was in any useful sense the ideology of a rising revolutionary bourgeoisie. He was convinced that the links between Enlightenment and Revolution were intimate, but any answer to what they were could be neither scientific nor simple. Anticipating a later influential insight of others (as in so many passing observations throughout his works) he saw that the Enlightenment was as much a later construct of the Revolution as a cause of it. A historian could only hope to achieve some clarity about it at the price of distortion, since the evidence was so abundant and, ‘stumbling amidst this *embarras de richesses*, the historian is in permanent danger of being buried beneath his own treasure trove’ (p. 251).

It was this sense of the infinite ambiguity and elasticity of evidence which made Norman such a stimulating teacher. He sometimes reflected that his true vocation was to teach rather than conduct research, and his approach always bore the hallmarks of his early years working with extra-mural students in and around Manchester. But his homespun style and constant invocation of what ‘Joe Soap’ might say concealed a careful determination to challenge his students to think against the grain. He always tried to get to know them socially, and had a loyal following in both the Manchester departments to which he belonged. He might well have stayed there throughout his career, comfortably established at the heart of the county where he grew up, with its own distinctive culture. Here he could follow the fortunes of Lancashire cricket, and easily reach the fells of the Lake District, where he loved to tramp. But now he was suddenly confronted by one of those chance occurrences which he was convinced govern all our lives, and so much of history too. The retirement

²⁰The title of *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre* (London, 1974) was consciously taken from Sterne’s *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*.

of Vinaver, whom Norman admired and revered, brought a new head of French. In the desire which so many new heads of department have to shake things up, he called Norman in and told him that he was becoming too embroiled in the French Revolution. He was to switch his research to the Renaissance. Norman's historical interests were wide, but he was now one of the country's leading authorities on the Revolution, with an international reputation, and teaching this special subject was his greatest intellectual passion. Yet Norman knew his man from long experience as a colleague, and also that professorial power was such at Manchester that protest seemed fruitless. He immediately decided he had to leave.

Within a year a chair of modern history was advertised at Newcastle. Norman was appointed to it in 1967, and left Manchester with obvious relief. The family established itself in a large house in Gosforth, within walking distance of work (Norman hated driving: he said he was always afraid he might accidentally kill someone). Jacqueline (who had no such fears) and their two teenage daughters liked Northumberland, and the friendliness of an area quite as culturally distinctive as Lancashire. The department was small, but Norman was pleased to be among historians, and he and Jacqueline astonished his new colleagues by entertaining them at home with a generosity that was legendary among all those who came to know them. Yet this was seldom reciprocated, and they soon began to miss the wide social interaction they had enjoyed in Manchester. Norman had also valued the shared world of francophone colleagues, and arrived in Newcastle with the hope of setting up a joint degree in History and French. The French department was willing enough, and a draft programme was negotiated, but the historians were reluctant to sacrifice student places and possibly future posts for a programme which they thought unlikely to recruit among the largely monoglot Newcastle student body. Norman was very disappointed, and colleagues sensed that after the abandonment of this scheme he tended to become somewhat detached from departmental affairs. No doubt the sense of distance was increased when he won a Leverhulme award, and consequently a year's leave-of-absence, to write a book about Robespierre. When the leave ended, he returned more restless than ever, confiding to Jacqueline his gloom at the thought of spending the rest of his life on Tyneside. But as *Robespierre* went to press, a happier chance was about to occur. Another restless professor, Gwyn A. Williams, had grown dissatisfied with his position at the University of York. Founded in 1963 by Norman's old Manchester colleague Gerald Aylmer, the York history department was young and expanding, and Norman had come to know it in the late 1960s as external examiner. When, in 1973,

Williams eventually departed for Wales, Aylmer turned his mind to a replacement, hoping perhaps for one easier to deal with. Rumours had reached him of Norman's unhappiness, and also of other universities trying to tempt him away. Norman's field was similar to that most recently taught by Williams, so there was a gap he could fill. Moving quickly, Aylmer made some urgent consultations and engineered an interview whose outcome nobody at York seriously doubted. And so this quintessential Lancastrian moved to Yorkshire, where he spent the rest of his life. Later he would often declare that he would do anything for Lancashire, except live there.

Norman's Newcastle years saw the appearance of a brief illustrated survey of the revolutionary age.²¹ It was essentially a distillation, which he claimed to have written in six weeks, of the main themes of *The Enlightenment*. But the most important Newcastle achievement was *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre* (London, 1974). It took everybody by surprise. Instead of a conventional biography or 'life and times', where Norman thought Thompson's treatment of the Incorruptible still unsurpassed,²² it offered a conversation between a narrator providing such facts about Robespierre as could be relied on, and three interlocutors trying to make their own contradictory sense of them. One was a civil servant, one a Communist, and one a clergyman. All represented different aspects of Norman's own way of thinking. He was, he explained in the preface, a 'historical agnostic' who rejected any sort of teleology. And on so poorly documented a figure as Robespierre 'greater familiarity with the evidence merely provided new support for each of the conflicting opinions that I had hoped it would reconcile. It did at least convince me that to approach this tormented and self-contradictory man with urbane impartiality is to deprive one's self of any chance of understanding him at all' (Preface, p. x). So Norman threw impartiality aside, not to offer a new interpretation, but to outline as many possible interpretations as he thought compatible with ambiguous and contradictory evidence; inviting his readers, as in *The Enlightenment*, to reach their own conclusions. As Richard Cobb remarked in a long and full review,²³ the result was not simply a study of Robespierre, but 'an opportunity to discuss the nature of historical evidence'. There were, in fact, many pages of fairly conventional exposition,

²¹ Norman Hampson, *The First European Revolution, 1776–1815* (London, 1969).

²² J. M. Thompson, *Robespierre* (Oxford, 1935).

²³ *New Statesman*, 13 Sept. 1974, 249; repr. in Richard Cobb, *Tour De France* (London, 1976), pp. 45–54.

especially when it came to the plots, putative or actual, that Robespierre had to confront during his time on the Committee of Public Safety. Norman was repeatedly drawn over subsequent years to this baffling labyrinth, without ever feeling that he had found its thread.²⁴ But set pieces and purple passages were avoided, even during the drama of Thermidor, which was wrapped up very briskly to conclude the book. Robespierre gone, there was no discussion of the aftermath of his overthrow, much less of the vicissitudes of his historical reputation. What Norman clearly enjoyed most was writing the dialogue, with its scope for jokes and home-spun wisdom, no doubt well honed by years of teaching. Yet even here the evidence for every point of discussion was fully set out in footnotes. Norman was always grateful to his publisher, the legendary Colin Haycraft of Duckworth's, for insisting that the only place for notes was at the foot of each page. They displayed the vast range of reading on which every page, behind the banter of the fictional characters, was based.

The boldness and imagination of Norman's approach drew admiring reviews, in Great Britain at least. Americans, uneasy with his very British conversational style and attitudes, were less sure what to make of it. It was too subtle and complex ever to become a prescribed student text, and Norman never attained across the Atlantic the celebrity and respect that he enjoyed on his home territory, despite reviewing from time to time in the *New York Review of Books*. With the help of Jacqueline, the *Life and Opinions* secured a French translation, but made little impact across the Channel. Few French readers were as steeped in British ways of thinking as Norman was in theirs. Some aspects of the book have undeniably dated: the party-member and the very Anglican-sounding clergyman now seem like characters from another age, inevitably blunting the impact of their observations, however fundamentally pertinent they remain. Nevertheless this was Norman's masterpiece: the self-confident and inimitable product of a writer at the height of his powers, unafraid to ignore conventional ways of presentation. And the portrait it offered of Robespierre was genuinely fresh—neither hero nor monster, fundamentally well-intentioned, but scarcely less confused than subsequent historians by the exhilarating but frightening whirlwind he was caught up in. Later writers drawn to Robespierre have never underestimated the importance of these insights,²⁵ and what Norman called Robespierre's 'potential

²⁴See Norman Hampson, 'François Chabot and his plot', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth Series, 26 (1976), 1–14.

²⁵For example, Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity. Robespierre and the French Revolution* (London, 2006), p. 363; Peter McPhee, *Robespierre. A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2012), p. 244.

humanity',²⁶ clearly caught the interest of Hilary Mantel when she was writing by far the best recent novel set in the Revolution, *A Place of Greater Safety* (London, 1992). During this time, Norman's book was her 'constant companion'.²⁷ Many years later, after she had named *Saint Just* as one of her books of the year, she and Norman established an eclectic correspondence much valued by both sides,²⁸ and through her widely read novel his influence was indirectly disseminated far beyond the world of teaching and scholarship.

Robespierre appeared in 1974, like a fanfare for Norman's arrival in York. Here he would find the sort of professional contentment perhaps not enjoyed since his days on *La Moqueuse*. The History department was lively and welcoming, with a well-established tradition of sociability which he and Jacqueline soon threw themselves into. They bought a very large house, once again within walking distance of the university. It had once been at the centre of a market garden, had a large conservatory, and was surrounded by extensive grounds where Norman could indulge his passion for garden design, taking cuttings, and growing all sorts of flowers, fruit and vegetables. Internally the style was all French, with parquet throughout and Jacqueline's family furniture. At its heart were the kitchen and dining room, where visitors marvelled at her cooking and Norman's choice of wines, charmed by their very distinctive but well-practised style of serving and presentation. Only intimates knew that in addition to growing the raw materials for the kitchen and (always) fresh flowers for the hall, Norman was an expert at icing cakes for family occasions. At the university he enjoyed being a professor without the burden of authority, until the departure of Gerald Aylmer for Oxford in 1978 thrust the duties of head of department upon him. In this he saw his job as keeping the ship on an even keel rather than attempting to steer it in new directions. Younger colleagues sometimes found this frustrating, but he felt committed to the Aylmer tradition of keeping York as little like the old Manchester as possible. A fundamental part of this approach was small-group teaching. Although impressive at delivering noteless lectures, Norman felt most

²⁶ Personal letter to William Doyle, 24 July 1992.

²⁷ Hilary Mantel, email to William Doyle, 12 Jan. 2012; personal letter to Norman Hampson, c. Sept. 1992.

²⁸ In an earlier survey of Norman's work in Malcolm Crook, William Doyle and Alan Forrest (eds.), *Enlightenment and Revolution. Essays in Honour of Norman Hampson* (Aldershot, 2004), p. 9, I erroneously stated that he gave Mantel 'a number of tutorials'. Both assured me at later dates that this never happened. They only ever had one brief meeting, some years after *A Place of Greater Safety* was published.

at home and effective in tutorials and seminars, where he could interact with individual minds. The department continued to offer him opportunities to teach seminars long after his retirement in 1989, and he taught his last York seminar, significantly on the topic of history and literature, at the age of 82. He disliked academic infighting, and the personal acrimony which it so often bred: although an Oxford graduate, he was shocked by stories filtering back to York of plots and intrigues at the ancient universities. Intellectual jousts were a different matter. He enjoyed arguments about history, and was often drawn to colleagues with whom he disagreed most strongly. Students who were at York in the 1970s remember how he and the Marxist Paul Ginsborg packed lecture rooms by publically airing their differences on the nature of revolution. Neither Norman nor Jacqueline was ever heard to pass a word of public criticism of any colleague, whatever their private views may have been. In 1983, a rarity indeed for any professor, he dedicated one of his books, *Will and Circumstance*, to the department.

Books flowed regularly from his pen at York. First came a concise, illustrated history of the Revolution, this time taking the story down to 1799.²⁹ It was too succinct to dwell on most of the controversial issues or to give Norman much scope for ironic asides. More of a challenge was *Danton*, published again by Duckworth in 1978. It followed logically enough from a life of Robespierre, since most historians had seen them as polar opposites, and the destruction of one at the hands of the other in the spring of 1794 was one of the most dramatic and fateful episodes of the Terror. Norman had already had to confront this when writing about Robespierre, and characteristically had found the evidence much less clear-cut than was conventionally thought. His insight into Danton was also fired by the writings of Robert Darnton, who was making a name by arguing that the professional frustrations of ambitious writers had bred a determination to destroy the Ancien Régime when the opportunity offered. They then went on to build careers under the new regime. These arguments implied that the aims of many leading revolutionaries were as much personal as ideological, and Norman found the idea stimulating. In 1976, at a colloquium in Bordeaux, he argued that the time had come to 'study the revolutionaries as political men rather than actors in a cosmic tragedy'.³⁰ Danton was his prime exhibit, making a career from Parisian

²⁹ Norman Hampson, *The French Revolution. A Concise History* (London, 1975).

³⁰ Norman Hampson, 'Les bourgeois déclassés de la Révolution française', in P. Butel (ed.) *Sociétés et groupes sociaux en Aquitaine et en Angleterre* (Bordeaux, 1979), p. 233.

politics with the Cordeliers Club as his political machine. He and several lesser contemporaries were offered as France's first modern professional politicians. This case was argued at greater length in the biography. But ultimately Norman seems to have found Danton much less interesting than Robespierre, or indeed a number of other more ideologically motivated figures to whom he would shortly turn his attention.³¹ The book was relatively short (174 pages of text) and conventional in plan, beginning with a historiographical survey and then narrating each step in Danton's career. Partly this reflected a singular lack of reliable evidence. Norman found that Danton was brilliant at covering his tracks and keeping his options open. Most of his speeches were improvised, and he left few papers. Connoisseur of ambiguity though he was, Norman ultimately found this frustrating. 'It will never be possible' he concluded, 'to say with confidence what Danton stood for' (p. 68). This was in stark contrast to the extravagant claims of generations of historians, whose judgements ranged from the almost superhuman life-force portrayed by Carlyle to the corrupt and probably treasonous hypocrite relentlessly pilloried by Mathiez. Norman's Danton carried very little ideological baggage. Professionally successful before the Revolution, he embraced it because the times were changing rather than because he longed for change himself. He rode the Revolution as a supreme opportunist, and was eventually brought down by a record of indifference to matters of principle. In calmer and less moralising times he might have had a long and very successful public career, but the very absence of solid evidence which so frustrated Norman had made it easy to produce an indictment against him in 1794, mostly made up of moral disapproval, innuendo and guilt by association. 'The French Revolution', Norman concluded, 'has been the source of so much myth-making that to present Danton in terms considered appropriate to other men in other periods is to invite the accusation of cynicism. Heroes are preferable, villains permissible, but politicians, whatever their virtuosity, have no place in that particular *Gotterdammerung*. My only defence is to reply that no one finds it odd nowadays that able men should create careers for themselves within a political party of their choice, or even change parties as political circumstances alter' (Preface, p. xi).

The persistent voice of common sense clearly commended itself to the British Academy, which elected Norman a Fellow in 1980. When congratulated, he would modestly reply that 'It goes with the job', aware that his

³¹ In Hampson, *Will and Circumstance*.

predecessor as head of the York department had been elected four years earlier. Not many heads of history departments might feel so confident. But the headship did not impede the flow of his writing. His last book for Duckworth appeared in 1983, and took him back to the great themes which he had explored twenty years earlier in the John Rylands Crawford Collection. *Will and Circumstance* sought to trace the influence of Rousseau (will) and Montesquieu (circumstance) on some key actors in the Revolution from their intellectual apprenticeship beforehand, through to their attempts to apply the lessons of these masters in the bewildering world into which the Revolution thrust them. The choice of figures was constrained by how far good evidence existed from both sides of 1789, but Norman found enough material to include Mercier, Brissot, Marat, Robespierre, and Saint-Just. An initial section laid out the basic ideas of the two great philosophers, offering as clear and concise a guide to their thought as could easily be found. Then came a series of chapters on each of the writers (except Saint-Just, still too young to have written much) before the Revolution. Finally they were each revisited as revolutionaries, to examine how far the unforeseen upheaval had modified their attitudes. By this time Norman's views on Robespierre were familiar enough, but his treatment of the others, based as always on careful and exhaustive reading of their works, was fresh and unusual. Particularly striking were his conclusions on Marat, whom he saw as a charlatan and fantasist before the Revolution, and an irresponsible agitator once it began: 'There are times when one wonders whether Marat knew or cared what he was writing' (p. 212). Norman was shocked by Marat's constant calls for more heads to roll. But he also noted that when Marat claimed, as he repeatedly did, that nobody listened to him, it was true. Even the Peoples' Friend's much-touted involvement in the September massacres of 1792 was called into question. Buried in a wider book, these chapters on Marat have seldom caught the attention of subsequent writers about him, but the wisdom of their conclusions remains unsurpassed. Norman also brought some sharp insights into his portrait of Brissot, whose importance in the Revolution had perhaps been underestimated since the days of Mathiez. But what struck him most as he examined Brissot alongside Robespierre, usually seen as his nemesis when he and his Girondin friends were purged from the Convention in June 1793, was how little they differed on most matters. The book concluded with an appendix in which the pronouncements of both men on a range of issues were juxtaposed. Their famous differences over the advisability of war in the spring of 1792 had too readily obscured the fact that they derived their inspiration and political reflexes from the

same writers. They, and by implication many revolutionaries like them, believed with Rousseau that men could be made by what they ought to wish to be. But attempts to make them so were constantly impeded by circumstance—as Montesquieu might have foreseen.

Norman spent his last decade in the York chair elaborating on these insights in the many meetings and colloquia which he was invited to address. When in 1987 the Society for the Study of French History was founded, he was unanimously elected its first chairman. Previously he had been chairman of the British Society for Eighteenth Century Studies. He received an honorary doctorate from the University of Edinburgh (1989). He spoke at major conferences in Bamberg (1979) and Oxford (1987), contributed to an influential series of seminars on the Enlightenment in Cambridge (1979), gave the Stenton Lecture at Reading (1982),³² and visited the Rudé Seminar in French History in Australia. He also made a belated first visit to North America, which he viewed with a slightly bemused detachment. At Bamberg he had met and got on well with the American George V. Taylor (1919–2011), whose articles in the 1960s had provided a far more solid and radical foundation for two decades of revisionism than the gadfly approach of Alfred Cobban. But neither Norman nor Taylor ever felt at home with the drift of transatlantic scholarship on the Revolution towards theory and abstraction, which some were now beginning to call post-revisionism. With his constant emphasis on the influence of great writers, Norman was perhaps closer than he liked to admit to post-revisionism, whose advocates tended to see the revolutionaries as locked into thought patterns making terror inevitable. Yet he continued to see himself as an empiricist, believing that nothing in history was inevitable. The academic year 1986–7 gave him a sustained opportunity to express this outlook through an invitation to deliver the Sir D. Owen Evans Memorial Lectures at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, published in 1988 as *Prelude to Terror* (Oxford). The focus was on the Constituent Assembly, whose failure to produce a lasting peaceful settlement of the French future he saw as ‘one of the great tragedies of modern times’ (p. i). The Constituent, he argued, produced most of the constructive work of the Revolution. It had swept away the privilege-ridden chaos and injustices of the Ancien Régime, and attempted to establish a new and better order based on liberty, equality and humane values. Half the deputies, perhaps far more, had been elected by beneficiaries of the old abuses, and yet most of them participated willingly if not enthusiastically

³² Norman Hampson, *The French Revolution and Democracy* (Reading, 1983).

in sweeping them away. Norman was less prepared than ever to conceal his admiration for the altruism of the men of 1789, and the boundless hope that inspired them. He depicted the Revolution throughout 1789 and much of 1790 as driven by a broadly optimistic consensus; but by the time the Assembly broke up in September 1791, the consensus had broken down and the country was polarised. The way was then open to Terror. Norman had already offered a succinct analysis of how Terror emerged from that point onwards in a Historical Association pamphlet of 1981, which for twenty-five years proved a godsend to students.³³ His purpose in *Prelude to Terror* was to plot the failures of the Revolution's founding fathers. A terroristic future he thought entirely avoidable, and yet the intellectual instincts which they brought to revolutionary politics made it hard if not impossible for them to accept the legitimacy of opposition or disagreement. What was unique about the Revolution was its 'Messianic dimension', which was shared by both left and right in the Assembly: 'From one point of view the deputies were hard-headed men trying to find practical solutions to practical problems, but unless one appreciates that most of them were also convinced that they were at the same time building a new heaven and a new earth, one cannot even begin to understand them' (p. 106).

Understanding them was Norman's life mission as a historian, and in his last major book he confronted perhaps the most difficult revolutionary of all to understand, Saint-Just.³⁴ This time sympathetic understanding failed him—as it had to some extent with Marat. The story he told was that of the transformation over two eventful years of 'a utopian dreamer into a satanic monster' (Preface, p. iii). Norman had never liked Saint-Just, as had been clear from *Will and Circumstance*, where his social ideas were characterised as 'intolerable, when they were not unintentionally funny', and his economic ones infantile (p. 264). It was perhaps this very absurdity which lured him into a full-scale study. 'But', as he wrote to me after I reviewed the book,³⁵ 'when I started work on the biography I was ready—expecting—to find attenuating circumstances. It was Saint-Just himself who turned me into a savage critic and I got more and more hostile as his career developed.' Even so, this survey of a fleeting meteoric career was almost twice as long as Norman's previous life of Danton, who was active in revolutionary politics for far longer: clearly a man of ideas,

³³ Norman Hampson, *The Terror in the French Revolution* (London, 1981).

³⁴ Norman Hampson, *Saint-Just* (Oxford, 1991).

³⁵ Personal letter, 24 July 1992.

however rebarbative, intrigued him more than a man of action. Allowing himself the extra space also enabled Norman to bring out less familiar aspects of the young ideologue's career, such as his unexpected military competence, or the possibility that he might quite easily have avoided joining Robespierre on the scaffold. But his final conclusion was graphic: 'If the sin of Lucifer was spiritual pride, which led him, almost incidentally, to the use of evil as the necessary means to a transcendental end, Saint-Just was Lucifer' (p. 236).

In his later works, Norman was increasingly ready to set out his philosophy as a historian. He remained resolute in rejecting any sort of grand theory: 'If ... theory is to make sense it cannot allow much room for "Chance, kings and desperate men"; the end must be implicit in the beginning. There is, of course, an obvious sense in which one thing led to another but to assume that it could not have led anywhere else is to opt for a degree of determinism in the past that we would never admit in our own lives.'³⁶ Another constant theme was mistrust of sources: 'All of these come from men who were themselves ignorant of what was going on, prone to take their suspicions for facts and mainly concerned to vindicate their own judgment and motives. All have to be treated with considerable scepticism, but the actions of the men concerned were determined by their view of the situation, however erroneous this may have been. Their mistakes helped to decide what happened, and they have therefore significance which the mistakes of historians do not.'³⁷ And yet 'If history is to be truly scientific it has nothing to say that is worth hearing. If it tries to fulfil the role that once gave it importance, that of interpreting the past to the present, much of what it presents as true will be only conjectural at best and sometimes wrong.'³⁸ Unlikely as this was to attract general readers, nevertheless Norman was convinced both that 'History only matters when it matters to non-historians', yet that it was 'as useless and necessary as poetry or music.'³⁹

He never entirely abandoned his youthful literary dreams. Throughout his life he had continued to compose occasional poems, and planned to write novels after retirement. When retirement came in 1989 he disposed of many of his working books with this in mind. But imaginative literature

³⁶ Hampson, *Prelude to Terror*, p. xii.

³⁷ Hampson, *Saint-Just*, p. 239.

³⁸ Norman Hampson, *Danton* (London, 1978), pp. 12–13.

³⁹ 'The "lessons" of the French Revolution', in H. T. Mason and W. Doyle (eds.), *The Impact of the French Revolution on European Consciousness* (Gloucester, 1989), p. 188; and Norman Hampson, *History as an Art* (Inaugural Lecture, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1968), p. 18.

was not his true vocation and within a few years he was writing history again. From a lifetime of accumulated notes he produced *The Perfidy of Albion* (Basingstoke, 1998), surveying French perceptions of England during the Revolution. It gave him the chance to revisit the murky rumours of foreign plots first explored when writing about Robespierre, but he confessed that he was no closer to disentangling them. He also dwelt on the infamous law of 29 May 1794 which forbade the taking of British or Hanoverian prisoners. It reminded him too vividly of his captain leaving surrendering Italians to drown. Perhaps it was this which spurred him to break a private resolution made in 1944 never to write his war memoirs. They certainly appeared within three years, but perhaps no reader except those who knew him would have suspected that their author was the leading British historian of the French Revolution.

That standing was celebrated in 2004 when a dozen friends and colleagues produced a long-overdue Festschrift.⁴⁰ Norman's last work, however, a dialogue on the Year II perhaps too reminiscent of his Robespierre book, failed to find a publisher. As one who had once been besieged by invitations to write books and apply for chairs, he found this dispiriting, but his creativity was clearly on the wane. He and Jacqueline kept up their relentless round of entertaining and hospitality until her health began to fade. Some years before that happened, they fulfilled a longstanding ambition to visit together the Egyptian sites which Norman had first seen during the war. But Jacqueline's decline was long and painful, and after she died in 2007 Norman was left drained. Friends soon noticed that he was becoming increasingly reclusive and uncommunicative. Even his garden no longer consoled him, although he refused to move to smaller quarters. Alone with his pipe and his books, his main pleasure seemed to be the visits which his daughters made as regularly as their busy professional lives allowed. His health remained good until, following a series of falls, he became almost immobile and confused. Finally, after a long stay in hospital, his daughter Michèle arranged for residential accommodation near her in Nottingham, where he died on 8 July 2011 within a few days of arriving. It was fitting that the order of service at his well-attended funeral back in York was printed with the Cross of Lorraine, that symbol of French freedom to whose cause his whole life owed so much.

WILLIAM DOYLE

Fellow of the Academy

⁴⁰Crook, Doyle and Forrest, *Enlightenment and Revolution*. It contains, pp. 19–21, a full list of his historical writings.

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