



RICHARD COBB

# Richard Charles Cobb

## 1917–1996

BLESSED WITH A WRITING STYLE that most historians only dream of, Richard Charles Cobb was the greatest British historian of the French Revolution in the twentieth century. He strongly influenced the study of the Revolution in British academic life, partly through his numerous students who subsequently took up university posts, but mainly through the force and the striking eccentricity of his unusual personality and his effervescent writing style. His historical writings are not characterised by a particular methodology—indeed, he would certainly have welcomed a recent description of him as an exponent of an ‘anti-methodology’.<sup>1</sup> His work manifests a way of researching and writing about French history that broke with what Cobb saw as the ‘armchair history’ approach prevalent among British historians of France, which was based on reliance on printed sources, often accessed from Britain. In contrast, Cobb flaunted a very subjective identification with France and grounded his history in immersion within French society and the closest possible encounter with manuscript archives. This contributed to the development of his inimitable

<sup>1</sup>C. Cuttica, ‘Anti-methodology par excellence: Richard Cobb (1917–96) and history-writing’, *European Review of History/Revue européenne d’histoire*, 21 (2014), 91–110. Besides using his many obituaries for this essay, and the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry by Colin Lucas (‘Cobb, Richard Charles (1917–1996)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford, 2004, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/60770>>, accessed 1 May 2015) I have drawn particularly on analyses by two other of his ex-students: M. Lyons, ‘Cobb and the historians’, in G. Lewis and C. Lucas (eds.), *Beyond the Terror: Essays in French Regional and Social History, 1794–1815* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 1–20, and G. Lewis, ‘Richard Charles Cobb, 1917–96, “A very English social historian of France”’, *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History*, 25 (1998), 7–10.

prose style—intricate perceptions and sensations set down in long, baroque sentences, full of Gallicisms, Parisian argot, colourful anecdotes dotted with whimsicality and humour high and low, plus incantatory lists of French (and, later, English) place-names.

Curiously, for the first fifty years of his life, however, Cobb published almost entirely in French and was read only by a narrowly defined academic audience. This reflected the unusual trajectory of his career. With the interruption caused by the Second World War, he spent nearly all of his time from his schooldays onwards in France, until in 1955 at the age of nearly forty he returned to make an academic career within the British university system. The glittering prizes followed—a college fellowship (1962) and then a Chair at Oxford University (1972); election to the Fellowship of the British Academy (1967); the Wolfson Prize for History (1978); and national—or rather, transnational—honours (CBE in 1978, Officier de l'ordre national du mérite in 1977, and finally Chevalier of the Légion d'honneur in 1986). But long before this last date he had begun to write almost entirely in English—and more and more on English subjects, most prominently about himself in fact. Autobiographical fragments appeared in a series of slim volumes quite separate from his French history publications and established him as a highly distinctive chronicler of English provincial childhood and middle-class mores in the inter-war period. In this guise he won new cohorts of readers—and an entry in Margaret Drabble's *Oxford Companion to English Literature*.<sup>2</sup>

## I

Cobb's own memoirs are the best source for the experiences of his childhood and youth. Bearing in mind his own admission that he rated 'readability' over 'absolute accuracy', we should peruse these with at least the same amount of caution he applied to eighteenth-century documents.<sup>3</sup> Born 20 May 1917, the historian of the French Revolution relished the

<sup>2</sup>M. Drabble (ed.), *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 6th edn. (Oxford, 2000), p. 213. Cobb's autobiographical works are *Still Life: Sketches from a Tunbridge Wells Childhood* (London, 1983), *A Classical Education* (London, 1985), *Something to Hold Onto: Autobiographical Sketches* (London, 1988), and *The End of the Line: a Memoir* (London, 1997). There are also substantial autobiographical sections in his *A Second Identity: Essays on France and French History* (Oxford, 1969), especially 'Introduction: experiences of an Anglo-French historian', pp. 1–50, and *A Sense of Place* (London, 1975), notably 'Part One: becoming a historian', pp. 5–48.

<sup>3</sup>Cobb, *A Classical Education*, p. 10.

idea that he was born in the year of its Russian successor, although his birthplace, Frinton-on-Sea, had little that was revolutionary about it. His parents—Francis Hills Cobb, a civil engineer in the Sudan civil service, and his wife, Dora, née Swindale—exchanged one genteel home for another, settling in Tunbridge Wells, where Cobb spent the rest of his childhood, along with his sibling Diana. He attended the Beacon School in nearby Crowborough (where, however, he was a boarder), before moving to Shrewsbury School for his secondary education.

When once asked in interview what he owed to his personal, family and educational background, Cobb replied: ‘Oh, I should think everything—son of a colonial civil servant, Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, empire-builder father, Christian as well (very much so), believing in Kipling.’<sup>4</sup> Yet in fact, this list of ‘everything’ represents much of what Cobb’s historical imagination either ignored or rejected outright. His perspectives were always resolutely Franco-British, and he preferred the local to the global, the metropolitan to the imperial; throughout his life he proved the tireless critic of bureaucracy in all its forms, past, present and future; and his opus magnum focused on coercive dechristianisation during the French Revolution rather than the experience of the faithful. To cap it all, he even mocked what he saw as Kipling’s self-important sense of celebrity.<sup>5</sup> This is an odd way of thinking about ‘everything’.

Cobb wrote more, and more revealingly, about his French doctoral supervisor, Georges Lefebvre, and his feelings for him, in a single essay than he did about his parents and sister in half a dozen volumes of memoirs.<sup>6</sup> Despite his long lingering over his childhood experiences, the texture of his relationships with his closest family members remains a *zone d'ombre* (as he would certainly have put it) throughout his recollections. And although his account of his days in France are frequently picaresque and even bawdy and lewd (drinking bouts ending up in brothels, and so on), by the last decades of his life he gloried in a stolid middle-class identity—in 1988 he claimed to be ‘firmly rooted in the English middle class’, and had ‘never felt more English or more middle class’. Yet the nostalgic glow of his accounts of his early life—mostly written when he was in his sixties and after—should not mislead: most of Cobb’s early

<sup>4</sup>See ‘Interviews with historians. II. Richard Cobb’, *Colloquium*, 1962, 23–30 at 24. This student magazine was not published; the late Gwynne Lewis brought it to my attention.

<sup>5</sup>A ‘Mr Rudyard Bloody Kipling’ anecdote is recounted in several places including Cobb, *Something to Hold Onto*, p. 85.

<sup>6</sup>R. Cobb, ‘Georges Lefebvre’, in Cobb, *A Second Identity*, reprinted from *Past & Present*, 18 (1960), 52–67.

adult life and career comprised an overt rejection of his middle-class family and public-school roots.

Cobb cited approvingly Jack McManners's remark, in a review of one of his works, that Cobb had an 'inability, in the last resort, to bring himself to sympathise with those who seek to exercise power, be their motives good or evil'.<sup>7</sup> Cobb's anti-authoritarian instincts—so at odds with the conformism of his family background—were evident in his utter repulsion for Robespierre and Saint-Just, but they were honed in his early life, notably at Shrewsbury. The school allowed him a theatre in which he could develop a rebelliousness and a love of practical joking of which his memoirs give no indication hitherto. Pranks ranged from the puzzled discomfiture of his divinity teacher by waggishly impersonating God phoning his disapproval of the poor man's conduct, through to joking collusion in the matricidal fantasies of a school-friend—which took a fatal turn when the friend did in fact take an axe to his mother, a story which Cobb was to recount in detail in *A Classical Education*.

Yet if Cobb was something of an adolescent rebel, he was by his own admission a rather timid one. His school history lessons broadened his outlook for international affairs. Like many of his generation he consequently lived the 1930s in gnawing fear of a further international conflagration which would involve his call-up for military service. He warded off dread of bodily damage, disablement or death in warfare by developing reassuring and humdrum routines of daily life as quasi-magical rituals to keep the nightmares at bay. 'How desperately we cling to the familiar and the routinal', Cobb reflected, 'and never more so than in periods of public peril, crisis and war!'<sup>8</sup>

## II

By the late 1930s, Cobb was developing these routines of reassurance far away from his middle-class origins. In 1935, after Shrewsbury politely asked him not to return to the school following his Oxford entrance examinations (a sure sign that his rebelliousness was having some impact), he left England to spend time in Continental Europe. Despite a short but disastrous visit to Austria, where he was employed on relief work for the

<sup>7</sup>J. McManners, 'People in Revolution', *Times Literary Supplement*, 587, 27 Nov. 1970, cited in Cobb, *Reactions to the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1972), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup>Cobb, *Something to Hold Onto*, p. 14.

Quakers and was beaten up by the police and imprisoned for a short period as a dangerous political agitator, he went to Paris and fell in love with the city and with the French. The year 1935 was for Cobb—in a nice homage to the Revolution—‘Year One of Liberty as far as I was concerned’.<sup>9</sup>

In his first visit to Paris, Cobb stayed with a suitably solid bourgeois family chosen by his parents, on the Boulevard de Bonne-Nouvelle. The riotously unruly sons of the family, however, introduced Cobb to a bohemian world whose attractions he had hardly suspected. The boulevards also allowed him access to a *Paris populaire* now long gone and probably best savoured in the French films of the period. Cobb was a student at Merton College, Oxford from 1935 to 1938 but found it, he recalled later in his life, ‘a very juvenile, adolescent, inbred, closed-off, elitist sort of Neo-Gothic and silly ball-playing, archery-playing, lounging-on-lawns sort of place’.<sup>10</sup> He spent as much of the vacations as he could in Paris, which remained closer to his heart. Reading his memoirs, one loses sight of his undergraduate experiences almost completely—another *zone d’ombre*. It is only in passing, for example, that he revealed that he received tuition from J. M. Thompson, the celebrated biographer of Robespierre (and a classic instance, incidentally, of an ‘armchair historian’).<sup>11</sup> From his cheap lodgings in Paris, Cobb became an inveterate boulevard *flâneur*. Besides giving him a profound knowledge of *Paris populaire* and a love of Parisian street-talk and back-chat, his regular itineraries represented for him ‘the fragile barriers erected by the timid and the fearful, people like myself, in a modest endeavour to keep at bay the relentlessness of public life, and the orthodoxies of totalitarianism’.<sup>12</sup>

If Cobb’s *flânerie* thus allowed him to practice his magical rituals of reassurance in the face of dread, escape from the embrace of middle-class England was emphatically not escape from fear of war. Although he later grimly remembered ‘the dreadful, naked panic of the summer of 1938 in Paris’, and himself claimed to be a fearful ‘Munichois’, actively willing the success of appeasement, in fact his Parisian experiences had included supporting the 1936 Popular Front, and he recalled ‘march[ing] hand in

<sup>9</sup> ‘Interviews with historians’, p. 24. ‘Year One of Liberty’ was a phrase used during the French Revolution to signify 1789.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Cobb wrote a kindly obituary of Thompson in the ‘Nécrologie’, *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 29 (1957), 92–3.

<sup>12</sup> Cobb, *Something to Hold Onto*, p. 30.

hand with Fraternity and Hope' in the 14 July celebrations of that year.<sup>13</sup> He also attended the electrifying lectures of Georges Lefebvre at the Sorbonne, as the approaching commemoration of the 150th anniversary of 1789 prepared the country for a new and urgent challenge. His historical imagination on the Revolution had been fired by the writings of the leftwing historians, Jean Jaurès and Albert Mathiez, and, following conversations with Lefebvre, he began work for an Oxford higher degree on the short-lived career of François Nicolas Vincent, the left wing militant who in 1793 became general secretary of the War Ministry—a choice of subject on Cobb's part that was symptomatic of the times but also revealing of his own perspective at this juncture. An early love for Lewis Namier's work on English politics (not a trait often found among historians of revolutions) had initially attracted him to the idea of work on the Shropshire gentry. Paris had shifted his passions towards a biography of a radical *sans-culotte*. The switch was not entirely happy at first: in 1940, his Oxford B.Litt. was referred.<sup>14</sup>

Cobb's time in Paris in the 1930s produced in him the impression of a 'second identity'—a theme to which he returned frequently in his writings. As he described them, his Parisian experiences were both a *dépaysement* and a *déclassement*. Given the cosmopolitan volatility, stimulus to fleshly pleasures and left-wing political commitment he encountered in the city, Tunbridge Wells must have seemed worlds away. But it was the social as well as the topographical environment which was new for Cobb. His upper middle class background and genteel provincial life in England had been shackles which Cobb now cheerfully threw off. Among his first, and most enduring, new friends for example was Maurice Chauvirey. An unemployed hairdresser at cinema studios when Cobb met him, this genial bon viveur, gambler and ladies' man would desert from the army in the 1940 débâcle and spend the Vichy years running dodgy black-market deals with the German occupying forces. Yet despite such cross-class friendships, Cobb's integration within French society stopped short of total integration. Even at Shrewsbury, Cobb had interspersed schoolboy sociability with lonely walks, cycle-rides and long-distance running, and the sense of observing from the sidelines was a perennial trait. It bled profusely into the type of history that he was to write. He was 'a stationary witness, an

<sup>13</sup>Cobb, *A Second Identity*, pp. 20–1.

<sup>14</sup>The socialist politician and writer, Jean Jaurès (1859–1914), Albert Mathiez (1874–1932) and Georges Lefebvre (1874–1959) provide the red thread of the leftwing interpretation of the Revolution dominant in France for the first two-thirds of the twentieth century.

observer of a swirling collectivity of which he is not part'—a *flâneur* in sum. He was speaking from experience when he wrote that loneliness bestows 'those qualities of curiosity, imagination and compassion that are the necessary tools of [the historian's] trade'. It was also his recipe for living.<sup>15</sup>

### III

The 'era of liberty' that Cobb experienced in Paris between 1935 and 1939 was rudely interrupted by the outbreak of war. Initially he seems to have done what he could to avoid the call-up, but in the event he failed a medical test and ended up in a civilian post in the Air Ministry. By 1941 he was itching to join the Free French, but was sent instead to do liaison work with the Czechoslovak independent brigade group, and the Polish military authorities. Although Cobb would have post-war nightmares lasting the whole of his life that he had been remobilised, he was not wholly negative about his army years, even when in the early days this consisted of endless latrine duties. Public school doubtless prepared him for discipline and austerity, but by throwing him pell-mell among a wide range of social types, the army continued the work of social *déclassement* begun in Paris. Fraternity, he was evidently surprised to learn, was a British as well as a French quality. Military service, he reflected, 'divest[ed] me of my class'.<sup>16</sup>

In the event, Cobb's war outlasted the declaration of peace. But from September 1944, he was at least back in France, in the wake of the D-day landings. He served in the liaison and interpreting services in Bayeux, before being stationed in Roubaix on the Franco-Belgian frontier. Here he fell in with the family of the novelist Maxence van der Meerch, and formed a lasting affection for the city and its environs.

Cobb had already, however, set his mind on returning to Paris to conduct research on the Revolution in France, this time for a French doctoral degree. He had contacted Lefebvre with this in mind as early as 1944. Eventually discharged from the army, he would live full-time in Paris from 1946 to 1955. For these nine years, Cobb 'dispensed with [his] own nationality, without any great feeling of deprivation'.<sup>17</sup> In 1952, he married a French woman, Françoise Suzanne Marguerite Richard, daughter of a

<sup>15</sup> Cobb, *A Second Identity*, 44.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

French army officer and herself an employee of the SNCF, the French national railway service.

Cobb supported himself in Paris largely through English language teaching, although the hospitality of friends was an important additional resource. Crucial in this respect was his friendship with his rough coeval, the marxist Albert Soboul, also a Lefebvre student. Cobb had set his mind on focusing his research on the left-wing *Hébertiste* group within the Revolution. He later recounted how initially it was with some suspicion and trepidation that he noticed Soboul working on the same set of boxes within the Archives nationales. But the two were able to devise a *modus vivendi*. Cobb abandoned the *Hébertiste* project, choosing to work instead on the under-researched topic of the the *armées révolutionnaires*, the paramilitary groupings of *sans-culotte* militants deployed for political, religious and economic tasks at the height of the Terror in 1793–4. Soboul meanwhile had discovered the papers of the Paris sections—the forty-eight administrative units into which Paris had been divided in 1790. His research purported to establish the existence of a city-wide popular movement of which previous historians—perhaps too focused on the activities of the national assembly and the Paris Jacobin Club—had been only dimly aware. Soboul’s thesis, published in 1958 as *Les Sans-culottes parisiens en l’an II*, would mark a significant date in French Revolutionary historiography and establish him as the obvious candidate for the prestigious Chair in the History of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne, to which he acceded in 1967.<sup>18</sup>

Soboul and Cobb got on famously together at this stage in their careers, and they also worked alongside the English researcher George Rudé (another Shrewsbury alumnus in fact) who completed a thesis under Lefebvre’s supervision on the impact of Parisian crowds on the main Revolutionary days of action (or *journées*). Soboul went out of his way to ensure that his own network of friends within the French Communist Party (Parti communiste français, or PCF) offered generous hospitality to his archival co-worker. In his memoirs, Cobb later confessed a certain fraudulence in singing for his supper in the constrained guise of a communist fellow traveller. He had never, he later admitted, read Marx.<sup>19</sup> But at the time it must have seemed that blending into surroundings was a pre-requisite of fashioning a ‘second identity’. Cobb fitted quite well into this

<sup>18</sup> For Soboul’s life and work, see C. Mazaauric, *Un Historien en son temps: Albert Soboul* (Nérac, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> T. Heald (ed.), *My Dear Hugh: Letters from Richard Cobb to Hugh Trevor-Roper and Others* (London, 2011), p. 78 (14 Sept. 1979).

new persona, moreover, signing left-wing petitions, authoring letters to *Le Monde* that won him commendation in the pages of *L'Humanité*, the PCF's daily, and by his own admission not only attending the PCF's memorial service for Stalin's death in 1953 at the Vel'd'Hiver but even managing to weep at it.

Yet Cobb's personal closeness to Soboul at this time obscured major differences in their approach. Soboul was self-consciously the standard-bearer of the intellectual orthodoxy on the French Revolution established by Jaurès and carried forward by Mathiez and to some extent by Lefebvre. The 'Jacobino-Marxist interpretation'—as its critics were later to call it—viewed the Revolution as a class conflict between a decaying nobility and rising bourgeoisie. The latter were forced by the pressure of civil and foreign war into enlisting popular support so that the new Revolutionary state could survive and ultimately ensure lasting bourgeois hegemony. Soboul explored the world of the Parisian *sans-culottes* who formed the popular movement which, he held, developed an autonomous identity that in key respects prefigured nineteenth-century socialism. This class-based and teleological model was already starting to come under vigorous attack from the wave of 'revisionism' led by Albert Cobban, Professor of French History at University College London. In due course, Cobb would make clear his serious reservations about Soboul's interpretations. But at this stage, he was just irritated by Cobban's approach, not least because Cobban was by training a historian of ideas and had rarely if ever set foot in a French archive. Symptomatic of where Cobb's sympathies lay at this stage of his career, when Cobban attacked Soboul, he sprang vigorously to Soboul's defence in the correspondence columns of the *Times Literary Supplement*. (By most accounts, Cobban got the better of the skirmish.<sup>20</sup>)

In contrast to Soboul, Cobb always characterised himself as someone who went into history without a strong parti-pris and who allowed the archive to dictate which way to turn. He was much less driven than Soboul, and much more interested in individuals than in movements. He revelled in the glorious chaos of the wild and unbalanced characters he found within the *armées révolutionnaires* that he was studying. He also was attracted to the presence of the *armées* throughout the country during the Terror—he identified more than forty such forces and undertook to cover them all. This took him to archives all over France—putting to good

<sup>20</sup>R. Cobb, 'À Bas la Révolution', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 Jan. 1965, p. 8; plus follow-up exchanges in *ibid.*, 28 Jan., 8, and 15 Feb., 114. See too C. B. A. Behrens, 'Professor Cobban and his critics', *Historical Journal*, 9 (1966), 236–40.

advantage the fact that his marriage to an SNCF official gave him the right to cheap train tickets.<sup>21</sup> This seemingly haphazard method of working allowed him to indulge a deeply held and enduring love of provincial cities such as Lyon, Rouen, Lille as well as more familiar Roubaix. It also brought him into contact with the world of provincial *érudits* and *sociétés savantes* committed to scholarship about the Revolution. This impacted on the way in which he published. Much of his very substantial contribution to publication in the 1950s and early 1960s took the form of gleanings ('glanes') from the archives and other short, pithy pieces that he published in the *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, flagship periodical of the Sorbonne tradition of French Revolutionary scholarship. But he also published copious articles in provincial journals such as the *Annales de Normandie*, the *Revue du Nord*, the *Mémoires de la Société de l'Histoire de Paris et de l'Île de France*, the Lyon-based *Cahiers d'Histoire* and *Présence ardennaise*. In 1955, the Association Marc Bloch de Toulouse had published as a *cahier* his substantial study on the *armées révolutionnaires* in the South of France. And in 1964, Cobb brought together the most substantial of these occasional pieces as a book, *Terreur et subsistances, 1793–5*.<sup>22</sup>

#### IV

By this time, however, Cobb had ended the nine-year phase of his French 'identity' and was resuming an English one. Allegedly on the stern prompting of his supervisor, Georges Lefebvre,<sup>23</sup> he applied for and was awarded a lectureship at the University of Wales in Aberystwyth. He arrived in Wales in 1955, at 38 years of age much older than the average neophyte lecturer. He spent 1959–60 as Simon Senior Research Fellow at Manchester University (where met he met Norman Hampson, then a junior lecturer and probably the British historian of the Revolution that he most admired)

<sup>21</sup>The marriage was dissolved in 1957.

<sup>22</sup>R. Cobb, *Les Armées révolutionnaires des départements du Midi*, Cahier no. 1 de l'Association Marc Bloch de Toulouse (Toulouse, 1956). Cobb also published *L'Armée révolutionnaire parisienne à Lyon et dans la région lyonnaise* as a short book (Lyon, 1952) and *Terreur et subsistances, 1793–5* (Paris, 1964). Cobb's published books in English are easily traced. His journalism is too dispersed to allow a listing—although for the *Times Literary Supplement*, see *The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive*. For his publications on French history in French in these formative years, see the Appendix to this memoir.

<sup>23</sup>Lefebvre's anxiety about Cobb's future emerges in his comments in the *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 28 (1956), p. 100.

before moving to a permanent lectureship at the University of Leeds in 1962. But in 1963 he took up an appointment as Tutorial Fellow at Balliol College, Oxford. He would remain at the university for the rest of his academic career. Promotion to a University Readership in 1969 would be followed by his appointment to the Chair of Modern History, to which was attached a fellowship of Worcester College. He would retire in 1984.

Cobb's *Les Armées révolutionnaires* appeared in print in the early 1960s (albeit it was never awarded a doctorate for reasons to do with French academic bureaucracy and Cobb's own inability to cope with it).<sup>24</sup> The work made an impact on both sides of the Channel. Cobb was viewed in Britain and France as an avant-garde member of a general movement which sought to envision the past not in terms of high politics and the doings of statesmen but rather 'from below', from the bottom up, through the lives and experiences of individuals from the popular classes. The doctoral theses of Soboul (1958) and Cobb (1961–3) formed part of a series of canonical works of this 'history from below' tendency in Franco-British scholarship at this moment, along with George Rudé's *The Crowd in the French Revolution* and Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* (London, 1959, and Manchester, 1959, respectively) and E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1963).<sup>25</sup>

Commentators often highlighted the left-wing sympathies of the 'history from below' grouping—Soboul was a PCF member, while Rudé, Thompson and Hobsbawm had all evolved through the Communist Party Historians' Group (as had the seventeenth-century scholar Christopher Hill). The impression of collectivity was enhanced by the fact that they sometimes wrote collaboratively.<sup>26</sup> Yet it was not long before Cobb was seeking to establish distance between himself and the group. There were personal as well as political reasons for this. Now based in England, and married since 1963 to an English woman, Margaret Cobb, née Goggin,

<sup>24</sup> R. Cobb, *Les Armées révolutionnaires. Instrument de la Terreur dans les départements, avril 1793–Floréal an II*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1961, 1963). The work was only translated into English much later, by Cobb's ex-student Marianne Elliott, as *The Peoples' Armies* (London, 1987).

<sup>25</sup> Although there is no shortage of works on the 'history from below' tradition, an excellent coverage of the way in which the work of Cobb, Soboul, Rudé and Thompson altered views of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries may be found in G. A. Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes: Popular Movements in France and England during the French Revolution* (London, 1968). Williams had been a colleague of Cobb at Aberystwyth.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, E. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London, 1969); G. Rudé and A. Soboul, 'Le maximum des salaires et le 9 thermidor', *Ahrf*, 29 (1957), 1–22; and R. Cobb and G. Rudé, 'Le dernier mouvement populaire de la Révolution à Paris. Les journées de germinal et prairial an III', *Revue historique*, no. 214 (1955), 250–81.

who had been one of his students in Leeds, and with whom he had four children, Cobb began to slacken his hold on his second, French identity. His move to Oxford may have accelerated and certainly enhanced this trajectory.

Initially, Cobb had found the return to Britain very painful. Although he often spoke with real affection of Aberystwyth, its position 'at the end of the (railway) line' in very rural mid-Wales made it a new and trying circumstance. He records making a weekly trip to the railway station just to reassure himself that the lifeline to the world he knew was still intact. Once at Balliol, however, Cobb was more in his element and indeed he transmuted almost at once into a very Oxford institution, on whom tall tales and outrageous anecdotes stuck like flypaper. Finding himself on the podium behind the speaker at a tedious lecture given by a visiting dignitary, Cobb removed his own false teeth and manipulated them in time to the unsuspecting speaker's rhythms and cadences. Undergraduates—these were pre-Teaching Quality Assessment days—told of the pint of beer that Cobb placed on the podium each time he lectured and of tutorials spent with him variously asleep, drunk, talking for hours about Georges Simenon and other favoured French novelists, or going down on all fours and barking like a dog. His teaching life was interspersed with wild and noisy carousing, scandalous behaviour and perpetual spats with college and university authorities and with pub landlords. Cobb thrived on hard work even when suffering hang-overs, and his ability to juggle so consummately an irreverence towards authority, drinking exploits and full-on dedication as a teacher and as a scholar with an international reputation was very much the stuff of student legend.

Cobb's intellectual reputation in England had also begun to grow along the academic grapevine as a result of the sparkling, brilliantly written and occasionally outspokenly rude reviews of books in French history that from around 1960 he began to contribute to newspapers and magazines. Most of these, however, were for the *Times Literary Supplement* (*TLS*), for which he wrote nearly a hundred book reviews between 1961 and 1996.<sup>27</sup> The *TLS*, however, observed rules of anonymity for its reviewers until 1974. Only latterly, then, did he break cover. On election to the British Academy in 1967, his publications were solidly francophone. Extraordinarily, he was able to boast only one academic research article in his mother tongue at that time, namely, 'The revolutionary mentality in

<sup>27</sup> See above, n. 22.

France', which had appeared in *History* in 1957.<sup>28</sup> But in 1969 he published *A Second Identity*, a collection of largely *TLS* pieces, with a long introduction, 'Experiences of an Anglo-French historian', which described his acquaintance with France back to 1935. He never wrote a book directly in French again (though a number were translated). By the time of his retirement in 1984, he could number eleven books in English—and another three appeared before his death in 1996, with a further volume appearing posthumously.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the autobiographical sketch in the introduction to his *A Second Identity* inaugurated a commitment to a genre that he would continue throughout his life, particularly after his retirement.

This shift in Cobb's principal mode of expression was accompanied by a political drift away from the old PCF days in Paris. In *A Second Identity* in 1969, he still recalled the experience of 'Fraternity and Hope' in the days of the Popular Front; but such left-wing grace-notes became fewer and fewer in his publications. At Balliol, he railed at the austere elitism of ex-Communist Master, Christopher Hill, and mischievously prided himself on being 'one of the leading reactionaries on pretty well every issue'.<sup>30</sup> His letters to Hugh Trevor Roper (Lord Dacre from 1979), published in 2011 are full of rancorous asides directed at left-wing colleagues. Overall, this correspondence with Dacre sadly reveals the unmistakable sound of sucking up.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps Cobb was reverting to type, recovering the 'first' identity rejected in 1935. And it is certainly true that

<sup>28</sup>The other works in English in the period were a literature review (R. Cobb, 'The era of the French Revolution: some comments on opportunities for research and writing', *Journal of Modern History*, 30 (1958), 118–30) and an obituary of Lefebvre—R. Cobb, 'Georges Lefebvre', *Past & Present*, 18 (1960), 52–67—reprinted in Cobb, *A Second Identity*.

<sup>29</sup>*The End of the Line* was completed days before his death and published in 1997

<sup>30</sup>Heald, *My Dear Hugh*, p. 29.

<sup>31</sup>My sense is that the social attitudes freely expressed in the correspondence with Dacre were not much reproduced in Cobb's correspondence with myself, Norman Hampson and other colleagues in the French revolutionary field. The most reactionary essay Cobb ever wrote about the French Revolution (a bravura performance in fact) was in Trevor-Roper's Festschrift: R. Cobb, 'Thermidor, or the retreat from fantasy', in H. Lloyd-Jones, V. Pearl and B. Worden (eds.), *History and Imagination: Essays in Honour of H. R. Trevor-Roper* (London, 1981), pp. 272–95. Cobb claimed not to remember Trevor-Roper from their undergraduate days. Trevor-Roper, other senior colleagues at Oxford, and Marxist medievalist Rodney Hilton played a key role in bringing Cobb back into the fold of the British Academy after his 'August Folly' (as he called it) of resigning from the body in August 1980 over the so-called 'Blunt Affair'. Cobb was following the lead of A. J. P. Taylor, who felt that the Academy had forced Blunt's hand to resign because of his recently revealed activities as a Russian spy. Taylor was never readmitted to the Academy. See K. Burk, *Trouble-Maker. The Life and History of A. J. P. Taylor* (London, 2002), pp. 339–42; Heald, *My Dear Hugh*, pp. 82–3.

by the account he subsequently gave of it, his left-wing sympathies were not much more than a veneer. More plausibly, perhaps, he was reasserting in England a broader penchant for adopting the prevalent ambiance of his surroundings. It is probably more accurate to describe Cobb as a man of several, and not just two, identities. The cultivation of outrageousness and the performance of eccentricity worked well within the relatively stable environment of Oxford college life.

The year 1974 found Cobb pronouncing, in his Raleigh Lecture to the British Academy, that ‘the French Revolution is almost extinct as a research subject in France’.<sup>32</sup> The obituary notice was more than a little premature, of course, and the main point of the talk in fact was to highlight contrastively the very lively state of scholarship on the French Revolution in British universities, not least in Oxford, where his own charismatic presence had attracted large numbers of postgraduate students to work under his supervision. ‘Supervision’ may be too strong a word in fact, as Cobb rarely offered the kind of close mentoring of written work now associated with doctoral training, and he would certainly have regarded with contempt the reduction since his day of the period allowed for thesis completion to three or four years. Cobb’s strongest suit as regards his students was inspiration: he wanted them to get across the Channel as fast as possible, to stay there, dug into the archives, for as long as they could, and to develop as swiftly as they might be able that ‘second identity’ that he boasted as ‘an Anglo-French historian’. He recorded his pleasure at being told in a provincial archive, that ‘un des vôtres est passé par ici; il est devenu excellent joueur aux boules’.<sup>33</sup> *Pétanque* was not a substitute for research; but a guarantee that research would be undertaken in the right spirit. Cobb’s admiration for one particular scholar had been irreparably damaged when he learnt that he had only ever been to the Archives Nationales once, sat in the *salle de lecture* for a single morning—and found the experience so alienating and intimidating that he ran back to London and never repeated the experience. This armchair attitude was precisely what Cobb most detested in British historiography of the Revolution, and what he most wanted to change. In the training and career of a couple of dozen graduate students, most of whom found posts within the British university system, he put this ‘immersive’ approach into practice.

<sup>32</sup>R. Cobb, ‘Modern French history in Britain (Raleigh Lecture on History), Read 5 June 1974’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 60 (1975), 278.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 292.

## V

The ‘obituary’ that Cobb accorded the academic study of the French Revolution within France in his Raleigh Lecture was of course not serious. But the remark did signal the fact that Cobb was less and less in tune with trends in French historiography—and it also highlighted a severe crisis taking place in French Revolutionary historiography. Despite his earlier defence of Soboul against Alfred Cobban’s revisionist critique, Cobb now turned decisively against his friend’s interpretation of the popular moment in the Revolution. In *The Police and the People: French Popular Protest 1789–1820* (1970), Cobb provided a devastating dissection of Soboul’s whole approach that he saw as overly schematic and too little attuned to the quirks and idiosyncrasies of the miscellaneous group of individualistic *sans-culottes* who made up the questionable category of the ‘popular movement’. What was surprising about the *sans-culottes* was not that they had been crushed as a movement in the latter stages of the Terror but that they had ever existed at all. They owed everything to a particular concatenation of circumstances in 1793, when the Revolutionary state was temporarily off balance; and they disappeared as inevitably and as swiftly as those circumstances vanished. They were a passing fancy, not a way station on the road leading towards *les lendemains qui chantent*.<sup>34</sup>

As I have suggested, Cobb had always wished to put distance between himself and the left-wing members of the ‘history from below’ group. The critique of Soboul marked a significant cooling in the relations between the two men. In 1972, a section of Cobb’s *Reactions to the French Revolution* was entitled ‘The irrelevance of the revolution’ and it argued powerfully how little the Revolution had mattered to the daily routines of the poorer sections of French society. Soboul riposted in 1974, going into print to suggest that Cobb could not really be considered a true disciple of George Lefebvre. Following Soboul’s death in 1982, Cobb’s memoir on their relationship—incidentally containing rather more information about the man than Soboul’s friends and family may have wished to see in the public domain—struck a wistful note for a lost friendship.<sup>35</sup>

Wittingly or not, Cobb’s critique of Soboul formed part of a revisionist movement within Anglo-American scholarship on the Revolution

<sup>34</sup> R. Cobb, *The Police and the People. French Popular Protest 1789–1820* (Oxford, 1970).

<sup>35</sup> Cobb, ‘The irrelevance of the revolution’, *Reactions to the French Revolution*, p. 163; Lyons, ‘Cobb and the historians’, p. 48; R. Cobb, ‘Albert Marius Soboul. A tribute’, in Cobb, *People and Places* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 46–92.

which by the time that Cobb retired was close to triumph. In the vanguard of US scholarship in fact was the French historian, François Furet, co-located between Paris and Chicago. Furet, along most notably with Keith Baker (a Cobban student), powerfully promoted an intellectual history approach to the Revolution which was at the antipodes of what Cobb had always preached. Furet was also a link to the *Annales* school, for which Cobb reserved some of his sharpest barbs: his article ‘Nous des Annales’, which reviewed a history of the Revolution by Furet and Denis Richet, was an uproarious send-up of academic pomposity and the deployment of obscure technocratic jargon (‘the capacity to state a silly idea sillily’).<sup>36</sup> Cobb also realised that the growing influence of the *Annales* was affecting engaged interest in the history of the Revolution. Ensconced within the academic fortress of the CNRS, the protagonists of the *Annales* school followed Fernand Braudel’s emphasis on the *longue durée* and on *l’histoire sérielle*, and they thus found an event-heavy phenomenon like the French Revolution difficult to deal with conceptually and methodologically. Many of the brightest young minds were more attracted to the Braudelian empire than to the Revolutionary bandwagon. Even before the collapse of Soviet and East European communism from the late 1980s left Marxist interpretations high and dry, historians of the Revolution in France were on the defensive and feeling left behind by the tides of history. Notwithstanding even the 1989 Bicentenary, public interest in the Revolution was declining.

In this very conflicted historiographical landscape, Cobb preferred to retire far away from the polemical fray. He sniped with amusing acidity at some of trends, but his divergence from Soboul made his relations with many other French historians problematic. His visits to French archives, moreover, were fewer and fewer, especially from the late 1970s. His *Armées révolutionnaires* had focused on the roots of popular political militancy but he was now increasingly drawn to groups too poor or too marginal to have experienced any sort of political *prise de conscience*: paupers, beggars, vagrants, criminals, prostitutes and the like. His publications were now invariably essayish in character. His slim Wolfson prize-winning *Death in Paris* (1978) reflected how far his approach had come. It focused in quasi-ethnographic detail on the material culture (buttons, shoe-buckles, tattered clothing, discarded headgear, etc) left by Parisian suicides in the late 1790s, particularly those drowned in the Seine.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup>R. Cobb, ‘Nous des Annales’, in Cobb, *A Second Identity*, p. 77.

<sup>37</sup>The trajectory can be followed from *The Police and the People* (1970), *Reactions to the French*

The impress of Cobb's 'second identity' never left his prose style, but in his later years he was finding himself less and less at home in a France which was changing too fast for comfort—or for Cobbian reassurance. The advent of De Gaulle in 1958 was not to his taste, and he detested the technocratic trends within French society which the Fifth Republic unleashed. He targeted much anger at the modernisation of the city of Paris in the 1950s and 1960s, which bade to erase from the central arrondissements the ambiance that had seduced him in the 1930s. He joined with his friend the demographic and social historian Louis Chevalier in decrying 'the assassination of Paris'.<sup>38</sup> Yet if Cobb hated the Fifth Republic, he hated even more the most serious effort to displace it, namely, the 'May Events' of 1968. Cobb was appalled to discover that student rebels targetted not only the reactionary right but also and maybe even more so the 'old' (communist) left as well. The events distanced Cobb altogether from any form of leftism. The approving historian of the wildest *sans-culotterie* in the 1790s thus came down like a brick on their student successors in the late 1960s. Indeed, he recognised no genealogy between 'his' *sans-culottes*, alongside whom he claimed to have lived since the 1930s, and these spoiled bourgeois *filis à papa* and *apprentis-Saint-Justs*, as he saw them.<sup>39</sup> The true descendants of the Revolution's *sans-culottes* were the denizens of the *Paris populaire* who were being heedlessly driven out of the city by the Fifth Republic's modernisers. In the 1930s, at the time of Cobb's arrival in Paris, one could still recognise the basic lineaments of the Revolutionary city of the 1790s. 'A great deal of Paris eighteenth-century history', he maintained, '... can be walked, seen, and above all heard, in small restaurants, on the platform at the back of a bus, in cafés, on the park bench.'<sup>40</sup> Cobb's boulevard peregrinations were not just rituals of reassurance developed in pre-war Paris but a fundamental research technique for understanding the texture of the built environment,

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*Revolution* (London, 1972), *Paris and its Provinces, 1792–1802* (London, 1975), *A Sense of Place* (London, 1975: especially the section, 'A view from the street: seduction and pregnancy in revolutionary Lyon', pp. 79–135), through to *Death in Paris: the Records of the Basse-Geôle de la Seine, October 1795–September 1801, Vendémiaire Year IV–Fructidor Year IX* (Oxford, 1978).

<sup>38</sup> R. Cobb, 'The assassination of Paris', in Cobb, *People and Places*, pp. 187–99. The elegiac note was soundly struck in *The Streets of Paris* (London, 1980), which contained photographs of a vanishing Paris by Nicholas Breach and Introduction and Text by Cobb. Cobb wrote the Avant-propos to the 1978 edition of Chevalier's *Classes laborieuses, classes dangereuses à Paris au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1978), lectured at the Collège de France in Paris at Chevalier's invitation, and frequently expressed support for Chevalier's ideas on the modernisation of Paris, evident in his *L'Assassinat de Paris* (Paris, 1977).

<sup>39</sup> See especially Cobb, *Something to Hold Onto*, 'Introduction', pp. 1–3.

<sup>40</sup> Cobb, *A Second Identity*, pp. 19–20.

a tribute to the archive of the foot.<sup>41</sup> Paris had changed, was changing. Cobb claimed to hate Baudelaire, but the spirit of his later writings on the city he loved had been exactly captured by the poet:

Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville  
Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d'un mortel).<sup>42</sup>

## VI

Cobb claimed never to have read a page of Marx, and produced something of a storm in a literary teacup when, as chair of the jury for the 1984 Booker Prize for Fiction, he declared he had never read Proust either. Doubtless and characteristically said so as to tease and annoy, this does, however, seem to be true—testimony perhaps to the extent to which Cobb in his French ‘phase’ fell in with the PCF’s critique of Proust for falling short of the canons of socialist realism. This neglect was regrettable, for memory was a key for unlocking Cobb’s oeuvre as much as Proust’s. Moreover, Cobb had an exceptional literary culture for a historian. All his life he voraciously consumed French (and English) novels and memoirs. An early taste for Maupassant, and then personal acquaintance with Maxence van der Meersch, the Flemish Goncourt-winning novelist, much of whose work was set in the department of the Nord, acted as stimuli too. He also derived inspiration from his countless sojourns in departmental cities to consult archives relating to his *Armées révolutionnaires* book. The breadth of his reading emerges particularly strongly from his *Promenades* (1980), which explores the works of a wide array of regional novelists (the index references nearly 200 works by over 100 authors sampled).<sup>43</sup> He specialised less in the literary great and good than in authors of local interest: thus besides Raymond Queneau, for his novels set in Paris and also Le Havre, and Georges Simenon (or rather his Inspector Maigret) for Paris, we also encounter Blaise Cendrars (for Marseille), Marcel Pagnol (for Provence), Hervé Bazin (for the Craonnais), Marc Bernard (for Nîmes), Eugène Dabit (for the Parisian suburbs) and many others. If these novelists allowed Cobb to hone that sense of place that is

<sup>41</sup>The phrase is Simon Schama’s.

<sup>42</sup>Baudelaire, ‘Le Cygne’.

<sup>43</sup>R. Cobb, *Promenades. A Historian’s Appreciation of Modern French Literature* (Oxford, 1980). Cobb’s range is also evident in the wide array of works on French history and culture that he reviewed, many of which were published in his books of essays. For Queneau, see also Cobb’s short pamphlet, *Raymond Queneau. The Zaharoff Lecture for 1976* (Oxford, 1976).

so important in his work, one notes that with few exceptions his favourite novelists focused on provincial cities rather than regions. Indeed, he was as distrustful of peasants as any revolutionary *commissaire aux accaparements*, and idiosyncratically equated regional folklore with Vichyite fascism. Probably the only sentiment he shared with Marx was his view of ‘the idiocy of rural life’.

Although there is a tendency to associate Cobb’s name particularly with the French capital, in fact by his own admission his history ‘was not French history, but French provincial history: Lyonnais history, Norman history, Lille history, Paris history’.<sup>44</sup> The inclusion of Paris in this listing is revealing: Cobb saw the city not through the eyes of the elites but like a ‘paysan de Paris’ (to cite Louis Aragon’s famous work, evoked in the *Promenades*), from the perspectives of its humbler inhabitants. Significantly, most of Cobb’s students who worked on the French Revolution found themselves exploring archives located in provincial cities. Cobb himself endlessly pushed the virtues of Lille, though most of his students headed for the sun (Nîmes, Marseille, Lyon, Bordeaux, Toulouse, Rodez, Montpellier, etc). His Oxford research seminar was never as vital and as lively as in the late 1960s and early 1970s when his students, back from their provincial research visits, delivered their findings, which endorsed the underlying philosophy evident in *Les Armées révolutionnaires*. Theirs was work that couldn’t possibly be done from an armchair in a university library or an Oxbridge common room—or even from Paris’s national archives. The national story of the Revolution could simply not be told from Paris. Cobb’s work stood for the ‘provincialising’ of French national history.<sup>45</sup>

While Cobb’s *Armées révolutionnaires* stressed the need to diversify and provincialise the revolutionary narrative, the book has particular strengths in three other areas. First, it problematised the origins and nature of popular political engagement. Cobb marked his distance from the more economic models of Soboul and Rudé, and highlighted both the variety but also sometimes the perversity of the political choices made by individuals. He was particularly interested in how narrow the line was that divided political choices in favour of the revolution from opting for

<sup>44</sup> Cobb, *A Second Identity*, p. 50.

<sup>45</sup> As was fitting for such an arch-individualist, although he had many students, there was emphatically no ‘Cobb School’. See Lewis and Lucas, *Beyond the Terror*, Preface, p. xi.

counter-revolution. This was to be a theme that he followed up in subsequent work on the White Terror.<sup>46</sup>

Cobb's emphasis on the diversity of the sources of popular political engagement, and the importance of understanding individual motivations and underlying psychology, eroded confidence in Soboul and Rudé's neater categorisations. His approach to political choices also allowed him to explore in a novel and exciting way the roots of popular impiety, a second key theme within his book. It was obvious that the late eighteenth century played a massively significant role in laying down the basis of nineteenth-century anti-clericalism. But the respective roles of the Enlightenment and the different phases of the Revolution were unclear, as was the geographical dimension to the question. Cobb's research, which explored how the iconoclastic, 'dechristianising' activities of the *armées révolutionnaires* fared in different localities (through activities such as removal of religious images and bells, persecution of the clergy, forced abdication and marriage of priests) was pathbreaking. Although he himself did not follow up on this important dimension of his work, it reinvigorated the sociology of religion practised by scholars working in the lineage of Gabriel Le Bras, and contributed to further work by Michel Vovelle, Tim Tackett and others.<sup>47</sup>

The third subfield which Cobb's *Armées révolutionnaires* irrigated was the question of popular food supply. He was the first to point out and to demonstrate the extent to which *le problème des subsistances* was at the heart of government policy, especially during the Terror, in which the strategy of Revolutionary Government revolved around mobilising popular support for the war effort. Soboul and Rudé—and before them Georges Lefebvre and the economic historian Ernest Labrousse—had spotted the extent to which the price of grain was a barometer of popular discontent and protest, but provided analyses that Cobb found mechanistic and

<sup>46</sup>For White Terror and the Thermidorian reaction, see especially Cobb, *The Police and the People*, and Cobb, *Reactions*. The thinness of the division between political opposites was also to be the central theme of his *French and Germans, Germans and French. A Personal Interpretation of France under Two Occupations, 1914–18/1940–4* (Hanover, NH, and London, 1983), a fascinating comparative study of resistance and collaboration during the two German occupations of French territory in 1914–18 and 1940–4. This striking work draws on no archival material but on personal experience of France and the occupied areas, plus very wide secondary reading.

<sup>47</sup>B. Plongeron, *Conscience religieuse en Révolution. Regards sur l'historiographie religieuse de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1969); M. Vovelle, *Religion et révolution. La déchristianisation de l'an II* (Paris, 1976), id., *La Révolution contre l'église: de la raison à l'être suprême* (Brussels, 1988); T. Tackett, *Religion, Revolution and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-century France. The Ecclesiastical Oath of 1791* (Princeton, NJ, 1986).

behaviouristic. None of them explored the full implications of the problem, not just in the Terror but also in its aftermath—when the Thermidorian deregulation of the economy brought intense hardship to the popular classes. And none explored with Cobb's finesse and humanity the psychological ramifications of *la peur du lendemain*—fear of impending dearth. Some of his finest writing both in French (notably the essays in *Terreur et subsistances*) and in English (in the extraordinary third section of *The Police and the People*) was devoted to this theme. It inspired the work of Olwen Hufton and many others on late eighteenth-century poverty, and set the research agenda for Cobb's own work in the 1970s and 1980s on the impact of revolution and counter-revolution on marginal groups within French society.<sup>48</sup> Although he often revelled in the rocambolesque exploits of bandits, criminals, vagrants and prostitutes—it was famously said that Cobb was the man who put the pimp into the Scarlet Pimpernel—this did not preclude him from chronicling, with moving detail, the deprived and often tragic lives of the humblest within society.

Musing, in the Introduction to *The Police and the People*, on how his work might be classified, Cobb stated he felt 'the strongest pull' towards the *Histoire des mentalités* collection edited by *Annaliste* Robert Mandrou.<sup>49</sup> And indeed, popular attitudes towards politics, religion and subsistence in the Revolutionary decade did add up to a kind of popular Revolutionary *mentalité*—a framework of beliefs, that is, rather than a stable set of political ideas. Yet this *mentalité* was less an explanatory device than an approximating marker of complex popular attitudes. Those attitudes had to be understood, moreover, as fragile as well as complex. They might easily morph into a counter-revolutionary *mentalité*—or into simple indifference and apathy. They had also to be understood in the *durée*—the Terror was only a snapshot, and to have a fully rounded picture of popular militancy one needed to cover at least from the 1780s to 1820, and probably even longer than that. As we have noted, Cobb felt he was still in touch with a *mentalité sans-culotte* in Paris from the 1930s to the 1960s.

After the success of Cobb's *A Second Identity* and *The Police and the People*, and given the *succès d'estime* of his *Armées révolutionnaires*, one might have expected him to rise above the detail and to provide a new

<sup>48</sup>O. Hufton, *The Poor in Eighteenth-Century France, 1750–89* (Oxford, 1974); A. Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor* (Oxford, 1981); and for a comparison of Cobb and Hufton, see C. Jones, 'Olwen Hufton's "Poor", Richard Cobb's "People" and notions of the *longue durée* in French revolutionary historiography', *Past & Present Supplement*, 1 (2006), 178–203.

<sup>49</sup>Cobb, *The Police and the People*, p. xv.

overall interpretation of the French Revolution that was grounded in the exciting perspectives his work had stimulated. But this would be not to know the man. The Cobb trademark always privileged chaos over order, diversity over unity, complexity over simplicity, disaggregation over synthesis, stereoscopy over monoscopy, aberrance over normativity and the exception, massively, over the rule. This was Cobb's way—and the latter part of his career was to prove more and more Cobbian.

## VII

Almost without exception, the great historians of the French revolution have produced a work of synthesis that offers a new and distinctive vision of this world-historical event. In this, Cobb is—as always—the exception. It may seem a poor dividend for a lifetime of hard work and copious publication merely to have stressed the Revolution's diversity. Others have done the same. The move away from armchair analysis to close engagement with the archives *sur place*? That probably would have happened too. Even the immersion technique seems less engaging for emerging scholars these days, with cheap airfares and the mass use of cameras in archives.

Yet if Cobb is characteristically an exception to the rule, he is a very great one. The richness of his historical imagination is *sans pareil* when set against any historian of the Revolution in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: indeed, it is much more in the register of Carlyle, Dickens and Michelet than, say, Lefebvre, or Soboul, Alfred Cobban or William Doyle. It is an imagination that encompasses a perennial awareness of the reassuring *tempos* and banal rituals of daily life; a sense of calibrations of rank and status, especially as expressed through material culture; a keen alertness to *ambiance*—that 'sense of place' that Cobb used as title for one of his books; and a penetrating eye for character and humanity—an eye only spasmodically dewy with nostalgia and more often hard-eyed and observant. These characteristics of his approach were as evident in his work on the French revolution and French history generally as in his later work on his English childhood. His sensibility thus provided a bridge that crossed easily between the two halves of his bifurcated life—indeed, the plural 'identities' that he cherished through to the very end of his life.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> For Cobb's performance of multiple identities, see S. Skinner, 'Tea with Medea', *London Review of Books*, 34 (19 July 2012).

Cobb produced his effects through description rather than analysis. The sparse notations he provides as to methodology—don't be boring, write agreeably and clearly, tell a story, treat documents with humility and respect, listen to the archive and don't dictate to it—are meagre in the extreme as regards historical analysis. Some of his advice, moreover, seems close to taking history into the terrain of fiction: he felt the historian should learn the tricks of the mortician's trade: 'a touch of rouge here, a pencil stroke there, a little cotton wool in the cheeks to make the operation more convincing'.<sup>51</sup> Like Carlyle, Dickens and Michelet, he was thus less an analyst than a resurrectionist.<sup>52</sup> We read him, like them, for their ability to transport us imaginatively to another realm. Expressed in his extraordinary, inimitable and seductively evocative style, his writings bring the past to life in a way that very few historians of any genre or period have been able to manage. As long as the history of the Revolution—indeed history *tout court*—attracts historians who value the imagination in understanding the past, Richard Cobb's place in the historiographical pantheon is assured.

Richard Cobb died on 15 January 1996.

COLIN JONES

*Fellow of the Academy*

*Note.* See p. 89. I record my thanks to Cesare Cuttica, Alan Forrest, Julien Louvrier and Michael Sonenscher.

## Appendix: Richard Cobb's Publications in French, 1949–72

The list below contains Richard Cobb's publications in French on history, and particularly French revolutionary history. He published some journalism in France especially in the 1940s and 1950s which it has not been possible to trace.

<sup>51</sup> Cobb, *A Second Identity*, p. 17.

<sup>52</sup> N. Ascherson, 'Cushy numbers', *London Review of Books*, 5 (3 Nov. 1983), evokes the fact that Cobb's history books 'are like cakes with succulent raisons of fragmentary novel baked into them'. For the Carlylean-Dickensian narrative of the French Revolution, see Jones, 'Olwen Hufton's "Poor"', 201–3; and for the role of second identities within them, C. Jones, 'Tales of two cities', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 20 (2010), 1–26.

From Cobb's return to England in 1955, he began publishing book reviews in English in the British press. His contributions to the *Times Literary Supplement*—which were anonymous until 1974—may be consulted in the *Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, 1902–2005* <<http://gale.cengage.co.uk/tls-historical-archive-19022005.aspx>>, accessed 1 May 2015. A number of these reviews were brought together in Cobb's *A Second Identity*, published in 1969. Many other works in English followed, including collections of reviews and journal articles, even as his publications in French declined very rapidly and disappeared completely.

For the period 1949–69, the only works Cobb did not publish in French were:

'The revolutionary mentality in France', *History*, 42 (1957), 181–6

'The era of the French Revolution: some comments on opportunities for research and writing', *Journal of Modern History*, 30 (1958), 118–30

'Georges Lefebvre', *Past & Present*, 18 (1960), 52–67

'Robespierre und der general Boulanger: Nationalgarde und Revolutionsarmee', in W. Markov (ed.) *Maximilien Robespierre, 1758–94* (Berlin, 1958), 255–87

Eleven of Cobb's essays in French were published in his book *Terreur et subsistances, 1793–5* (Paris, 1964), which also included one additional unpublished article. These items are listed below and prefixed by the symbol [TS]. A good number of Cobb's French-language publications took the form of 'glanes' ('gleanings')—extracts of documents from the archives, usually with a short introduction and comment. These are included below. *AHRF* is used throughout to designate the *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, which contains over half of Cobb's output over this period.

The list has been composed by using the *Bibliographie annuelle de l'histoire de France*, from 1945 onwards, and has also drawn on Cobb's own writing (which is not always reliable on details), and on the footnotes and bibliographies of a number of other revolutionary scholars.

1949

*AHRF*, 21:

'Un témoignage sur les massacres des Carmes: E. F. Tanche', 134–40

1950

*AHRF*, 22:

'L'armée révolutionnaire dans le district de Pontoise', 193–220

'Note sur Guillaume Bouland, de la section du Finistère', 152–5

## GLANES

'Thuriot et Robespierre', 64–5

'Une lettre de Hoche à Robespierre', 65

'Un aspect de l'esprit sans-culotte: le club de l'Évêché et le mariage de Chabot', 260–2

1951

*AHRF*, 23:

'Une lettre inédite de Robespierre', 1–2

'L'arrestation de Boulland en messidor an II', 82–4

'Trois témoignages sur les massacres de Septembre', 171–5

'Les impressions d'un prisonnier français en Angleterre (août-décembre 1793)', 176–7

'Un camarade de collègue et un domestique de Saint-Just', 289–93

GLANE:

'L'arrestation du frère d'André Dumont', 410–11

*Revue du Nord*:

'L'armée révolutionnaire parisienne dans le département de l'Aisne' (first part), no. 132, 241–52

1952

*L'Armée révolutionnaire parisienne à Lyon et dans la région lyonnaise* (Lyon)

*AHRF*, 25:

GLANES:

'La rapidité des courriers des Comités de gouvernement', 90

'Tatouage réputé contre-révolutionnaire', 90–1

'Couthon à l'Hôtel de Ville, le 9 Thermidor', 323–4

'Une calomnie contre Robespierre', 511

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