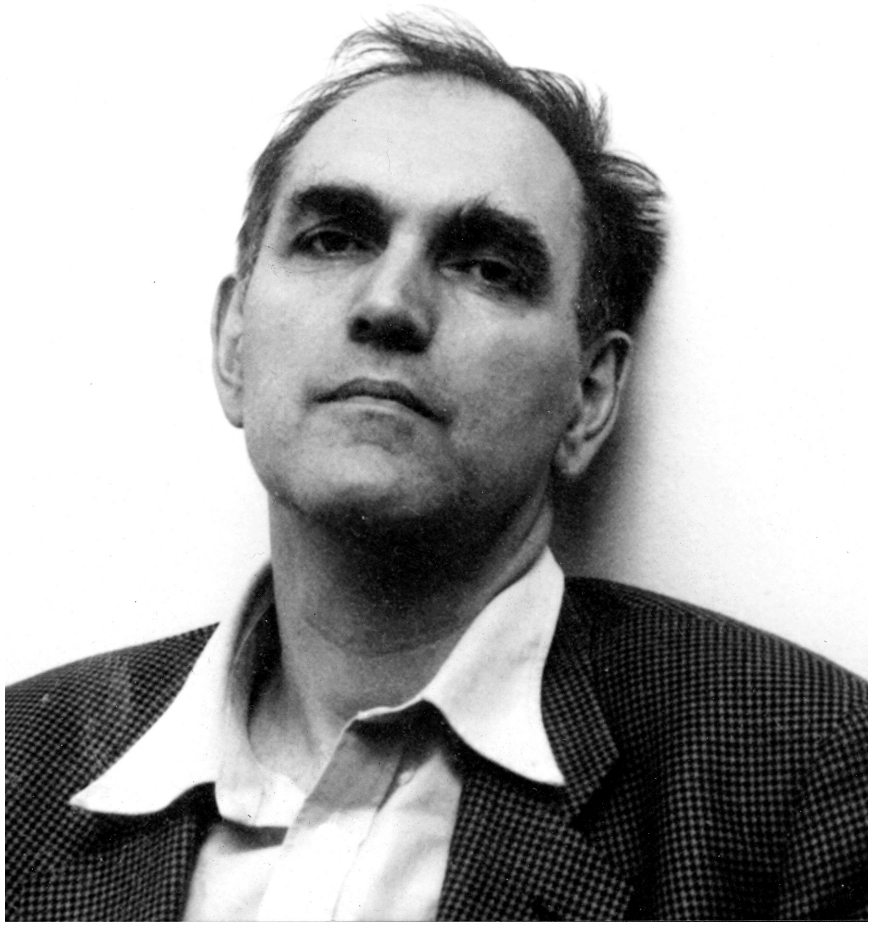

BEN PIMLOTT

Benjamin John Pimlott
1945–2004

BEN PIMLOTT WAS BORN ON 4 July 1945, the day before Britain swung strongly Labour in the general election which propelled the Attlee government to power, an administration of which he was to become a deft and sensitive chronicler. In fact, Ben's writings were to provide one of the most significant scholarly spinal cords of post-war contemporary British history from Attlee to Blair. The politics of the centre Left were central to both his scholarship, his personal convictions and his renown as a public intellectual. Yet he was never tainted by dogma or ideology and respect for him and his works straddled the political divides. Very tall, arresting, quietly spoken, courteous, attractive to women and intellectually fastidious, he dominated—but never domineered—his special scholarly patch and, in the 1980s and 1990s, raised the art of political biography to new heights. His early death in 2004, aged 58, left a very considerable gap in both the country's intellectual and public life.

Ben's formation was thoroughly Fabian. His father, John Pimlott, was an open scholarship boy from a west country grammar school to Oxford at a time when such an event was a rare example of a meritocrat rising. As Ben recounted in an affectionate memoir of his father, he came third in the formidable examination for the administrative class of the Civil Service in 1932 and rose fast in the Home Office. By 1937 he was an assistant private secretary to the Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare. Pimlott senior's glory years were as principal private secretary to Herbert Morrison, the wartime Home Secretary and Minister for Home Security. Morrison came to depend greatly on him and Pimlott stayed with him in the Lord President's Office following Labour's victory from which

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considerable swathes of the economic, industrial and social reconstruction of the UK were coordinated.

Improving the social condition of the country was Pimlott senior's motivation from his time at Toynbee Hall in East London (a history of which he published in 1935) right through until his last Whitehall posts in the Department of Education and Science before his early death in 1969. For example, John Pimlott played a pivotal role in the mid-sixties creation of the polytechnics (he chose the name to describe the new breed) in which he firmly believed as an instrument for bringing higher education to those whom the universities could not, or would not, reach. Pimlott senior was also the moving spirit behind the creation of the Police College at Bramshill. Ben's high public service charge and thoroughly Fabian instincts about the indispensability of rational, incremental social change were squarely in his father's tradition.

Pimlott senior was too intellectually curious a man to be satisfied with his weekday Whitehall life. The Pimlott household was not merely bookish, it was book producing too. Before the war, J. A. R. Pimlott (as his reading public came to know him) had completed much of the work for his first piece of social history, *The Englishman's Holiday*, which was finally published in 1947. This was followed by the beautifully crafted *The Englishman's Christmas* written in the sixties but only published, thanks to Ben's efforts, in 1977. Ben's literary heritage from his father was not confined to Britain or to social history. In 1947–8, supported by a Commonwealth Fund Fellowship, John Pimlott took his American wife, Ellen, and young family (Ben had two sisters, Anne and Jane) to the United States to study how the Federal Government, from the New Deal on, had made use of public relations as an instrument of policy and persuasion. Morrison was the most media-sensitive member of Attlee's Cabinet and it was a subject on which Ben and his wife, Jean Seaton, were to write in the 1980s. John Pimlott's *Public Relations and American Democracy* was published in 1951 and aroused considerable interest in the United States. Ben, in fact, had dual US/UK citizenship and only relinquished it when he received a letter, during the Vietnam War, summoning him for the draft.

Ben's 'biographical note' at the end of *The Englishman's Christmas* shows how much he savoured his childhood inheritance and the legacy of his tall, thoughtful public servant/private author father and the family home that had nurtured him and his sisters. Among its many bequests to him were a lifelong love of poetry, a fluent pen and a degree of literary precocity. Ben produced his first book at the remarkably young age of 18

when he collaborated with a small group of his fellow sixth-formers at Marlborough to write an institutional, social and political history of the college. In many ways, it was an affectionate collection of essays as its slightly over-rhetorical concluding paragraph showed.

> Only when his last term begins does he [the Marlburian] have the time or aloofness to sit back and examine his society critically; if his opinions are cold, much can be put down to the fact that he is a schoolboy now by definition only. His outlook is no longer that of one intricately bound up, unquestioningly, in the security of a stable, if somewhat isolated society. Perhaps, as he adjusts his Old Marlburian tie with apprehensive, excited fingers, he will realise this. Even if he does not, even if all he is outwardly grateful for is his impending freedom from petty restrictions, he has much he can be thankful for. For it was at Marlborough that the boy became a man.

As his co-author and lifelong friend, James Curran, recalled at Ben's funeral in St Mary-le-Strand on 23 April 2004, their headmaster, John Dancy (widely regarded as among the most progressive of the public school breed in the early 1960s) summoned them when *Marlborough* was published in 1963. He told them it was just the kind of book, should it fall into his hands, to provide aid and comfort to a Labour MP who might use it to frame questions in the House of Commons. Whereupon Ben replied that nothing would bring him more pleasure if the volume had precisely that effect. Dancy took particular offence at the book's survey of Marlburian sexual attitudes. In the book, Ben and James wrote: 'One topic of conversation, however, has not been mentioned. Samuel Johnson is supposed to have said that wherever two Englishmen meet they talk of the weather. It would probably be true to say that wherever two Marlburians, who know each other fairly well, meet they talk of sex.'

Part of the sociological survey which the future professors Pimlott and Curran had undertaken for the book, showed that in February 1962 (when Harold Macmillan was Prime Minister, Hugh Gaitskell led the Labour Party and Jo Grimond the Liberals), the voting intentions among the members of the college were Conservative 82 per cent, Liberal 10 per cent, Labour 4 per cent with a further 4 per cent saying they would not vote. Ben's interest in the Attlee governments was no doubt responsible for the questionnaire including 'Who won the 1945 general election?' The response? 'Some 32 per cent did not know. Of these, a third guessed it was the Conservatives, and there were two very emphatic Liberals.' What Ben's and James's poll did not seek to discover was CND affiliation. This is surprising because, as a 14-year-old, Ben had tramped and camped all the way from Berkshire to Trafalgar Square over Easter 1960 as a keen

participant in the Aldermaston March. (Forty-three years later he would march with his sons in protest at the coming war in Iraq.) His unilateralist instincts did not survive into his maturity, though the thrill of political bonding, as he had experienced it on the road from Aldermaston, never left him. His later multilateralism may have cost him safe Labour seats during the 1980s, including Sedgefield, where he was beaten for the nomination by a certain Tony Blair. Maybe this was among the reasons why Ben did not have a place in the Blair administration. The dissenting side of Ben was undoubtedly appreciated by his two very different history teachers at Marlborough, the touch louche medievalist, Peter Carter, and the Quaker, Bill Speck. And Ben certainly appreciated them.

Ben followed his father as an open scholar in history to Worcester College, Oxford, where he changed to Philosophy, Politics and Economics. Perhaps surprisingly, Oxford was not Ben's salad days, though he made several good friends such as Mike Radford, the film producer to be, and Bill Bradley, the future mayor of Los Angeles. He found, however, a kindred spirit in his third year when he was sent to Nuffield for tutorials to the still young, but already formidable, Patricia Hollis. After his first degree, he took a B.Phil. in Politics. And politics were his spur. Though possessing the supplest and subtlest of political minds, the *party* political star Ben was steered by was simple and consistent throughout his life. Labour, he believed, existed above all else to do something about poverty and the poor. This profound, bone-bred conviction saw Ben through Labour's civil war in the 1980s and inoculated him against the slightest temptation to join Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams and others in the Social Democratic Party breakaway. He had few illusions about the Labour Party, but, in his way Ben loved it as the first and best political instrument for improving the condition of the British people. He flourished as a scholar, but the academic life was never going to be enough for him and he tried three times to become an MP.

This political impulse was what took him to a lectureship in politics at Newcastle University in 1970, deep in Labour stronghold territory, and guided him into the research on what became his first major book, a study of Labour's locust years in the thirties. When published in 1977 as *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*, there was pain on almost every page about the futility of a party condemned to opposition in a decade when unemployment and the rise of fascism cried out for a British New Deal at home and collective resistance to the dictators abroad. For Ben, that so much of the sensible Left's energies were diverted in fighting off the Communist Party

of Great Britain and the United Front efforts of that 'political goose', as Attlee called Sir Stafford Cripps, was a cause of retrospective fury. In the 1980s, the destructive self-indulgence of the Labour Left and the accusations of 'betrayal' against the Wilson and Callaghan governments would cause him great and real-time frustration as the centre Left tradition got no more of a look in during the Thatcher years than it had in the Baldwin–Chamberlain era.

His thirties book was written at a time when Ben Pimlott was a seriously active and aspiring young Labour politician. He stood twice for Parliament in 1974. In Ted Heath's snap election in February he was Labour candidate for the safe Conservative seat of Arundel; a long way, in every sense, from his north-east base. A friend called Jean Seaton, who had met him through James Curran (fellow scholars of the politics of press and media), canvassed for Ben in Sussex bringing a team of experienced doorsteppers with her. In the October election, when the Wilson government was returned with a majority of three, Ben came within 1,500 votes of unseating Leon Brittan, then a rising star in Conservative circles, in Cleveland and Whitby. He ran against Brittan again in May 1979 by which time the political tide was flowing firmly in a Tory direction.

Historians are meant to eschew the counterfactual. But suppose he had gained a couple of thousand more votes in October 1974 and served as a backbencher in the last Wilson government and the Callaghan administration. He would certainly have made a mark as one of the most cerebral young MPs with much to say—and to say well—on unemployment, poverty and the special problems of deindustrialisation in the north-east. It is highly unlikely that he would have achieved ministerial office before the winter of discontent and the lost confidence vote on devolution brought down the Callaghan government in March 1979. And, if through a strong personal vote, he had clung on to Cleveland and Whitby, the locust years of opposition would have seen him rise as a public figure but not one, I suspect, of the width and the lustre he became in the 1980s which were the decade of his take-off as a widely known and admired public intellectual. Books there would have been—but would they have been quite so plentiful and important? Roy Jenkins, who played a crucial part in Ben's take-off, as we shall see in a moment, showed that a fine mind and a fluent pen could still operate within a parliamentary career. But the demands of a constituency a long way from London and of the House of Commons itself would have sapped even Ben's formidable energies.

As it turned out, Ben acquired width and depth in the seventies way beyond his scholarship on Labour in the thirties. He took his Ph.D. while at Newcastle. As a young man, he had assisted Anthony Eden (by this time the Earl of Avon) on his memoirs and he helped Eden once more with his final and most elegiac work, *Another World*, which was published in 1976 about his experiences in the Great War. Richard Thorpe, Eden's second official biographer, wrote of Ben's 'successfully encouraging him to draw more fully on his personal memories in a detailed analysis of the first typescript. The fact that this book was generally considered Avon's finest owes much to Pimlott's sympathetic input.' In the sixties, while working on the Eden papers, he spent two months living with the Avons at Alvediston in Wiltshire. Ben was required to buy a dinner jacket and wear it every evening when, Noel Coward, for example, might just drop by: undoubtedly a strain for a somewhat austere young Fabian.

In 1974–5, Ben travelled to Portugal to witness first hand the revolution taking place in the wake of the demise of the long-standing fascist regime in Lisbon. For a time it looked as if the country might go communist, but, eventually, the social democrats led by Mario Soares emerged to lead Portugal into the community of western European open societies. The experience left a vivid and lasting impression on him. Portugal was important to Ben. He learned his journalism reporting for *Labour Weekly*. And he learned to trust his political judgement arguing with US embassy staff, for example, that the revolution was Left, but not communist. A grant from the Nuffield Foundation in 1978 enabled Ben to come to London to work on the rich collection of papers, letters and diaries deposited by Hugh Dalton's executors in the British Library of Political and Economic Science at the London School of Economics.

By this time one of the great human and scholarly partnerships of their generation had been officially formed. For in 1977 Ben and Jean were married in Cambo, Northumberland. Ben and Jean swiftly became a cynosure for a wide circle of political and intellectual friends that embraced Whitehall and parties other than Labour as well as the university and artistic worlds. First in Hackney and then in Islington, the well-stocked Pimlott table on a Saturday night became a place of flair and fable. If the British centre Left has such things as a political salon, the Pimlotts ran one. High seriousness mingled with laughter and the ripest of gossip, though Ben could never stand frivolous chit-chat. How future Ph.D. students, reconstructing the politics of the eighties and nineties will quite capture it I do not know. But they will certainly need to try. Jean and

their three sons gave Ben the most marvellous home life and his devotion to them was palpable.

In the late seventies, Ben began the process of rescuing Hugh Dalton from the condescension of posterity. Once the biography and the two volumes of diaries were published, Ben talked and wrote of what it was like to have this extraordinary character move in to the Pimlott household for a very considerable time. Ben and Hugh were very different—Dalton malicious where Ben was generous, devious where Ben was straight and an arch plotter which Ben was not. Ben never lost sight, however, of how considerable a figure Dalton had been before the war in helping Labour face up to the threat of tyranny in Europe, suppressing its pacifist instincts and, at last, embracing rearmament; during the war at first the Ministry of Economic Warfare and then at the Board of Trade; as Attlee's first post-war Chancellor; and, following a gap after a foolish Budget Day indiscretion to a journalist brought him down, as Minister of Town and Country Planning. Above all, it was Dalton the serious policy-maker that fascinated. Dalton's antipathy to Keynesianism, because he (Dalton) so loathed the rich, particularly intrigued Ben.

It was Ben's combining of Dalton the high politician with Hugh the tortured human being (unhappy marriage; homosexual leanings; burgeoning ambition brigaded with a remarkable capacity to arouse mistrust and create enemies) which made the biography such a triumph when it was published in 1985. And Ben had taken quite a professional risk in devoting himself to its production. In 1979, he left his tenured lectureship at Newcastle for a two-year Nuffield-funded research appointment at the LSE. As it happened the permanent move to London paid off. He was appointed a Lecturer in the Department of Politics and Sociology at Birkbeck College, University of London, in 1981. From the start, Ben adored Birkbeck. As his friend and fellow Labour movement historian, Ken Morgan, put it, by coming to LSE and Birkbeck, Ben 'moved into a congenial new world of metropolitan intellectual sophistication'. He never acquired, however, the metropolitan chic that shades into arrogance. He was inoculated against that by his temperament, his social conscience and the R. H. Tawney tradition of Fabianism in which he breathed and wrote.

Such personal and scholarly ingredients kept his feet firmly on the ground when fame came in a rush in 1985. Rarely can the trigger for enduring renown be so easily identified as in Ben's case. Roy Jenkins pulled it in *The Observer*. Jenkins knew Dalton well. He had been among his protégés, like so many of the most promising Gaitskellites in the 1940s

and 1950s. Jenkins's book reviews in *The Observer* were, in effect, the gold standard against which new works of political biography especially were judged, Jenkins himself being a master of the genre as well as a connoisseur of others' efforts. 'This', wrote Jenkins,

> is a masterly biography . . . I do not think I shall ever read a more satisfying definitive biography, in which familiar events are recalled with accuracy, pace and style while a searchlight is shone into hitherto dark places. Mr Pimlott certainly does not avoid the dark places of Dalton's life, and he writes about them with an unsqueamish precision which occasionally takes one's breath away. I find Mr Pimlott's book not only the last word on Dalton but also a rather frightening commentary on the human condition.

As the cliché has it, you cannot buy publicity like that. *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* had won Ben his spurs within the scholarly profession, but *Hugh Dalton* projected him to wide and swift prominence as a literary-politico figure of the first order—no mean feat as Dalton was hardly a household name forty years after what he (Dalton) had called in his memoirs Labour's 'high tide'. And the zenith of the Thatcher era was hardly a propitious moment for a 750-page biography of a long-dead Left-wing figure. But, as Bernard Levin's review in *The Times* put it,

> Ben Pimlott's *Hugh Dalton* passes the ultimate test: those not at all interested in Dalton can still be enthralled by his story, so firm is the author's grip, so keen is his insight, so fascinating is the tale he has to tell.

Ben's fellow Fabian, Phillip Whitehead, himself no mean connoisseur of the Attlee–Dalton–Bevin–Cripps–Morrison–Bevan era, declared simply in the *New Statesman* that it was 'The best biography for years'.

Ben began his biography of Dalton in 1977 and it took him six years to write, a period, he recalled in the Preface to the 1995 edition, when 'contemporary images were, of course, much affected by Labour's fortunes, which were moving from fragile to catastrophic'.

In a characteristically eloquent passage, Ben delivered a kind of *apologia pro vita sua* in intellectual terms and a catharsis for the pain he and others had suffered during Labour's eighties civil war. After the 1979 defeat, he wrote,

> many well-informed people began to argue that Labour was finished, *kaput*, in terminal decline. In such conditions, the party's record became a happy-hunting ground for polemicists. Insiders alternatively denounced Labour's past for its compromises and sell-outs, or else romanticised it as a lost golden age. Non-Labour people saw no reason to be concerned about such an inward-looking organisation at all.

> In this climate, writing about Dalton became a refuge from much that was sterile in the present. It also became a way of expressing my own defiant belief that—contrary to a right-wing view that serious history was about the Establishment, and a left-wing one that true 'labour history' looked only at the rank-and-file—Labour had a heritage in high politics, and high ideas, that needed examining. The point kept on forming itself from the material: despite recent appearances, the left-of-centre in Britain had often in the past been a complex, fecund tributary to the mainstream of the nation's intellectual and cultural life.

This was exactly what Ben wished the centre Left to be and to do again. It was certainly what he strove mightily to do himself. And, in that same 1995 reflection on anatomising Dalton, he was quite open about it. 'I cannot,' he explained,

> entirely deny that the book had a missionary purpose. Though I strove to be non-partisan, critical and 'objective'—whatever such terms amounted to—I also found myself engaged in a kind of guerrilla warfare against current assumptions. In an ideological decade of political saints and villains, I remember hoping that the contradictions of Dalton's personality would puzzle and befuddle Labour's rival tribalists. At the same time, I wanted to remind defectors of the rich traditions they were deserting; and to suggest that expectations of Labour's imminent demise . . . did not take account of deep and multifarious roots.

All of Ben's books had a purpose way beyond his scholarly peer groups or totting up the required tally for the research assessment exercise. He was utterly convinced that telling the truth, however uncomfortable, was the key to proper biography—and that biography which was readable opened up large swathes of history to a substantial reading public.

With his friend David Marquand (who did 'defect' from Labour to the SDP), Ben, on the back of *Hugh Dalton*, became the leading fugeler and philosopher for serious political biography. It was Marquand, the biographer of Ramsay MacDonald, who had declared when that study appeared in 1977 (the year Ben embarked upon Dalton), that the 'historian is not a kind of celestial chief justice sentencing the guilty and setting free the innocent. He is part of the process he describes, and his judgements can never be more than provisional.'

Ben would have agreed with that and wrote something similar in the Preface to the first edition of Hugh Dalton. 'Biography', he declared,

> may be distinguished from fiction by what Virginia Woolf called 'the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders.' In biography, you

> strive to be accurate, and although you may speculate a little, you do not say what you know or suspect to be untrue.
>
> On the other hand, it is wrong to see biography as a search for the 'whole truth' about a character. Some distinguished biographers have presented themselves as humble explorers, seeking only to discover and inform. This is misleading. Biography is not mere reportage. The form is literary, the method interpretative: it is significant that 'portrait' should be the common metaphor. The author attempts to build not a distillation of important facts, but an impression, rising a *pointillisme* of detail, quotation and comment. But it is not achieved by deductive reasoning; nor is it testable.

It would be foolish to claim that biographers are born, not built. But there is something in it—not least, as Ben liked to say, a willingness to let someone you have never met into your lives, from breakfast-time to bedtime, for five years or more.

Ben was fortunate to have found his métier in one go and to have produced a gold-standard work first time round. The early eighties had also seen him, in Labour historian mode, producing two edited volumes: *The Trade Unions in British Politics* with Chris Cook in 1982; and *Fabian Essays in Socialist Thought* in 1984. But, naturally enough, it was the art of biography that featured as the subject of his inaugural lecture in 1987 when Birkbeck appointed him Professor of Politics and Contemporary History (he had been promoted to Reader the year before).

By the time he rose before an immensely distinguished audience to deliver it (Jim and Audrey Callaghan at the front), Ben had won the Whitbread Prize for *Hugh Dalton* and published two skilfully edited volumes of his diaries (*The Second World War Diary of Hugh Dalton, 1940–45*, in 1986; and *The Political Diary of Hugh Dalton 1918–40, 1945–60*, in 1987). Couched in his development of the philosophy and methodology of biography, there came a gem of a moment of Pimlott honesty—what he called 'the problem of the widow'. And he gave the example of the difficulty that Hugh Gaitskell's official biographer, Philip Williams, had in dealing with Gaitskell's affair with Ann Fleming, wife of Ian of James Bond fame. Ben went on for quite a bit about this. The Callaghans were of a generation and a non-conformist background that rather disapproved of sex being spoken of in public, as, I suspect, Ben knew full well (Jim Callaghan, himself a Dalton protégé, had been very helpful to Ben writing the biography). Ben, quite rightly, had insisted that the emotional life of a subject was important to understanding them as political and public figures especially in an age when public opinion was still shockable about such matters. Though he sympathised with Williams having to write and publish while the formidable Dora Gaitskell was still

alive. Over tea after the lecture, Jim Callaghan said to me 'Ben's wrong about old Hugh, you know.' Then, in his best Dixon of Dock Green manner, Jim explained: 'Hugh had a very tidy and well-organized mind. In one compartment he put the party; in the other compartment he put his ladies.' A very Jim remark.

In the late eighties, Ben was operational on a huge variety of fronts. The success of *Hugh Dalton* and his gifts as a columnist, a book reviewer and an essayist (some of the best examples of which he collected and published in *Frustrate Their Knavish Tricks* in 1994), meant that the features and books editors at the better end of what was still Fleet Street and Gray's Inn Road would turn quite naturally to him as their first choice. He was a political columnist for *Today*, 1986–7, *The Times*, 1987–8 and *The Sunday Times*, 1988–9 as well as serving a spell as the *New Statesman*'s Political Editor in 1987–8. His journalism carried his trademark of past knowledge and present analysis. Writing for the nationals meant that by the tenth anniversary of his arrival in London from Newcastle, Ben had reached a very wide public indeed if one includes his appearances on television and his radio broadcasts.

There was a distinct Pimlott style in the seminar room, too, especially at the regular Wednesday evening gathering of contemporary British political and administrative historians at the Institute of Historical Research in which he and Jean played a central role. Ben, as Jean said after his death, 'was the most peerlessly unfashionable man whose judgement about what was going on in the world was always absolutely uncompromised by anything other than clarity and evidence. He never had comfortable judgement but he always had an accurate judgement.' In the seminar room he gave the impression that he had really tussled with a subject, there was nothing quick, glib or facile about his process of ratiocination. And that once he *had* made up his mind, it was going to need something quite remarkable and compelling to shift it. Ben had referred to a similar trait in his father in the 'biographical note' appended to Pimlott senior's *The Englishman's Christmas*. In it Ben had quoted a 'close colleague' of John's in Whitehall who said of him that 'he could, when he thought fit, stick to his guns with a tenacity which his friends called determination and his opponents obstinacy'. This never meant that Ben belittled other people's interpretations if they were based on scholarly sweat and a care with the sources. In Ph.D. vivas, for example, he was very good with candidates who had constructed their theses and reached their conclusions in a different way to the route Ben would have taken had it been

his own research project. Ben never used his formidable intellect as a weapon to demolish people.

The Pimlott of the newspaper column and the Pimlott of the seminar room came together in the late 1980s in a fascinating, if controversial, fashion. Like many others on the centre Left, Ben was cast down by Mrs Thatcher's 102-seat majority in the June 1987 general election. Neil Kinnock had fought a brave fight and energetically begun to syringe the sectarian poison out of Labour—but there was a very long way to go. Pimlott the intellectual and Pimlott the activist decided something must be done. Was this the time for a new popular front of the mind among the sensible centre Left that would stretch from the Labour mainstream to the Liberals and the Social Democrats? He thought it was and created *Samizdat* as a journal of ideas under his editorship. Ben saw *Samizdat* as a way of helping recapture intellectually the middle ground as an indispensable precursor to Labour's regaining power (as did the young John Rentoul who spent hours around the Pimlott kitchen table putting the magazine together). *Samizdat* had a short life between 1988 and 1990.

It was vigorously criticised from the Right by those who argued that its very title was an insult to those inside the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc who had risked (and still were risking) a great deal in the preparation of underground literature. How could a group of comfortably off centre Leftists in an open society be so insensitive? More prosaically, Labour tribalists loathed the very idea as reeking of compromise, sell-out and coalitionism if not outright defeatism. *Samizdat* was well-written and thoughtful—and more than a mere gesture by frustrated centre Leftists of the more literary kind.

For those who sat on its board, there were special rewards. Michael Young, who had shared a room with John Pimlott at Toynbee Hall before the war, was an enthusiast for the project and the board met at the Institute of Community Studies in Bethnal Green which Michael directed. The discussions in the interstices of the business were wonderful (Michael Young and Eric Hobsbawm, for example, debating the degree to which Michael had foreseen the growth of the eighties 'underclass' in his *The Rise of the Meritocracy* thirty years earlier). *Samizdat* threw good parties, too. It was a tribute to Ben's stature and reach that so disparate a group relished those meetings under his chairmanship. Ben had a gift for bouncing back from electoral failure. For example, Tony Wright (later a Labour MP and highly influential chairman of Commons select committees) recalls Ben simply saying at a Fabian meeting shortly after the 1987 election, 'Right! What we need is a book called *The Alternative*.' Similarly

after 1992 he staged a conference, with a tonic effect, on a Saturday in London, called *Whatever Next?* which brought Tony Blair and Shirley Williams together on the same platform.

Ben had written *Hugh Dalton* for Jonathan Cape. Its success meant that other publishers were sure to compete for his next blockbuster. Ben was a great believer in scholars breaking into the top end of the trade press circuit and the sales and the advances that came with it. His decision to write an official biography of the still living Harold Wilson brought him into fruitful and formidable partnership with the mercurially brilliant Giles Gordon as his agent at Sheil Land and Stuart Proffitt as his young and intellectually muscular publisher at HarperCollins.

Ben now had a project whose subject he knew, though Wilson was fast fading in health. It was the former Whitehall officials, Mary Wilson and Marcia Falkender, Harold's Personal and Political Secretary, who provided the richest ingredients for the life. He also had that special feel for Wilson's prime ministerial years having lived through the period and actually having fought under the banner of two Wilsonian election manifestos in 1974. Here, like Dalton, was another immensely controversial figure who, in the late eighties and early nineties, really did need rescuing from the enormous condescension of posterity—not least from the Labour Party for whose unity he had sacrificed very nearly all, during the *In Place of Strife* crisis in 1969, over Britain and Europe in the early seventies and for virtually every minute of his two twilight premierships between March 1974 and April 1976.

Harold Wilson was a monumental 800-pager which took four years from conception to birth. This was literary and scholarly productivity of a high order. Ben began with a great deal of knowledge which Jean supplemented and shaped as what he called his 'cleverest and most inspiring critic'. Though only one book, *The Media in British Politics*, which they co-edited in 1987, bears both their names, Jean's presence is evident throughout the Wilson biography and indeed in everything Ben published.

Ben warmed to Wilson as a human being, as many scholars did who came to know him. However, he had no illusions about Harold's delusions and absurdities (as he had none too about Dalton's), or about the hows and whys whereby Wilson became a by-word for political brilliance indistinguishable from deviousness. He understood the roots of Wilson's one strand of consistency—keeping Labour together and electable. Here is Ben on Wilson's twists and turns on Europe in the difficult opposition

years between June 1970 when he lost power, to his shock, and his equally surprising resumption of office in March 1974:

> Wilson went to great pains to defend himself against the charge of being inconsistent, although there is no clear reason why—in politics or in life—people should not vary their remarks and opinions according to the circumstances. In fact, he was inconsistent in the impression he gave about his Party's purpose—facing this way, and then that—but carefully consistent on the key point that he was not opposed to entry in principle, and favoured it if the terms were right.
>
> It was true that, playing his cards one at a time, he always strove to keep as many options open as possible. It is also understandable that those with strong opinions, especially the pro-Marketeers, should at times have been infuriated by his behaviour . . . whether a more partisan figure, like Jenkins, or an even more political one, like Callaghan, would have done better—taking a firmer line, while avoiding splits or purges—is debatable. By one measure, Wilson succeeded. He remained Leader, and Labour stayed together, even forming another administration, though some would argue that the seeds of the Party's later division were sown by his handling of it at this time.

The Pimlott style blended personality, private lives, private demons, policy and historical context with a light touch that made even the potentially dreariest patches of intra-Labour history absorbable by the general reader.

Ben's wider interests and activities meant that *Harold Wilson* was written against an insistently ticking clock and the regular reminders about deadlines from his highly efficient publisher, Stuart Proffitt, who was determined it should be the flagship of HarperCollins' 1992 autumn season. As a result, a good part of the book was written in a pair of houses lent by friends in the very un-Wilsonian setting of the Ionian island of Paxos (Harold was a confirmed Scillies man and is indeed buried there). I can remember, too, a slightly desperate phone call from Ben on a September Sunday afternoon at the printers in Bury St Edmunds twenty minutes before the *final* final deadline checking a point with me about Harold's 'agreement to differ' with the anti-marketeers in his Cabinet in the run-up to the 1975 EEC Referendum and the 1932 precedent over free trade/protection during the National Government on which it was based.

Peace finally descended at the printers, the publishers and chez Pimlott in Milner Place, N1. The book was done and it did indeed dazzle through the autumn mists. Once more Ben received the gold medal from Roy Jenkins in *The Observer* ('Fascinating . . . Pimlott the X-ray has produced another work of formidable penetration'). For David Marquand in the *Times Literary Supplement* the key Pimlott skill had resulted in a 'mass of complex material . . . [being] . . . marshalled with the art that

conceals art'. For Andrew Marr in *The Independent*, Ben was simply 'the best political biographer now writing'.

Ben finished writing before Wilson's No. 10 papers for 1964–70 reached what is now The National Archives. His life of Harold relied heavily, therefore, on the extended interviews with his subject and Wilson's contemporaries at which he was adept. Only in January 2007 did the last of Wilson's prime ministerial files reach Kew and it will be a successor generation of younger historians who produce the studies within which the primary sources are fully blended. Yet future scholars, wanting to acquire an indispensable feel for Harold the man and the politician and for the times in which he operated, will always have to start with Pimlott on Wilson.

By the end of the 1992 book-reviewing season, the name Pimlott was firmly associated in the reading public's mind with top-flight political biography of the Left. It was a shock to many, therefore, when the news broke that Ben's next subject was the Queen. Indeed, it caused a touch of incomprehension verging on outrage in those circles of the Pimlott friendship penumbra where republicanism lurked. Though some, like Raphael Samuel, saw the point instantly, telling Ben, when told of his plan, 'What a marvellous way of looking at the history of Britain.' Others, as Ben recalled tactfully in his Preface to the first edition,

> expressed surprise, wondering whether a study of the Head of State and Head of the Commonwealth could be a serious or worthwhile enterprise. Whether or not they are right, it certainly has been an extraordinary and fascinating adventure; partly because of the fresh perspective on familiar events it has given me, after years of writing about Labour politicians; partly because of the human drama of a life so exceptionally privileged, and so exceptionally constrained; and partly because of the obsession with royalty of the British public, of which I am a member.

There were those, of whom I was one, who were certain it would be another triumph, intellectually and commercially, for the Pimlott–Gordon–Proffitt trio. And so it proved.

The point about Pimlott on the Queen is that it *was* another *political* biography and it was about a woman (which interested Ben). It was fascinating on personality and circumstance, but the special value it added was the Queen as Head of Government, the conductor of constitutional functions of which few among the absorbed consumers of royal literature knew hardly anything at all. Ben, however, did not shrink from criticism where he thought it merited. He thought she had mishandled the succession to Macmillan in October 1963 when the Earl of Home took the prize

and not the Deputy Prime Minister, R. A. Butler. 'Her decision', Ben wrote, 'to opt for passivity and in effect to collude with Macmillan's scheme for blocking the deputy premier, must be counted the biggest political misjudgement of her reign.'

In reaching this judgement, Ben stood apart from most other constitutional historians who have, before or since, sought to reconstruct the events of October 1963. His friend Professor Vernon Bogdanor, for example, in his *The Monarchy and the Constitution* (1995), had written that

> the criticisms made of the queen with regard to the 1963 succession crisis lack substance. It is implausible to believe that Macmillan was able to misrepresent the opinion of the Conservative Party in the memorandum which he handed to the queen. Faced with the preponderant judgement in favour of Home, based, the memorandum apparently declared, on a canvass of the Cabinet, the Conservative Party in both Houses of Parliament, and in the country, it was not for the queen to conduct her own separate canvass and involve herself in the internal politics of the Conservative Party . . . The queen took the straightforward course, and it was for the Conservative Party, if it so wished, to make it clear it would not accept Home as prime minister.

(The Queen acting on a mid-nineteenth-century precedent, had given him time to see if he could form an administration.) Nevertheless, the experience of the Macmillan–Home succession quickly led to the Conservatives abandoning the consultative 'customary processes' for leadership selections in favour of votes by the Conservative Parliamentary Party, the first of which, in 1965, saw Sir Alec Douglas-Home (as he had become on renouncing his peerage in 1963) replaced by Ted Heath.

Ben dined with the Queen at Windsor after the biography appeared but he did not discover what she had thought of it. Protocol prevented him from asking and her from saying. Writing about the Queen affected Ben profoundly. Those who heard him speak about her at Whitsuntide 2002 in Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford, to mark her jubilee, will never forget it. Ben captured how dreadful it must be to be *born* into a function that you have not sought or worked for—and what a remarkable character this had made her. The stolid if highly distinguished audience succumbed to genuine emotion when Ben ended with 'God Bless the Queen!' 'God Bless the Queen!' they cried in return. The Chancellor of Oxford University, Roy Jenkins, was seen to dab his eyes. (Five years earlier, on the day after Princess Diana died, No. 10 rang up Ben for advice. It was the biographer of the 'people's Queen' who gave Downing Street the phrase the 'people's Princess.')

His first edition of *The Queen: Elizabeth II and the Monarchy* was published in 1996 (he published an updated edition in 2001—it now weighed in at 780 pages—to mark her golden jubilee). In the same year Ben was elected FBA and joined S5, the Academy's section embracing political studies, political theory, government and international relations. Senior figures in Whitehall came to associate Ben with the Academy because 10 Carlton House Terrace became the venue for a remarkable Friday afternoon seminar he would alternatively chair with the Cabinet Secretary of the day. This was a legacy of the Economic and Social Research Council's Whitehall Programme Commissioning Panel which Ben had chaired in 1993–4 and whose steering committee he led for a further five years. The subjects ranged widely from devolution and immigration through the role of the Treasury to civil contingency planning for emergencies and terrorist attack and public service reform. These occasions were relished by the group of scholars invited and especially by Sir Robin Butler and Sir Richard Wilson during their time as Secretary of the Cabinet. Wilson's successor, Sir Andrew Turnbull, to Ben's great regret, brought them to an end, thus breaking probably the most fruitful link between the scholarly and the Whitehall communities of recent times, though Ben, in his last months, was on the point of agreeing a new format with Turnbull.

Baffling as that rupture was, it was as nothing compared to New Labour's failure to make use of Ben after the Blair election victory in 1997. No one in the university world had done more to help Labour reacquire electability. Ben's M.Sc. in Public Policy at Birkbeck had groomed numerous special advisers in the Labour government to come (and they, rightly, swore by their mentor). Maybe Ken Morgan, himself a Labour peer, had it right when he declared his astonishment 'that the Blair government saw no need to call on Ben, or some of his Fabian friends, for assistance or advice after the 1997 election. Perhaps this reflected the instinctive apprehension of New Labour towards academics, however distinguished, who were felt all too liable to stray unpredictably "off message" into the dangerous pastures of independent thought.' Certainly had Ben gone to the House of Lords and been appointed a minister, there would (to his credit) have been uncomfortable times ahead even before the Iraq War of 2003 to which he was strongly opposed. With a few exceptions, a knowledge of history (including that of the Labour Party itself) has not been among the strongest suits of those upon whom the Blair patronage has fallen and Ben would never have succumbed to what one of his Cabinet ministers called the 'Tony wants' syndrome.

A few months after Labour's return to power, Ben astonished some of his friends by becoming Warden of Goldsmiths College, University of London. He had served his time as Head of Department at Birkbeck. But he had never been a Dean or a Vice-Master. He got on with administration but never seemed to relish it. Some friends (of whom I was one) perhaps selfishly wanted him to keep writing as the chief absorber of the best hours of his working day. He was 53 and at the peak of his powers. He could be a touch short when such regrets were voiced, talking of the importance of well-run public institutions in general and of the glories of Goldsmiths in particular.

It soon became apparent, however, that he loved Goldsmiths and was hell bent on raising its profile generally and capitalising on its glowing artistic and media studies reputation. He set about being a campus builder too. His aim was to make a marvellous if gritty place a thing of glory. Yet he would always find time to examine a Ph.D. or to review a serious book. Ben the planner and shifter of business fell foul of the Association of University Teachers at Goldsmiths. But the College's Council backed him and he was into his second term as Warden when leukaemia was diagnosed in 2003. He bore his illness with immense fortitude and his laptop clicked until almost the end. He died in University College Hospital on 10 April, Easter Saturday, 2004, aged 58.

Ben was not a religious man in the formal sense though he and Jean were married in an Anglican ceremony; Dan, Nat and Seth were all christened in the Anglican Church. He rarely missed Sunday morning service at St Paul's Cathedral. 'He didn't believe in somebody on a white cloud', said Jean. But he had a spiritual side, he loved Anglican form and order and he was a connoisseur of beauty in words, sound and pictures. The gap he left was huge both in the scholarly and the political world. He gave the notion of the public intellectual a good name for there was nothing flash or meretricious about his fame or his public thinking. His learning was fastidious, his spirit generous. When a serious book dealing with some aspect of the Pimlott terrain has appeared since Easter 2004, the reaction has been 'I wonder what Ben would have made of it?'—but one among many measures of his enduring influence.

In the wider sweep of history, Ben will be remembered politically for standing firm in the age of centre Right Labour defections to the SDP in such a way that others rallied, took heart and stayed at a time when the great tradition, in which Ben had always believed, might have been lost for ever. Above all he will be remembered for the books that were written and, among his friends, for the great ones that might have been (a nearly

completed novel may yet appear and there *were* Pimlott diaries, too), not least the big work on Clem Attlee, Harry Truman and the early post-war years that he was planning when illness struck. Ben, had he been a musical score, would have been marked *Nobilmente*—just like the opening bars of Elgar's First Symphony.

PETER HENNESSY
Fellow of the Academy

Note. The author is indebted to Professor Jean Seaton for her indispensable help in the preparation of this memoir.