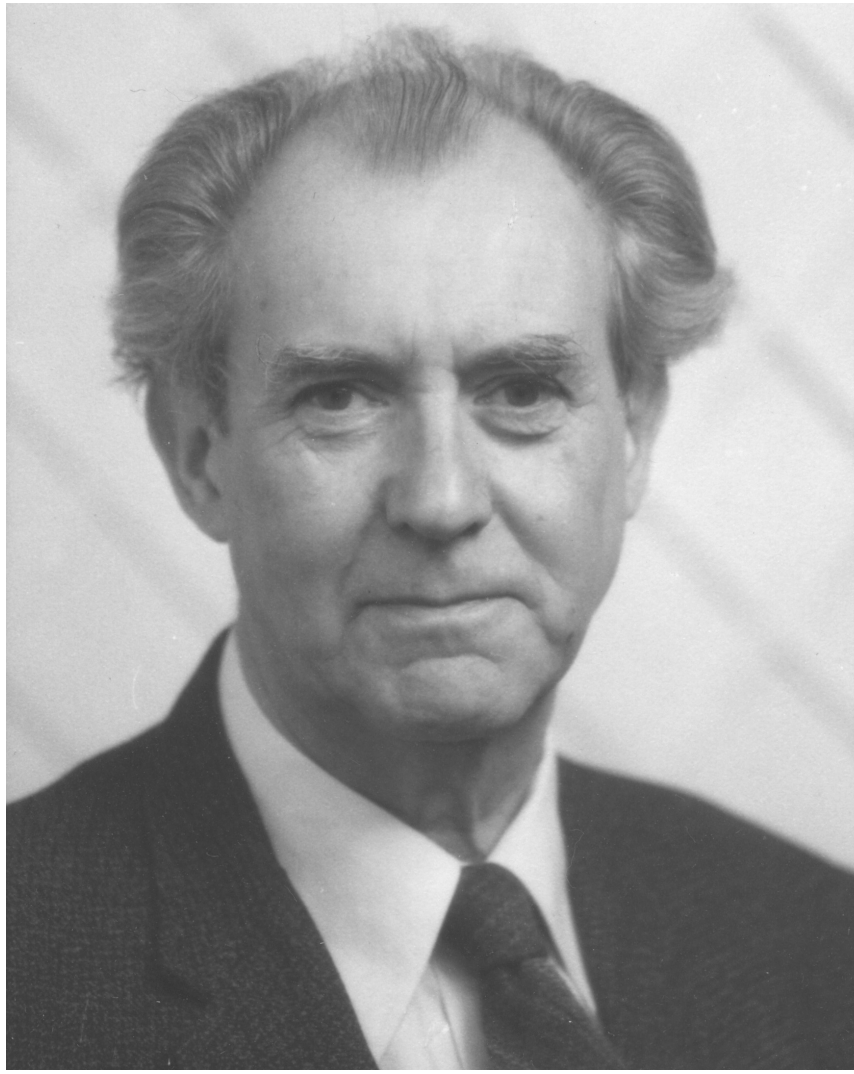

NORMAN COHN *Gerhard Cohn*

Norman Rufus Colin Cohn
1915–2007

I

NORMAN COHN wrote three major histories around a single theme. *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London, 1957) related the apocalyptic beliefs of twentieth-century totalitarian movements, whether Nazi or Communist, to their origins in medieval heresy. *Warrant for Genocide* (London, 1967) established that the key document of a Jewish world conspiracy, *The Protocol of the Elders of Zion*, was a nineteenth-century Tsarist forgery. *Europe's Inner Demons* (London, 1975) argued that the belief in a Satanic pact was at the heart of witch persecution in early modern Europe. Looking back on these works, Cohn thought that they could only have been written by a man 'between all worlds', both in their content and their angle of perception.

Cohn's father, August, barrister-at-law at Middle Temple, was by birth a German Jew. He took British nationality in the 1880s after hearing Gladstone expounding liberalism. His mother, Daisy Ann Raimer, was partly German by birth, a devout Catholic, who lived most of her childhood in South Africa. It was on a visit there that his father met and married her.

Norman Cohn was born in London on 12 January 1915, the youngest of six boys. His brothers and all his cousins fought on opposite sides in the First World War. He refused to change his Jewish surname in the Second World War when he was advised to do so. He was twice married, the first time in 1941 to a Russian, Vera Broido. She had lived in a ménage à trois for seven years with a much older man and a founder of Dada,

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Raoul Hausmann, and his complaisant wife. Her memoirs, composed in her ninety-first year, were published under the title *Daughter of Revolution* (London, 1998). In pursuit of a Menshevik Revolution her mother entered Bolshevik Russia in 1927. She was captured and arrested in 1927. Vera Broido never saw her mother again. There was a Menshevik show trial in 1931. Her mother and two others were among those originally charged with treason, but were not proceeded against, which meant that they had not been broken by torture. Only with the collapse of Soviet Russia and the opening of the archives after the Second World War did she learn of her mother's fate: long periods of solitary confinement, three times sentenced to death by military tribunals, and then the heartbreakingly simple last sentence of her memoirs: 'She was shot on 14 September 1941.'

After her death in 2004, Norman Cohn married another remarkable Russian, Marina Voikhanskaya, who had been expelled from the Soviet Union in the 1970s for protesting against the compulsory detention of political dissidents in psychiatric hospitals. Cohn died on 31 July 2007, and is survived by his second wife and Nik, the son of his first marriage, himself a celebrated writer, one of whose books gave rise to the musical *Saturday Night Fever*.

The 'man between all worlds' became an historian by accident. At his school Gresham's the language teaching was much better than the history. It was on a language scholarship that he went to Christ Church, Oxford, in 1933. He read French as a single language and specialised in the Middle Ages. Uniquely at that time in the Modern Language School he was awarded a scholarship to read German for another three years. In 1939 Christ Church gave him a postgraduate grant which the outbreak of the Second World War prevented him from taking up. His career, after the war ended, followed a predictable trajectory. Between 1946 and 1962, he was first a lecturer in French at the University of Glasgow, then a Professor at Magee University College, Londonderry, and finally a Professor at King's College, University of Durham (now the University of Newcastle upon Tyne). What could not have been predicted was that, in the ten years that it took him to write *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, he had made himself into an historian.

The Second World War was the catalyst. He volunteered for the Army in 1940 and was commissioned in the Queen's Royal Regiment. His expertise in German led to his transfer into the Intelligence Corps in 1942. On the eve of embarking for the Second Front in 1945 he was summoned to Bletchley. He and a fellow recruit were offered alternative post-

ings in Poland or Austria. Cohn did not get his first choice of Poland, but his consignment to Austria would have profound consequences for his future career. There he would have unlimited access to Nazi writings. He would listen to Nazi officers talking to each other when they thought that their captors did not understand what they were saying. He was repelled by Nazism, but had no illusions about Communism. There were pre-war confrontations with Bolshevik sympathisers in his own Labour Party ward to draw upon. His first wife's parents had been leading Mensheviks. In the 1930s his first wife became a close friend of Frederic Voigt, the Berlin correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian*. In her memoirs she recalled the impact his 1938 book, *Unto Caesar*, had made upon her, and in particular his thesis that Communism and German National Socialism were both forms of secularised millenarianism. Above all, there were the contacts Cohn now made in Austria with refugees from Eastern Europe.

He was aware of the very different aspirations of the two great totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century—Master Race versus Classless Society—but also what they had in common: a belief that the world could be transformed by the elimination of certain categories of human being. For one it was the Jew; for the other, the bourgeoisie. Both wrapped this shared fantasy in scientific language. His mission was to decode the language and recover the history. When he said this in his concluding chapter of *The Pursuit of the Millennium* nothing gave greater offence than his seeming equation of Nazism with Communism. Even some admirers wished away that last chapter.

One who would not have done so, although they never met or knew each other, was the diarist, Victor Klemperer. There are interesting parallels in the life stories of two 'men between all worlds'. Klemperer was a German Jew. He defined himself in religion as a Protestant, and in politics as a liberal (perhaps, like Cohn's father, a Gladstonian one?). His second wife (like Cohn's mother) was a devout Catholic, whose wedding to Klemperer, in deference to her scruples, was solemnised in a Catholic church.

The story of the survival of Klemperer and of his diaries is an astonishing one: a Jew in Dresden who saw out both the Holocaust and the Allies' devastation of his city. With magnificent recklessness, he kept on writing his diaries which, if discovered, would have meant his own death and of all who were mentioned in them. The great survivor ended his days as a Professor in the German Democratic Republic. He had resumed his diaries in 1945 with the same meticulous attention as before to the linguistic tics which betrayed the totalitarian mentality. In 1933 he had

summed up the mood of the nation 'as before a pogrom in the depth of the Middle Ages or in deepest Tsarist Russia'. Hearing Hitler on the radio in 1934, he said he had 'the voice of a fanatical preacher'. More pithily his wife said simply: 'John of Leyden'. When resetting his targets in 1945, he wrote: 'I must slowly begin to pay systematic attention to the language of the fourth Reich. It sometimes seems to me that it is less different from that of the third than say, the Saxon of Dresden from that of Leipzig.' In 1947 he recorded a depressing encounter with a student protégé who was 'absolutely convinced of the world domination of the Jews organised through Freemasonry'. He went on: 'this means, therefore, that this decent Marxist and philo-Semite, whom I had recommended for a diplomatic career, is completely convinced of Nazi theory and legend'. His wryly bitter conclusion was that 'probably he also believes in The Elders of Zion'. In 1950 he would say that 'class here is what breed is for the Nazis'. It could stand as the epigraph for the conclusion of *The Pursuit of the Millennium*.

The two men 'between all worlds' had one more thing in common. They were modest scholars who never would have anticipated the acclaim that would subsequently greet their writings. Klemperer, for instance, never could have expected his diaries to be published, far less to become set texts in German secondary schools.[1] Cohn, when still a Professor of French, thought that he was writing a scholarly monograph for a small readership. In fact, since its publication in 1957, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* has never been out of print. It has been translated into French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Norwegian, Greek, Hebrew and Japanese. *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1975 listed it as one of the hundred non-fiction works which had the greatest influence on the way in which post-war Europeans perceived themselves. Cohn is placed there alongside Camus, Sartre and Foucault. These testimonies are impressive but even so fail to do justice to the originality of what he was trying to do when he began the ten years of research on his topic. There was then no systematic history of millenarianism into which a prospective book could be slotted.

Marjorie Reeves faced a similar obstacle when she began her millenarian researches. The two great scholars are rightly often bracketed together. There was a high mutual regard between them. Cohn called Reeves's *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages* (London,

[1] The first of three volumes appeared as V. Klemperer, *I Shall Bear Witness, 1933–41* (London, 1998).

1969) 'a great book'. It was published a decade after his own work, although her researches for it began earlier even than his. Neither had the benefit of a close supervision of their research. The medievalist Sir Richard Southern, in his introduction to Reeves's Festschrift in 1980, brought out just how unusual her proposed doctoral field of study had seemed when the thesis was presented in 1932. Its title was 'Studies in the reputation and influence of the abbott, Joachim of Fiore, chiefly in the fifteenth and sixteenth century'. What is striking is the defensive note in her introduction to her thesis. Her credo would also become Cohn's and is worth quoting at length:

> . . . to treat the fantastic as history may well require explanation. We are accustomed to throw the sensible and serious actions of political life against a background of contemporary thought which is equally sober. Most of the prophetic material upon which these studies are based was an altogether different complexion: it is bizarre; it is fantastic; it seems, in itself, to be quite worthless. Yet such material forms an essential element in historical background, and one cannot fully appreciate the texture of that background without it. Not only must one seek within the realm of fantasy for an understanding of these strange abnormal creatures that occasionally move the world of politics—a Rienzi, a Savonorola, a Charles VIII—but further, we must recognise beneath the groundwork of normal political life, a far more general subsoil of prophetic belief, long since crumbled into superstition, than the rationalist is wont to admit.[2]

Her moral is clear (and this as early as 1932): to understand contemporary strange abnormal creatures (Mussolini? Hitler? Lenin? Stalin?) we must dig deeper into the subsoil of prophetic belief which nurtured them. The historians today of Muggletonians, Familists, Fifth Monarchy Men and the like feel no comparable pressure upon them to justify what they are doing, and that in part is because of the pioneering work of Cohn and Reeves. Reeves's examiners had wanted her thesis to be published. She put down the huge gap in time between thesis and book to 'indolence'. Her years of 'indolence' were spent in teaching history at secondary school, lecturing at a teacher training college, becoming Vice-Principal of St Anne's and revolutionising history textbooks in primary schools. If she had published the book immediately after the thesis, she later amusedly pointed out, nobody would have noticed. When the book did come out in 1969, to her surprise she found herself at the cutting edge of scholarship. How did she know? Two Oxford history colleagues, independently of

[2] R. Southern, 'Marjorie Reeves as an historian', in A. Williams (ed.) *Prophecy and Millenarianism: Essays in Honour of Marjorie Reeves* (London, 1980), pp. 5–6.

each other, asked to have tea with her then to talk about Antichrist. One was Hugh Trevor-Roper (later Lord Dacre); the other, Christopher Hill. She claimed that she had been thus rewarded in their interest for her 'indolence'. Sir Richard Southern put it more melodramatically: 'by 1969 the world was ready for Joachim'. But in part the world had been made ready for it by *The Pursuit of the Millennium*: a book which par excellence treats the fantastic as history.

II

Nothing fails like success. Cohn's first book had met with instant acclaim. If his aim simply had been to write an acceptable history of millenarianism up to the Middle Ages, he had pulled it off. Between 1957 and 1963, however, his career was in a sort of limbo. What was the Professor of French to do next? The answer was there in the Conclusion of his book (one reason among many why it should not be wished away). He restated there his still uncompleted mission to recover the historical roots of twentieth-century persecution and genocide. But how was he to achieve this? For a start, to give up being Professor of French, and then—this would be the more difficult part—to be offered in 1963 the directorship of a newly established Columbus Centre at the University of Sussex. The 'Sussex years' between 1963 and his retirement in 1980 were to be very productive. He would publish two follow-up books to his first one—*Warrant for Genocide* in 1967, and *Europe's Inner Demons* in 1975. Publications and honours flowed. From 1973 to 1980 he was the Astor-Wolfson Professor of History at Sussex, and on his retirement, Emeritus Professor. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1978. We shall see, though, that the term 'Sussex years' is a misnomer unless it is firmly kept within those inverted commas. This point would come out indirectly at a Sussex Inaugural Lecture on 4 March 2008.

The lecture was given by the new Professor of Intellectual History at Sussex, Rob Iliffe, on 'Isaac Newton's radical heresy in the Digital Age'. As a retired teacher at Sussex I had not met Iliffe before the lecture. But I knew that he had come to Sussex from the post of editorial director of the online Newton Project. What could be more twenty-first century than that? And he opened his lecture with a tribute to the influence on his researches of the writings of Norman Cohn—a man who had been born in 1915. Another retired Sussex historian, John Harrison, and myself came in on the coat-tails, as it were, of Iliffe's gracious tribute. Harrison

had written about nineteenth-century millenarianism, I about seventeenth-century millenarianism. We had taught an open interdisciplinary seminar on 'The Second Coming' together for a number of years. On our way to teach once, we were accosted by an agitated university chaplain who asked us 'When does The Second Coming start?' As one we answered 'You tell us.' Cohn never attended our seminar, although his presence would have enriched it. Harrison never met him. I never met him on the campus. I met him once, but it was at Oxford. No senior colleagues, when challenged, remembered meeting him. He was fast becoming 'The Man Who Never Was'. Rather belatedly I now set out to crack the problem of Cohn's 'Sussex years'. This was a search that would take me into familiar Cohn territory: problems of conflicting sources, lost manuscripts, and even an apocalyptic flood.

I drew my first blank at Sussex's library. Here, if anywhere, the archive would yield up the secrets of the setting up of the Columbus Trust under Cohn as its director. For safety reasons the library had previously transferred many of its holdings to a house in Lewes, which became one of the first casualties of the Great Lewes Flood of 2000. My particular research had not dried up; it had washed away. Help was at hand, however, in the person of another Bletchley graduate, like Cohn himself. Asa (later Lord) Briggs was Sussex's second Vice-Chancellor and a founding member of the Columbus Centre Trust. Blessed with a prodigious memory and generosity of spirit, he cleared up many puzzles. I learned some surprising facts.

First was the discovery that Sussex University had never appointed Cohn, or paid him. In a sense, Cohn appointed Sussex. The genesis of the Columbus Centre was to be found in April 1962 at a meeting held to commemorate the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. The editor and proprietor of *The Observer*, David Astor, gave an address which was printed in *Encounter* in the following August. He had argued that we were still far from grasping the full implications of the Holocaust and called for an academic study of the processes which led up to it. Future study would be most fruitful, he argued, if comparisons were made with other exterminating movements. Astor's address provoked much interest between 1962 and 1963 which led to discussions in which the author of *The Pursuit of the Millennium* participated. In 1963 Astor offered Cohn the post of Director of a Centre (which still had to be set up) for research into 'Collective Psychopathologies'. The choice of Sussex as a base was partly Astor's; he had been a personal friend of Sussex's first Vice-Chancellor, Lord Fulton. It was also partly Cohn's. He was attracted to the new University's interdisciplinary reputation (although he preferred the term multidisciplinary).

It was the Trust, not the University, which paid Cohn's salary. In return the University received a small annual fee. Wealthy Trustees, like Lord Sieff, Harold Levi, Sir Harold Samuel and Lord Evans, contributed funds to the Centre, but Lord Briggs is adamant that the largest financial input, and the intellectual leadership, were provided by Astor. The Trust met annually and in its earliest days its committee was chaired by R. A. (later Lord) Butler. Cohn had no contractual obligation to teach, but gave occasional voluntary lectures to undergraduates. One neighbour, a Maths graduate, recalled with impressive precision forty years on a scintillating lecture by Cohn on the millennium. Our premier novelist, Ian McEwan, wrote a long and well-researched article on 'The Day of Judgment' in *The Guardian* on 31 May 2008. He quotes freely from the closing pages of *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. He emphasises the importance of Joachim of Fiore. He notes how Cohn steers our attention to the apocalyptic language of *Mein Kampf* and to the centrality of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in racist ideology, now re-emerging 'as a central text for Islamists, frequently quoted on websites and sold in street bookstalls across the Middle East'. McEwan read English at Sussex, and might well have sat alongside my Maths neighbour at a Cohn lecture to undergraduates. This is pure speculation but even were it true it would be at best a happy, if unintended, consequence of a relationship between Sussex and Cohn which was independent of any Columbus Centre remit.

That remit was a research, not teaching, one. Books produced under the Centre's auspices, and bearing the imprint of the Sussex University Press, included works like Leon Poliakov's *The Aryan Myth: a History of Racist Ideas in Europe* (London, 1974); Henry Dicks's *Licensed Mass Murder: a Socio-Psychological Study of some SS Killers* (London, 1972); and Donald Kenrick and Gratton Puxon's *The Destiny of Europe's Gypsies* (London, 1977). It is not to slight these fine works to say that nothing was finer than Cohn's own two publications for the Centre: *Warrant for Genocide* (1967) and *Europe's Inner Demons* (1975).

Warrant for Genocide pointed out that already in medieval Christendom Jews were widely regarded as forming a conspiratorial body working in the service of Satan. Cohn showed how that belief was dressed up in modernist guise after the French Revolution and was embodied in a whole series of publications culminating in *The Protocols*; how it helped to incite pogroms during the Russian civil war; how it swept the world in the 1920s; and in the 1930s provided the ideology for an international movement that prepared the way for the Holocaust. The book has been translated into French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Serbian,

Russian, Hebrew and Japanese. In the Soviet Union the Russian translation circulated as *samizdat* before its open publication in 1990. In the United States the book gained the Anisfield-Wolf Award for its contribution to 'race relations'. More than forty years after its original publication, the English version is still in print. His third book dealt with the history of a stereotype. Reviewing Patrick Wright's *Iron Curtain: from Stage to Cold War* (Oxford, 2007), Tom Nairn begins a discussion of Cold War stereotypes by reference back to Norman Cohn's description of the medieval witch craze, in *Europe's Inner Demons*, as a 'supreme example of a massive killing of innocent people by a bureaucracy acting in accordance with beliefs which, unknown or rejected in earlier centuries, had come to be taken for granted, as self-evident truths'. The Cohn insight most valued by Nairn was that the 'power of the human imagination to build up a stereotype was exploited and channelled by the authorities, notably the magistrates' (*London Review of Books*, October 2008). That witches really existed as a survival of an ancient pagan religion, argued in the once influential book by Margaret Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford, 1921), was impressively put to rest in a few pages of Cohn. He wrote that the only way to establish whether her evidence stood up was 'to examine the sources in their original contexts—a tiresome task, but one which is long overdue'. And which nobody else had done. He, more modestly, claimed no more for *Europe's Inner Demons* than that it 'cleared the way'. It did more than that. It has been translated into French, Spanish, Hungarian, Norwegian and Japanese, and is still in print. Its merits have been recognised in a favourable review of what in many ways is a successor, Alain Boureau's *Satan the Heretic. The Birth of Demonology* (Chicago, 2006). The reviewer likens Boureau to a good liqueur to be taken after the meal, but an entrée of Norman Cohn remained indispensable.[3] That seems true in a larger sense. With Cohn you do not get the main course—millenarianism or witchcraft—in its entirety, but he is the best man to start with. There are many books published since Cohn tackled both these subjects, and some of them perhaps better than his, but he himself saw that what marked his out (and, of course, with them *The Pursuit of the Millennium*) was their central concern with 'the urge to purify the world through the annihilating of some category of human beings imagined as agents of corruption and incarnation of evil'. In other words, they stayed within their original Columbus

[3] N. Vincent, 'Review of Boureau, *Satan the Heretic*', in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 58.3 (2007), 49–51.

Centre (and David Astor) remit. If this was a burden to Cohn, at least we now know that it was a self-imposed one, the product of those intensive conversations in 1962 and 1963 which preceded the setting up of the Centre. But a question remains: did the teleology get in the way of the history?

III

There is a big hole in *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. With the burning of Jan Willemsen at Cleves in 1580 the story of medieval millenarianism could, Cohn argued, 'conveniently be brought to a close'. He was aware of what had been left out. There was very little on England, and his own research interests did not extend to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Those interests themselves have even sometimes been misrepresented. He never argued that millennial beliefs and revolution were indissoluble concepts. Perhaps an accident of timing reinforced that impression. In 1957, when Cohn published his first book, Ingmar Bergman's great film, *The Seventh Seal*, was released and it seemed as if the medieval flagellants had stepped straight across the film set and on to Cohn's pages. Once encountered there, they stayed in the reader's mind and were meant to do so. Generations of undergraduates, for instance, thrilled to Cohn's masterly evocation of the Messianic Reign of John of Leyden. But Cohn knew that millenarian beliefs could have stabilising, as well as destabilising, effects. He was sensitive to the power of belief in a Last World Emperor as a secular companion to the Angelic Pope. The thirty-one entries on the Emperor cult in the index to *The Pursuit of the Millennium* will surprise only those with a simplified reading of Cohn's thesis. Five years after his book, Sylvia Thrupp edited a collection of essays by historians and anthropologists entitled *Millennial Dreams in Action* (The Hague, 1962) which was intended to correct what she perceived as the heavy bias in treating the subject to 'the more dramatic types of movement, those that alarm civil and religious authorities or openly clash with them'. The hole in *The Pursuit of the Millennium* is the Reformation in Tudor and Stuart England, with its State-sponsored cult of the Godly Emperor. The crucial text here is the preamble to the Act in Restraint of Appeals of 1533:

> Where by divers sundry old authentic histories and chronicles it is manifestly declared and expressed that this realm of England is an empire, and so hath been accepted in the world, governed by one Supreme Head and King having the dignity and royal estate of the imperial crown.

The idea that John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* was ordered to be chained in every English parish church to disseminate this imperial message has been effectively scotched in a recent article.[4] At the same time it provides still more evidence of how the Privy Council made propagandist use of Foxe. His millennium to pursue was a past one, not a future one of a thousand years. In his five periods of church history, he calculated that the millennium had begun in the second with Constantine, the First Christian Emperor, which he called 'the flourishing time'. This was the hole which Cohn did not fill in the text, but which he attempted to do in an Appendix to *The Pursuit of the Millennium* which was largely focused on one seventeenth-century English millenarian sect called the Ranters. Here is where the charge that teleology distorted his history has most force.

In his foreword to the 1961 paperback edition of *The Pursuit of the Millennium* Cohn acknowledged that, only four years after its first publication, the perception of Nazi and Communist parallels still provoked most debate. He was unapologetic but made a distinction which he thought might be helpful: 'That the forgotten prophetae of the Middle Ages pointed forwards is of less interest and importance than that Lenin and Hitler, demonstrably and catastrophically, pointed backwards.' Pointing backwards had a special appeal to men 'between two worlds' like Cohn and Klemperer; the one as an observer of twentieth-century totalitarianism and the other as (twice over) its victim. In Michael Burleigh's *The Third Reich* (London, 2000), an interesting attempt to define contemporary totalitarianism makes frequent reference backwards to German past history. It is no surprise that his bibliography cites *The Pursuit of the Millennium* as providing 'an essential starting point'. For all three writers the twentieth century remains their central focus. Pointing forwards, however, has its own hazards which Cohn might have underrated. The temptation here is to make links in a future chain: *post hoc propter hoc*. In his foreword to *The Pursuit of the Millennium* he is modest and diffident initially about the material on the Ranters introduced in his Appendix. He calls it 'curious' only and in any case 'belonging to a later period'. It swells in importance, however, when he takes on the argument of medieval historians that there never was such a thing as a movement of the Brethren of the Free Spirit. He points forwards from them, as a corrective, to his

[4] E. Evenden and T. S. Freeman, 'Print, profit and propaganda: the Elizabethan Privy Council and the 1570 edition of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*', *English Historical Review*, 119 (2004), 1288–1307.

Ranters in the seventeenth century. The similarity between the two movements 'leaves no room for doubt at all', he claims, about the existence of either. He even acknowledged that his seventeenth-century Appendix gave him a confidence in his medieval sources 'which might otherwise have been rash'.

Move forward in time from 1957 to 1970 and we find his confidence in his Ranter evidence burgeoning. That was the year of the third edition of *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, a separate article on the Ranters in *Encounter* by Cohn, and the first ever monograph on them by A. L. Morton.[5] Cohn now acclaims the importance of the 'almost wholly forgotten Ranters because they were a link in a long series of mystical or quasi-mystical accusations extending from the thirteenth century to the present day'. Morton puts it in a similar way. The Ranters were 'a main link in the chain that runs from Joachim of Fiore to William Blake'. His chain does not extend forwards to Hitler and Lenin, it is true, whereas Cohn's chain runs to 'the present day'. But Cohn is talking here, not about participation in genocide but in sexual promiscuity. In *Europe's Inner Demons* Cohn praised Robert E. Lerner's *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the late Middle Ages* (Berkeley, CA, 1972) as 'not only the most recent but also the most thorough survey of this difficult field'. But Lerner's researches led him to suspect the contemporary claims that the Brethren of the Free Spirit had 'ever practised free love at all'. Cohn turns to his own Appendix to brush aside this objection: 'in view of what is known about the English Ranters of the seventeenth century, who proposed very similar doctrines, this scepticism seems excessive'. He quotes a fourteenth-century source for a similar antinomian assertion. In that work, Saint Catherine, now that she had been deified, had been expected by her confessor to embrace a life of total freedom. But instead she does not go on to break the moral law. Emancipated, she tells her confessor that she will not deviate from the model of Jesus Christ. Lerner accuses Cohn of citing this passage out of its context, and of omitting the Saint's answer 'which could almost have been written to confute him'.[6]

Scepticism about the Ranters' promotion of free love has extended even to whether they had ever existed in the first place. That is the case argued by J. C. Davis in his *Fear, Myth and History* (Cambridge, 1986). 'Ranters' are a descriptive term, seen by him more as a projection of

[5] A. L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters: Religious Radicalism in the English Revolution* (London, 1970).

[6] R. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the late Middle Ages* (Berkeley, CA, 1972), p. 219.

deviance, put on them by their opponents, like other contemporary descriptions of 'atheists' 'witches' or 'Popish plotters', than an established entity in their own right. Similarities in accusations made across the centuries carry a different connotation for Cohn than they do for Davis, who sees them rather as reproducing the ritual inversions habitually invoked by opponents in religious debate. The controversy which Davis launched is still not closed, but in the course of it Cohn's reliance on what the Ranters said about themselves, and what their opponents said about them, have been equally undermined. On the first, Nicholas McDowell's *The English Radical Imagination* (Oxford, 2003) has blazed a trail. In a section of his book, 'Rhetorical strategies of Ranter writing', he shows that the memoirs of the Ranter, Abeizer Coppe, can no longer be taken at their face value.[7] As for what Coppe's enemies said about people like him, Davis does to Cohn what Cohn did to Margaret Murray. Or, as Cohn put it, of undertaking the 'tiresome task' of putting primary sources in their original context.

Two of Cohn's 'core witnesses', re-examined by Davis, about the accusations which they made against Ranters were Thomas Edwards and Richard Baxter. Edwards was a Presbyterian minister and a bitter opponent of all Independents, who wrote the best-selling denunciation of the licence of his times in *Gangraena* (1646). Cohn says that 'there are no grounds for doubting the accuracy' of what he said. There are a lot of grounds for doing so, many of them to be found in Ann Hughes's *Gangraena and the Struggle for the English Revolution* (Oxford, 2004). Heresiographers are not, as a rule, renowned for their objectivity. Professor Hughes even discusses whether he was one of those pamphleteers who simply made things up, but thinks on balance not. He encouraged correspondents to write to him, to contribute examples of outrageous libertinism where they had encountered them, in order to add to his swelling collection of such material. The case against him is not of conscious deception but lack of discrimination in transmitting whatever came to hand. But he had journalistic skill in knowing how to hurt an enemy. His Independent opponent, John Goodwin, was caught out playing bowls on the Sabbath, and this is how he was thereafter referred to by Edwards. The Law of Unintended Consequences has the great Victorian evangelist, C. H. Spurgeon, inviting weekend visitors to his home to join him in 'the old Puritan game of bowls'.[8]

[7] N. McDowell, *The English Radical Imagination: Culture, Religion and Revolution 1630–1660* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 89–136.

[8] A. Hughes, *Gangraena and the Struggle for the English Revolution* (Oxford, 2004), p. 439.

The second of Davis's 'core' witnesses is Richard Baxter, a Puritan minister whom Cohn correctly describes as a 'serious and responsible writer'. Ranters were bracketed with Quakers by him among the contemporary sects who were turning the world upside down. Indeed Baxter was one of Edwards's anonymous clerical sources quoted in *Gangraena*. But Davis points out that Cohn omitted Baxter's later worry that he could never actually remember ever meeting a Ranter. More damaging still was Baxter's regret in the 1680s that he had ever provided ammunition for Edwards in the first place. He believed by then that he had greatly inflated the Ranter menace. In 1682 he scoffed at the weight he himself had previously given to 'the absurd Speeches of a few ignorant soldiers'.[9] This was not his only rethinking in the 1680s. Baxter had started his studies in Revelation from an agnostic base. As a young man he had been dismayed to see how varied were the findings of commentators on the text. At the same time he took that, in his own words, 'for truth which the pious adversaries of Popery agreed in, believing that they knew what I did not'. That incontrovertible truth was that the Pope was Antichrist.

In 1684 he published a paraphrase of the entire New Testament, and could not leave out the Book of Revelation. Rereading past commentators revived old misgivings. He did not like, for instance, the way that the seventeenth century writer, Thomas Brightman, 'Englished' the Apocalypse—the very quality which made him a seminal figure for 'root and branch' ministers in the 1640s. Baxter became convinced that the Pope, while he had many faults, being Antichrist was not one of them. This public denial struck at the very core of Protestant belief, as Baxter knew that it would. Enemies accused him of turning Papist, and on the other hand later biographers hailed a liberal mellowing in his old age. But neither the blame nor praise was warranted. In 1686 Baxter was imprisoned and made a detailed reappraisal of millenarianism. That was not why he had been put in prison. He indeed wanted these inquiries to remain a secret. Rather, they were the consequence, not the cause, of his incarceration. He relished the chance it provided for a decent sabbatical. 1686 was his Columbus Centre moment, although, unlike Cohn, he was not paid for it. His manuscript research papers on millenarianism lay neglected in the Doctor Williams's Library, London, until 1959, when the librarian, Roger Thomas, first drew attention to their existence. He wondered why Baxter had never got round to publishing these ideas and could

[9] J. C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: the Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 124, citing R. Baxter, *The True History of Councils Enlarged and Defended* (London, 1682), p. 190.

only speculate that age—he was then 71—had prevented this 'sobering challenge to the wild men of his day'.[10] In fact, it was the fear of being associated with just such 'wild men' that drove post-Restoration nonconformists like Baxter to go to considerable lengths to conceal the extent of their interest in the millennium. Baxter's private letter to his mother condemning the Venner millenarian rising of 1661, for instance, was intercepted by the censors and used as evidence against him![11] Bunyan prudently kept his treatise on Antichrist a secret, even although his manuscript's unambiguously loyal conclusion is that 'Antichrist shall not down, but by the hands of Kings.'[12] The fate of Fatio, Newton's surrogate son, who ended up in the stocks at the beginning of the eighteenth century for a rash commitment to the wild millenarianism of the Cévennes prophets, had similarly salutary lessons for his master. As they would have had equally for Baxter. He shared his prison cell with Thomas Beverley, a committed millenarian, and their correspondence was among the papers retrieved from Dr Williams's Library. Beverley believed that the world would end in 1697 and, after that date passed, went on to claim that it had happened, but the only problem was that nobody had noticed that it had. Baxter had little difficulty with engaging in courteous debate with such views, even when they were more plausible than these niceties of chronology, because both men had in common their pursuit of the millennium, whether it was placed in the past or in the future. What Baxter could not forgive in Beverley, however, was not his getting his dates wrong but in linking millenarianism to a publicly expressed sympathy with antinomians. As he justly said, 'the Millennial opinion I have never been a censorious opposer of while men kept up Peace and Charity with it'.[13] His most powerful argument against the belief that the Pope was Antichrist was the claim made by Joseph Meade (one Protestant interpreter of Revelation who was venerated by both Newton and Baxter) that it had originated with Albigensian heretics. It was a useful Protestant tool as such, therefore, in polemics against Catholics, in much the same way as the belief that there really had once been a Pope Joan. He scribbled in the margin of his manuscript in 1690 against Beverley, however, that 'though

[10] R. Thomas, *The Baxter Treatises: a Catalogue of the Richard Baxter Papers in Dr. Williams's Library* (London, 1959), p. 2.
[11] Baxter Correspondence (in Dr Williams's Library), iv, fol. 63.
[12] R. Sharrock (general editor) *John Bunyan. Miscellaneous Works, 13* (Oxford, 1976–1994), p. 462.
[13] Baxter Treatises, vii, fol. 45.

a Lie serve us for a job, to prejudice men the more against Popery; it always doth more hurt than good'.[14]

Now what Baxter's own researches in prison had convinced him was that 'Christ's Kingdom had been set up by Christian Emperors and Kings.' His inspiration, as it was for many Tudor and Stuart English Protestants, was John Foxe. Baxter had his own schematic pattern for reading the Apocalypse. There were five ways of expounding it. Three were bogus: 'Meerly Literal' ('contrary to Reason'); 'Cabalisticall' ('fictitious and presumptious'); 'Conjectural' ('by reasons which seem plausible to each man as prejudice and fancie dispose him'). But two were valid: 'Rationall' ('fetcht from the context of former prophecies'); 'Revelationall' ('by propheticall Inspiration or Vision'). With his usual honesty (the Pope was not Antichrist; there never was a Pope Joan; had he ever seen a Ranter?) Baxter saw his own practice modestly as rational with a dash of the conjectural. Wistfully he refers to the superior revelationary experience: 'This last John Foxe sweareth by an Appeal to God that he had. And some others too have bin as confident as if they had Visions: I can boast of no such thing.' When Foxe's hero, Constantine, was converted to Christianity, the millennium (a past one), according to him, began. Revelation thus condemns Popery, not directly (by a dubious Scriptural identification with Antichrist) but indirectly—and more tellingly—by contradicting what Scripture now unambiguously reveals: that National Churches were 'nothing but Christian Kingdomes ruled by the Magistrates Sword: and guided by confederated pastors under him'. He went on to claim that 'it is the form of Government that Christ expressly offered the Jews, and owned and claimed in the world . . . which no part of Scripture more fully showeth than the Apocalypse and former prophecies'.[15] This is the dimension we miss in Cohn and for which any numbers of allusions to the Ranters cannot substitute. We saw that both Cohn and the Ranters' first historian, A. L. Morton, claimed the seventeenth-century group as 'links in a chain' going back to the thirteenth century and Joachim of Fiore. In *The Pursuit of the Millennium* Cohn boldly related Joachim of Fiore's writings to the 'Marxian dialectic of the three stages of primitive communism, class society and a final communism' and to the Nazi 'Third Reich of a thousand years'. But he does not press either argument too hard and is no less fascinated by the Prophet's ability to stay (just) this side of orthodoxy, and to win the back-

[14] Baxter Treatises, ii, fol. 103v.
[15] Baxter Treatises, i, fol. 172v.

ing of Popes, or, like Francis of Assisi, end up as more saint than heretic. His section on Joachim in the book is in fact short, distinguishes Joachite from pseudo-Joachite commentary, and is sensitive to his ambivalent readings of Christian Empire (compared to Baxter's single one, for instance) where Frederick II is either the saviour Emperor of the Last Days or the Beast of the Apocalypse.

Cohn was given an opportunity to develop these more nuanced views of the Prophet at a remarkable Symposium on Joachim held at St John's College, Oxford, in July 1974, for scholars who had been invited to contribute to a proposed Festschrift for Marjorie Reeves. Norman Cohn was one of three participants who did not contribute papers and so is absent from the eventual volume, *Prophecy and Millenarianism* (Harlow, 1980). The excellent Editor, Dr Ann Williams, had foreseen such contingencies. She had arranged for a transcript of the 1974 discussions to be kept and deposited ultimately in the archives of St Anne's, Oxford. One of the highlights of a memorable day was the debate on Joachim between Reeves and Cohn, the two giants in their field. When I wanted to consult the transcript of that debate, the present St Anne's library staff were very helpful but had to report that they had no record of these proceedings in their possession. Had the Lewes floods spread to Oxford? Any fears on that count were put to rest when I finally tracked down Dr Williams, who had moved in the intervening years from Aberdeen to Exeter. The transcripts had been offered by her at the time to St Anne's but were not then accepted. She has not abandoned hopes of retrieving them in the future from her own personal papers. Fortunately Marjorie Reeves had made her own separate inquiry, two years after the meeting of the Symposium, into the absorption of Joachim, if there was indeed any, into seventeenth-century Puritan thought. Joachim had stood out as the major prophet of Antichrist, particularly because of his statement that Antichrist was already born in Rome, which he made to Richard Coeur de Lion in 1191. John Foxe had been impressed enough to tell the story twice in his *Acts and Monuments*. John Bale's library contained several pseudo-Joachimist manuscripts and an appeal to his prophecies in the Age of the Spirit.

In his last and unfinished work on the Apocalypse, John Foxe cites Joachim twice and is indebted to him for the structure of a past millennium starting at around AD 300. Foxe is no more a millenarian than Baxter would be after him, but what they both share is a participation in the prophetic tradition to read the signs of the new age dawning. It is Brightman (whom Baxter can never quite forgive for 'Englishing' the Apocalypse) who ranges himself most closely with the Joachites in placing

the last age of history so clearly between victory over Antichrist and the world's end. James Maxwell is an earlier writer who draws on pseudo-Joachimist prophecy to trace the English royal line back to Constantine, and to point forwards to the future Charles I as the Second Charlemagne. Reeves finds the nearest to Joachimist thought in the Ranters in the writings of John Saltmarsh in the 1640s. But Saltmarsh was dead before the Ranter controversy reached its climax and there is no evidence that he had ever read Joachim. The case of Saltmarsh raises the difficult problem of 'influence'. Were Joachites and Puritans only seeming to derive similar religious experiences because they were drawing upon similar Biblical sources? Reeves finds none of the mid-seventeenth-century writers she consulted showing strong direct use of medieval sources (with the possible exception of William Dell). Yet her findings, although scrupulously cautious, are not in the end negative. She claims 'that in relating history and prophecy the Protestant thinkers still follow a medieval way of thought'.[16] Seven years later, in his Introduction to her Festschrift, Sir Richard Southern saw that what was original in her treatment of Joachim was her understanding of his importance in the prophetic pattern of history. In a brilliantly prescient aside he claimed that pattern to be 'still fully alive in Isaac Newton in 1700'. She began with the study of Reformation political thought and action, and then worked backwards to Joachim himself. Thus she avoids the twin perils of 'links in chains', pointing forwards (from Brethren of the Free Spirit to Ranters) and the past treated only as booty for the present, pointing backwards (from hippies to Ranters).

One of Cohn's earliest admirers was Lord Dacre. When he edited *Hitler's Tabletalk, 1941–44* (London, 1953), his introductory essay on Hitler's mind explored the way that half-understood concepts such as a Third Age, a millennium, and Antichrist could be picked up and powerfully transposed in Viennese coffee-houses in the early twentieth century. On 9 February 1967 Cohn wrote to Dacre, reminding him of the generosity of his earlier review of *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (one indeed of the very first) and thanking him now for writing appreciatively in advance to him about his second book. He looked forward to reading his review of it. During the year since he finished *Warrant for Genocide* he had been working hard on a third project: the European witch-craze. It is illuminating to see how he regarded his three books as tied to the

[16] M. Reeves, 'History and eschatology in Medieval and Early Protestant thought in some English and Scottish writings', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, NS 4 (1973), 99–123.

Columbus Centre agenda and as such compatible with Dacre's own search for what it was in Germany's myths and history that Hitler's mind could have been working upon in his lost years in Vienna. He was the more excited now to learn that Dacre was working, like he was, on the European witch-craze, and was impatient to read his forthcoming article (subsequently to be published as *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*: Harmondsworth, 1969). But Dacre had hinted at one possible area of disagreement between them, even in his congratulatory letter, and prompted this defence from Cohn: 'As for my psycho-analytical interpretations—I really must assure you that I'm not proposing to write, or to sponsor, a retrospective analysis of Hitler! This rumour was started by a press agency, which passed it on to *The Times* and *The Guardian*.'

Before his 'Sussex years' Cohn had a bruising encounter with IQ-testing when that was the fashion of the day. He tested himself and found that he scored 80. He reported these findings to a colleague with the comment that this established that he could dress himself without any outside help. His friend, an equally eminent scholar and, like him, to be a future Fellow of the British Academy, was shamed by his candour into revealing his own secret: he had taken a similar test and scored an only slightly less humiliating 100. Perhaps the twists and turns that we shall see in Cohn's relationship with psycho-analytical explanations had their long-term roots here? Certainly psycho-analysis was given great weight in the early discussions about the setting up of the Columbus Trust. Lord Briggs emphasises the contribution of Anthony Storr in this context. And Cohn reiterated to Dacre his belief in its validity, at least at the time of his writing, as one of history's most important interpretative tools.

Dacre's letter had prepared Cohn to some extent for his mixed review of *Warrant for Genocide* which would follow in *The Spectator* of 17 February 1967. Praise was bestowed by Dacre on a 'fascinating and exciting' book, but he registered two reservations: 'I am afraid that I cannot take the Oedipean thesis. By definition, it could only apply to Christians. Why, then, have there been pogroms also in Moslem lands?' And Dacre criticises Cohn for crediting ideas 'with great, almost autonomous continuity'. Thus he sees modern anti-Semitism in both his books as a *direct* continuation of medieval apocalyptic ideas.

These criticisms (and praise) recur in Dacre's review of the last book in Cohn's trilogy, *Europe's Inner Demons*, in *The Sunday Times* of 2 March 1975. He again revels in Cohn's detective work in exposing the nineteenth-century precursors of Margaret Murray 'who come from the same world:

fanatical Catholics sniffing conspiracy and freemasonry everywhere'. What he misses in this 'interesting' book is background—'the world-view of the late Middle Ages'—and method—the inquisitors' use of torture. And then a characteristic barb: 'These, I believe, are more relevant than the "psycho-historical speculations" about the repressed cannibalistic impulses of infancy ascribed to "psycho-analysts of the Kleinian school" to which Mr. Cohn devotes somewhat a speculative postscript.' Dacre's own later essay on the European witch-craze seeks to acknowledge the relativism of Lucien Febvre, the great *Annales* scholar, and the contingent nature of relativism itself with, at the same time, this dismissive reduction of witchcraft beliefs to mental and social pathologies. Protestant eschatology, in Tudor and Stuart England at least, is now seen as essentially an orthodox and reinforcing element, rather than a vehicle for radical dissent. Millenarian and witchcraft beliefs are thus now seen by many historians to complement, rather than to challenge, the general assumptions of their age. As one historian has put it: 'to share them was not an indication of personal or social alienation and maladjustment but of deep involvement in a collective mentality'.[17] Cohn did not bridle at this revisionism; he welcomed it. It is a measure of his humility and capacity for self-criticism that in his later years he quietly set about expunging from later editions of his works passages which no longer now to him seemed right. The disappearance of many of his psycho-analytical speculations after these excisions reflected the fact, as he put it privately, 'that I no longer regard the psycho-analytical approach to social phenomena as fruitful'. This was of a piece with an almost elegiac coming to terms with retirement in 1980. Like Hardy, after completing *Jude the Obscure*, he felt that he had 'supp'd full with horrors' and could now turn to less harrowing matters. But this was not quite how things turned out.

IV

Within a year of retiring as Director of the Columbus Centre Cohn was invited to Concordia University, Montreal, to help launch an Institute for Genocide Studies. In 1985 the Institute came into existence and has

[17] S. Clark, *Thinking with Demons* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 344–5. He shrewdly notes (p. 181, note 8) how Dacre in *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* combines his admiration of the *Annales* school of interpretation of demonology (p. 23) with a simultaneous dismissal of the 'psychopathic delusions of the madhouse' (pp. 18–9) in the same essay.

become a firmly established part of the university. In their first major publication, *The History and Sociology of Genocide* (New Haven, CT, 1990), the founding fathers, Professors Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, praised the contribution of Cohn, who was awarded an honorary LLD by Concordia University. His research for the next fifteen years studied the origins of the apocalyptic tradition in antiquity. It was entitled *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come* (New Haven, CT, 1993), but the sub-title of the 2001 second, revised edition, *From Combat Myth to Eschatology*, conveys its essence. Cohn maintained that the prophet Zoroaster placed the Iranian combat myth in an eschatology which lies at the heart of Jewish reading of the Apocalypse, and much of early Christianity, as is evident in the Book of Revelation. His concluding chapter on that theme was revised and expanded, in the same manner as he had rewritten his earlier works. The book has been translated into German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Norwegian and Japanese. His last book, *Noah's Flood: the Genesis in Western Thought* (New Haven, CT, 1996), shows how between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries the story of the Flood both helped and hindered the development of scientific geology.

The Cohn–Reeves tradition of treating fantasy as history is in the good hands of a younger generation, as witnessed by Stuart Clark's excellent *Thinking with Demons* (Oxford, 1997). The very Cohn-like title of his work reveals his concern to treat the 'demonologists'—and keep them wrapped up in their inverted commas—not as obsessionals, but as men who turned to the subject to make sense of their other concerns 'as theologians, priests, philosophers'.[18] Cohn would have said 'Amen' to that. Clark paid perhaps the best tribute ever to Cohn when he called the pamphleteer, John Wagstaffe, a 'seventeenth-century Norman Cohn'. For Wagstaffe, the concept of 'witches' originated in priests' denunciation of private rivals and developed when 'Priests of different Religions called one another so, and condemned one anothers religions.' Jews called Christians witches; Christians called heathens witches; inquisitors and Jesuits called heretics and reformers witches. Confessions of witchcraft were then dictated to the accused by their torturing inquisitors. The sabbat was manufactured for Catholic polemic. Clark was right in his characterisation. Wagstaffe, writing in 1671, could just as easily have been Cohn, more than two hundred years later, putting Margaret Murray to rights

[18] Ibid., pp. 598–600.

about 'covens' or Tsarist forgers to rights about Jewish world conspiracies. Cohn spent a lifetime on thinking with demons, and we have been immeasurably the richer for it.

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Note. I have used the biographical and bibliographical material which Norman Cohn deposited with the British Academy, and I am also indebted in the preparation of this memoir to Lord Asa Briggs, Professor J. C. Davis, Professor Geza Vermes, Dr Ann Williams, and my former Sussex University colleague, Professor Blair Worden (for access to Lord Dacre's private papers). Professor John Gray contributed a moving personal tribute to Norman Cohn in *The Independent*, 29 September 2007.