



AUSTIN WOOLRYCH

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Austin Herbert Woolrych 1918–2004

I

AUSTIN WOOLRYCH, who died on 14 September 2004, was a scholar whose career, distinguished though it was, really only blossomed after his sixtieth birthday. The circumstances of his life made him a late starter and his first published work did not appear until he was in his late thirties, and his first monograph not until he was 64. The two books for which he will be most remembered appeared in his sixty-ninth and his eighty-fourth year. To put it another way, by the age of 60 he had published just over 500 pages of academic prose; between his sixtieth birthday and his death twenty-five years later, he had published another 2,000 pages. And in other ways too, he spread his wings in his last fifteen years in a manner that rounded out what had hitherto been a successful career distinguished, but also limited, by dutifulness.

The economic and political circumstances of his early life diverted his career from a natural academic track.¹ Austin was born on 18 May 1918, one of three children of Stanley H. C. Woolrych, who had had a brilliant but frustrated career as an Intelligence Officer in the First World War, setting up an outstanding counter-intelligence office in France, but then

¹ Most of the details about Austin's family and personal life in what follows are drawn from the splendid appreciation by Lesley le Claire published in the Festschrift presented to Austin in 1998: I. Gentles, J. Morrill and B. Worden (eds.), *Soldiers, Writers and Statesmen of the English Revolution* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 1–18. Austin tells us that his first encounter with war was to be evacuated to the basement of the maternity hospital in which he was born on account of a Zeppelin raid (A. H. Woolrych, 'A Pembroke historian's run of luck', *The Pembrokian* (April 2003), p. 10).

being transferred to a cul-de-sac posting as military attaché in Bern.² On demobilisation, Stanley returned to a business career, and Austin was brought up in comfortable circumstances in North London, attending Westminster School to the age of 16. He was always very conscious of his ancestry—the Woolryches (or Wolryches) were an ancient Shropshire gentry family, and Austin could give a vivid account of the family vault and noble tombs in the church of St Andrew, Quatt. Austin was descended from a cadet branch of the main family, which allowed him to deplore with a sceptical pride the exploits of the head of the family, Sir Thomas Woolrych, royalist Governor of Bridgnorth in the Civil Wars. Austin himself was a temperamental moderate Parliamentarian, at once fascinated and repelled by the fanaticks of the period he made his own.

At sixteen, Austin was a studious boy at the top of his class at Westminster and he must have imagined himself going on to university, and following a family preference for Oxford. But this was 1934 and his father's business was hurting badly from the economic recession. It was decided that he should leave school and make his own way in the world. And so he found himself as a clerk at Harrods with a starting salary of £1 a week. His period at Harrods left little mark on him: he himself referred to it in 2003 as 'dreary ill-paid work'.³ It did, however, leave one important legacy: the magnificent copper-plate handwriting which remained with him until his eighties. He never aspired to master the typewriter, let alone the computer. His personal letters were handwritten, as were his public lectures, and his books and articles were handwritten and then typed by his secretaries at the university. This continued long into retirement, but it is astonishing to record that Oxford University Press set his last book, *Britain in Revolution 1625–1660* delivered by Austin at the age of 84, straight from his 1,400 handwritten pages.

To relieve the tedium of Harrods, Austin set out to broaden his mind. He travelled to work on the tube reading Proust, Joyce and Hardy, and he spent his days off in London's museums and galleries and his evenings at concerts.⁴ Few of his generation were as catholic in their tastes both in the full spectrum of the visual arts and of the performing arts and of genres of writing. His embrace of the contemporary was more cautious than his warm embrace of all that had come before—in musical taste, for

² His exploits are chronicled in Janet Morgan, *The Secrets of Rue St Roch* (London, 2004).

³ A. H Woolrych, 'A Pembroke historian's run of luck', *The Pembrokian* (April 2003), 10.

⁴ 'The stimulus that kept me going . . . came from the cheapest seats at Covent Garden or at the Queen's Hall (then 2s. or 3s.)', *ibid.* 10.

example, he leaned towards the classical rather than the gothic or the romantic (his last major purchase of CDs—he had a prodigious collection—was of the 200-plus cantatas of Bach which, he said, he had not listened to properly and systematically before). The time and trouble he took to establish regular concerts in the Great Hall is one of his enduring legacies to the University of Lancaster.

What is not clear is whether he spent the journeys to and from Knightsbridge reading any History. Such evidence as he left us suggests not: his passion was for literature and for poetry not for history, even history in the *belles lettres* tradition. At any rate, the frustrations of the 1930s had little to do with a passion for the academic life. Although it was only as a widower that he really indulged his passion for seeing the world, there was a prescient sense of how he would prefer broadening his mind to molly-coddling his body. In the late summer of 1938 he cycled from London to Venice, covering 1,100 miles in just over a fortnight and detouring to be sure of taking in the highest and most demanding of Swiss Alpine passes. He then devoured the art and architecture of Venice for a week, before catching the train home. When, in later years, he took to travelling the world, he sought out all aspects of visual culture, taking special pleasure, for example, in the ‘philosophy’ of the Chinese garden or the symbolism of Aborigine Art. And wherever he went, he sought out concerts and (if possible) opera. When he returned from China in 1987, he came laden down with scrolls, silk and CDs of Chinese music (as well as a Sony Walkman he had secured for a keen price after an extended barter in a Hong Kong side street).⁵

The summer of 1938 saw Austin in Venice and Hitler in Prague. Austin did not share Mr Chamberlain’s faith in the Munich agreement, and as soon as he got home he volunteered for the Territorial Army in the Inns of Court Regiment. When, a year later, war was declared, he was speedily called up and sent to Sandhurst. He was commissioned as a Lieutenant (later Captain) in the Royal Tank Regiment in March 1940 and sent to serve in the Middle East. He got to know and to dislike the desert. Landing at Qatar on a journey to the Far East in 1987, he said, in a way which was shocking to those who knew him as a most polite user of the English language—‘this is what in 1941 we used to call “a million miles from F—k all”’. The soldier he was for those six years never

⁵ For his Venetian adventure, see the appreciation by le Claire; his time in China in 1987 was spent in the company of the present author, and that and other anecdotes about travel are from his personal memory.

entirely left him—there was always a trace of the parade ground if not of the mess about him. A year of hectic activity and movement brought him with his tanks to El Alamein and to a brush with death. He was seriously wounded by shrapnel which left him with the effective loss of sight in one eye (one piece of shrapnel had to be left in the eye and this was to cause him intense pain in the last part of his life, though he was not one to draw attention to it). This injury, compounded by bouts of both dysentery and diphtheria, ended active service and he saw out the war from behind a desk, mainly on army staff appointments panels. Nonetheless, he enjoyed the camaraderie of army life with its discipline and combination of team-building and individual responsibility, and there can be little doubt that this informed his practice as a head of department at Lancaster University in his later years. It also gave him an insight into how soldiers fighting a just war in the 1640s thought and acted. As Lesley le Claire, in her appreciation of Austin written for his *Festschrift*, rightly says, ‘there is no better setting of a scene before a battle than his simple prologue to [his account of the battle of] Marston Moor. It bears repeating because of the way in which he takes that dangerous but necessary leap of imagination from one epoch to another. It is not a romantic leap. His personal experience as a soldier in the twentieth century is fused with his accumulated knowledge of the mind-set of a soldier in the seventeenth and the battle procedures under which he would be operating.’⁶ And this is what Austin wrote:

By about five a quiet fell upon the two armies and the royalists could hear their opponents chanting their metrical psalms in Marston Field. It was a comfort to taut nerves and tired muscles to sing the songs of an earlier chosen people, for those soldiers had to stand a test which modern warfare has forgotten—that of watching for hours, without cover and at a range close enough to be seen, a whole army poised rank on rank for battle, arms glinting, colours flying and all the panoply of death flaunting its gayest colours.⁷

II

When peace was secured in 1945, Austin toyed with staying on in the army, but Muriel, whom he had met and married in the early years of the war, was dead set against it. And so, like so many others, he took as his peace dividend the chance for a higher education that family circum-

⁶ Le Claire, *Soldiers, Writers and Statesmen*, p. 5.

⁷ Austin Woolrych, *Battles of the English Civil War* (London, 1961), p. 72.

stances had taken from him in the 1930s. He applied for a place at Pembroke College, Oxford, choosing it for no better reason than that a cousin had been there in the 1920s. His own telling of the story of what happened next is the best:

Still in uniform, I was interviewed by the Master . . . We talked of many things, and my luck was I could hold my own on the novels of Henry Fielding, which I had read in preparation for studying English. I did not know that he had written a book about them. Eventually he said: *'we shall be happy to accept you, Captain Woolrych: what do you propose to read?'* . . . I said something like *'it's eleven years since I left school and my languages are in bad repair, so I would like to read English'*. *'Unfortunately'*, he replied, *'we have no English don: would you consider taking history?'* I did not hesitate and I hope graduates in English will not be offended if I count it another providence in my lucky life.⁸

The whole tone of this passage speaks volumes of the fastidious, courteous, un-self-important man he was. It was indeed a fortunate contingency, for while if he had studied English he might have emerged as a rather good if slightly antiquarian Milton specialist, it is clear that his training in Oxford brought out a naturally gifted historian. Going up in the Michaelmas Term of 1946 he graduated in seven terms (as a former serviceman he was spared prelims) and he then began to study for a post-graduate degree (later submitted for the degree of B.Litt.) on the subject of the Good Old Cause before and after the collapse of the Protectorate.

However two terms into graduate study, he was recruited to join the rapidly expanding History Department at the University of Leeds. He was to remain there from 1949 to 1964 as the university grew from about 2,000 students to some 7,000. The great civic universities of the 1950s still had more students doing general degrees than honours degrees, and general degrees were all a bit of this and a bit of that. Furthermore, even with the Honours Degree students, teaching was largely by formal lectures, with virtually no small-group teaching, at least until the final year, and little one-to-one teaching except for the return of occasional essays. Austin set out to reform the General Degree, and to make the most of the gruelling regime of lecturing. He was a completely loyal lieutenant to successive heads of department—Norman Gash and then, from 1955, Asa Briggs. He took on more than his fair share of the time-consuming tasks, especially admissions at which he excelled. The professors despatched him to talk round more senior colleagues who thought change in the structure of the degrees would mean more work and new courses

⁸ 'A Pembroke historian's run of luck', pp. 10–11.

to be written, and he was the single most important voice in the reform of the non-Honours degree into a Combined Studies degree with rather more intellectual coherence than what had gone before. But he was no agitator for reform for reform's sake and as a teacher he accepted the discipline of lecturing as a given and took it very seriously, writing out the lectures for his survey course on the Tudors and Stuarts with that same meticulous attention to clear structure, judicious argument and vivid detail that he was to bring to what he published throughout his life. For Austin the words 'meticulous', 'cautious', 'thorough' were words of compliment. His students were given every help in understanding where the weight of historical opinion lay. He was well-respected by his colleagues as someone who did what needed doing without complaint or self-aggrandisement. He made lifelong friends at Leeds, and he made sure that after he had moved on he kept in touch by meeting up with them regularly—especially at the mid-way point between Leeds and Lancaster which lies, of course, in some of the most beautiful parts of the Dales, where strenuous walking could be combined with good food and a glass or two of decent wine.

The life of a university lecturer in the 1950s was one of collegiality amongst staff, but little personal contact with students, and this left Austin feeling unsatisfied. So it is not surprising to find him taking on a large amount of University Extension Work. This sprang not only from his lifelong commitment to lifelong learning; it brought him the friendship of those with common interests and passions, and so he would sign up generously for lectures to small groups of enthusiasts, and he never said no to invitations to lead short residential courses at the university's extension college at Grantley Hall, near Fountains Abbey. He was also an enthusiastic lecturer to branches of the Historical Association and it was for the Association that he wrote his first publication, a pamphlet on Penruddock's rising on the occasion of its tercentenary in 1955. Penruddock's rising was named after the leader (in Wiltshire) of the one briefly successful part of the futile royalist attempt to overturn the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell. It was planned to coincide with similar risings elsewhere, of which one of the most important was to be an attack on York by royalists gathered, with inappropriate symbolism, on Marston Moor, and it was at the local York branch of the Historical Association that Austin first offered a draft of this pamphlet. It is also striking that almost half of all his reviews were for the Association's journal *History*.⁹

⁹ For this, and all other comments on the scale of his publishing output, I have relied on the bibliography in Gentles *et al.*, *Soldiers, Writers and Statesmen*, pp. 323–35.

As further evidence of his commitment from early on in his career (a commitment never abandoned) to lifelong learning, his other early publications in the period down to 1958 were short articles for *History Today*,¹⁰ then—much more than later—directed at the general public rather than the student market.

It was thus as he approached his fortieth birthday, and following the arrival of a new dynamo in the shape of Asa Briggs, that Austin was encouraged to see himself not as a commentator on historical scholarship but as a participant in its debates. In his fortieth year he published two articles drawing down (but much extending) the research he had undertaken for his B.Litt dissertation.¹¹ The first of these, a narrative and commentary on the collapse of Richard Cromwell's Protectorate that focuses on the *mésalliance* of army officers and hard-line Republicans who outflanked the generals and the Protectoral official for long enough to force the latter out, but not long enough to create any kind of stable alternative, is notable for the way it interweaves the fragmentary evidence of political schemings in private with a managed use of the press to build up pressure on the regime. It is a notable refinement of previous accounts and it conducts the gentlest of sabotage manoeuvres against the version of events offered by Godfrey Davies, sometime History Fellow at Pembroke College, Oxford, and the self-proclaimed and self-important heir to Gardiner and Firth as master narrator of the revolutionary decades. But more interesting was the companion piece which appeared slightly later, an account of the Yorkshire Rising that destabilised what was left of the armies of the Good Old Cause and eased the way for Monck's march on London with regiments of the English army of occupation in Scotland that was to lead to the re-establishment of the full Long Parliament, to 'free' elections and to the recall of Charles II. This article begins with a characteristic disclaimer:

The Yorkshire rising [of January 1660] has been little remembered . . . But the episode was famous in its day and the evidence is worth resifting, both to establish the full facts and to find what light they throw on the cross-currents of political aims and interests at the point of the Great Rebellion's final breakdown.¹²

¹⁰ 'Yorkshire's Treaty of Neutrality' *History Today*, 6 (1956), 696–704; 'The collapse of the Great Rebellion', *History Today*, 8 (1958), 606–15.

¹¹ 'The Good Old Cause and the Fall of the Protectorate', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, 13/2 (1957), 133–61; 'Yorkshire and the Restoration', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 39 (1958), 483–507.

¹² 'Yorkshire and the Restoration', p. 483.

The article does a great deal more, of course. It is a penetrating account of the actions of George Monck and of Thomas Fairfax and it comes closer than any of the biographers of those men to penetrating their intentions (in so far as they understood them themselves), given that one of their immediate intentions was to conceal their longer-term intentions from others. It offers a magnificently delicate account of the ebb and flow of fear and hope amongst a gentry at once tantalised by a range of possible outcomes far preferable to recent reality but also aware that the rewards of success were as nothing compared with the consequences of defeat at the hands of a brutalised English army.

It must have been around this time that Austin accepted invitations to write two books that were addressed at a wider readership but based on a thorough knowledge of the sources. The first, and more impressive, was his *Battles of the English Civil War*.¹³ It is a study of three battles (Marston Moor (July 1644), Naseby (June 1645) and Preston (August 1648)). This is a startling concept but one that was beautifully executed. The series into which it was commissioned was called 'British Battles' and all the other volumes in the series analysed single engagements. The decision to go for three battles rather than one was wholly Austin's. As he put it in 1991:

it seemed to me that if I focused on three major battles I could sufficiently tell the story of each without inflating it and at the same time convey something of what it felt like to be marching or riding into action for king or parliament three and a half centuries ago. And since most of the officers and many of the men on both sides were fighting for causes that they passionately believed in rather than just for pay and plunder, I had to give proportionately more space than military historians commonly do to the political and religious issues, both as they first led to open war in 1642 and as they underwent modification in the course of the fighting.¹⁴

Thus it was a military history with the politics back in, not (as with Veronica Wedgwood's recent study of the Great Civil War which he greatly admired) a political narrative that explores the impact of military conflict.¹⁵ It is distinguished military history partly because of that; and it was distinguished in a way that arose from his meticulous checking of detail. In his account of Naseby, for example, he was the first to realise that a road mentioned in the contemporary accounts was not where the

¹³ A. H. Woolrych, *Battles of the English Civil War* (London, 1961; reprinted with a new introduction, London, 1991).

¹⁴ Woolrych, *Battles* (1991 edn.), prelims, unpaginated.

¹⁵ C. V. Wedgwood, *The King's War 1641–1647* (London, 1957).

road was in the nineteenth or twentieth century. The whole battlefield needed to be moved a few hundred yards to the west of previous accounts. This helped him to explain a number of difficulties in previous accounts. This in turn was to lead to a very modern battle in his later years when the Ministry of Transport decided to build the East-Coast Ports to M1/M6 road (the A14) to the North rather than the South of Naseby (allegedly because the Tory minister was more sympathetic to the protests of the local Hunt than to those of local historians) and Austin's battle-lines came into play. Austin campaigned relentlessly, but in vain, to prevent the road cutting through the space between the Parliamentary lines and the baggage train and to ensure that visitors would hear on the wind not the ghosts of the Ironsides singing psalms but Continental supermarket lorries bringing European goods to Eurosceptic consumers.

The book may focus on the three largest battles of the English civil wars; but it has wonderful vignettes of other military encounters, such as the tense stand-off at Turnham Green (November 1642) where Charles almost won the war before it got fully into its stride; and the political context (if not the religious context) is given just the space that is required. A book for inclusion in a Research Assessment Exercise it is not; a classic work of cross-over history it most certainly is.

The little biography of Oliver Cromwell published in OUP's short-lived 'Clarendon Biographies' series (1964) is rather less successful.¹⁶ It is a gently whiggish account and it achieves a fine balance between political and military history; but its chronological cover is very uneven—more than 10 per cent of the whole book is devoted to a few months in 1647, compared with just two pages on 1648 and two paragraphs on Cromwell's role in the trial and execution of the King. More pages are devoted to the first forty years (about which so little is known) than to Oliver's period as Lord Protector. The judgements and assessments are shrewd enough, but the book failed to establish itself in a crowded field as one of the key biographies. Oxford University Press did Austin no favours by reissuing Sir Charles Firth's great biography (*Oliver Cromwell and the Rule of the Puritans*) in its 'The World's Classics' series for less than £1 just after Austin's book came out.

By 1964, then, he had published two short works aimed at a general readership and four articles aimed at that same readership, together with three researched articles and about twenty reviews, mainly for either

¹⁶ Austin Woolrych, *Oliver Cromwell* (Oxford, 1964).

History or for *The Listener*.¹⁷ It was a slender basis on which to secure one of the plum jobs in the profession; and it was for his teaching and for being a good citizen at Leeds that he got that promotion. He was to seize the opportunity with both hands.

III

One of the new universities founded in the early 1960s was designated to be in the North West. Improbably, the competition became one between Blackpool and Lancaster, and the latter eventually won. The Academic Planning Board sat down in 1963 to make the crucial appointments that would shape the new university, and one of their first appointments was a Professor of History. They offered the post to Geoffrey Barraclough but (probably fortunately) he first accepted and then declined it. Barraclough (1908–84) had a long and successful spell as Professor of Medieval History at Liverpool (1946–56) and while he was a distinguished medievalist he was much more than that. He had spent the war at Bletchley Park working on the Enigma Project, but had found time to write *The Origins of Modern Germany* (1946) which had had a profound influence on British and American post-war policy towards Germany; and his *Introduction to Contemporary History* was in press at the time of the offer of the post at Lancaster. He was also President Designate of the Historical Association (1964–7). He was a restless man, with a restless mind, whose career was marked by many changes of mind and resignations, so Lancaster would have had a bumpier ride had he confirmed his acceptance.¹⁸ Perhaps the university's decision to offer the post to Austin after Geoffrey Barraclough had turned it down was based on the need for a safe pair of hands. That is certainly what it got.¹⁹

¹⁷ The deputy editor of *The Listener* was Maurice Ashley, and when Ashley published his *The Greatness of Oliver Cromwell* in 1957 (and that was the best selling biography at the time Austin's was published), Ashley thanked Austin for having read it in draft (indeed Austin is the only historian thanked).

¹⁸ D. H. Fischer, 'Barraclough, Geoffrey (1908–1984)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30794>>, accessed 20 Sept. 2007.

¹⁹ The account of Austin as head of department at Lancaster is based on material in the appreciation by Lesley le Claire in *Soldiers, Writers and Statesmen*, and from Eric Evans, 'Obituary: Austin Woolrych', *Cultural and Social History*, 2005:2, 131–3 and private communications with the author.

What Austin most obviously created at Lancaster was an excellent *History* Department. Most of those of the other new universities—most notably Sussex (presided over by his mentor at Leeds, Asa Briggs) and East Anglia—rejected single honours programmes in traditional subjects and produced ‘schools of studies’ (at East Anglia there were historians and historical components in ‘English and American Studies’, ‘European Studies’ and in ‘Social Sciences’). The Lancaster model, to which Austin contributed largely, was colleges made up of scholars and programmes in cognate disciplines, all historians sharing a college and physical space with adjacent disciplines. The original aim—as at Stirling—was to make diversity the organising principle in each college, but Austin successfully argued that the clustering of arts departments in one college would ‘greatly facilitate the close consultation and cooperation between them which our degree schemes . . . will demand’.²⁰ It is striking that he saw to it (against the grain in the 1960s) that History was located within the Arts not within the Social Sciences, and this gave a more traditional feel to the History practised there. Not that Austin’s sense of what constituted History was narrow. He designed a syllabus and then went in search of people to teach it (the way the army did things). And he was determined that there should be medieval history as well as modern history, African and American History as well as British and European History, local history as well as national history, and that there should be a strong place for the history of science. What was not included was history informed by the burgeoning social sciences—economics, sociology, political science. There was little scope for methodologically driven study. His strong preference for empiricism and the craft of history informed the type of syllabus he wanted and the people he wanted to teach it. The senior appointments he made reflected this—Geoffrey Holmes from Glasgow, Harold Perkin and John Marshall from Manchester, Joe Shennan from Liverpool. None of his senior colleagues came from Oxbridge or London. They were all committed teachers with strong empiricist leanings. He then set to work to recruit the best of the younger scholars completing their Ph.D.s and his sound judgement was more consistent than that of most of his colleagues who were setting up departments from scratch. What is more, when he made a couple of appointments that did not work out, he blamed himself and worked tirelessly to support and affirm the weaker brethren.

²⁰ Quoted by Le Claire, ‘An appreciation’, p. 10.

He was to remain head of department for almost twenty years, combining it for several of those (1971–5) with the post of Pro-Vice-Chancellor. And being one of the founding fathers and a man noted for his discretion and unassertive wisdom he was much employed in other capacities by successive Vice-Chancellors—a long stint on the body that ran the Library, for example. Eric Evans, speaking for all those who served under him in the department, describes his style as ‘enlightened paternalism’ that some found stifling at times. But as he adds, ‘all recognised the rigour, duty and clear-sighted vision that drove the man . . . He enriched the experience of every one he worked with.’²¹ He prized what he called ‘collegiality’ and he expected everyone to take their turn at routine departmental chores and to cover for one another (allowing a sabbatical system more generous than most). His paternalism involved a close engagement with each staff member’s teaching and research, and he was very determined that teaching would be carefully planned and delivered. Although keen to ensure a balance of teaching and research in others, he unflinchingly put research on a back burner for himself, and he produced less scholarship in his first fifteen years at Lancaster than he had in fifteen years at Leeds—two learned articles and a major introduction to an edition of Milton’s prose writings in the last years of the Commonwealth. He was not idle: he was working steadily, relentlessly, on what was to be his first true monograph, his study of the eight months that separated Cromwell’s forcible dissolution of the Rump Parliament in April 1653 and his assumption of the title of Lord Protector in December 1653. But he only completed this work, on which he had been working for twenty years, on the eve of his retirement.

It was an inspired notion on the part of the American editors of the Yale Edition of the Prose Works of John Milton to ask Austin to write the introduction to Volume 7 (a volume that included nine polemical works beginning with *A Treatise of Civil Power* (Feb. 1659) and ending with the second edition of *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* (April 1660)). It allowed Austin to draw on all that he had learnt from his B.Litt. thesis, to display his masterly close reading of texts, and to contextualise them with accuracy and imagination. The introduction is 228 pages long, perhaps 100,000 words, a work of startling patience, calm precision and immaculate forethought. Milton was silent, at least in prose, for the last four years of Oliver Cromwell’s life; he burst into print once he was dead. In the context of an eight-volume edition of

²¹ Evans, ‘Obituary’, p. 132.

his works, what was Austin to do about explaining and exploring the only silent years of Milton's maturity? He decided not to 'attempt a comprehensive survey of the intervening years, but [to] introduce a few retrospects in order to describe certain new developments in policy and controversy, particularly in the ecclesiastical sphere, which must be understood if these last polemical writings are to be understood'.²² This is more easily said than done; and it is brilliantly achieved. For example, there still has been no better or more succinct account of the Savoy Conference and of its (offensive to Milton) Confession of Faith to be imposed on all public ministers of the gospel. The introduction as a whole offers a sumptuous account of the great burst of desperate polemic in the dying months of the Commonwealth, and the siting of Milton's work within that desperate polemic. The account of the political groupings that brought down the Protectorate and then brought down one another is another example of capturing in words the movement of a lava-flow. Perhaps best of all is the description and commentary on the radically different texts of *The Readie and Easie Way* published in February and April 1660, as Milton risked his life to advocate schemes that would prevent the restoration of kingly tyranny.

It was by far Austin's most ambitious work to date; one linked to a standard edition that would stake his claim to be a major scholar and not only a highly successful populariser. It must have been painful for him to wait eleven years for a text he finished in 1969 to see the light of day, a frustration made far worse when an initial publication in 1974 was followed immediately by the withdrawal of the book because of another scholar's incompetence (one of the editors had selected a corrupt late edition as the basis of his work). Austin accepted all this with an astonishing stoicism and refused either to lay blame or to seek sympathy. It was just one of those things. Meanwhile he got on with running his department and with writing his book on the Nominated Assembly of 1653.

He had trailed his intentions to write the book that finally came out in 1982 under the title *Commonwealth to Protectorate* in an article published in 1965.²³ This examined every shard of evidence that has survived about how and for what purposes Cromwell and his council of officers came to call the men they did to form the Nominated Assembly (or Barebone's

²² *Complete Prose Works of John Milton, Volume Seven*, ed. Robert W. Ayers with an introduction by Austin Woolrych (New Haven, CT, 1980), p. ix.

²³ 'The calling of Barebone's Parliament', *English Historical Review*, 80 (1965), 492–513.

Parliament), a constituent assembly intended to prepare the people for the responsibilities of liberty now that tyranny in most of its forms had been overthrown. It started the process that his book was to complete of seeing the Assembly as far more eclectic than had been thought, far less a collection of millenarian fanatics. Austin was not a man for shortcuts, and the book was allowed to take as long as it took. He was helped in this by the absence of a beguiling central archive. The story had to be pieced together from a hundred archives and from a comprehensive reading of everything published in a busy year for the press; and all this before the availability of microfilm let alone on-line versions of the contents of the *Short Title Catalogue*. Even the appearance of two magnificent accounts of the high politics of the period 1646–53²⁴ did not cause him to hasten his march to completion. The book duly appeared in 1982—an easy read of more than 200,000 words.²⁵ The first quarter of the book examines the fall of the Rump and how the crises resulting from that dissolution led eventually to the decision to establish an assembly of about 140 men chosen as men ‘fearing God and of approved integrity’—approved that is by the army high command. The next three-fifths of the book analyse the composition and activities of that Assembly (which, against expectation, had quickly proclaimed itself a Parliament) and then tells the story of its achievements and divisions which culminated in its breakdown and surrender of its powers back to the Army; and a final chapter is a masterly account of the establishment of the Protectorate. It is a book that skilfully combines analysis and narrative, politics and religion, social and constitutional history, and, as in all his works, wonderful vignettes of men who make even the most fleeting of appearances. It is, in the words of Perez Zagorin’s laudatory review, a ‘slow motion, high-magnification study’ which shows a ‘continuing tension between radical millenarian Puritanism and moderate constitutionalism . . . not only between distinct and opposed bodies of men but also within the individual minds of many of the actors in [the] story’;²⁶ and Mark Kishlansky praised it for supplanting Christopher Hill’s characterisation of the Assembly as ‘a party congress nominated by the local party cells’ by a sense of a body chosen by the Army Council ‘to reflect the heterogeneous composition of the revolutionary movement’. The book carried forward a reinterpretation

²⁴ David Underdown, *Pride’s Purge* (Oxford, 1971); Blair Worden, *The Rump Parliament* (Cambridge, 1974).

²⁵ Austin Woolrych, *Commonwealth to Protectorate* (Oxford, 1982).

²⁶ Perez Zagorin, Review of *Commonwealth and Protectorate*, in *Renaissance Quarterly*, 36/3 (1983), 448–50.

begun in the mid 1970s of the English Revolution ‘which, if less emotionally attractive than its ideological competitors, is reasoned and reasonable’. Woolrych was, in a word, conscripted into the revisionist camp.²⁷ No reviewer demurred.

IV

Woolrych handed the manuscript of *Commonwealth to Protectorate* to OUP in August 1980. He knew that retirement beckoned, and in the academic year 1981–2 he did something he had denied himself in all his years in Lancaster. He took a sabbatical and spent it as a Visiting Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. It was a foretaste of retirement, a year of uninterrupted pleasure in the archives, his first since 1948–9. And it helped to lay the foundations of his second and even better monograph, *Soldiers and Statesmen*, which was to appear just six years later.²⁸ In gratitude, he dedicated the book to the Warden and Fellows of All Souls.

This crucial year prepared him for retirement in all kinds of ways. It committed him to giving over his retirement to scholarship; it eased him out of the profound obligation he felt to the department he had created and allowed him to move gracefully into handing over the reins. He formally retired in 1983 and allowed his successors to get on with it, but taught his special subject for two more years. These were not easy years, however, for Austin and his family—Muriel and their now grown up son and daughter—and there were a number of problems, the most inexorable of which proved to be Muriel’s chronic ill-health, brought on by a lifetime of smoking. Austin had a wanderlust, and yearned to explore the world, but Muriel could only cope with the sedentary pleasures of a Greek island hotel and in due course became housebound and unable to contribute much to the running of the splendid country house with large garden which had been their home for a quarter of a century: Patchetts in the lovely village of Caton in the Lune Valley a few miles north-east of Lancaster. Austin was an uncomplaining carer, and a new love sprang up between them before her death in 1991. But there is no doubt that these were the most difficult years for him, and the completion of *Soldiers and Statesmen* in this context is wholly remarkable.

²⁷ Mark Kishlansky, review of *Commonwealth and Protectorate*, in *Journal of Modern History*, 55/4 (1983), 695–7.

²⁸ Austin Woolrych, *Soldiers and Statesmen: the General Council of the Army and its Debates 1647–1648* (Oxford, 1987).

V

Commonwealth to Protectorate covered the events of April to December 1653 in 200,000 words; *Soldiers and Statesmen: the General Council of the Army and its Debates 1647–1648*, covers the events of March to November 1647 in 160,000 words. The subtitle (apart from implying a discussion of 1648, which the book really does not) indicates the very tight focus of the book. It is a study of the remarkable period during which the Army defended itself against an incorrigible king, an ungrateful parliament and a people impatient for peace and an end to the taxes necessary to maintain an army. The army defended itself by creating a council made up of field officers and of (s)elected representatives of the junior officers and rank and file of every regiment. This General Council and its committees met weekly (and at times—as in the famous Putney Debates at the end of October and into November—daily) to defend the honour of the Army, to secure their rights as soldiers, and to ensure that no settlement of the kingdom was made which did not incorporate those principles for which their colleagues had fought and died.

Soldiers and Statesmen tells the story of the creation, work and demise of the General Council, and a wider political narrative is cast around that. More than one-third is (appropriately enough) devoted to the Putney Debates, but in many ways the discussion of the earlier debates as the General Council came to articulate its role of monitor and guarantor of a settlement between an untrustworthy king and a fickle parliament are the most startling and innovative parts of the book. On Putney itself there are plenty of recoveries—such as that the great debate on manhood suffrage took place in a committee meeting away from Putney Church—but that account is notable for the clarity and balance of its narration rather than for any analysis of what was said. But the account of the debates at Saffron Walden in the spring and at Reading (preceding the Army's occupation of London and purging of the 'incendiaries' from Parliament) restores a proper sense of the trajectory of Army engagement with the settlement of the kingdom. Unlike *Commonwealth to Protectorate*, which had retained a striking detachment in its discussion of the (self-destructive) behaviour of groups and factions, *Soldiers and Statesmen* is decidedly partisan. The heroes are those who are committed to the settlement agreed by all in July–September (The Heads of the Proposals), the villains are those who sought to destabilise the process established to achieve the *Heads*. Austin made little attempt to explore (in any sense) where the Levellers were coming from; he simply finds their

attempt to hijack the General Council and its agenda impractical in intention and catastrophic in its consequences (one reviewer spoke of Austin's 'real hostility' to the Levellers, 'who are regarded as mendacious troublemakers').²⁹ By and large, the book offers a formidable narrative account where previously there had been fuzziness, and close engagement with previous accounts is eschewed, although it had to deal, mainly in courteous footnotes, with a radically different narrative provided by Mark Kishlansky in a book that appeared just as he began his own researches.³⁰

Reviewers were unanimous in their praise for the book. Roger Howell spoke of the book as 'marked by both exhaustive scholarship and clear exposition',³¹ while Ronald Hutton in *English Historical Review* wrote of Austin 'building a picture with perfect clarity' and concluding (not without a hint of tartness), 'research has often been likened to a coal-face: in this case it may be that we have at last worked through to the bare rock'.³² In general, reviewers took the view that the weaknesses of the book reflected the weaknesses of the sources, and that it had resolved as much as could be resolved from the surviving texts. It was only twenty years later that historians began to interrogate the texts of the debates again, using the hermeneutics of the new intellectual history to locate the debates at Putney in particular into a range of theological and classical discourses; and it was then too that they challenged some of the *contexts* within which the army debates took place (a much more nuanced understanding of radical politics in London and Westminster, for example). So this book may be the one that has the least staying power of his major works. Nonetheless, for twenty years it has held its place in the field as the authoritative statement of what can be known about the nearest England has come to an effective written constitution.

Soldiers and Statesmen was not the only publication of his early retirement. In 1986 he contributed a thoughtful essay on the Putney Debates to a Festschrift for his friend and contemporary Ivan Roots,³³ and in 1991 an essay on 'Cromwell as a soldier' to a volume of essays reflecting on

²⁹ Ronald Hutton, short notice in *English Historical Review*, 105 (1990), 473–4.

³⁰ Mark A. Kishlansky, *The Rise of the New Model Army* (Cambridge, 1979).

³¹ Roger Howell, review in *The American Historical Review*, 94/1 (1989), 129–30.

³² Hutton, *English Historical Review*, 105 (1990), 473.

³³ A. H. Woolrych, 'Putney revisited: political debate in the New Model Army in 1647', in C. Jones, M. Newitt and S. K. Roberts (eds.), *Politics and People in Revolutionary England: Essays in Honour of Ivan Roots* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 95–116.

major aspects of Oliver's career.³⁴ He was also still writing for wider audiences—including a short book on *England without a King 1649–1660* in a series dreamt up by his colleagues, called 'Lancaster Pamphlets' and aimed squarely as 'up to date treatments of major historical topics covered by the A level syllabus and by introductory courses in Universities'.³⁵ The first six titles were all by colleagues, men he had appointed to posts at Lancaster. The baton had been well and truly handed on.

He remained an active reviewer until the mid 1990s. The bibliography in his Festschrift lists seventy-eight reviews written between 1958 and 1995.³⁶ He reviewed for a surprisingly narrow range of journals—thirty-five reviews for *History* across the whole period, seventeen for *English Historical Review* mainly in the period 1960–76, ten for *The Listener* (mainly in the years 1959–66) and ten for the *TLS* (between 1979 and 1994).³⁷ His reviews were unfailingly courteous in every sense. He was scrupulously careful to give a clear account of what a book was about and what it argued. He rarely suggested his own view, leaving it to the reader to judge whether the argument of the book was one they would want to engage with. He was not so concerned to assess argument as technique. He rarely, very rarely, showed off, although he could damn with faint praise ('there are some historical figures of undoubted importance who simply do not submit to the biographer's art',³⁸ 'those who know the period well will find few fresh insights in this new book [but will find] a sizeable crop of positive errors'³⁹). And he captured the essence of a scholar he thought very able but also very lazy by complimenting him on 'his original aperçus at many points'.⁴⁰ But even when there was acid in his words, it tended to come dissolved in honey. For overwhelm-

³⁴ A. H. Woolrych, 'Cromwell as a soldier', in J. Morrill (ed.), *Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution* (London, 1990), pp. 93–118.

³⁵ Austin Woolrych, *England without a King 1649–1660* (London, 1983).

³⁶ Calculated from the bibliography in Gentles *et al.*, *Soldiers, Writers and Statesmen*, pp. 323–35.

³⁷ The remaining reviews were for *Parliamentary History* (3), *Northern History* (1), *History of Political Thought* (1) and—surprisingly—just one for *The Times Higher Education Supplement*.

³⁸ A. H. Woolrych, review of Vernon Snow, *Essex the Rebel*, in *English Historical Review*, 87 (1972), 624–5.

³⁹ A. H. Woolrych, review of Antonia Fraser, *Cromwell: our Chief of Men*, in *English Historical Review*, 90 (1975), 194–5.

⁴⁰ A. H. Woolrych, review of Ivan Roots, *The Great Rebellion 1642–1660*, in *History*, 52 (1967), 330–1. The only really sharp review he wrote, published in *History*, 61 (1976) at 450–1, ended with the rebuke that 'there are some pages on which even the grammar goes to pieces'. The author of the book changed field from Stuart England to the history of baseball.

ingly his tone was warm, celebratory, encouraging, especially of the younger scholars.

VI

From the time of Muriel's death in 1991 and more particularly as he neared his eightieth birthday in 1998, Austin decided to devote himself more single-mindedly to his last great work, his single-volume history of *Britain in Revolution 1625–1660*, and the flow of occasional lectures and papers, and his reviewing, slowed to a trickle.⁴¹ But if no other academic distractions were to get in the way of this book, he was also determined to keep a balance of work and play in his life. His interests are listed in *Who's Who* as walking, travel and opera, and these were all indulged. He had moved to a more manageable modern house of solid stone construction backing onto the ancient parish church and churchyard in Burton-in-Kendal, and there were many (strenuous) walks to be had from there (as many an unfit academic who visited him discovered). He travelled to all five continents after his seventy-fifth birthday, including visits to the rain forests of South America, the jungles of Borneo, the heights of Nepal, the game reserves of East Africa, the High Andes, the glaciers of the southern tip of New Zealand, the flatlands of Patagonia and a whistlestop twenty-eight-day tour of China. In his very last years, he relented and settled on cruises (so long as there were plenty of days on shore to explore ancient civilisations or vineyards) and he found late romance with a companion on those final holidays. And indeed death came to him after he had sipped a good wine and watched a fine sunset in Lanzarote. He was a lover of opera, and in his visits to central and eastern Europe his first stop on arrival was to secure tickets for all available productions. But his musical tastes were much broader. His love of art in all its forms, including artefacts made by skilled craftsmen, really does need to be added to his list of key interests, and he was, in truth, almost as proud to be a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts as he was to be a Fellow of the British Academy.⁴² To that must be added his connoisseurship of wine and much else; and friends knew not to telephone him in the early evening which was invariably devoted to a half bottle of an elegant

⁴¹ Austin Woolrych, *Britain in Revolution 1625–1660* (Oxford, 2002).

⁴² It always gave him pleasure to take his close friends to luncheon in the RSA before or after a section meeting at the Academy.

red wine to celebrate another day of glacial progress on his last great book, completed when he was 83 and published in the autumn of 2002.

Britain in Revolution 1625–1660 was to be a grand narrative in the tradition of S. R. Gardiner and C. V. Wedgwood.⁴³ It was intended to be, and is, an utterly reliable and most meticulously documented narrative of how Britain and Ireland stumbled into a series of interlocking civil wars, which resulted, against all anticipation, in the abolition of monarchy, House of Lords and established church, in a series of bold republican experiments and in a rich and resonant outpouring of libertarian and licentious ideas.

Britain in Revolution is a big book, over 800 pages in length with almost equal amounts of space being given to the periods 1625–40, 1640–6, 1654–9, 1649–53, 1653–8 and 1658–60—indeed Austin speaks of the ‘four climacterics’ of 1641, 1647, 1653 and 1659 and his narrative represents a series of low teleologies describing and assessing what led into and out from each of these ‘climacterics’. It is a three-kingdom narrative in very much the same way as S. R. Gardiner’s eight volumes on the period from 1642 to 1655 or C. V. Wedgwood’s account of the Great Civil War were three-kingdom narratives—it is English history enriched by a detailed understanding of the impact of affairs in, and English involvement with, Scotland and Ireland and it is highly informed about those interactions. The book thus sees ethnic tensions as representing more of a dynamic force within the Revolution than social tensions within England itself. It is closest to Gardiner, whose ur-text on the revolutionary decade still casts its shadow over almost everything written about it, in its temperamental whiggery: in its palpable belief that the parliamentarians had the better cause in the 1640s, in its anti-clericalism and privileging of secular voices, in its approval of campaigns for civil and religious liberty, and its distrust of Enthusiasm. But much more than that it is quite simply a brilliantly successful considered narrative painted on a huge canvas with immaculate control and balance. Whether it is more than the sum of its parts is debateable. But that its parts are magisterial, authoritative, presented with exemplary clarity is undeniable. Do you want to know what part Cromwell played in the seizure of the King from Holdenby House in 1647? Do you want a succinct account of whether the slaughter at Drogheda was a ‘massacre’? Do you need to remind yourself of the main constitutional proposals in Sir Henry Vane’s *A healing ques-*

⁴³ He remained deeply committed to her and to her scholarship after it had lost favour with many in the profession and he contributed a notable essay to her Festschrift and a warm, generous and appropriate notice of her life in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 97 (1998), 521–34.

tion propounded and resolved, a work of notorious obscurity? On these and hundreds of other questions, Woolrych steers a safe course through troubled literatures.

The book is far more than a *vade mecum* to the events of the English/British Revolution(s); but it is a hugely reliable *vade mecum* as few books today are. Beyond that the book encapsulates the essentially old-fashioned, but actually timeless, virtues of meticulous close reading, with that keen ear for what was said and how said and what unsaid and how unsaid, that reveals he might have been a great English don after all. It is not a contentious book. He had read pretty much everything of value and he picks his way through areas of contention and disagreement, but by winnowing out a version which made best sense, and without overt engagement with what others had had to say. Most reviewers were content that his judgement was consistently fine. He completed it in 1,400 pages of the hand he had learned at Harrods and despatched it to OUP who thought that there would be fewer printing problems if it was set from his text rather than via a typist. And the result is immaculate. It will surely remain in print for decades as a classic.

VII

Austin Woolrych remained active and alert until the very end of his life. He had been elected to the Academy as a Senior Fellow in 1988 and attendance at the meetings of section H9 was one of his top priorities. He kept up with his friends and with their work. He was a loyal friend in the truest sense. Anyone who sent him an offprint would get a response that showed he had read it; and he offered advice, in the spirit of his reviews, on any technical deficiencies or factual errors. The slight lack of self-assurance in him made his tone gruffer if his own work had been overlooked or misrepresented; but the effect was almost wholly benign. If anything gave him greater pleasure than his election to the Academy, it was the presentation to him, on his eightieth birthday, of a *Festschrift*. The History Department at Lancaster ran a lovely party for him in Leighton Hall, and his friends honoured him with essays that were gathered around the themes of all his work—*Soldiers, Writers and Statesmen of the English Revolution*.⁴⁴ Only two of his own former students are represented in the

⁴⁴ I. Gentles, J. Morrill and B. Worden (eds.), *Soldiers, Writers and Statesmen of the English Revolution* (Cambridge, 1998).

volume—he had never sought to bring graduates to Lancaster—but he had served as external examiner to several of the others, and no one took more seriously the responsibilities of examining, nor the willingness to become a friend and supporter for life.

Short and stocky, a little shy but with a ready smile, and with a definite military bearing, Austin Woolrych was an easy man to like and to respect. He was fastidious in his courtesies as in much else, and was tolerant of most human foibles except laziness. In about 1980 he organised a study day for sixth formers from the whole area around Lancaster in the Great Hall of the University and invited four very distinguished historians to speak. All were to assemble the night before for a dinner in their honour. One failed to show up. The Lancaster lecturer with whom the great man was to stay was despatched to telephone him. A report came back that the great man had got the dates confused. Austin left the table and went to the telephone. As all went quiet around the dinner table, Austin's end of the conversation was highly audible: 'But you confirmed in person that you would be here on the 16th . . . No I don't think it is too late for you to get up here . . . Yes, I do know a 6 a.m. start is inconvenient, but so would your absence be for 500 people who want to hear you . . . I will try to ensure there is lunch for you, but if your train is late you must just go straight onto the podium . . . We look forward to seeing you tomorrow.'⁴⁵ This steel was usually concealed behind the politeness, but no one who knew him had any doubt that it was there. He was genuinely incapable of a lack of consideration for others. He had a gift for friendship. His awareness of the way Fortune had smiled on him made him generous, unpretentious, at once resolute and modest. His scholarship was so hewn from the rock that it will endure as little of the work by his contemporaries will endure. Students and their teachers will be turning back to check what Woolrych has to say in *Britain in Revolution* for generations to come. Like all the things in life that he most appreciated, it was built to last.

JOHN MORRILL

Fellow of the Academy

⁴⁵ This is the author's own clear recollection, but cross-checked with another scholar present at the dinner. I have not dared check with the scholar at the other end of that telephone line.

Note. The sources for this memoir are all noted in the footnotes; but in addition I should add that I have drawn on private conversations with members of Austin's family and with Professor Eric Ives, Dr Sarah Barber, Mr Gordon Forster, Dr David Smith and above all Professor Blair Worden. Anyone who has read Lesley le Claire's 'Appreciation' of Austin in his Festschrift will recognise, as I do, my immense debt to her: it is in I. Gentles, J. Morrill and B. Worden (eds.), *Soldiers, Writers and Statesmen of the English Revolution* (Cambridge, 1998), at pp. 1–18.