



ROBERT BLAKE

# Robert Norman William Blake

## 1916–2003

ROBERT BLAKE was elected to a Fellowship of the Academy in 1967. At that time he had been a Student and Tutor in Politics at Christ Church, Oxford, since 1946. He had published admired revisionist studies of the soldier Lord Haig (1952) and the politician Bonar Law (1955), but unquestionably it was the brilliant success of his biography of Disraeli in 1966 that stimulated support for his election.

Robert Norman William Blake was born in the Manor House, Brundall, on the Yare, Norfolk, a little outside Norwich, on 23 December 1916. His father, William Joseph Blake (1877–1964), born and brought up in Cornwall, was senior history master at the King Edward VI Grammar School in Norwich. His mother, Norah Lindley, née Daynes (1886–1957), of a Brundall family, was the daughter of a prominent Norwich solicitor. Blake's second given name, Norman, was shared with a maternal uncle, His Honour John Norman Daynes, QC (1884–1966), who was a Judge of County Courts, 1945–57. For all his life, Blake identified himself fervently with his native county; but it was through his maternal line that his Norfolk roots originally ran deep. It was from his uncle Norman that in 1966 he inherited Riverview, a fine and ample Victorian house in Brundall with terraced gardens overlooking the Yare. Riverview remained his beloved retreat for the rest of his life.

The eldest of three children (there was a brother who died young, and a sister, Jill), Robert attended a dame school in Brundall before going on to the King Edward VI School in Norwich where his father taught him history. He was bred in Norfolk Toryism, subject to quirky touches probably inherited through the Gladstonian Liberalism traditional with the Dayneses. His father inspired him with claims to indirect descent from the

great West Country-born Cromwellian admiral, Robert Blake. Opinions Blake later expressed about the virtues of instilling sound Anglicanism in the young very likely reflected his own churchly upbringing in Brundall and Norwich: 'The young should always be brought up in the Established Faith. They can then have all the more fun in deviating from it later. Few figures are more pathetic than children conscientiously educated in virtuous agnostic principles.'<sup>1</sup> In 1935 he followed in his uncle Norman's footsteps by going up to Magdalen College, Oxford, with a view to preparing for a legal career. He read 'Modern Greats', Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE). Tall and rangily built, Blake earned outside his academic studies repute as a hockey player and proved a usefully 'pacy' opening bowler for the Oxford Authentics. He was elected president of the Junior Common Room, an unusual distinction in those days for a grammar school boy. He was a member of the convivial 'Grid', or Gridiron Club, testifying to a congenial clubbability that was to remain characteristic throughout his life. He recalled narrowly escaping death when an empty champagne bottle thrown from a first-floor window of the club narrowly missed his head as he was about to enter it at the Carfax end of the Corn. The thrower of the bottle was one Hugh Trevor-Roper of Christ Church.<sup>2</sup> Blake took a First Class in PPE in his Final Schools in 1938. (His uncle Norman had taken Firsts in Classical Moderations, 'Greats' and Jurisprudence.) Again in his uncle's footsteps, as an Eldon Law Scholar Blake began reading for a career at the Chancery Bar. But the coming of war in 1939 abruptly cancelled all such innocent ambitions.

In memoirs written late in life, Blake wrote:

When war broke out on 3 September, I was in no doubt what to do. Hugh Shillito, a solicitor, son of the local parson and a school friend, was in MI5 and offered to get me a job there. People with Oxford Firsts should not be wasted, he said. I disagreed. Many years later reading Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour*, greatest of all World War II novels, I realised that Guy Crouchback was expressing in far better words what I felt at the time. I was sure I should be in one of the Services. I could have applied for deferment, as I was in the middle of a two-year course of reading for a degree in Law, and the rules of call-up allowed me to continue till I took the exams. But I had no desire to do this. Keith Joseph with whom I was planning to share lodgings on the Iffley Road made the same decision. We cancelled our tenancy and both joined the Royal Artillery, but the vagaries of different postings meant that we did not

<sup>1</sup> Blake to Hugh Trevor-Roper, 12 Jan. 1958, Dacre Papers, Christ Church (henceforth, DP). For Trevor-Roper see *PBA*, 150. 247–84.

<sup>2</sup> Blake to B. Worden, 9 July 1980, DP.

meet again until 1946. While I was escaping as a prisoner of war in Italy 1943–4 he was fighting his way up the peninsula in the Eighth Army whose outposts I reached in January 1945. It would have been fun to have met and I wish we had.<sup>3</sup>

Blake represented accurately the mood prevalent among young men of his generation. There was ‘none of the enthusiasm and idealism of 1914’. He was at home in Brundall<sup>4</sup> when Neville Chamberlain made his ‘uninspiring call to arms’. He hoped to join the Navy ‘(Admiral Blake!)’, but his eyesight was not up to requirements. He applied for the Royal Artillery in which another of his mother’s brothers, Gilbert Daynes, had served in the Great War. As a potential Officer Cadet he reported to the Artillery Barracks in Dover early in October. Blake’s OCTU training was at Larkhill on Salisbury Plain. On receiving his commission he was posted to 287 Battery, 124th Field Artillery. His regiment was part of the artillery support of the ‘later famous 50th Division with T.T. (Tyne and Tees) as their shoulder badges’. Appointment as Regimental Survey Officer came about ‘probably because I was considered “brainy”, an ambivalent quality in military esteem’. This involved rudimentary knowledge of trigonometry, sines and cosines: ‘Luckily I had a survey sergeant who understood all this.’

By early spring of 1941 it was clear that the Division would soon be shipped abroad for active service in the Middle East. They disembarked at Port Tewfik shortly after Hitler’s invasion of Russia. ‘In retrospect a turning point of the war, this left me and most of my friends devoid of enthusiasm; it would be another walkover in the dreary sequence of Poland, France and the Balkans.’ Service in Cyprus and Iraq then followed. Blake’s one grateful memory amid the dreary wastes of Mesopotamia was to witness near the RAF base at Habbaniyah ‘the unexpected sight of a pack of hounds followed by riders in top hats, pink (i.e. red) or black coats, white breeches and highly polished boots. It might have been the Quorn—Jorrocks in Arabia, I thought. The riders were the regular garrison, in pursuit not of the fox but the jackal.’ In October 1941 orders directed Blake’s regiment urgently to the Western Desert. By February 1942 it was en route through Egypt into Libya. ‘We now trundled slowly via El Alamein along the road to the Gazala Line and to one of the great military disasters of the Desert War.’

<sup>3</sup> Blake, unpublished draft for memoirs, ‘Part II: War’, Chap. 1, p. 1. Keith Joseph (1918–94), minister in Conservative cabinets 1962–4, 1970–4, 1979–86; life peer 1987.

<sup>4</sup> The Manor House was sold when Blake was a schoolboy. The family built ‘Red House’ in Brundall.

Blake was eloquent on the depressing peculiarities of that war: ‘continual desert haze, the product of smoke and sandstorms stirred up by battle and by the khamsin, a ferocious wind which would blow at unpredictable moments’. He quoted the later Field Marshal Lord Carver, whose books, *Tobruk* (1964) and *Dilemmas of the Desert War* (1986), he admired. ‘At every level the distinguishing characteristic of these battles was a bewilderment about what was going on, the greatest difficulty in telling friend from foe, and in sifting accurate and timely information . . . from wildly inaccurate and often out of date reports.’<sup>5</sup> Blake’s battery was in continuous action from 27 May to 21 June 1942. He recorded at one point his only contact with the top brass. On coming across Major-General Herbert Lumsden, commanding 1st Armoured Division, Lieutenant Blake made bold to enquire ‘How are we doing Sir?’ Lumsden replied after a pause: ‘I’m afraid we haven’t been very clever, my boy.’ By 16 June Blake’s was among the British and Imperial forces pushed back by Rommel toward Tobruk. Blake had a grandstand view of the ‘wonderfully impressive’ operation mounted by 15th Panzer Division: ‘Even as I watched I thought what a bunch of amateurs we were compared with the Afrika Korps.’ The Tobruk garrison surrendered on 21 June. Blake, outside the main theatre, was one of a party determined to defy orders and escape. They were captured by Italians. Blake’s contingent of prisoners was flown from Benghazi to Lecce (his first, and, in the absence, as it happened, of the RAF, quite enjoyable, experience of flight), and thence via Bari to Chieti, a permanent POW camp in the Abruzzi region, near Pescara on the Adriatic. After the shock of capture, the direness of his situation came in upon Blake. ‘The month I spent in Bari was the most hateful of my life. The humiliation, the squalor, the despair of being a prisoner, the heat, the revolting food, the sheer boredom, the indefinite prospective period of incarceration, all combined to induce a mood of black despondency, such as I have never experienced before or since.’ At Chieti the camp, as such camps go, was ‘not too bad’. The Italians adhered more or less to the Geneva Convention. There were Red Cross inspections. Food parcels arrived. There was an RAMC dentist (though no anaesthetics). ‘Books were what really mattered.’ Blake read the whole of the Bible—‘omitting Genesis 36!’—most of Macaulay and Gibbon, and all Shakespeare’s plays, ‘discovering how bad some of them were’. For all that, the fifteen months at Chieti were monotonous and frustrating. There were about 1,000 British and 300 American officers of com-

<sup>5</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 17.

pany rank in the camp. Escape plans by tunnelling achieved nothing by the time Mussolini's regime was overthrown in July 1943. The Italian guards vanished overnight. The prisoners could have walked out, but were ordered to stay put and wait for Allied forces to arrive. Montgomery, who was responsible for that order,<sup>6</sup> underestimated grossly how long that would take to happen. Blake recorded that he was always ashamed that he was one of the vast majority of 'sheep' who obeyed that 'amazing and scandalous' and 'insane' order: 'Writing over sixty years later my blood still boils at this piece of War Office ineptitude.' By the time the order was countermanded in September after the armistice with the new Italian government, the Germans had seized nearly all the camps in Italy. Most of the POWs were transported to Germany, where 60,000 of them spent the next eighteen months in miserable captivity. However, Blake and two companions, George Burnett and Arthur Dodds, thereafter lifelong friends, managed to avoid that fate. After being transported from Chieti to Sulmona, a group of five contrived to hide for eighteen ghastly days in the rafters of a hut. (Blake suffered from nightmares on the strength of this for the rest of his life.) In the eventual escape attempt in October two of the group were recaptured; but Blake's trio evaded their German guards and slipped away to live desperately as fugitives in German-occupied Italy for nearly three wolf-haunted winter months. (He would regale his daughters with stories of 'red-eyed wolves' howling for many a year.) In January 1944 they reached an Eighth Army outpost. By February Blake was debriefed at Selsdon Park Hotel in Croydon,<sup>7</sup> and given six months' leave. (The rule was that officers were to get three months' leave, but a cousin, Guy Daynes, a doctor vetting sick leave applications at Whitehall, nepotically substituted six for three.) Blake was awarded a Mention in Dispatches in recognition of useful intelligence he was able to supply to the RAF about a munitions train at Sulmona. He spent the last months of the war and the first months of peace in the intelligence service, MI6, presumably on the grounds of his reputation for 'braininess'. He found Kim Philby an agreeable colleague.<sup>8</sup> He was demobilised in April 1946.

Blake does not explain why he decided not to resume plans for a career at the Bar but instead opted for Academe. Perhaps he had lost his zest for

<sup>6</sup> M. R. D. Foot to author, 16 June 2007: 'a verbal order—no piece of paper has ever, so far as I know, surfaced'.

<sup>7</sup> Famed as meeting place for Edward Heath's Conservative shadow cabinet in Feb. 1970, the birthplace of short-lived 'Selsdon man'.

<sup>8</sup> H. A. R. 'Kim' Philby (1912–88); SIS, 1940–6; Washington 49–55; spy for Russians; defected to Russia 1963.

sitting examinations. War had examined him enough. Possibly in the unsettled post-war situation a steady if modest academic income was preferable to precarious chances at the Bar. But perhaps, equally, his readings of Gibbon and Macaulay at Chieti inspired him with the rudiments of an historical sensibility, the grounds of which had perhaps been already prepared by his father, the schoolmaster historian. Certainly his wartime experience gave cause for asking himself questions of high political and historical import: ‘Why were we fighting Germany in the desert anyway?’<sup>9</sup> Outside embattled Tobruk he had mused on the circumstance of the descendants of north European tribes trying to kill each other in a land so desolate that it was barely possible to exist there, let alone fight. ‘What a bizarre turn of events that Britons and Germans should be locked in mortal combat hundreds of miles south of their own green and pleasant lands.’ Probably the most immediate influences in the direction of a career in scholarly explanation of such bizarre turns of events were the advice of his father—rather to the regret of his uncle Norman—and two Oxford dons, then Blake’s colleagues in the Secret Intelligence world, Hugh Trevor-Roper and Charles Stuart, who imported him into Christ Church.

Blake related in a manuscript fragment, ‘Memories of Christ Church’, that his two closest friends in the Senior Common Room were Trevor-Roper and Stuart. ‘We formed a small pressure group which might be described as radical Tory.’ This was ‘at a time when most modern historians were on the left’.<sup>10</sup> They saw themselves as cavaliers fighting Oxford’s ‘powers of darkness’ (oft-times also ‘forces of darkness’). One of the grandest of Christ Church notables then resident was Sir John Masterman, Trevor-Roper’s tutor as an undergraduate and author of the ingenious wartime counter-intelligence Double Cross Operation of later fame, at that time Provost-elect of Worcester College. Masterman had been influential in encouraging Blake to apply for a vacant politics tutorship at Christ Church. Blake merely recorded that he was a don at Christ Church from April 1946 until October 1968 when he became Provost of The Queen’s College:

I was elected to Christ Church to fill the vacancy in the tutorship in politics left by Frank Pakenham who had gone to the Lords as a minister in Attlee’s government. He generously gave me all his relevant books on the subject with copious annotations which would no doubt have been very helpful if they had been legible.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> K. O. Morgan (Lord Morgan), *Independent* obituary, 25 Sept. 2003, 22.

<sup>11</sup> MS fragment. Sir J. S. Masterman (1891–1977); Provost of Worcester 1946; Vice-Chancellor 1957–8. F. A. Pakenham, seventh Earl of Longford (1905–2001); minister in Labour governments; campaigner against sexual liberation and for prison reform.

...  
 My induction into the grandeur of Christ Church was in 1946, the centenary [*sic*] year of its refoundation by Henry VIII. I remember Shakespeare's play performed in Hall with (Sir) Michael Howard as Cardinal Wolsey,<sup>12</sup> and the dinner in honour of King George VI, our Visitor, and Queen Elizabeth. Plenty of champagne etc had been reserved through the war years against this notable occasion, and we sang 'Here's a Health unto His Majesty' with a verve and vigour I have never forgotten.

In Blake's time at Christ Church, or the 'House', as it was commonly referred to, two former Rhodes Scholars from Canada successively presided, John Lowe and Cuthbert Simpson. Dean Lowe was 'a man of few words but much efficiency. Hospitality was not his forte. Well-watered white wine cup was the form.' Dean Simpson was in all ways very different. 'Impatient at Committees and irritated by Governing Body meetings, he was socially most hospitable. And in the art of mixing a dry martini, which he had learned, with other things of course, at the General Theological Seminary of New York, he excelled.'

Of figures in the SCR other than Masterman, the college notables Blake particularly recalled were Sir Keith Feiling, soon to be elected to the Chichele Chair of History at All Souls, and Sir Roy Harrod, a fellow Norfolk man and Blake's colleague in the PPE faculty. The 'enigmatic presence of "the Prof"', Lindemann, Lord Cherwell, who had been Churchill's wartime scientific adviser made itself felt till 1957 when he died'. Blake was one of his executors. (It was alleged of Blake that he had a fondness for wicked men.)

It took me time to get used to the peculiar nomenclature in Christ Church where the Head of the College is the Dean who is also Dean of the Cathedral which is also the college chapel, where the residentiary Canons are professors and members of the Governing Body, where the disciplinary officers are called Censors, and the fellows are Students with that essential capital 'S'.

Blake recalled in his memoir fragment that despite the worst winter in living memory in 1947 and the carry-over of wartime austerities, he found these early years 'an exhilarating period. The undergraduates consisted largely of war survivors, much older than the modern average age and keen to make up for their lost years. Many of them were little younger than I was, and one or two even older.' These were fond old memories. The reality, nearer the time of those 'dismal post-war years', was of 'no food, precious little drink, a general hatred of fun and learning, morose

<sup>12</sup> Sir Michael Howard (1922– ), Regius Professor of Modern History, Oxford, 1980–9.



bigots denouncing one at the slightest hint of gaiety'; to which he added 'exiguous salaries, medieval dirt, squalor and discomfort'—and far too many undergraduates.<sup>13</sup>

It was against this regime—the regime of Dean Lowe—that the radical Tory pressure group plotted and intrigued. Their constant refrain was resistance to the 'clerical Party and any increase in the Chapter Fund'. Their plot was to 'work up an anti-decanal country party vote' (in eighteenth-century political terminology)<sup>14</sup> against the college establishment with a view ultimately to laicising the college. They echoed Keith Feiling's regret about a certain dank passageway in the college: 'Kilcanon Gate: would that it would function.'<sup>15</sup> They intrigued to insert a member of 'the party' on every committee.<sup>16</sup> The intensity of their plotting could on occasion get hectic. Blake warned his fellow conspirators of the 'radical party' that 'my reputation as "Moderate Old Blake" is wearing thin'; and that his insidious role as 'Judicious Old Blake' was exposed.<sup>17</sup>

Apart from his more innocent tutorial duties, Blake served both his college and the university faithfully as Senior Censor of the House (1950–5), and Senior Proctor (1959–60) and member of the Hebdomadal Council (1959–81) for the university. He was also an Oxford City Councillor (1957–64) and a magistrate. He served his college faithfully as well in unofficial capacities, most prominently in playing a forward part in defeating the project of one of Oxford's most eminent powers of darkness, Warden Smith of New College, to construct a road across Christ Church Meadow to ease congestion in the High Street. That controversy raised much heat and dust. Another among the powers of darkness to be confronted in this matter was Warden Bowra of Wadham. ('Oh I don't care about your mouldy old meadow. My first duty is to my college.') The Prof. addressed Bowra to his face as 'Bloody fellow!' to which Bowra responded loudly, 'Shut up!' 'I intend in particular', Blake informed Trevor-Roper of yet another power amid the darkness, the Warden of All Souls, 'to pillory J. Sparrow whom I HATE! Sanctimonious, mountebank, humbug, are the words which leap to my mind when I reflect on his odious speech.' Blake, furthermore, could not fail to notice the extent to which the powers of darkness pullulated with Winchester and New College men: 'I cannot help feeling relieved that the Prime Minister is

<sup>13</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 16 April 1960, DP.

<sup>14</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 21 Sept. 1949, DP.

<sup>15</sup> A. L. Rowse, *Historians I Have Known* (London, 1995), p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 26 July 1951, DP.

<sup>17</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 5 Sept. 1951, DP.

Eden rather than Gaitskell.<sup>18</sup> For all that that the Conservative Cabinets of those days teemed with Christ Church men, it was the coming of Wilson's Labour government in 1964, particularly in the person of Richard Crossman, a former New College don, that resolved the matter in Christ Church's favour in 1968. The controversy also had its serious side. It contributed significantly to the trend against the primacy of motor traffic in civic planning, of which the High Street colleges were eventually beneficiaries.

It was in affairs of that kind, where intimate awareness of the 'form' of Oxford dons was at a premium, that the 'pressure group' of Trevor-Roper, Stuart and Blake at Christ Church performed most effectively. Of Charles Stuart it was said that 'he always exuded an air of being the best informed person present'.<sup>19</sup> One of their aims was to 'dispel the views of some of our elders who seemed to forget that the war was over'. They wanted their college to assert itself as one of the richest Oxford foundations, and to '*behave like a rich College*', exerting a corresponding influence and authority within the university at large. A 'Christ Church mafia' was often adduced to explain the way things happened in the university.<sup>20</sup> As Colin Matthew pointed out, the power structure of Oxford University in the 1960s and 1970s could be deduced from the lists of dining clubs, which, with their membership, Blake kept pinned to a board in his study.<sup>21</sup> In two of the intrigues of that time about which we know a great deal because of Trevor-Roper's genius for entertainingly malicious gossip, the matter of the Regius Chair of Modern History in 1956–7, and the matter of the chancellorship election in 1960, Blake, 'my friend and ally', was ever at hand.

In the first affair, much depended on which of the two contenders to succeed the stricken Prime Minister Eden, R. A. Butler or Harold Macmillan, would prevail. The chair was in the gift of the Crown, on the advice of the prime minister. Much depended also on who would succeed the stricken Oxford Vice-Chancellor, A. H. Smith of New College. That latter issue was earlier decided: none other than Provost Masterman of Worcester would take over to see out Smith's term. At the beginning of the business, the mafia were more concerned to hold the powers of darkness at bay than to promote themselves. They were sure that were a

<sup>18</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 29 Dec. 1955, DP. See also *The Letters of Mercurius* (London, 1970), pp. 15–21.

<sup>19</sup> Private information.

<sup>20</sup> A. Sisman, *A. J. P. Taylor* (London, 1994), p. 25.

<sup>21</sup> H. C. G. Matthew, *Education Guardian*, 23 Sept. 2003.

medievalist unavoidable, the Cambridge Runciman was far preferable to any of the Oxford contenders. 'I agree with you', wrote Blake to Trevor-Roper, 'that we do not want a medievalist *ceteris paribus*, but Steven Runciman is not the type of medievalist to whom we can reasonably object. What we dislike is a dull, costive, parochial, mystificatory, sacerdotal approach to history of any period. It so happens that the Oxford medieval school is dominated by that attitude, and it could be argued that, for this very reason, a medievalist of cosmopolitan and rational outlook at the head of the history school is all the more necessary.' However, were Runciman to be for any reason unavailable, Blake had no doubt that Trevor-Roper was 'the right man for the chair'. So might there not be something to be said for putting that idea in J. C. [Masterman]'s mind? In a letter to Trevor-Roper at the beginning of 1957, Blake, after observations rather critical of Butler—for all that he 'never fails to speak with admirable common sense' as one coming from 'a great Cambridge intellectual family'—together with a preference for Macmillan's reaching the top of the greasy pole, turned to 'a far graver topic viz the Regius Chair'.

Meanwhile the resignation of that worthless old ninny—alas all too belated—A. Smith has transformed your prospects. It seems clear to me that, whoever becomes P.M.—B. or M.—J. C.'s voice is now going to be really authoritative. After all not only is he the V.C.—which is in itself most important—but he is the acknowledged Doyen of the Modern History Corps, the man who was given the job of settling the last appointment.<sup>22</sup> If he backs you—and in the light of what you say in your splendid 12pp letter to Charles [Stuart] it looks as if he will—then you are in. It is, therefore, of paramount importance—and that is why I write so urgently—that you should under no circumstances commit yourself in public on the politics of Suez. I know that you feel strongly about it, and the temptation to make an adverse crack must be almost irresistible. Resist it! The fact that Eden is out makes the inadvisability of such a crack even greater. Remember that they are *all in it* and are publicly committed, and whatever their private views, doubts, regrets etc, they will much resent any rubbing in of the fact that they were bounced by a semi-lunatic into action which should either have been pressed to the bitter end or never have been initiated. . . . So on no account either in the N.S. & N. or the Sunday Times make any attacks on the Govt. just now. Of course you need not perjure yourself by supporting them. Silence, my dear Hugh, silence, silence, is all your old friend Blake asks.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Vivian Galbraith (1889–1976), Regius Professor of Modern History, Oxford, 1948–57.

<sup>23</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 10 Jan. 1957, DP. J. H. A. Sparrow (1906–92), Warden of All Souls 1952–77; Sir S. Runciman (1903–2000), Fellow of Trinity, Cambridge, 1927–38; Waynflete Lecturer, Magdalen College, Oxford, 1953–4. N.S. & N. = *New Statesman & Nation*.

Blake, who knew Eden quite well through the Christ Church connection, was aware that Eden's illness was genuine, but at the same time he had intelligence from the Prof., lately at Chequers over Christmas, that there was 'not the slightest sign' of Eden's resigning or even being ill. Blake dwelt on this point, he explained to Trevor-Roper, 'because I don't think that one can argue that the policy of Eden is being in any way repudiated, and therefore that a potential Regius Professor can safely attack it yet'. Caution remained the watchword. Were Butler to secure the succession, Blake was sure he would be much more likely to favour Runciman on 'mere Cambridge grounds—advice from his cousin, J. R. M. [Butler] etc'.<sup>24</sup> For his own part, Blake had written circumspectly at that moment to Trevor-Roper about Suez. In public he defended Eden's policy.<sup>25</sup>

Such were the ways of the Christ Church mafia. At all events, Macmillan did indeed soon replace Eden. Consulted by the new prime minister's patronage secretary (himself one of Masterman's pupils at Christ Church) as to the claims of the competing candidates (of whom the favourite was A. J. P. Taylor),<sup>26</sup> Blake advised for Trevor-Roper. What weight this counted for at Downing Street can only be surmised; probably little. In the event Masterman's sabotage skills were largely redundant. Trevor-Roper ended up with the prize by default. Lucy Sutherland insisted on retaining her headship of Lady Margaret Hall and Taylor refused to give up combining media showmanship with his scholarly responsibilities.

In the affair of Professor Trevor-Roper's successful intrigue in 1960 to reciprocate by campaigning to install Macmillan as Chancellor against the candidate of the powers of darkness, Oliver Franks, Blake was usefully placed as Senior Proctor.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, he was in a position at the time of the crucial Convocation vote to lend his gown to the improperly dressed Chancellor of the Exchequer, Heathcoat Amory. Lord Chancellor Kilmuir, Macmillan's emissary, had sought them out to get assurances of success, himself giving assurances that there were no constitutional obstacles to the candidature of an incumbent prime minister. Considering that there had not been a chancellorship contest since 1925, the pair were perhaps reckless in confidently giving assurance. Franks was an immensely distinguished public servant of Liberal political provenance, important in the origins of

<sup>24</sup> Sir J. R. M. Butler (1889–1975), Regius Professor of Modern History, Cambridge, 1947–54.

<sup>25</sup> K. O. Morgan, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford, 2004–7.

<sup>26</sup> A. J. P. Taylor (1906–90), Fellow of Magdalen College, 1938–76.

<sup>27</sup> R. Davenport-Hines, *Letters from Oxford, Hugh Trevor-Roper to Bernard Berenson* (London, 2006), p. 296.

both the Marshall Plan and NATO, formerly Ambassador in Washington, presently chairman of Lloyd's Bank. He was the candidate of what Trevor-Roper described as the 'most active, most radical, most ruthless, most skilful of all academic politicians', Sir Maurice Bowra, Warden of Wadham. Franks was also, however, in the estimation of Alan Taylor, the 'Martin Tupper of our times'.<sup>28</sup> Provost Masterman, converted to the cause by Senior Proctor Blake, was summoned to the fray. And thus it all came right in the end. There were stories of train-loads of newly enrolled electors converging on the Sheldonian Theatre. The powers of darkness were repelled, but only by 90 votes in a total of 3,304. In his Proctorial Oration at Easter 1960, Blake described the election as combining 'some of the best features of a gaudy and a cricket match with none of the more tedious qualities of either'. Another cause for rejoicing in 1960 was the preferment of Cuthbert Simpson as Dean of Christ Church, 'symbolic of the party of fun, frivolity and gaiety defeating the party of boredom, earnestness, and drabness'. Oxford, Blake concluded, had improved.<sup>29</sup>

In one respect Blake differed from most of his fellow dons who likewise diligently tutored, administered and intrigued. This was in a readiness in research and publication. Trevor-Roper, his reputation already established with his lively and irreverent *Archbishop Laud* of 1940, had given recently an impressive new lead in this direction with his brilliant *The Last Days of Hitler* in 1947, the phenomenal publishing event of the time. His intimacy with Blake is measured by his arranging for Blake to accompany him on his first visit to Bernard Berenson in July of that year at Vallombrosa. 'BB' remained for the rest of his long life a cultish figure for Trevor-Roper; Blake seems not to have been impressed. 'A certain type of Englishman—wary of singularity or made uneasy by "airs"'—as Richard Davenport-Hines has commented, 'often was not'.<sup>30</sup> Blake enjoyed much of the trip, other than dealing with the numerous breakdowns of Trevor-Roper's Bentley, which he as an Italian speaker had to deal with. But in any case his bond with Trevor-Roper in no degree slackened.

That bond in fact led Blake indirectly to his first publication. Trevor-Roper had become intimate with Lady Alexandra, née Haig, estranged second wife of Rear-Admiral Clarence Howard-Johnston. Lady 'Xandra's' father had been the British Commander-in-Chief in France in the Great War, Field-Marshal Lord Haig, and the Lady herself was god-daughter to

<sup>28</sup> R. Davenport-Hines, *Letters from Oxford, Hugh Trevor-Roper to Bernard Berenson* (London, 2006), pp. 290–1.

<sup>29</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 16 April 1960, DP.

<sup>30</sup> Davenport-Hines, *Letters from Oxford*, p. xx.

Queen Alexandra. With the loosening of patriotic attitudes in the 1920s and 1930s, the Field-Marshal's reputation as a military commander had become a matter of controversy. From being a hero of victory Haig (who died in 1928) was accused of blinkered obsession with a strategy of bloody trench-war attrition, which he relentlessly imposed in spite of all the efforts of Lloyd George to alleviate its horrors. Xandra's brother, George 'Dawyck', second earl, had in his possession his father's diaries. These, it was felt, would, if published, do much to vindicate the Field Marshal's strategic decision that, with assurances from the French generals, especially the hero of Verdun, Pétain, that, after the catastrophic failure of the boasted Nivelle offensive, collapse of morale within the French armies was imminent, their British allies had no choice but to resort to a series of persistent offensives to wear down the Germans, enormously costly in casualties, but indispensable for ultimate success. Duff Cooper's authorised biography in 1935–6 had made use of the diaries, but in so cautiously discreet a manner as to negate their true historical value. Cooper did not want to cause trouble with the French military at a time when Anglo-French solidarity was imperative in the face of resurgent Nazi Germany.

That was no longer the case when Blake, through Trevor-Roper's good offices, was invited by Dawyck Haig to undertake an edition of the diaries. This was published in 1952 as *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig, 1914–1919, being selections from the private diary and correspondence of Field Marshal the Earl Haig of Bemersyde, K.T., G.C.B., O.M., etc.* Apart from acknowledgements to the second earl, Blake expressed his thanks for the advice and assistance of Sir Charles Petrie, the voluminous historical writer and gunner in the First World War. In his preface Blake made two main points. First was the 'unique value' of the papers. Haig was the 'only great general in our history to have kept a detailed day-by-day record of events as they occurred during his campaigns'. Haig's account, moreover, was in execution worthy of the events it depicted. Blake had no doubt that the diaries would 'effectively dispose of the myth that Haig was a dull, ordinary, and rather obtuse soldier'. Secondly, Blake explained that while Duff Cooper had been the only other person with permission to quote verbatim from the diaries, circumstances then dictated 'good reasons enforcing discretion on certain points'. It was 'difficult to reveal with candour Haig's opinions on the French Army and its leaders'.<sup>31</sup> In essence, Blake left in the passages Cooper left out.

<sup>31</sup> R. Blake, *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig, 1914–1919, being selections from the private diary and correspondence of Field Marshal the Earl Haig of Bemersyde, K.T., G.C.B., O.M., etc.* (London, 1952), pp. 11–12.

The resulting furore, in a sense, could be said to justify Cooper. But, when Blake consulted Cooper, according to Trevor-Roper, Cooper urged him to publish all. Cooper, who had been Ambassador in Paris 1944–7, now took the view that discretion was no longer desirable. In fact it would do positive good to expose Pétain's defeatism in 1917 in the light of events in the defeat of 1940. Cooper was among those who praised Blake's edition. The ensuing story is most entertainingly, if not necessarily with entire accuracy, told in Trevor-Roper's account to Berenson. A convulsive storm set off in France was such that, after a tirade from the French Admiral at the then NATO headquarters at Fontainebleau to whose staff Rear-Admiral Howard-Johnston had just been appointed, the Rear-Admiral felt obliged to send in his resignation to the First Sea Lord. His wife, Lady Xandra, was now snubbed by the *couturiers* who had hitherto lavishly indulged the *fille du maréchal*. 'We all thought', Trevor-Roper put it to Berenson,

that the second world war had rendered the first a somewhat academic matter —foolishly forgetting that of course the French, having taken no serious part in the second, took a different view of their relative importance; also that the French generals of the first war, being now in retirement, have nothing else to do except to rage furiously together in their clubs. . . . indeed Marshal Juin has been made a member of the French Academy . . . solely for having denounced Robert's book as a forgery (for the Field-Marshal, being a gentleman, *could* not have said such things!). The most disreputable behaviour has been that of Duff Cooper . . . when he went back to France and found that, in consequence of having praised the book, three challenges to duels were awaiting him . . . and the entire committee of the French Travellers' Club (of which he is president) called on him asking him to resign. Whereupon, in the most abject manner, he judged it prudent to execute a brisk *volte-face*, and published a statement in *Figaro* saying that he deplored the inopportune publication of documents which ought to have been permanently suppressed! Robert Blake's rage against this pusillanimous behaviour is rendered the more acute because he is a Norfolk man, and all Norfolk men, I have discovered, now turn purple and tremble when Duff Cooper is even mentioned. For some obscure local reason unintelligible to those who have not been born among the turnips and partridges of those inaccessible fens, they violently resent Duff's presumption in taking the title of Viscount Norwich. . . . Dawyck Haig tells me that the only member of his own family who has not denounced the publication is an aunt who lives in Wales, and whose reason for praising it is simply that it has given such mortal offence to her neighbours the Lloyd Georges!<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> R. Davenport-Hines, *Letter from Oxford*, pp. 102–3. Cooper's father had been a well-known pox-doctor in the city. According to the *Daily Telegraph* obituarist the irritable Evelyn Waugh was irritated by the mode of the Haig commission, and invented 'a shady don called Blake'.

For all his rage against Cooper, Blake's edition did indeed do much to initiate a rehabilitation of the Field-Marshal's reputation. This process has survived the crass propaganda on radio (1962), stage (1964) and in cinema (1969) of 'Oh What a Lovely War'. Undoubtedly the best measure we have of Blake's achievement is to be seen in examining *Douglas Haig. War Diaries and Letters, 1914–1918*, edited by Gary Sheffield and John Bourne (London, 2005). Their meticulous edition differs from Blake's in the particular typescript version they use, and in their emphasis on military selections rather than Blake's emphasis on politics. Their respect for Blake is manifest. They dedicate their edition to 'two great Haig scholars, Robert Blake and John Terraine'. And then, as if in ultimate confirmation of rehabilitation, we find *The Good Soldier. The Biography of Douglas Haig*, by Gary Mead (London, 2007).

Doubtless it was a relief for Trevor-Roper to extract himself from 'struggling in a desperate quagmire of controversy' sufficiently to penetrate those Norfolk fenlands of turnips and partridges to do duty as Blake's best man at his marriage on 22 August 1953 to Patricia Mary, born 1925, eldest daughter of Thomas Richard Waters, farmer, hunter and shooter of The Grove, Great Plumstead. Thus was inaugurated a supremely happy married life when Blake moved out of his college rooms to set up house with Patricia in a college property, Thornhill, in Harberton Mead, on the eastern side of Oxford towards Headington. Patricia gave birth to Deborah Cicelie in 1955, Letitia Lindley in 1960 and Victoria Mary in 1963. Trevor-Roper's intention to marry a divorced woman caused a scandalised stir at the Cathedral College of Christ Church. Senior Censor Blake deserved well of Trevor-Roper with his skills in humouring and pacifying the Dean and Chapter.<sup>33</sup> The Blakes duly assisted at Trevor-Roper's marriage on 4 October 1954 to Lady Alexandra at Marylebone Presbyterian Church. (The Field-Marshal had been an Elder of that confession.)

Indeed, in a curious way, Blake was soon to become much involved with two more eminent Presbyterians, both sons of the manse. His next publication, *The Unknown Prime Minister. The Life and Times of Andrew Bonar Law, 1858–1923* (London, 1955), came about through his introduction to the press magnate Max Aitken, Lord Beaverbrook, Law's executor, who was also in possession of his fellow Canadian's archive. Law

<sup>33</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 31 July 1954, DP.



had wanted his youngest son Richard, later Lord Coleraine, to write his biography; but occasions ever hindered and Coleraine passed arrangements over to Beaverbrook. In what exact circumstances Blake first met that wicked old man is not clear. It was not owing to Alan Taylor, who later became Beaverbrook's 'house historian'. Taylor seems not to have become acquainted with the press baron until that year, 1955.<sup>34</sup> In fact, it was Blake who preceded Taylor in the house historian role. One thing always insisted on in stories about Blake's elevation 'to a different plane of celebrity' on passing into the entourage of the proprietor of the *Express* empire was that what 'particularly impressed Beaverbrook was Blake's ability to consume large quantities of champagne without apparent effect'. And that was, as Kenneth Morgan, who knew Blake very well, continued, 'a talent that endured'.<sup>35</sup>

Beaverbrook's invitation to Blake to undertake Bonar Law's biography owed much to the example set by the Haig book. That had been a case of rescue. Beaverbrook was in no doubt that Law needed rescue also. Beaverbrook had the means of it, with the Lloyd George archive also in his keeping. It was a formidable assignment. There were two big counts against Law. The first was that he was a dull provincial Canadian mediocrity tempered in the Glasgow iron trade whose oratory was likened to the riveting of rivets. The second was that in his reckless challenge as leader of the Conservative Party in 1912–14 to the constitutional proprieties in defying the Liberal government's policy of establishing an Irish Home Rule parliament in Dublin that would impose Catholic rule on Protestant Ulster, he risked civil war in Ireland and introduced a toxic new virus into political life. That was George Dangerfield's diagnosis in his pervasively influential *The Strange Death of Liberal England* of 1936.<sup>36</sup> Law's part in that strange death was indeed second to none. As to the larger frame of indictment, on the first count there was little Blake could do. On the second count he could reasonably plead for an awareness of mitigating circumstances.

He could explain that Law had been elected leader of the Conservative and Unionist Party in 1911 because the party foresaw rough times ahead, times that the aristocratic incumbent, A. J. Balfour, would not be up to coping with, times that the alternative gentlemanly candidates vying to succeed him, Walter Long for the 'Old Families' and Austen Chamberlain, son

<sup>34</sup> This I have deduced from Sisman, *A. J. P. Taylor*, p. 255.

<sup>35</sup> Morgan, *Independent*, 25 Sept. 2003, 22.

<sup>36</sup> R. J. Q. Adams, *Bonar Law* (London, 1999), p. xii.

of the great Liberal Unionist Tariff Reformer Joseph, would equally find beyond them. The party elected Law because they knew him to be a fighter, and, when necessary, a brawler. Law was the first non-gentleman to lead the gentlemen of England. Blake could explain to generations long emancipated from Victorian sectarianism that Law's passionate Protestantism was something quite different from crude bigotry. He could demonstrate that in reality Law was a victim of the historical predicaments that in a blackly absurd way locked both Liberals and Conservatives together as prisoners of their past. For the Liberals it was a fatal heritage of Gladstone and the Irish going back to the 1880s and 1890s. For the Conservatives it was the fatal heritage of the failure of the House of Lords to pull off a 'referendal' role in relation to Lloyd George's 1909 budget of the kind it had successfully pulled off against Gladstone's second Irish Home Rule Bill in the 1895 election. In the first case the Liberals were stuck with a highly controversial policy from which many of them would have liked to escape. And, as with Gladstone, they no longer after the 1910 elections had a majority independent of the Irish. In the second case, the Conservatives, having provoked the 1911 Parliament Act, no longer had in reserve a House of Lords that could do to Asquith then what it had earlier done to Gladstone. In other words, Law was in the impossible predicament of having to resist a policy he interpreted as stemming from disgraceful submission to Irish blackmail without any chance of recourse either to parliament or to the people. He had no choice other than brawling or surrender. Law's brawling in defence of Protestant Ulster was from a strictly constitutional point of view deplorable. Blake duly deplored; but by treating it within the frame of Law's insoluble predicament he achieved what one heavyweight critic on the left commended as 'a remarkably balanced analysis of the Ulster question'.<sup>37</sup> The Ulster question was in any case subsumed by the coming of war in 1914. Law became freer to play his part in the strange death. He led the Conservatives into the wartime coalition in 1915 that did in Asquith in 1916 and led them out of the peacetime coalition that did in Lloyd George in 1922. He lived to see the creation of an autonomous Northern Ireland. He did not live to see the failure of his other great passion, Tariff Reform, in 1923. Nor did he live to see the Conservative revival and the Liberal catastrophe in 1924. Yet that was his legacy. One of the most perceptive reviewers of the book commented that 'the most interesting fact in British politics today is the survival of the Conservative

<sup>37</sup> Morgan, *Independent*, 25 Sept. 2003, 22.

Party; this the Conservatives owe to many forces, many leaders, but not least, as Mr Blake has so convincingly shown us, to Bonar Law'.<sup>38</sup>

In November 1923 Law's ashes were interred in Westminster Abbey. Among those attending was Asquith, who, in the effortlessly superior way of a Balliol man, reputedly quipped on how fitting it was that they were burying the Unknown Prime Minister next to the Unknown Soldier. Blake decided to use Asquith's attributed quip as the title of his biography. As he explained in his preface, it was not because he considered it 'either just or true, but because, however unfairly, it has come to be the verdict of most people today'. He guessed that Law himself would not have grudged Asquith his little revenge.<sup>39</sup> Law had no vanity and little of Asquith's broadness of mind. For Law to be interred in the Abbey was in itself a distinct oddity of the time. Two prime ministers only had hitherto been accorded that state honour, Palmerston and Gladstone. That Law should be so honoured was a testimony to the power of the press barons Beaverbrook and Rothermere. Even in Law's own lifetime, as Blake pointed out, his 'origins, career, character, and the reasons for his success acquired something of an aura of mystery which the passage of time has done nothing to remove'.<sup>40</sup>

Blake's efforts to remove that aura of mystery received high commendation. Alan Taylor praised him for answering many questions so decisively that they 'never need be asked again'.<sup>41</sup> How did Law become leader? Would the Liberal government have gone to war in 1914 had the Germans not invaded Belgium? How did Law overthrow Asquith? How did Law overthrow Lloyd George? Where did the Conservative Party get its money from? In his 1972 biography of Beaverbrook, Taylor judged *The Unknown Prime Minister* 'a first-rate production, which has stood the test of time as the standard work on its subject'. Blake had revealed for the first time the story of Baldwin's succeeding Law in 1923. Taylor thought Blake a little too credulous of Beaverbrook's anecdotes; and in any case, had failed to rescue Law in the end from the first count of being hopelessly unglamorous: 'Bonar Law was still the Unknown Prime Minister'.<sup>42</sup> For Kenneth Morgan, an authority on Lloyd George, 'Blake illuminated Law's relationship with Lloyd George as no other writer has

<sup>38</sup> C. L. Mowat, *American Historical Review* (1956), 62: 125–6.

<sup>39</sup> R. Blake, *The Unknown Prime Minister. The Life and Times of Andrew Bonar Law, 1858–1923* (London, 1955), p. 531.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Observer*, 9 Oct. 1955.

<sup>42</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (London, 1972), p. 615.

done.<sup>43</sup> Charles Mowat judged it ‘fair and frank’, ‘admirable’ in its ‘fresh and unblinking scrutiny’ on such matters as party funding and honours, and above all in Blake’s not shrinking from judgement in his whole handling of the Ulster crisis.<sup>44</sup> The American R. J. Q. Adams, from the privileged position of a Bonar Law biographer benefiting in 1999 from more than forty years of research and publication on Law’s times and from a vastly augmented range of unpublished materials not available to Blake, conceded that the then ‘young Oxford don’ had produced a ‘perspicacious and elegantly readable book’. But he echoed Taylor: ‘It has been widely praised, and continues to be read, and cited by historians. Yet it is true that what our time is pleased to call Bonar Law’s “image” continues to reflect Dangerfield’s vision more than that of Beaverbrook or Blake.’<sup>45</sup> It has to be said, in Blake’s defence, that reviewers of Adams have not in general detected wholly convincing evidence of success on his part in exorcising Law from the curse of Dangerfield.<sup>46</sup>

Blake himself, however, was more concerned to exorcise the curse of Beaverbrook. What the press lord wanted was a snappy, punchy celebration of Law as a great, dramatic personality. He was disappointed in a model of judicious scholarly refinement. Beaverbrook had another cause for complaint. One anecdote that Blake rashly accredited was a story of Law’s need as Conservative leader in the wartime coalition to consult the prime minister in 1916 at a critical juncture of the war, and how Asquith patronisingly made him wait while he finished a rubber of bridge with three ladies. The Asquith family reacted furiously. Beaverbrook advised Blake to let it be, but Blake insisted on grappling with Asquith’s daughter, Lady Violet Bonham Carter. Beaverbrook was intensely annoyed at being dragged into the controversy. He duly dredged up his memory to vindicate Blake; but Blake fell from favour. Nor (the story went) did the aged Beaverbrook take kindly to Blake’s advice conveyed by the press lord’s great-nephew Jonathan Aitken that Alan Taylor would be too uncritical to suit as biographer.<sup>47</sup>

In many ways *The Unknown Prime Minister* remained a kind of Blakeian model. He blended perspicacity derived from laborious and

<sup>43</sup> Morgan, *Independent*, 25 Sept. 2003, 22.

<sup>44</sup> *American Historical Review* (1956–7), 62: 125–6. Neither the *English Historical Review* nor the *Cambridge Historical Journal* noticed Blake’s *Unknown Prime Minister*.

<sup>45</sup> Adams, *Bonar Law*, pp. xiii–xiv.

<sup>46</sup> See M. Bentley in *English Historical Review* (2001), 116: 271; G. Egerton, *Journal of Modern History* (2001), 73: 164–5; N. McCrillis, *American Historical Review* (2000), 105: 1008–9.

<sup>47</sup> K. Burk, *Troublemaker. The Life and History of A. J. P. Taylor* (London, 2000), p. 317. Aitken was familiar with Blake through the Conservative Philosophy Group.

impeccable research with the clarity of elegant readability. Blake was ever studiously careful about that blend. He scanned his texts by reading them aloud to Patricia, a sound judge. He hated editorial demands for revisions and cuts: 'I can't bear cutting my own work—it is *all* so good.'<sup>48</sup> In a satirical passage in writing to Trevor-Roper, Blake extolled the careerist benefits of books being 'dull and unreadable'. He recommended consulting the 'History School Establishment' for advice—'say Gibbs, Wernham, and Habakkuk?' 'Ask them to make as many suggestions as possible, particularly in respect to style and clarity, and incorporate the lot. The result would be books of truly professorial timber (i.e., ones in which nobody can by any possibility see the wood for the trees), your reputation would rocket up, and the Establishment would feel much flattered by the deference which you had paid to them.'<sup>49</sup> Blake's background in Modern Greats helped to immunise him from both the narrow sectarianism of the 'old history' stemming from post-Victorian academic professionalism and from the ideological extravagances of the 'new history' influenced by such as the Marxisant *Annales* school in France. He made no apologies for asserting the intellectual and educational primacy of political and constitutional themes. There was always a touch of the Eldon Chancery Law Scholar. In any case, for all that his subjects remained rather on the margins of the grand historical record, the young Oxford don had established a sound academic reputation.

The next few years were necessarily a good deal devoted to domesticity and the raising of young daughters. His mother's death in 1957 and then his father's, at a great age, in 1964—there had been dealings with Oxford's pre-eminent Cornishman, Leslie Rowse, and attendances at Trevor-Roper's public lectures—marked a diminishing of the Norfolk connection that was soon repaired with Uncle Norman's bequest in 1966 of Riverview. But his dealings meantime with Bonar Law had set Blake off on a path of political studies centring on that 'most interesting fact in British politics', the survival of the Conservative Party. There was a view, moreover, that made much of Law's being a kind of spiritual father to a series of 'spiritual heirs', that is to say, Conservative leaders in latter times extracted from among the middling social orders: 'Baldwin, Heath,

<sup>48</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 11 April 1955, DP.

<sup>49</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 31 Aug. [1956], DP. N. H. Gibbs (1910–90), Chichele Professor of History of War, 1953–77; R. B. Wernham (1906–99), Professor of Modern History, Oxford, 1951–72; Sir (Hrothgar) John Habakkuk (1912–2002), Chichele Professor of Economic History, 1950–67.

Thatcher and Major—perhaps even Macmillan.<sup>50</sup> Here, conceivably, was a potentially rich field for Blake's future exploration.

Meanwhile, however, apart from the duties of family domesticity, Blake was kept busy between 1950 and 1955 as Senior Censor, that is chief academic and disciplinary officer, at Christ Church. The college then nominated him as the university's Senior Proctor for the 1959–60 academic year. That led in turn to a place on the university's governing body, the Hebdomadal Council, from 1959 to, as it happened, 1981. He testified both to his Norfolk loyalties and to his training in economics with '*Esto Perpetua*'. *A History of the Norwich Union Life Insurance Society, 1808–1958. An Account of One Hundred and Fifty Years of Progress and Development in the Service of the Community* (Norwich, 1958). This rather lightweight item of fancy printing he imbued with his customary efficiency though, as he acknowledged, it owed much to Sir Robert Bignold's history of the Bignold family of 1948, from which, as Blake disarmingly allowed, 'I have borrowed freely and without hesitation'. His public services as councillor and magistrate in Oxford led to overtures from Conservative constituencies. But by now Blake was quite set in his academic ways.

Those ways led, by 1961, to the question whether he should take an interest in the vice-chancellorship of the newly founded University of East Anglia, to be established in Norwich, practically on his Brundall doorstep. It was rumoured that the Christ Church mafia, principally in the form of the Norfolk notable Sir Roy Harrod, was keen to plant a *colonia deducta* there; but arranging matters in Oxford was a very different thing from arranging matters in the eastern turnip fields. With Sussex well on its way, 'there was gossip about what was happening at Norwich which, along with York, was the next university project to be recognized. Rumour had it that they were having difficulty finding a vice-chancellor and there were jokey conversations in Cambridge about whom it would suit.'<sup>51</sup> It can be assumed with fair certainty that those jokey conversations would have been especially jokey about suiting a candidate of the Christ Church mafia, for all his local connections. Trevor-Roper reported the influential hostility of the Cambridge grandee Noel Annan.<sup>52</sup> Blake was not among the candidates interviewed. There is no reason to believe that Blake would have suited the New or 'Plate Glass' university ethos. He

<sup>50</sup> Adams, *Bonar Law*, pp. xiii–xiv.

<sup>51</sup> Frank Thistlethwayte, *Origins. A Personal Reminiscence of UEA's Foundation* (privately published, 1993), p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 19 Sept. 1961, DP.

was not a man to go with the latest academic fashions or do away with traditional faculty and departmental structures. What he did do, over the next few years, was to become what an American scholar referred to as ‘the master British political biographer’,<sup>53</sup> by way of exploring that most interesting fact of modern British history, the survival of the Conservative Party.

Blake started off with an intention to retrieve from obscurity another kind of ‘unknown prime minister’, the fourteenth Earl of Derby. Edward Geoffrey Smith Stanley (1799–1869), Lord Stanley from 1834 and inheritor of the earldom in 1851, was three times Queen Victoria’s prime minister, 1852, 1858–9, and 1866–8. With the Conservative Party hopelessly split with Peel’s fall over the question of agricultural protection in 1846, it was Derby’s fate to lead his minority ministries as mere interludes when the ascendant Liberals quarrelled among themselves. It would not be until 1874, under Derby’s former henchman in the Commons, Benjamin Disraeli, that the Conservative Party regained a Commons majority. There was certainly a case for rescue. A generally unattractive figure, notorious for a bad temper which he exploited to advantage at moments when he chose to be agreeable, Derby was the most bibliographically neglected of the Victorian prime ministers. Blake signalled his intention to rescue in eight pages in *History Today* in 1955. But it is not difficult to understand why he lost heart in this enterprise. Conducting two biographical rescue operations by request might be condoned as an accident of scholarly life; deliberately to choose a third would begin to look like academic perversity. Moreover, Wilbur D. Jones of the University of Georgia had tried to fill the Derby gap in 1956 with *Lord Derby and Victorian Conservatism*. Though it was damned utterly by Charles Stuart,<sup>54</sup> Blake could use it to explain his turning his attention to the case of Disraeli. In 1964 he contributed ‘The Rise of Disraeli’ to the *Essays in British History presented to Sir Keith Feiling*, edited by Trevor-Roper (London, 1964). That was an earnest of what was to come.

*Disraeli* came, in 1966, in what was reported in the words of the American literary scholar at Austin, Texas, Clarence Lee Cline, as ‘the best biography of anyone in any language’.<sup>55</sup> Having served as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Leader of the House of Commons in the minority Conservative administrations, Benjamin Disraeli was requested by Queen

<sup>53</sup> *Journal of Modern History* (2001), 73: 164.

<sup>54</sup> *History* (1959), 44: 173–4.

<sup>55</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Private information. Cline (1905–98) was Professor of English at the University of Texas, Austin.

Victoria on Derby's retirement early in 1868 to undertake the government. As prime minister he became ipso facto leader of the Conservative Party. It was doubtful that he would ever have been elected to that position. He resigned in November of that year in consequence of defeat in the general election, and was replaced by Gladstone. That pattern repeated itself twice more: Disraeli replaced Gladstone after the Conservative win in the 1874 election, and Gladstone stormed back in 1880. The Earl of Beaconsfield, as Disraeli then was, died a year later.

Lord Beaconsfield was accorded his official tombstone biography by W. F. Monypenny and G. E. Buckle in six volumes (1910–20). That grandiose monument of marble and bronze exuded its intimidating presence, later compacted into four-volume and two-volume editions, over the political-biographical field for half a century. Blake saw his task as emulating its authority, though necessarily on a less heroic scale, by a comprehensive fresh appraisal of the mountainous materials available. 'M&B' remained for Blake a huge quarry, particularly for the many letters quoted from 'the best letter-writer among English statesmen'. As well as the collections already used by them and the materials at Windsor, Blake had the advantage of the quarries at Hughenden of the little visited Disraeli archive, and of the Derby archive, both of the prime ministerial fourteenth and the foreign secretary fifteenth earls. Blake's approach to Disraeli was much in the style of his approach to Bonar Law; but it was, so to speak, back to front. Disraeli was in no need of rescue. What was needed, rather, was fairness and frankness, unblinking scrutiny and not shrinking from judgement applied to stripping away from Disraeli's portrait all the warmly glowing old varnish of over-coloured legend, and exposing him restored in the historical light of common day.

Blake thus revealed a man and a politician far removed from the categories conventionally assigned to him as a profoundly insightful, far-seeing statesman. Trevor-Roper had been helpful: 'Is Dis's theory of tory history total rubbish?' Blake asked in 1965. Blake had in mind such as Charles I as alleged martyr for poor landlords against the rich. Blake felt that Disraeli was on firmer ground with his eighteenth-century Venetian Oligarchy.<sup>56</sup> The impact of the book owed much to the shock effect of saying things hitherto unsayable. Of his triumph over Gladstone in the Reform question in 1867, for example, Blake commented that Disraeli deserved 'to go down in history as a politician of genius, a superb improviser, a parliamentarian of unrivalled skill, but not as a far-sighted

<sup>56</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 13 Sept. 1965, DP.



statesman, a Tory democrat or an educator of his party'. Nor was Blake any more impressed by Disraeli's reputation as pioneer of social reform legislation. In this respect he was perhaps a little too severe. On some aspects of it—for example, the trade unions—one might fairly intuit simple lack of interest on Blake's part. No doubt much of it was a bromide to contrast with Gladstone's strenuous heroics. But the reforms were genuine enough for Lord Salisbury to endorse at the time and for Joseph Chamberlain to celebrate later. Norman Gash commented that, in reviving and revising a career 'previously swaddled in the mummy cloths' wrapped around by the official keepers of the Disraeli legend, Blake, 'shrewd and often original in his assessment of Disraeli's character and achievements', had written 'as much as anything can be the definitive life', 'a life which destroys many of the myths that linger round that enigmatic shade'. Much of what he says 'will not altogether please the adherents of romantic toryism'.<sup>57</sup> Gash's influential enthusiasm doubtless owed much to the circumstance that he was at this time working on a monumental biography of Disraeli's great enemy and victim, Robert Peel. In a curious way, Blake's reading of Disraeli was in itself a kind of Peelite revenge.

But if Blake made Disraeli much less convincing as a heroic legend, he made him much more interesting as a man. Blake read Disraeli's novels with the eye of an astute critic, much to his own and to his subject's advantage. He saw accurately that Disraeli's life was a literary life. His greatest novel was his own career. Blake exposed the vividly disreputable aspects of Disraeli's early career as a dandy novelist. He acknowledged the lead given in this direction by Professor B. R. Jerman's pioneering *The Young Disraeli* of 1960 in disclosing much that was deplorable both morally and financially in the early years. It was Blake's achievement to integrate Jerman's findings within a larger scheme of interpretation, comprehending the whole of Disraeli's career, bringing out the continuities of the raffish early years and the persistent disposition to myth-making and a naked pursuit of fame behind the poses of respectability he adopted to placate the suspicious, and generally anti-semitic, Conservative mass. He showed how Disraeli's youth was a comedy of misadventures undertaken to fuse his notions of an intensely aristocratic Sephardic heritage of Jewishness with the Byronic outcast fashions of the time. For Peter Fraser, Blake's greatest achievement was 'to have brought out the close

<sup>57</sup> *English Historical Review* (1968), 83: 360–2.

and continuous relationship between Disraeli's inner life, as construed from his novels, and his public actions'.<sup>58</sup>

*Disraeli* (London, 1966) had all the merits of clarity and easy readability established by Blake as his trademark in the Law book. He had created a classic. The impact of *Disraeli* lifted him to a new level of eminence in his profession. It was famed as the favourite reading of the later President Nixon. In 1967 Blake was elected to a Fellowship of the British Academy, his sponsor being Alan Taylor. He was elected also in 1967 to the prestigious Ford's Lectureship and delivered before the university in 1968 the lectures that became a best-selling textbook, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill* (London, 1970). This was a distillation of his findings about how to explain the survival of the Conservative Party. Blake duly celebrated the virtues of adaptability and pragmatic avoidance of doctrinaire fancies. Though successful as a text, it has never much endeared itself to readers yearning for some acknowledgement of the presence, or indeed the power, of ideas. There was talk now of Blake for the Cambridge Regius chair due to become vacant in 1968. He would accept it, he told Trevor-Roper, but would prefer the headship of a college. Being head of a house he thought compatible with writing. Both Magdalene, Cambridge, and Magdalen, Oxford, were soon to be vacant. Besides, with respect to the Regius, after what he had written about Harold Wilson, there was no chance of any preferment from that quarter. His thoughts turned again in 1966 to the benefits of getting the deanery of Christ Church laicised.<sup>59</sup>

All such thoughts were soon redundant. The Fellows of The Queen's College pre-elected Blake in 1967, and admitted him as Provost in October 1968. Blake acknowledged Trevor-Roper's 'prompting'.<sup>60</sup> From suburban Thornhill at Harberton Mead the Blakes moved to the semi-palatial splendour of the Provost's Lodgings. What the Queen's fellows wanted was a dose of the administrative and disciplinary talents Blake had been observed over the years applying successfully at Christ Church. An impressively tall man, with a courteous stoop, Blake by this time in his fifties had acquired for his owlish countenance a rubicund complexion and the general air that might well have him mistaken for a Norfolk squire. For those not in the know, it was initially easy to underestimate him, just as it was easy to underestimate him intellectually because of the

<sup>58</sup> *History* (1969), 54: 116–17.

<sup>59</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 20 June 1967, DP.

<sup>60</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 22 Oct. 1968, DP.

readability of his scholarship. The Queen's fellows got from him what they needed: as one of them put it, 'his role as magistrate had echoes in his conduct as Provost!' To that he added an immense human warmth and capacity for kindnesses. He presided over the college with both dignity and affable geniality. It was as if, recalling his memories about the contrasting Deans Lowe and Simpson at Christ Church, he determined to blend the dedicated efficiency of the former in the Governing Body and its committees with the gregarious urbanity of the latter on High Table and all collegiate amenities. He dispelled the somewhat 'cantankerous' atmosphere obtaining at the time of his election. It was cantankerous undergraduates in fact who soon claimed his attention. His years as Christ Church Censor, Senior Proctor and city magistrate made him adept at dealings with the undergraduate body. Queen's, like Christ Church, was not much infected with what he described as the 'dotty disaffection' rampant at Balliol which disturbed many universities at that time. Some Queen's undergraduate ideologues did attempt to stir things up by demanding information about the expenses of High Table. Provost Blake rebuffed them on the grounds that they might get 'the wrong idea', or, rather, 'the right idea, which would be far worse'.<sup>61</sup>

Patricia—herself an Oxonian, formerly a pupil of Menna Prestwich<sup>62</sup>—proved equally adept at her role as consort. With only the slightest hint of irony did she lead lady guests from the dinner table in the traditional manner required by the Provost. Indeed, what the Provost required in certain respects suggested that Blake would not, as his great Brundall friend Professor Robert Ashton of UEA firmly maintains, have been well-placed as a New University vice-chancellor.<sup>63</sup> As a Fellow of Queen's, Kenneth Morgan recalled one of the few controversial attitudes taken up by Provost Blake, when he tried to block the admission of female undergraduates: 'He advanced then views somewhat similar to those offered by Peel in opposing the Reform Bill in 1832.' He accepted a heavy defeat with his usual good humour.<sup>64</sup> He was, as he would say, a constitutional monarch.

Scholarly fame added to the collegiate prestige of his successful provostship made Blake a capital Oxford figure. Shortly after his admission he had become a member of 'The Club', a select group of a dozen dons frequenting the inwardnesses of Oxford who dined in rotation at

<sup>61</sup> Morgan, *Independent*, 25 Sept. 2003, 22.

<sup>62</sup> See Blake to Trevor-Roper, 26 Dec. 1966, DP.

<sup>63</sup> Private information. The Ashtons live at the Manor House, Blake's birthplace.

<sup>64</sup> Morgan, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

each others' colleges twice a term. In 1969 he inducted Trevor-Roper and Raymond Carr to join with Sparrow, Masterman, Isaiah Berlin, Kenneth Wheare, Tom Norrington, George Pickering, William Hayter, Bill Williams, and himself.<sup>65</sup> The mysterious *Mercurius Oxoniensis* of those years reported the doughty part played in Congregation in 1969 by Master Provost Blake in routing the scheme of the powers of darkness to build an animal house for the zoologists in the University Parks. Blake deserted his brethren on the Hebdomadal Council and attacked 'so gallantly that a great murmur of applause arose and Sir Maurice and the Wykehamicall party gnashed their teeth furiously'. On the occasion of the threat of a 'School of Humane Sciences', however, Master Provost Blake was 'unhappily absent (at a great feast, but this *inter nos*)'.<sup>66</sup> Blake was suitably apologetic at the 'most depressing' defeat 'of the party of light' in that battle. Another fight in which the 'party of light' distinguished themselves was 'to have the Hart Legislation reversed root and branch'. This legislation of 1969 enacted the findings of the commission chaired by the Professor of Jurisprudence, H. L. A. Hart, set up in 1968 as a consequence of the student tumults, to recommend reforms in the disciplinary system relating to junior members of the university and in consultative arrangements with such members. Trevor-Roper was in hopes that a successful repeal 'would bring *Mercurius* out of his seasonal hibernation'.<sup>67</sup> As it turned out there was no need for further exertions of 'party of light' gallantry. The 'Hart Legislation' faded into obscurity as a consequence mainly of invincible student apathy.

Close observers drew attention to the fact that the seemingly 'rubicund embodiment of the old Toryism of the shires' was in reality a pragmatic, undogmatic Peelite type of Conservative, who made friends right across the political spectrum. Among his favourites at the college's Saturday guest dinners were the sometime Labour Party leader Michael Foot and his wife Jill. Foot and Blake seemed to Alan Taylor an 'incongruous couple' when they attended his retirement lunch at the LSE in 1976;<sup>68</sup> but Foot could exchange notes with the Provost as a veteran of the Beaverbrook entourage; and they shared both Disraelian and Byronic interests. In 1971 the newly elected Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath advised that Blake be honoured with a life peerage in acknowledgement of extraordinary contributions in scholarship and in services to

<sup>65</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 19 Dec. 1969, DP.

<sup>66</sup> *The Letters of Mercurius* (London, 1970), p. 52.

<sup>67</sup> Trevor-Roper to Blake, 2 Jan. 1974.

<sup>68</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *A Personal History* (New York, 1983), p. 261.

Oxford and Conservatism. On 17 May he was created Baron Blake of Braydeston in the County of Norfolk. Braydeston parish church was his preferred place of worship.

Thus services in the House of Lords, where he spoke with authority on matters within his ambit, were added to the already exacting list of his administrative undertakings. He was honoured to move the Address in Reply at the opening of the 1972 session, ‘almost fully attired in the panoply of the Royal Artillery’. Proclaiming himself a ‘political historian by trade’, Blake characteristically enlivened debates, such as one on Northern Ireland in 1980, with extensive quotations from such as Lord Salisbury in 1872. He remained on the Hebdomadal Council until 1981. He was a Pro-Vice-Chancellor from 1971 until retirement in 1987. The great oddity of these years was that he never became Vice-Chancellor. As it was his habit to accept every commitment that came his way, this anomaly requires explanation. At a meeting in April 1971 of the ‘Electoral College’, or the Nominating Committee for the Vice-Chancellorship as it was properly known, all candidates were eliminated other than Blake and the Principal of Jesus, Hrothgar Habakkuk. (Blake confessed: ‘I can never spell his name.’<sup>69</sup>) Blake had misgivings, as he explained to Trevor-Roper,<sup>70</sup> about accepting should he be offered the post. ‘It would have wrecked all my literary plans, and created many other problems—college as well as personal.’ The vote went against him, as Blake guessed, seven to five. He knew that Sparrow and Kenneth Wheare were ‘passionate’ for him. There were objections, he gathered, ‘on the ground of my identification with the Conservative Party’. Well, as Blake reflected without rancour, it would have been even more hopeless for a Whig in eighteenth-century Oxford. He suspected that his ‘activity in opposing some of the Hart “reforms” may have played its part too’. Then there were the scars left by past battles such as that over the zoology tower. There were some who thought Blake too easy-going as an administrator. Habakkuk, moreover, was Blake’s senior as head of house, and it would be his last chance to complete a four-year term before his sixty-fifth birthday.

Even so, there were regrets. ‘While you and I’, Blake remarked to Trevor-Roper, ‘when confronted with a fence, either leap gaily over it, or, if it looks too formidable, burrow under it with steady mole-like precision, the Principal of Jesus tends to sit on it’, rather in the manner of Mr Jenkinson in *Headlong Hall*. (Thomas Love Peacock was ever one

<sup>69</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 8 Aug. 1972, DP.

<sup>70</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 6 April 1971, DP.

of Blake's favourites.) But would such propensity to hold that things are exactly as they should be, life is neither progressing nor regressing and there is no need or possibility of doing anything about it, prove capable of keeping at bay the new Registrar, a hyper-active reformer, lately imported from Peterhouse, Cambridge, advocate of 'egalitarian, left-wing Benthamite policies'? As for the future, by the time Habakkuk retired from office, Blake would be sixty—'too old, not statutorily, for sixty-two is the upper age at which one can begin, but practically; and indeed I would expect the Electoral College to look for someone younger'.<sup>71</sup>

Chastened a little, perhaps, but in no way downhearted, Blake promptly resumed his calling as paladin of 'the party of Light and Life in Oxford'.<sup>72</sup> 'We must meet at an early day in the term', he wrote to Trevor-Roper in April 1971 from Riverview, 'and plan whom we can ruin next'.<sup>73</sup> Blake served long as delegate of the Oxford University Press. One of his jobs in relation to the Press was as chairman of the committee supervising the project to publish Gladstone's voluminous diaries. The committee appointed M. R. D. Foot as editor. He produced two exemplary volumes in 1968, but it was felt that progress was too slow. The committee wanted to have an editor under their immediate eye. In 1970 Colin Matthew, formerly a pupil of Charles Stuart at Christ Church, was appointed assistant editor to get things moving, and Foot was eventually dropped.<sup>74</sup>

Blake's London life and his clubmanship meanwhile burgeoned. 'He might leave the college around teatime', observers recalled, 'sometimes dinner-jacketed for a London club or debates in the House of Lords. A journalist wrote that, when he met up with colleagues from the London political or media world, Blake "went into overdrive"'.<sup>75</sup> Blake served as chairman of the Hansard Society Commission on Electoral Reform, 1974–6. As to clubs: for conviviality, Pratt's or the Beefsteak; for professional networking, the Oxford and Cambridge; for an Oxford sporting man, Vincent's; for Norfolk, the County in Norwich. There was a burgeoning also of Blake as media don, sought after on the strength of his *The Office of Prime Minister* (London, 1975) for authoritative opinions on

<sup>71</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 8 Aug. 1972, DP.

<sup>72</sup> Trevor-Roper to Blake, 29 March 1974, DP.

<sup>73</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 6 April 1971, DP.

<sup>74</sup> Private information. A. F. Thompson, Matthew's research supervisor, was the actual mover on the committee. The account of the affair given by Professor Boyd Hilton in *Politics and Culture in Victorian Britain, Essays in Memory of Colin Matthew* (Oxford, 2006), 17–18, has it incorrectly that Matthew's revitalising impact 'enabled Foot to resign from the project within two years'.

<sup>75</sup> Morgan, *Independent*, 25 Sept. 2003, 22.

constitutional issues. There was nothing novel about this. Back in 1952 A. J. P. Taylor, media showman *don par excellence*, had suggested a revamped 'In the News' TV talk show, featuring Muggeridge, Betjeman and himself, and then one of Isaiah Berlin, Stephen Spender, or Robert Blake 'as a possible fourth member of the team'.<sup>76</sup>

But Blake was never long distracted from his real love, scholarly research and publication. His next substantial book took a sharp turn away from the high politics of modern Britain to the direction of the imperial politics of central Africa. A former member of the British South Africa Chartered Company suggested to Blake that he write its history. Blake's historical sensibility made the suggestion attractive. Here was a classic test case of the economics of empire. The great reputation at stake was that of Cecil Rhodes, swashbuckling empire-builder extraordinary. Rhodes in fact had long been an attractively adventurous subject for Blake. He had written to Trevor-Roper back in 1955, when completing the Bonar Law book, that he was endeavouring to 'persuade the Rhodes Trustees to let me write the life of C. Rhodes'. His problem at that moment was that 'old L. S. Amery', veteran statesman of empire, was 'one of the key figures on that distinguished, if somewhat muffinish body'. Blake had discovered that Leo Amery's long-boasted claim to have been instrumental in blocking Curzon's chances as against Baldwin to succeed Law in 1923 was without foundation. Should he go ahead and disclose this or wait for the Trustees to decide?<sup>77</sup> He went ahead and presumably the Trustees decided against.

But now that old ambition was given new life. Bill Williams of The Club ran Rhodes House. It was amid the debris in the early 1960s of the collapsed joint Colonial Office and Commonwealth Relations Office project of a Central African Federation leading to Dominion Status that memories of the Chartered Company persisted. The 'freedom fighters', Kenneth Kaunda in Zambia, the former Northern Rhodesia, and Hastings Banda in Malawi, the former Nyasaland, both repudiated the Federation and erected authoritarian 'Afro-socialist' regimes. All that was left of the old colonial order was the original Rhodesia created by the Chartered Company, equipped with responsible government in 1923 in place of the Company, federalised in 1953, defederalised in 1963, and by now, having declared unilateral independence from the British Crown in 1965, eventually by 1969 the Rhodesian Republic, governed by an apartheid regime led by Ian Smith.

<sup>76</sup> Sisman, *A. J. P. Taylor*, p. 207.

<sup>77</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 11 April 1955, DP.

Having accepted the proposal, Blake early decided that, in the dramatic and historically unprecedented circumstances of the 'winds of change' proclaimed by Macmillan in 1960, a simple history of the Company would miss far too many opportunities of high import. The British South Africa Company had been incorporated under Royal Charter in 1889. Its Rhodesia, the Rhodesia of Cecil Rhodes and his freebooters, the heartland of the Company, told, in its way, a brave story. But Blake decided to tell a bigger story beyond 1923, a history of Rhodesia to his present time. Between 1968 and 1973 he visited Rhodesia several times. A postcard from him to Trevor-Roper in 1969 observed that since the regrettable death of the Portuguese strongman Salazar, Rhodesia was at least a place where law and order was enforced. The book was published in 1977 (*A History of Rhodesia*: London), with Ian Smith still holding out in Salisbury against a guerrilla war.

What Blake told, unavoidably from his point of view, was a white man's story. His chief informants were his favourite people of the old liberal establishment that lost power in 1962, the engagingly clubbable Godfrey Huggins (Lord Malvern), Roy Welensky and, most favoured of all, the New Zealand missionary Garfield Todd. Least favoured of his informants was the incumbent rebel chief of government, Ian Smith. It was a story of gallantry, enterprise, conquest, greed, depredation, confiscation, racism, oppression, the opening up and civilising of the central African plateau, before the 1890s bereft of any knowledge of the wheel, or draught animals, or the plough, or of written language. Blake guardedly explained himself: 'One cannot write about Rhodesia without entering into the area of modern political controversy. I do not expect those whom I have consulted to agree with my judgement of events, and I must take full responsibility for it.'<sup>78</sup> He explained also that he had tried with difficulty 'to get some insight into the mentality of the Rhodesian Africans, which is not quite the same as that of the Africans in neighbouring countries, for a host of historical reasons'.<sup>79</sup> Here his insights told him of primitive brutality ingrained by an extremely complex social order.

Blake told his story in the style of the stooping courtesy of his manners, with every effort to remain wholly objective and to avoid offence. He had never, in his earlier writings, deliberately involved himself in the kind of polemics and controversies so relished by Trevor-Roper. (Indeed, back

<sup>78</sup> Blake, *A History of Rhodesia* (London, 1977), p. xvi.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.



in 1963 Trevor-Roper had made himself notorious among the progressive believers by his insistence in a BBC broadcast on the unhistoricity of sub-Saharan Africa: 'there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness.'<sup>80</sup> Now polemic and controversy came down upon Blake. Perhaps he should have known better than to comment on a letter from Lady Grey to her daughter after the bloody suppression of the Shona rebellion in 1897, about the emotions stirred in her by a sunset vision of a kraal-burning patrol of the 7th Hussars and mounted infantry passing by on its way back to Bulawayo: 'Much of the atmosphere of the time and the place is there: the romance, the glamour, the sense of adventure, and also the sadness of that cruel clash between two alien worlds.'<sup>81</sup>

There were notices that paid tribute to Blake's habitual 'pleasant and engaging style'.<sup>82</sup> Robin Palmer in the *International Journal of African Historical Studies* conceded that Blake's 'fluent and magisterial' text made 'an excellent read', and such, 'in these days of Althusserian and Poulantzian mysticism, were hard to come by'.<sup>83</sup> But invariably came the knuckle-rappings. Some complained of Blake's showing 'little acquaintance with serious Africanist and imperial scholarship or analysis of race relations'.<sup>84</sup> Others complained that the 'ruling whites' dominated the book. Yet another allowed in *Foreign Affairs* that Blake's was 'an important account', but 'the black nationalist perspective is almost entirely absent'.<sup>85</sup> And so on. *Rhodesia* was ignored by the British journals. The flavour of Blake's huge offence to the prevailing liberal Africanist consensus is most vividly conveyed in the words of Professor John MacKenzie, late of the University of Lancaster, who conjured the name of Edward Long, notorious author in 1774 of a most grossly racist history of Jamaica, as a kind of antecedent inspiration: 'I find it extraordinary that this imperial tradition, however much it might become more subtle than the work of Long, continues right down to Robert, Lord Blake's *History of Rhodesia* more than two hundred years later.'<sup>86</sup>

Absurd extravagance of that kind Blake could well ignore. But he could not ignore the cloud of right-thinking disapproval hanging over what was to prove his last substantial scholarly work. It was a book in the

<sup>80</sup> See K. A. Appiah, *New York Review of Books*, 17 Dec. 1998.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 42–3.

<sup>82</sup> O. B. Pollack, *American History Review* (1979), 84: 516.

<sup>83</sup> R. Palmer, *International Journal of African Historical Studies* (1979), 12: 148–51.

<sup>84</sup> Pollack, *American History Review* (1979), 84: 516.

<sup>85</sup> July 1978.

<sup>86</sup> Canadian Council of Area Studies, Learned Societies, *Africa and Asia: Convergence and Divergence in History and Scholarship*. Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2 June 2003, 3.

wrong place at the wrong time. He was not dissuaded, however, from urging unapologetically in the Lords in 1978 historically cogent reasons (with the almost ritual genuflection to the great Lord Salisbury) for not renewing sanctions against the rebel Smith regime in Rhodesia.<sup>87</sup> Indeed it was his bent as an historian that did most to lessen Blake's impact in the Lords. There has always been a question as to what politicians can fairly expect of the academics they ennobled. To the Conservative Party chiefs Blake tended to be too detached from the general run of contemporary politics; and when not detached, too eccentric or, as in this case, maverick. A club he was not a member of was the Carlton. Many Oxford dons deplored such signs of what they interpreted as a visceral Toryism more worthy of the shires than of the cloisters of Academe. It was one thing to plead for understanding of the predicament of Douglas Haig or Bonar Law; but to plead for understanding of the predicament of Ian Smith—'whom I have met several times'—for all Smith's 'capacities for devious procrastination', was quite another. It came near to provocation.

From now on Blake confined himself with one exception (and an exceptional failure) to high productivity on a small scale. He kept his hand in with *Disraeli's Grand Tour* (London, 1982) and a volume in the Paladin History of England series of which he was general editor, *The Decline of Power, 1915–1964* (London, 1985), respectfully received. The pragmatic, down-to-earth deprecator of ideas and theories as guides to politics, now, in the early 1980s, confronted the rise of Thatcherism. Blake, it seems clear, found no great problem adapting himself to the new Conservative order. Such adaptation could in itself, of course, be accounted sensible pragmatism, particularly in the deteriorating times for the country in the 1970s. As Blake put the case, 'arguably dogma was needed to jerk the country out of the slough of despond symbolised by the "Winter of Discontent"'.<sup>88</sup> And, after all, the sort of people shocked by Thatcher were pretty much the sort of people shocked by *A History of Rhodesia*. Blake contributed on occasion to the audience of politicians, dons and journalists who met in these years as the Conservative Philosophy Group;<sup>89</sup> and he did see much of one don prominent in that group, Maurice Cowling of Peterhouse, Cambridge. Whether Cowling's known high regard for Blake had any bearing on Cowling's later importation of Trevor-Roper (by then created Lord Dacre of Glanton) as

<sup>87</sup> *Parliamentary Debates (PD), Lords*, 9 Nov. 1978, 542–5. See also Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Major* (London, 1997), p. 330.

<sup>88</sup> Blake, *Conservative Party from Peel to Major*, p. 369.

<sup>89</sup> Blake addressed the Group in Autumn 1975 on 'Conservatism in an Age of Revolution'.

Master of Peterhouse in 1980 is a matter not beyond conjecture. Certainly, Dacre had cause to thank Blake for his exertions on Dacre's behalf; for 'I know that you wrote to Maurice Cowling a letter which was of great effect in the election at Peterhouse. For which many thanks indeed.'<sup>90</sup>

In the matter of the arguable necessity of dogma to match the demands of those critical times, Blake's political antennae had already sensed the coming of an end to the post-war statist *dirigiste* 'Butskellite' world and a shift to a free-market monetarist emphasis with what he called the 'Libertarian and Adam Smithian doctrines of the Institute of Economic Affairs'. Blake observed the 'Pauline conversion' of his old friend Keith Joseph in 1975 'from consensualism to Toryism'.<sup>91</sup> In *The Conservative Opportunity* (1976), in a series edited by Christopher Patten, then director of the Conservative Research Department, Blake presciently drew attention to 'one of those rare and profound changes in the intellectual climate which occur only once or twice in a hundred years. There is a wind of change in Britain, and much of the democratic world and it comes from the right, not the left.'<sup>92</sup> For all that he shared Trevor-Roper's misgivings in 1977 as to whether the Tories had a 'clear plan' about inflation and trade union power,<sup>93</sup> Blake was 'one of the first', as he later claimed, 'to criticise consensus'.<sup>94</sup> Blake, though he did not yet know it, had foreseen Thatcherism. He defined it essentially as a backlash against Heath's abrupt reversal of the 'Selsdon Man' policies in 1972.<sup>95</sup> That insight he would eventually register in 1985 in an updated edition of *The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher*.

Within Oxford in these years winds of change were blowing that Blake increasingly found chilly. On the surface this did little to diminish his phenomenal range of activities. He became (once more following in his uncle Norman's footsteps) Prime Warden of the Dyers' Company, 1976–7.<sup>96</sup> He became a Trustee of the British Museum, 1978–88. He played his part in the affairs of the British Academy. He served it as Vice-President, 1974–5, when he produced for it *The Office of Prime Minister*. This came out of three *Thank Offering to Britain* lectures funded for the

<sup>90</sup> Dacre to Blake, 31 Dec. 1979, DP. See also Cowling to Blake, 21 Jan. 1980, DP.

<sup>91</sup> Blake, *Conservative Party from Peel to Major*, p. 415.

<sup>92</sup> Blake and Patten, *The Conservative Opportunity* (London, 1976), p. 3.

<sup>93</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 22 Aug. 1977, DP.

<sup>94</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 8 Oct. 1987, DP.

<sup>95</sup> Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher* (London, 1985), p. 367.

<sup>96</sup> Norman Daynes wrote a short history of the Most Worshipful Company (1965).

Academy by the Association of Jewish Refugees.<sup>97</sup> He contributed a piece on Anthony Eden in *British Prime Ministers in the Twentieth Century*, edited by J. P. Mackintosh, in 1978, in which he defended Eden's Suez policy pugnaciously. He insisted still as he had insisted back in 1957 to Trevor-Roper: 'Eden's failure did little to harm him in the eyes of the party.'<sup>98</sup> Impressed no doubt with what Blake had done for Bonar Law, Eden had paid him 'huge sums' in 1959 for putting what Blake described as Eden's 'worthless memos' into shape.<sup>99</sup> Blake was quoted in the matter of Eden's alleged collusion with the Israelis by the grateful author of Eden's entry in the new *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, D. R. Thorpe. 'There must have been a great deal of *suppressio veri*', Blake allowed, 'principally of course in connection with the charge of "collusion". No one of sense will regard such falsehoods in a particularly serious light. The motive was an honourable one of averting further trouble in the Middle East, and this was a serious consideration for many years after the event.'<sup>100</sup>

In the light of such unabashed *Realpolitik* it was hardly surprising that Blake's growing visceral Tory repute led to widespread reports of his storming out of an Academy meeting early in July 1980, red-faced and assumably indignant, for its failure to deprive Anthony Blunt, exposed by Thatcher in 1979 as one of the 'Cambridge spies', of his fellowship. Among other things, Blake was shocked, it seemed, at the contingency of being expected to sit next to the odious Blunt at table. There were those who explained that Blake, permanently red-faced, departed abruptly simply because he had to get to the Lords for a division.<sup>101</sup> (Blake's own account of Heseltine's flouncing out of Thatcher's Cabinet in 1986 had it that many people in the room thought 'he was merely departing for the loo'.<sup>102</sup>) On the other hand, Trevor-Roper's account has a certain authoritative plausibility. He and Blake lunched well but not wisely prior to the meeting, with copious draughts of port, 'and that it was the effect of the drink on Robert's carriage that (in Hugh's eyes anyway) caused the merriment. But Hugh was certainly under the apprehension that Robert

<sup>97</sup> It was a book greatly valued by Harold Wilson, who asked in person for a second copy. Information from Mr Peter Brown, former Secretary, now Archivist, of the Academy.

<sup>98</sup> Blake, *Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher*, p. 366.

<sup>99</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 1 Oct. 1959, DP.

<sup>100</sup> J. P. Mackintosh (ed.), *British Prime Ministers in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 2, *Churchill to Callaghan* (London, 1978), pp. 112–13

<sup>101</sup> Private information. The Academy Council voted narrowly to expel Blunt, but the Fellows avoided coming to a vote.

<sup>102</sup> Blake, *Conservative Party from Peel to Major*, p. 369.

had left in protest.<sup>103</sup> That in fact was the case, as Blake himself explained in an apologetic letter to the president, Kenneth Dover. He had not meant to be personally discourteous, but if he was being discourteous to ‘our wrong-headed colleagues’, so be it. He considered the Academy’s decision ‘disgraceful and discreditable. Most people outside the academic cloisters are astounded. It will have done our image nothing but harm.’ To have refused even to ‘deplore’ the conduct of a traitor seemed to Blake insufferable: ‘I would have voted for expulsion without hesitation.’<sup>104</sup> These opinions he repeated publicly in an article in the *Daily Mail*. As an old MI6 man, he fully shared Trevor-Roper’s unforgivingly acid contempt for Philby and Blunt and their treacherous accomplices. In any case Blunt assisted by resigning. That Alan Taylor should *then* have resigned his fellowship Blake denounced as ‘pure idiocy, headline seeking, play acting’.<sup>105</sup>

Trevor-Roper’s peerage as Dacre of Glanton advised by Thatcher in 1979 and then his mastership of Peterhouse in 1980 gave Blake occasions for congratulations and affectionate reminiscence: ‘In April 1946 I joined you in Christ Church and we led a party of radical trouble-making young men.’ Old Dean Lowe would have been much surprised at their subsequent elevations; Masterman less.<sup>106</sup> Then, pugnacious as ever, not content with his challenge to Oxford’s *bien pensants* over Eden’s collusion in the Suez affair, Blake compounded his offence blatantly in his contribution in 1981 to the Festschrift honouring Lord Dacre on his retirement from the Regius Chair in 1980. In ‘The Jameson Raid and “The Missing Telegrams”’, Blake pleaded justification for Joseph Chamberlain’s collusive deceptions in 1897 over Rhodes’s scheme in 1895 to subvert the Transvaal Republic. ‘He was not the first or last statesman to do this, and it is fair to say that other and greater matters were at stake than personal survival.’<sup>107</sup>

Leaving the strait-laced classes to chew on yet another instance of high *raison d’état* complicity, Blake imperturbably resumed his taxing range of activities. He chaired the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, 1982–9, having much ado with such matters as disposition of the Blenheim Papers in lieu of Marlborough death duties, and arrangements for the new Public Record Office. He was on the board of TV

<sup>103</sup> Private information.

<sup>104</sup> Private information.

<sup>105</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 21 Oct. 1980, DP.

<sup>106</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 24 Dec. 1979, DP.

<sup>107</sup> H. Lloyd-Jones, V. Pearl & B. Worden, *History & Imagination: Essays in Honour of H. R. Trevor-Roper* (London, 1981), p. 338.

Channel 4, 1983–6. As chairman of the Rhodes Trust, 1983–7, Blake no doubt dispelled its ‘muffinish’ tendencies in the same robust spirit in which he vindicated Rhodes and Chamberlain. The retirement of Oliver, Lord Franks, from the chancellorship of East Anglia in 1984 presented Blake with another Norfolk temptation.<sup>108</sup> On this occasion, however, he found himself confronted by the formidable Cambridge grandee, Owen Chadwick, OM.

He was joint editor of two supplementary volumes of *The Dictionary of National Biography*, covering the years from 1971–80 (1986), and 1981–5 (1990). In his entry on Eden in the first of those volumes Blake asserted that on Eden’s resignation in January 1957 the Queen consulted him about his successor: ‘He never revealed his choice, nor was it necessarily decisive, but there is good evidence that he did not recommend Butler.’ On this point Blake was at least partially in error. Thus for the replacement *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* series Blake’s earlier Eden entry was not retained, and a new entry was entrusted to D. R. Thorpe, Eden’s biographer, earlier referred to. Thorpe had the benefit of more accurate information about Eden. In a farewell audience, he gave no formal advice to the Queen as to his successor, whom he assumed would inevitably be Macmillan, but on 11 January, in a dictated note for his biographer, he recorded that the Queen had given him the opportunity during the audience ‘to signify that my own debt to Mr Butler while I have been Prime Minister was very real’. No doubt Blake found this irksome; but at least he had the satisfaction of being quoted by Thorpe on a capital matter in Eden’s defence.

Blake’s voracity as public institutional minder and keeper persisted relentlessly. He was president, Electoral Reform Society, 1986–93, as a long-standing and rather eccentric advocate of proportional representation.<sup>109</sup> He found ecclesiastical gratification as High Bailiff and Searcher of the Sanctuary of Westminster Abbey, 1988–9, and High Steward representing the Crown at the Abbey, 1989–99. He presided over the Royal Society of Literature. On the death in 1985 of his fellow Norfolk and Queen’s man Arthur Bryant, Blake took over his column in *The Illustrated London News*. He was heard on radio. As the journalist Alan Watkins recalled, as well as being a good historian, a fine biographer and a nice man, Blake was also ‘one of that odd collection who are wheeled out before the television cameras from time to time, when the Royal

<sup>108</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 18 Sept. 1984, DP.

<sup>109</sup> See *PD, Lords*, 20 Jan. 1993, 919–20.

Family has suffered some embarrassment or other. They are called “constitutional experts”.’ Watkins added: ‘He was, after all, an adviser to the Palace.’ His advice was invariably to the effect that no constitutional implications arose.<sup>110</sup> He was indeed widely believed to be regularly consulted when the Palace needed constitutional advice. Visits of the Queen Mother to her college were occasions relished by Provost Blake, ‘who acted as compère and impresario with much brio’.<sup>111</sup>

All this testified to a continuing high public profile outside as well as inside Oxford. Blake travelled often to deliver lectures and to receive honorary degrees.<sup>112</sup> He undertook in 1980 at the request of its chairman to write the history of the great Far Eastern trading house of Jardine Matheson. He saw this as a natural follow-on to his Rhodesia book: ‘I have always been fascinated by the impact of British economic power on distant and alien lands.’ This promised pleasurable excursions to Hong Kong and beyond. But always as an Oxford man it was inside Oxford that counted in the end. Winds of change can blow in contrary directions. In the country at large they blew from the right. In Oxford they blew from the left.

In 1979 Margaret Thatcher became prime minister. She was an Oxford graduate (second class in chemistry, Somerville). As an Oxonian and the first woman prime minister, she could conventionally have expected an honorary degree within a year or two. Blake was a guest at Chequers in 1979 on the strength mainly of the kind of work he had done with Patten. As to the honorary degree, meanwhile, the Oxford dons showed themselves reluctant. From a leftist perspective she was a bogey. From an academic viewpoint she had made clear her contempt for what Noel Annan in his *Our Age* (1990) called the ‘new radical intelligentsia’ that had in her view done so much to bring the country into decline.<sup>113</sup> Their specific indictment against her was that she was a philistine who deliberately starved the universities and the ‘arts’ of funding. Efforts to honour the strident victrix of the Falklands War came to nothing in 1983. Blake’s attentions were not unnoticed. ‘I’ve reason to believe’, he confided to Trevor-Roper, ‘high quarters would welcome your and my thoughts about the next election.’<sup>114</sup> In 1985 Thatcher suffered the unprecedented

<sup>110</sup> *Independent*, 27 Aug 2004, 11:24.

<sup>111</sup> Morgan, *Independent*, 25 Sept. 2003, 22.

<sup>112</sup> He was honoured by Glasgow University, 1972; East Anglia, 1983; Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, 1987; Buckingham, 1988.

<sup>113</sup> Noel Annan (1916–2000), Provost of King’s Coll. Cambridge, 1956–66, Provost of University Coll. London, 1966–78, Vice-Chancellor, University of London, 1978–81, life peer 1965.

<sup>114</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 14 Nov. 1983, DP.

snub of being refused a degree. Chancellor Macmillan, now Earl of Stockton, was so taken aback at the discourtesy that he considered resigning.<sup>115</sup> Blake shared Stockton's sentiments. A 'vindictive act of petty spite' was his phrase for it.<sup>116</sup> It was a painful situation for one whose political partisanship hitherto had never taken a personally acrimonious turn. He wrote Thatcher a long letter of apologetic commiseration.<sup>117</sup> He updated his *Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher* text in 1985. He was invited again to Chequers in 1986 in acknowledgement of his solidarity. He did not, however, become part of her inner circle of sages and think-tankers.

The new chill in the Oxford atmosphere impinged also on Blake. To the radical intelligentsia-type dons of the time, his being 'a strong supporter of Margaret Thatcher' counted as having 'views that were sometimes startling for so mild-mannered a person'. Such dons were of opinion that for all his role as a Tory historian, Blake 'never really appreciated the nature of the forces that captured his party in the 1980s'.<sup>118</sup> On the contrary, as Blake might have pointed out, he had been a prophet at least as early as 1976 of the desperately needed coming of those forces. The problem was that there would be no picking and choosing among them. That they would disturb, among many other necessities, the cosy world of the dons was unavoidably part of the new political logic.

Then, in 1986, Chancellor Stockton died. Although the chancellorship electorate, Convocation of graduates, was a quite different thing from the Congregation of dons who had snubbed Thatcher in 1985, the lady proudly disdained candidature. It was well known that Edward Heath of Balliol rather lusted after the honour. The ex-Labour Liberal-Democrat Lord (Roy) Jenkins, another Balliol man, looked likely to emerge as his rival. So far, so conventional. The general assumption was that a chancellor of Oxford would be a grand Oxonian public figure. The problem was that Heath was much disliked on the Right for his sulky disloyalty and Jenkins was much disliked on the Left for his treachery. There was an embarrassing dearth of credible alternative grand public Oxonians. The nearest precedent for a non-Oxonian was the great Duke of Wellington. At first, for the 'party of Light and Life' it was a joke. 'Perhaps', as Blake put it to Dacre, 'we could arrange that each of us should be put up. We could let the intrigues, manoeuvres and canvassing go on to the last possible moment, at which juncture I would announce

<sup>115</sup> A. Horne, *Macmillan, 1957–1986* (London, 1989), p. 271, n. 124.

<sup>116</sup> Blake, *Conservative Party from Peel to Major*, p. 366.

<sup>117</sup> Private information.

<sup>118</sup> Matthew, *Education Guardian*, 23 Sept. 2003.



that propriety and decorum have decided me late in the day to withdraw in favour of an older man.<sup>119</sup>

Dacre, as an old hand at chancellorship elections, wanted to run the ancient Lord Chancellor Hailsham, the former Quintin Hogg; but this was hooted out of contention. Dacre's mind then turned to the recourse of a distinguished academic. Lord Bullock? Lord Briggs? Or, for that matter, why not himself? It would be straining the evidence to deduce that Blake's joke set this thought going; but set going it was. Dacre, it seems, had reason to believe there were young dons, perhaps 'young Turks', who wanted to put him forward. He professed to have 'no idea of what my public image (if I have one) is'. His term at Peterhouse was almost at an end. From the 'dank and dismal fens' on 25 January 1987 Dacre conveyed these thoughts to Blake. 'As we are old friends, I would not want to act without keeping you informed. Perhaps we can confer.'<sup>120</sup> The tragedy for these old friends was that the joke turned sour. Blake had no desire to confer about Dacre's possible candidature. Perhaps it came much amiss to him that Dacre seemed to be converting something said in jest into an invitation to put himself forward. The point was that if there were to be an academic candidate, Blake regarded himself as no less eminently eligible. The old 'cavalier' camaraderie of the Christ Church days had up to that point not faded. It was, of course, in certain respects a different camaraderie from that of the 'radical young men'. Charles Stuart, left at Christ Church after Trevor-Roper went off to the Regius and Oriel and after Blake left for Queen's, had lapsed as a presence into the background.<sup>121</sup> With his 'big book', his provostship and his peerage, Blake's repute rather eclipsed that of his former senior and mentor. 'I am most grateful for your sponsorship, advice and practical guidance', Dacre wrote to Blake after 'that elaborate ritual' of induction to the Lords.<sup>122</sup> Trevor-Roper's long Regius incumbency from 1957 to 1980 was brilliant with elegantly erratic essays and oddments but barren of the oft-expected 'big book'. The translation to Peterhouse engineered by Blake had been intended to give Dacre time and space to set that to rights. Dacre, however—highly disconcertingly to Cowling—chose to see his duty as that of reforming a slack Cambridge college up to Oxford standards. On the social side, it seems, the Blakes occasionally found Lady Xandra 'diffi-

<sup>119</sup> Blake to Dacre, 3 Jan. 1987, DP.

<sup>120</sup> Dacre to Blake, 25 Jan. 1987, DP.

<sup>121</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 26 Dec. 1966; Trevor-Roper to Blake, 16 April 1974, DP.

<sup>122</sup> Dacre to Blake, 14 Nov. 1969, DP.

cult'. But still, in those years, between them the jollity of the party of Light and Life abided.

That jollity departed abruptly as Blake found himself being in effect invited, as it can reasonably be assumed he saw it, to become the butt of his own joke and set himself aside in favour of an older man. He had absolutely no intention of so doing. It was not as if Dacre was unaware that Blake saw himself no less eligible than Bullock or Briggs or, for that matter, Dacre. One of Dacre's supporters had told him of Blake's ambition for the chancellorship: 'this office is one he would dearly like for himself'.<sup>123</sup> To win the chancellorship would for Blake more than make up for the lost vice-chancellorship. This did not deter Dacre in a letter a few days later to his designated successor at Peterhouse, Henry Chadwick, from ranging over a wide field of possible chancellorship contenders—Hailsham, Thatcher, Carrington (unfortunately not an Oxonian), Jenkins; or, should there be need of fall-back to a last-resort academic, himself—without mentioning Blake.<sup>124</sup>

Blake responded on 27 January with what seemed a galvanised promptness to Dacre's of the 25th with the tidings that Sir Geoffrey Warnock, Principal of Hertford and former Vice-Chancellor, 1981–5, had asked whether he was willing to have his name put forward, and he had replied affirmatively. No doubt he would be overwhelmed by the legions of the claret-loving Silenus, Jenkins; 'but it is better to have run and lost than never to have run at all'.<sup>125</sup> This immediately became public knowledge. Blake thus was the first candidate to declare himself. He professed himself to the *Evening Standard* 'Londoners' Diary' of 28 January 'surprised to be asked'. Dacre was stunned. He thought that Blake had presumptuously pre-empted the cancellarial field. He should have waited to see if Heath proposed to stand. Besides, Heath had made him a peer, and it was improper for Blake to oppose him. Dacre had no option but to withdraw. In any case, as Blake and pretty well everyone else knew, Dacre's public image had been so contaminated by the embarrassing 'Hitler Diaries' affair of 1983 as to make him practically unelectable.

Heath and Jenkins soon joined Blake in the field. Blake prudently disclaimed being a Thatcherite candidate, stressing rather his academic qualifications. He provided sumptuous luncheons. Glorious spring sunshine enveloped the scene. This time, however, it was to be no entertaining

<sup>123</sup> Godman to Dacre, 3 Jan. 1987, DP.

<sup>124</sup> Dacre to Henry [?Chadwick], 10 Jan. 1987, DP.

<sup>125</sup> Blake to Dacre, 27 Jan. 1987, DP.

amalgam of a gaudy and a cricket match. Blake was very much put out when the Tory whips took him at his word, and pressured Thatcher to put the government's weight on Heath's side. He was seen in the queue of voters outside the Sheldonian angrily haranguing a television camera on the theme that the Conservative Party owed more to him than it did to Heath, and that Central Office was guilty of monstrous ingratitude. The election was a disaster. Dacre was informed that 'the dons voted for the politicians, Londoners for Blake'.<sup>126</sup> The Left would vote neither for the traitor Jenkins nor—for all his disclaimers—the Thatcherite Blake. They plumped for Heath. Jenkins won with 3,249 votes; Blake came in a decently honourable second with 2,674; and Heath trailed with 2,348. Blake unwisely continued his vendetta against Central Office in a recriminatory letter in *The Times*.<sup>127</sup> The party of Light and Life never quite reaffirmed itself.

Blake thus parted from official life in Oxford in 1987 with what can only be assumed to be at best mixed feelings. He bequeathed a thriving collegiate community. His policy had been 'to make Queen's rich and behave rich'.<sup>128</sup> Invitations to the United States came no doubt in such circumstances as welcome diversions. He delivered later in 1987 the Crosby Kemper Lecture at the Winston Churchill Memorial Library at Fulton, Missouri, where Churchill in 1946 had spoken prophetically of an 'iron curtain' dividing Europe. He then passed an agreeable fall semester as Cline Professor of English Literature at the University of Texas at Austin, where he lectured on 'Disraeli: problems of the biographer' and on Trollope. Blake returned with equilibrium restored and chagrin softened. He retired to blessed Riverview at Brundall. He converted a former coach house into a convenient and capacious study-library where he stored his books and set about renewing the life of scholarship. He had foreseen the coming of Thatcherism. Did he foresee the Thatcherite retribution of the Education Reform Act of 1988 and what Noel Annan called the end of the golden age of the dons?<sup>129</sup> In the Lords Blake stoutly defended the idea of a general shake-up of education from top to bottom against those accusing the government of 'hostility and malice', of a 'declaration of war' against teachers and dons.<sup>130</sup> He commented on Thatcher's involuntary departure in 1990: 'enough was enough, but we'll

<sup>126</sup> Catto to Dacre, 10 April 1987, DP.

<sup>127</sup> Godman to Dacre, 1 April 1987, DP; *The Times*, 1 April 1987.

<sup>128</sup> Blake to Dacre, 14 Nov. 1983, DP.

<sup>129</sup> N. Annan, *Our Age: Portrait of a Generation* (London, 1990), p. 386.

<sup>130</sup> *PD, Lords*, 18 April 1988, 1276–8 (Education Reform Bill).

miss her'.<sup>131</sup> A don at Pembroke College, Cambridge (Queen's 'sister' college, of which Blake was an Honorary Fellow), recalled Blake, well-oiled after a feast sometime in the mid-1990s, lamenting the way his career had suffered from his politics.<sup>132</sup> Was this regret for the lost chancellorship? Or the missing vice-chancellorship? Or both?

These last years at Riverview saw a joint production with Hugh Cecil of *Salisbury, the Man and his Policies* (Basingstoke, 1987), and *World History from 1800* (Oxford, 1989) in *The Oxford Illustrated Encyclopaedia*, volume 4. Something of a reconciliation with Oxford was effected in 1992, when he was invited to give the centenary Romanes Lecture, the first of which had been delivered by Gladstone. His subject was 'Gladstone, Disraeli and Queen Victoria', with the advantage given not to Disraeli, for all that Disraeli held the advantage with the Queen, but to Peel's Peelite inheritor. The brisk fulfilment of the monumental Gladstone *Diaries* project was immensely gratifying. Also in 1992 he published an entertaining *Sayings of Disraeli* (London, 1992), which he dedicated to 'George Burnett and Arthur Dodds, companions in our escape from Italy, 1943-4'. He edited with Roger Louis of the University of Texas, Austin, in 1993 a collection of essays on Churchill (*Churchill*; Oxford, 1993). This contributed to the controversy over Churchill's political legacy in the 1990s hosted by the Churchill Centre. In debate at Church House, Westminster, in July 1995, Blake defended Churchill against allegations that he had sold Britain out to the United States in the war. He further pushed his own line on this in *Churchill, a Pocket Biography* (Stroud, 1998).

Resentment against the Conservative whips now made for rare appearances in the Lords. He made an exception, however, in the animus he shared with Thatcher against ratifying the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. The issue, he insisted, was 'never properly discussed'; 'irreversible changes should never be made without the express agreement of the nation'. Blake had become increasingly Eurosceptic; and, as president of the Campaign for a British Referendum,<sup>133</sup> he and Rees-Mogg led ninety Tory Lords in aid of her demand for a referendum. They lost; as did their fellows in the Commons, and the Tory wounds never healed. 'There can be no doubt', Blake concluded, 'that the Maastricht debate was more damaging to party unity than any comparable divisions since Tariff Reform in 1903.'<sup>134</sup> *The Conservative Party from Peel to Major* was witness to that.

<sup>131</sup> Blake to Dacre, 6 Dec. 1990, DP.

<sup>132</sup> Private information.

<sup>133</sup> *PD, Lords*, 17 Feb. 1993, 1181-2; 7 June 1993, 606-8.

<sup>134</sup> *Conservative Party from Peel to Major*, p. 399.

Agreeable trips to Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Jardine Matheson people no doubt reminded him of the good times at Salisbury before it became Harare, and before Rhodesia became Zimbabwe and before it was all wrecked by the Mugabe regime. (He had predicted 'awful prospects for Zimbabwe' as early as 1983.<sup>135</sup>) He lectured at far-fetched places: Beijing and Aberystwyth. Life at Riverview suffered irreparably from the death, in 1995, of Patricia. Queen's College offered solace in grateful recognition of her consortship with the very unusual gesture of a memorial service. Blake soldiered on. But it seemed that another big, sustained work of research was now beyond him. At a luncheon in the Oxford and Cambridge club in 1998 to mark a new edition of *Disraeli*, his tribute to his lamented Patricia and his evident pride in his hostesses, his three attractive and talented daughters, made for a touching and memorable occasion. A fall at the club shortly afterwards led to a leg's being amputated. But even this little hindered the flow of reviews and journalism.

*Jardine Matheson, Traders of the Far East* appeared at long last in 1999 (London). The delay was not entirely a matter of Blake's being dilatory. The house was concerned not to cause difficulties with the Chinese authorities in their take-over of Hong Kong. Blake's trademark clarity and elegance made it, as Jeremy Hardie remarked in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 'a great deal more entertaining than most company histories'.<sup>136</sup> But it lacked the amplitude and weight of *A History of Rhodesia*. Blake used the firm as a peg on which to hang an informative and enjoyably readable general account of British commercial relationships with the Far East. Fair and frank, with unblinking scrutiny, unshrinking in judgement as usual, Blake made no bones about the fortunes of the house being laid on a massive shift of legal opium from India illegally to China. 'A few sideswipes at "do-gooders" take care of them', complained J. E. Hoare in *Asian Affairs*, 'but avoid any real attempt to examine the Issue.' The Jardine records were among the fullest company archives available to historians; but Blake neglected to exploit them. Important state policy material in the Public Record Office he wholly ignored. There was a heavy reliance on secondary sources. 'While many no doubt will read this account with pleasure', Hoare concluded, 'a definitive account of Jardine Matheson & Company, in all its aspects, still awaits us.'<sup>137</sup> That severe verdict was quite justified. After nearly twenty years in

<sup>135</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 7 Oct. 1983, DP.

<sup>136</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 Feb. 2000, 27.

<sup>137</sup> *Asian Affairs*, the journal of the Royal Society for Asian Affairs, June 2000.

gestation, the shallowness of the Jardine book undoubtedly reflected failing powers. Blake had indeed ‘hardly brought a historian’s craft to this work’. He made no further ventures in the historian’s craft.

Strictly speaking, of course, Blake was never a member of any academic Faculty of History. He was a Politics, a PPE, man, a fact that often surprised people. This was not quite a distinction without a difference. He could mock ‘Gibbs, Wernham and Habakkuk’ on Trevor-Roper’s behalf, but needed not to do so for his own. He could the more conveniently distance himself gratefully from the ideological fashions deforming the humane scholarship of the time. He had no desire to found a school of disciples. He could be his own man in the trade as political historian, as he had defined himself to the Lords. Of politics tutors, he would say, ‘their approach should be historical, and not based on socio-politico-theoretical guff’.<sup>138</sup> As Disraeli was a literary politician, so Blake was a literary historian. The serried volumes of the Longman’s *History of the Conservative Party*, for which he was mover behind the scenes though not a contributor, marked a kind of emancipation from an intellectual condescension of being backhandedly praised from the left for having ‘revived the history of the Conservative Party as an academically respectable study’.<sup>139</sup> On the other hand, the range of his scholarship, compared, say, to Trevor-Roper’s brave contentions in the worlds of European Renaissance and Reformation, was narrow, even allowing for his Rhodesian and Far Eastern excursions. Unlike Trevor-Roper, he was not honoured with a Festschrift by colleagues and pupils. His place in the academic firmament is best summed up by Professor David Cannadine in his life of G. M. Trevelyan, ‘Britain’s official Historian Laureate, the Hereditary Keeper of the Nation’s Collective Memory, combining—in terms of a later generation of practitioners—the popular appeal of Sir Arthur Bryant, Sir John Plumb, A. J. P. Taylor and Dame Veronica Wedgwood with the Establishment connections of Lord Blake, Lord Briggs, Lord Bullock and Professor Owen Chadwick.’<sup>140</sup>

Meanwhile, failing powers were little reflected in diminution of activity. Blake inherited his father’s resilient constitution. In 1999 Blake contributed ‘Constitutional Monarchy, the Prerogative Powers’ to essays in honour of Geoffrey Marshall, a successor in 1993 as Provost of

<sup>138</sup> Blake to Trevor-Roper, 6 April 1971, DP.

<sup>139</sup> Matthew, *Education Guardian*, 23 Sept. 2003.

<sup>140</sup> D. Cannadine, *G. M. Trevelyan. A Life in History* (London, 1992), p. 26.

Queen's.<sup>141</sup> Blake's assistance at Marshall's being honoured on his retirement in 1999 was the occasion of his last visit to the college. He was among the peers who submitted written evidence on Standards of Conduct in the House of Lords in 2000. His ambition now was to write his memoirs. He managed two substantial chapters on his wartime experience. He left a four-page fragment on the early days at Christ Church. The death in January 2003 of Hugh Trevor-Roper, Lord Dacre, doubtless evoked many recollections. Professor Blair Worden recalls that when visiting Blake shortly afterwards in the company of Adam Sisman, Dacre's then biographer, 'limits to Robert's affection remained'.<sup>142</sup> This touch of unforgiveness testified to the abidingly raw emotions of the chancellorship contest. When Blake died of coronary sclerosis at Riverview on Saturday, 20 September 2003, in his eighty-seventh year (the same span as his father), he was awaiting an ABC television crew. He was buried in nearby Braydeston churchyard. His memorial service at Christ Church was attended by Lady Thatcher. Kenneth, Lord Morgan, who delivered the tribute, recalls her 'gimlet eye' when he said something about 'stern, unbending Toryism'. What Lord Morgan mainly talked about was Blake's human warmth, his innumerable kindnesses both as a man and a provost and his role in the party of Light and Life at Oxford.

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*Note.* I must express grateful acknowledgement for valuable assistance from Lord Blake's eldest daughter, the Hon. Deborah Blake, and his sister, Jill, Mrs Geoffrey Ivy; to Kenneth, Lord Morgan of Aberdyfi; Professor Blair Worden (to whom I am grateful for permission to quote from the Dacre Papers); Professor Robert Ashton; Professor M. R. D. Foot; Mr Brian McGuinness; Mr Richard Davenport-Hines; Dr Jonathan Parry; Mr Patrick Higgins; and Mr Peter Brown, who has most helpfully assisted me on behalf of the British Academy.

<sup>141</sup> D. Butler, V. Bogdanor and R. Summers (eds.), *The Law, Politics and the Constitution: Essays in Honour of Geoffrey Marshall* (Oxford, 1999).

<sup>142</sup> Private information.