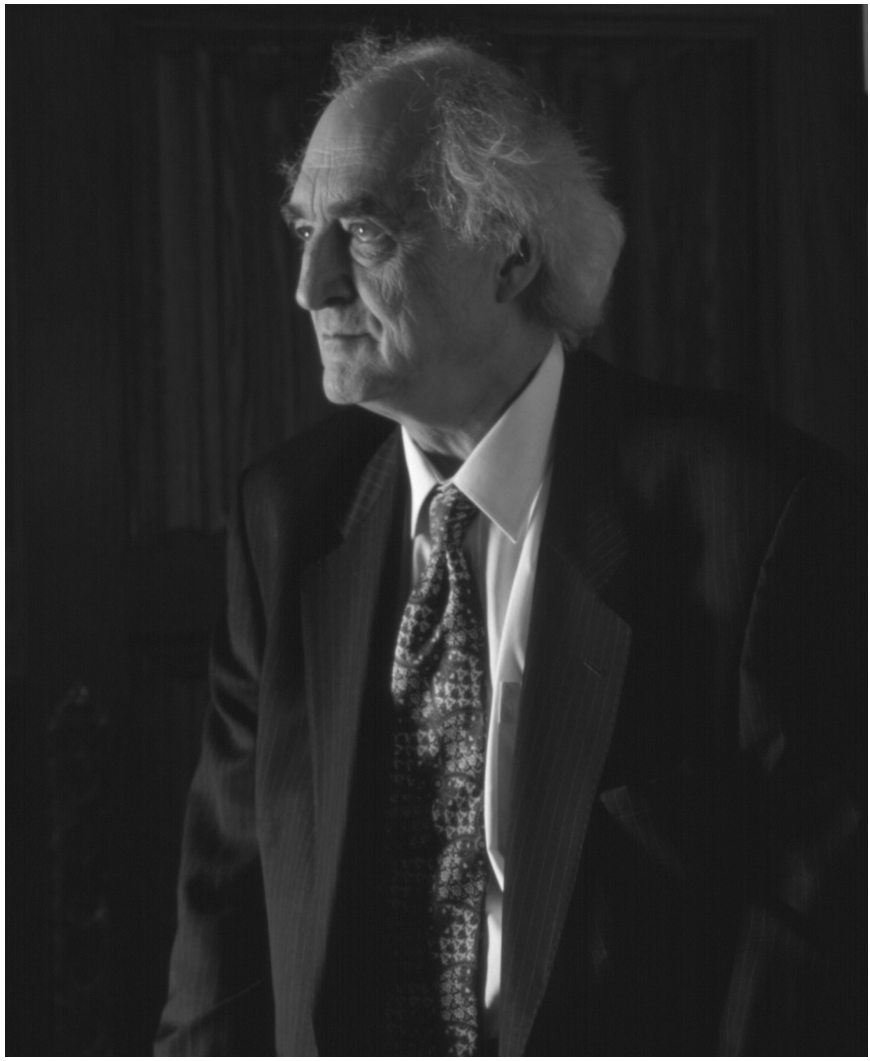

CONRAD RUSSELL *Derry Moore*

Conrad Sebastian Robert Russell 1937–2004

CONRAD RUSSELL, THE FIFTH EARL RUSSELL, historian of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Britain, was born on 15 April 1937. He was the younger son of the mathematician, philosopher, political activist and Nobel prize winner Bertrand Russell, OM, FRS. In 1931 Bertrand became the third Earl Russell, inheriting the title created in 1861 for his grandfather Lord John Russell, proponent of the 1832 Great Reform Act and twice prime minister. Bertrand was an admirer of the novelist Joseph Conrad, and in 1921 wrote to him to ask permission to name his first son John Conrad. The author died in 1924, but Russell also gave the name to his second son, intending that (unlike John) he should be known by it. Conrad's mother was Bertrand's third wife, the striking redhead Patricia Spence, always known as 'Peter', an Oxford undergraduate hired originally as a summer holiday governess who later became Bertrand's secretary. They married in January 1936, after Bertrand and his second wife, the feminist Dora Black, concluded an acrimonious divorce triggered by his leaving her for Peter in 1932. Peter was still in her twenties, while Bertrand was already 64. Conrad was born in April 1937 and spent his first year in Kidlington near Oxford, where his father told at least one visitor, Lady Constance Malleson (the actress Colette O'Niel), that the baby was 'the spitting image of my grandmother Stanley' [of Alderley].[1]

In autumn 1938 Conrad and his parents moved to the University of Chicago where Bertrand had been offered a one-year professorship. Subsequently they moved to the University College of Los Angeles,

[1] Ray Monk, *Bertrand Russell, The Spirit of Solitude* (London, 1996), p. 611; Ronald Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London, 1975), pp. 459, 463.

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together with John and Kate, the much older children of Bertrand's second marriage, both educated at American universities. Some of their time in California was idyllic, but problems arose with the president of UCLA and they moved on to City College of New York. The college found itself bitterly attacked for appointing a notorious atheist, and the post was withdrawn. Bertrand was saved from destitution by the offer of a lectureship at the Barnes Foundation, but this too went wrong. To American eyes, Bertrand was cold and aloof while Peter was prickly, insisting on being addressed as Lady Russell although her husband did not use his title. Feeling snubbed, Dr Albert Barnes withdrew the post, and although Bertrand successfully brought suit for breach of contract, for a time the family lived in isolation in a primitive three-roomed cottage with barely enough money for basic sustenance.

These upheavals put the Russells' already uneven marriage under considerable strain, especially as they were both homesick and worried about the situation in wartime England. However, Bertrand delighted in his son. 'Conrad is the joy of our lives, partly by his merits partly because he doesn't know there is a war on', he wrote in December 1939. Photographs taken in 1940 show a fair-haired, sturdy little boy laughing and holding his parents' hands as they stroll around Los Angeles. Playing with his model train set, Conrad's concentrated focus on the track is already evocative of his expression in adulthood. His mis-pronunciation "diddy" instead of Daddy became the family term for Bertrand. In 1941 in Pennsylvania, Bertrand described him as 'very happy to be in the country, where he can wander about freely', adding in 1943 that 'Conrad flourishes exceedingly, he is very tall, very healthy and very intelligent'. Yet problems were beginning to emerge: 'Conrad gets into trouble with other children for speaking English instead of American and is worried by American nationalism which is very pervasive.'[2] In 1944, Bertrand accepted a five-year fellowship at Trinity College, Cambridge, and crossed the Atlantic on a Liberty ship, while his wife and son returned on the overcrowded *Queen Mary*. After a difficult period when the only accommodation available for Peter and Conrad was a squalid boarding-house, Bertrand bought a property in Babraham Road, filling it with unwieldy furniture acquired earlier from Wittgenstein. The Cambridge ladies did not call. They had encountered the same ostracism in Kidlington: dons'

[2] See photographs 40–2, reproduced in Clark, *Russell*. Nicholas Griffin (ed.), *Selected Letters of Bertrand Russell: The Public Years 1914–1970* (London and New York, 2001), pp. 369, 380, 387, 395–6.

wives did not consider them respectable. Unsurprisingly, Peter hated Cambridge, but Conrad enjoyed his mixed day-school and fell in love with the architecture. 'He gave the Master his considered opinion of the college Library (built by Wren!)' reported Bertrand.

Throughout Conrad's early years the influence of his father was immense, even overpowering. Bertrand could be a remote husband and father, and his study was out of bounds to everyone. 'This rule was so sacred', Conrad remembered, 'that I did not venture to break in until I was eight. When I went in, with my heart in my mouth, my father was covering pages with an endless succession of mathematical symbols. When the door opened he simply continued working and, after what seemed an age, I withdrew crestfallen wondering whether he had ever known that I had been in the room.'[3] However, Bertrand treated the boy as an equal whose ideas deserved attention. He taught him precision of thought and language, and from this rigorous parental training, Conrad emerged as someone who enjoyed discussion and was always ready to give careful consideration to any reasonable viewpoint.

The Russells' marriage deteriorated further and in the winter of 1946 Peter attempted suicide. Gradually she recovered and they spent a family summer in North Wales, purchasing a house near Ffestiniog. 'This place is perfect for Conrad who has learned to swim and dive and is practising rock-climbing', enthused Bertrand. A neighbour and close friend, the writer Rupert Crawshay-Williams, observed Conrad enjoying his own skill in pronouncing lengthy Welsh place-names: 'he is the perfect intellectual's son: enormous and cherished vocabulary'. Conrad quickly picked up new ideas. He listened to the grown-ups describing an experiment on behavioural conditioning. A pike (a voracious eater of minnows) is separated from them by a glass plate inserted into his tank, against which he bangs in vain. When the glass is removed, the minnows come within reach but the pike does nothing. Conrad immediately exclaimed, 'The minnows had stopped being eatables and become bump-my-noses.' Another neighbour, Michael Burn, writer and journalist on *The Times,* overheard what he characterised as 'Conrad's gift for a dismissive truth'. An admirer of Bertrand Russell arrived to pay tribute, and found the child digging in the sandpit. 'What are you doing, my little man?' the

[3] Clark, *Russell*, pp. 490–1: Griffin, *Selected Letters*, p. 404; *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell 1944–67*, vol. 3 (London, 1969), pp. 15–16.

visitor enquired well-meaningly. 'I am minding my own business', came the withering reply.[4]

Conrad went to Dartington Hall as a boarder in autumn 1946, but did not enjoy it. At home the situation did not improve, and by late March 1949 Peter was in the London Clinic. In April, Bertrand and Conrad were invited by friends to stay in Taormina, Sicily, and went off without her. Peter turned up unexpectedly, and an immense upheaval followed, as she suspected Bertrand of reviving his old affair with Colette O'Niel. Peter woke Conrad up one morning and abruptly told him she was leaving by taxi and never wished to see Bertrand again. Conrad and his father travelled home a week later, but the family crisis left him traumatised. Bertrand hoped Conrad was growing calmer, but there were further incidents in which the boy demanded an apology from Colette. 'He is inclined to hysteria', wrote Bertrand. Conrad was living with his mother, fearful that she might again attempt suicide, but he spent a final summer holiday with Bertrand in Wales in 1949. Well into his adult life, Conrad struggled with a misplaced but heavy sense of guilt that he had been asleep and hence not quick enough to prevent Peter's furious departure from Taormina. He could do little for at least the first hour of every morning, feeling haunted by the final scenes of his parents' marriage. Bertrand regretted the damage. 'The worry, weariness and disgust of the sordid quarrel with Peter, and the terrible injury to Conrad, have left me half-dead emotionally', he wrote shortly afterwards. The Ffestiniog house legally belonged to Peter, who sold it. Bertrand was made OM in 1949 and was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1950. By November 1952 the divorce from Peter was finalised, and she gained custody of Conrad, who had won a King's scholarship at Eton in autumn 1950. 'I do not see him' wrote Bertrand sadly, although he continued to pay for Conrad's education and holidays.[5]

Initially Conrad was not socially at ease at Eton. His father was an earl, but the descendants of Lord John Russell had none of the wealth of the dukes of Bedford and his unconventional upbringing distanced him from upper-class society. In his last term, autumn 1954, he was Keeper of the College Wall (captain of the college scholars in the Eton wall game), which gave him some gratifying cachet. At Eton he acquired his lifelong

[4] Griffin, *Selected Letters*, p. 416; Rupert Crawshay-Williams, *Russell Remembered* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 35–6. I am grateful to Michael Burn for personal correspondence.

[5] *Autobiography of Bertrand Russell* (vol. 3), pp. 50, 71. Russell wholly omitted the Taormina crisis from his autobiography but it can be reconstructed from his letters. Griffin, *Selected Letters*, pp. 433–4, 438–40, 443, 471.

love of cricket, cited as his recreation in *Who's Who*, together with swimming, enjoyed originally in Wales. Conrad swam regularly until he was well into his sixties, both on holiday in the Mediterranean and in Hampstead Heath ponds. School holidays with his mother were stressful. In childhood, Bertrand had been terrified of his grandmother who warned him of hereditary madness in the Russell family, and Peter repeatedly told Conrad that Bertrand was mad. In 1954 his older half-brother John was diagnosed as schizophrenic and never fully recovered. As a result of all this upheaval, in his teenage years Conrad experienced periods of deep depression and perturbation.

In 1955 he went up to Merton College, Oxford, where he read Modern History under three inspiring tutors, Ralph Davis, Roger Highfield and John Roberts. He made many friends, and even played rugby in the Merton second XV, later remarking that it had been 'quite a shock' to find that people genuinely liked him. Joining the Labour party in 1956, he organised the Oxford contingent which went to the Trafalgar Square demonstration against Suez. He distributed a preliminary circular that instructed participants, 'Ties will be worn on this occasion, preferably Old Etonian'. He was a founder-member of the Oxford CND group, emulating Bertrand who early in 1958 became the national president. Conrad also campaigned with Paul Foot to allow women to join the Oxford Union, which endeared him to many female undergraduates. Tall, with bony features and a fine head of unruly hair, 'the Hon. Con' was a striking figure around the university.[6]

Conrad graduated with a First in Modern History in 1958, and undertook research into the early seventeenth century, but after two years he had not made much progress with the expected D.Phil. The lack of what was becoming the standard entry qualification for the academic profession had some long-term detrimental effects, but in autumn 1960 he was appointed as a lecturer at Bedford College, University of London. In 1962 he took his Oxford MA and also married Elizabeth Sanders, one of his students. Both of them delighted to tell the story of their engagement. Elizabeth was a beautiful and vivacious undergraduate with many admirers. Having on one occasion received two different proposals of marriage, she went in some confusion to consult her tutor. Conrad listened courteously. 'Oh', he said at the end, smoking thoughtfully for some time, 'I had rather hoped that you would marry *me*'. She accepted. Her practicality and sunny good temper complemented and ameliorated Conrad's intense

[6] Obituaries especially *The Independent*, 16 Oct. 2004, p. 56, and personal knowledge.

intellectualism and inability to cope with much of ordinary life—a trait perhaps passed on from Bertrand, famously unable even to make himself a cup of tea. However, in deference to the strict attitudes of the Principal of Bedford (the oldest women's college in the university, which did not accept male undergraduates until 1965) Elizabeth moved to Westfield College to complete her degree. Conrad thought this was splendid: she would have tutorials on late medieval history with May McKisack. The notably happy union with Elizabeth helped him to overcome the traumas of his early life. Aware of his profound emotional debt to his wife, he later listed 'uxoriousness' among his recreations. As he grew older Conrad was increasingly conscious, as he said, that theirs was the first marriage in the Russell family since 1864 to last 'till death do us part'.

Emboldened perhaps by settling into a profession, and encouraged by his marriage, Conrad moved to reconcile himself with his very elderly father. In 1952 Bertrand had married his fourth wife, the American Edith Finch, and in late 1955 they moved to Plas Penrhyn, a Regency house on the Portmeirion peninsula. In June 1967 Bertrand wrote to his daughter Kate, 'I got yesterday a letter from Conrad, saying he wants to make friends again, and I have sent a friendly answer.'[7] Conrad enjoyed visiting Plas Penrhyn, with its fine views of Snowdon, the estuary and the sea. He took Elizabeth to meet Bertrand and Edith there early in 1968, and later in May he made a two-sentence speech at Bertrand's 96th birthday party, celebrated with champagne and lots of caviar, a present from Russian admirers. Elizabeth was pregnant, so she remained in London, but Crawshay-Williams described a lively conversation. Bertrand produced a sociological query: when did it cease to be immoral to travel on a Sunday? 'Conrad's already very well-packed memory produced a beautifully relevant story, about the Warden of a Cambridge college who was approached in the 1890s by a travel agency wanting to arrange a Sunday excursion from London to the college. In his reply the Warden said: The Warden is convinced that your proposal is as unwelcome to the Almighty as it is to the Warden himself.' Conrad was present at his father's last birthday party in May 1969, a small family affair which included Elizabeth with Nicholas, age seven months, as the youngest guest, as Bertrand proudly recorded.[8] Conrad fondly recalled the times spent with

[7] Clark, *Russell*, p. 552; Griffin, *Selected Letters*, p. 612.

[8] Crawshay-Williams, *Russell Remembered*, pp. 153–4; Griffin, *Selected Letters*, p. 624; Ray Monk, *Bertrand Russell 1927–1970: The Ghost of Madness* (London, 2000), p. 499, erroneously dates Conrad's reconciliation with his father to Christmas 1968.

his father. 'I remember him reaching the top of Cnicht when he was 77 and I was 11, and our climbing powers were approximately equal, and I remember him at 95, swinging over the steps to the balcony, for the sheer delight of the view of Snowdon in the afternoon sun.' Visits to North Wales to see the friends he had made there continued long after Bertrand's death in February 1970.[9] The reconciliation with his adored but intimidating parent had been another great step in Conrad's search for self-stability, but it came at a high price. His mother cut him off completely and they ceased to be even on speaking terms.

The History department of Bedford College was housed in St John's Lodge, Regents Park, a handsome Regency villa, and on one occasion Conrad was appointed Fire and Safety Officer. His finest moment came when he personally tested the safety device installed to evacuate the upper floors. Slowly, the cigarette-smoking Conrad was lowered in a sling past the windows of colleagues (whose tutorials were inevitably disrupted as he hove into view), before coming gently to rest on the lawn. Elected as a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 1971, Conrad was promoted to a London University readership in 1974, and in the following year he became one of the convenors of the Tudor–Stuart seminar held at the University of London's Institute of Historical Research. This brought him into regular contact with Professor Joel Hurstfield, who had succeeded Sir John Neale as the senior convenor. Both Conrad and Elizabeth were great devotees of the IHR and never missed the Monday seminar. Elizabeth worked for a time as Hurstfield's research assistant, and she made the seminar a much friendlier place, introducing herself to postgraduates and visiting academics and then presenting them to senior members. In discussion, her astute but refreshingly straightforward questions encouraged others to speak up instead of cowering in the background. For historians in the colleges of London University, scattered across one of the world's largest cities, the logistical problems of meeting regularly to discuss their subject might prove insuperable without the IHR. As a result, the Monday seminar acquired immense intellectual significance for Conrad and many others.

In 1979 Conrad moved to Yale to succeed Professor Jack Hexter, who had made the university the leading American institution for the study of seventeenth-century British parliamentary history. The move did not prove wholly successful as the family found difficulty settling in. Their neighbourhood was unwelcoming, and the two boys Nicholas and John

[9] Clark, *Russell*, p. 50. Information in a private letter from Michael Burn.

experienced problems in transferring to the American educational system. Conrad was regarded by Yale undergraduates as a figure of notable English exoticism, although he also inspired some of them to go on to graduate work in his specialist field. One of them, Lori Anne Ferrell, recalls the terrifying treatment meted out to those who arrived late to class. Even in mid-sentence, Conrad would stop speaking, gaze at the offender and enquire in tones of great civility and concern whether the student 'had a course syllabus yet'—no matter how far into the academic year it was. Stories about him abounded. In part because of his distinctive accent and bearing, he was one of those singular teachers about whom students become obsessed. Most of the colourful anecdotes were entirely fabricated, as Professor Ferrell discovered when, some years later, she asked Conrad about them.[10] Yet they arose from an undergraduate appreciation of his relentless focus on ideas, his Russell background and his outstanding academic abilities.

Conrad particularly valued the facilities of the Yale Center for Parliamentary History, with its wealth of microfilm and transcripts of manuscripts, especially the unrivalled collection of unpublished parliamentary diaries. Researchers could compare different accounts of crucial debates without the toil and expense of going round scattered English repositories and transcribing each diary in turn. His five years of reading at the Center were vital in laying the foundations for much of his later work, and he formed a high regard for colleagues there such as Dr Maija Jansson and Dr William Bidwell, who were generous with their vast expertise. He found other aspects of American society less congenial, not least the food, which he characterised as 'insubstantial'. Conrad's tastes were for well-cooked meat, two vegetables (preferably soggy) and roast potatoes swimming in fat. He loved dishes such as toad in the hole and apple crumble and could not abide pasta or salads. He smoked throughout meals and took several teaspoonfuls of white sugar in his coffee. It was a mystery to his friends that despite this dreadful diet he never put on any weight.

After five years at Yale, Conrad returned to Britain in 1984, succeeding his old friend Joel Hurstfield in the Astor Professorship of British History at University College, London. He gave an outstanding inaugural lecture in March 1985, entitled 'The British problem and the English

[10] Private correspondence with Professor Lori Anne Ferrell of Claremont Graduate University, California.

civil war', which indicated the direction in which his ideas were moving.[11] Conrad was a well-known figure in the wider university. At the London History Board's annual meeting to scrutinise Finals papers, he would make achingly funny suggestions for the more precise rewording of questions, revealing hitherto-unsuspected *doubles entendres* while looking both innocent and inscrutable throughout the discussion. At the Final Examiners' meeting, he scrupulously explained how he had arrived at his own marks (which were often at variance with those of his co-examiners). He spoke regularly at the History Faculty Board, once proposing that instead of devising new courses, we should simply continue to teach what we already knew, until we had all completed the various books and articles on which we were currently engaged. Only after that, would it be worth our while to turn to 'novelties'. There was a strong sense that Conrad was aware that this admirable proposal would not find favour with higher authority. Meanwhile, his academic reputation was growing and he was invited to deliver the Ford Lectures at Oxford in the winter of 1988. They were gratifyingly well-attended and subsequently published with a dedication to the Warden and Fellows of Merton, whose hospitality Conrad had enjoyed during his time as Ford's Lecturer.[12] Closer to home, the 1980s saw many changes in the organisation of London University, and he was strongly opposed to moves breaking up the traditional federal structure of collaborative teaching and examining. This caused friction at University College, and in 1990 Conrad transferred to King's College as Professor of British History. He delivered another incisive inaugural lecture in 1991, 'The Scottish party in English Parliaments, 1640–42, or the myth of the English Revolution', later published in *Historical Research*. He was also elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1991 and remained at King's until his retirement in 2002, when he became a Visiting Professor in the department.

After returning from Yale, Conrad was delighted to be back in the Institute of Historical Research. For research students and junior colleagues, the Tudor–Stuart seminar with Conrad at its head played a formative role in their intellectual development. Discussions repeatedly underscored the value of archival research. Frequently Conrad would bring out the importance of a crucial reference in a way that its discoverer had not fully appreciated. He had a remarkable memory and could

[11] Reprinted in Conrad Russell, *Unrevolutionary England 1603–1642* (London, 1990), pp. 231–52.

[12] Conrad Russell, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (Oxford, 1990).

quote at length from other documents to give point and context to new material. His enthusiasm was contagious. History was not only an academic pursuit of great rigour, but also a pleasure shared between like-minded friends. In lighter moments Conrad might be moved to perform renditions of noted seventeenth-century orators: Sir Edward Coke made some memorable guest appearances. Members of the seminar also found that Conrad read not merely for his own research but also for theirs. Many of us cherish a sheaf of notecards in his spiky handwriting offering choice morsels from archives as diverse as the Phelips MSS in the Somerset Record Office and the Carreg-lwyd MSS in the National Library of Wales. Conrad particularly enjoyed the summer term, when steadily increasing numbers of friends from North American universities would trickle across the Atlantic to appear in the IHR common room for tea before joining in the seminar. In this way, his own years at Yale, although relatively brief, played an important part in supporting a wide circle of Anglo-American historians who exchanged ideas and insights. There were amicable disagreements, but those whose research was influenced by their visits to London paid tribute to the impact of encountering Conrad's work and his generosity in sharing his knowledge.

Unfailingly courteous to seminar guests, Conrad was nevertheless a formidable presence. His increasingly crumpled appearance was at odds with his aristocratic profile and distinguished stoop. Speakers who overran their time found, alarmingly, that he would slowly pull out his heavy silver pocket watch (inherited from Bertrand) and silently slide it across the table towards them. Occasionally his comments were disconcertingly opaque, obliging junior convenors to feign incomprehension in order to elicit a specific point the speaker could attempt to answer. We also learned to decode. After a thin paper, Conrad would opine that it was very interesting but he would require more evidence. After a bad paper, he would require *much* more evidence. Good papers got a word of thanks, an opening question, and then an immediate invitation to the seminar to plunge into detailed discussion which lasted three-quarters of an hour. Conrad also thought that the conversation over drinks and dinner afterwards was a valuable aspect of academic enquiry, and encouraged people not to rush away. Since otherwise he was not particularly sociable, going out to seminar dinners was probably the only way most historians came to know him personally. Conversation tended to focus on his current research project, to the exclusion of other subjects. Once, returning from California at the beginning of the autumn term, I related how I had found myself caught up in a serious earthquake. After a moment of mild interest Conrad

deflected discussion to the events of autumn 1641, which to him were far more immediate. The real pleasure for the dinner party was in seeing how his mind worked, how he isolated key problems, and how he would probe various possibilities until he arrived at a historical solution which satisfied him. He dedicated his last great book, *The Fall of the British Monarchies 1637–1642*, 'To the Members, Past, Present, and Future, of the Tudor and Stuart Seminar at the Institute of Historical Research' and in the preface thanked the current members, who had 'supplied some forty pairs of spectacles to peruse almost every problem' encountered in his research and writing.[13] The unpretentious retirement dinner that the seminar held in the local Spaghetti House (Elizabeth's choice) in his honour in June 2002 was, he said, one of the proudest events of his life. The speaker that evening was Professor Linda Levy Peck of George Washington University, then President of the North American Conference on British Studies, who began her paper by paying tribute to Conrad's Anglo-American career. Former members of the seminar came from far and wide, both to drink his health and to thank him for the unforgettable stimulus of participating in discussions.

Throughout his academic career, Conrad was a devoted tutor and his students felt the vibrancy of engaging directly with a historian who was posing new questions in his own field. Dr Jacqueline Eales came up to Bedford College in 1972. She found Conrad attentive to the youthful ideas she floated, but also firm in insisting on proof as well as fashionable theories. In a kindly manner he would intone, 'An interesting idea. I have been looking for the evidence for that for some time. Do let me know when you find it.'[14] Postgraduate students sensed his intense motivation, as he communicated a sense of excitement about the subject. They learned that there were big historical questions still awaiting an answer, and that their own archival research might provide the key to the problem. Conrad was also attentive to the need for pastoral care in the History departments in which he taught. On his retirement, the head of department, Dr Arthur Burns, paid tribute to his efforts for King's students as a whole. He was never too busy to offer good advice and practical assistance on a whole range of student welfare issues.[15] He often took time to have lunch with a student who wanted to talk. In 1993 he came to the defence of Austin Donnellan, an undergraduate in the King's History

[13] Conrad Russell, *The Fall of the British Monarchies 1637–1642* (Oxford, 1991), pp. ix–x.
[14] *The Times*, 3 Dec. 2004, 'Lives Remembered', p. 63.
[15] *Comment* (the magazine of King's College, London), Nov. 2004, p. 15.

department accused of 'date rape' by a fellow-student. The college authorities (acting, it must be said, in accordance with the current received wisdom on handling these contentious matters) urged Donnellan to withdraw from his degree course, thereby tacitly admitting guilt. Instead Conrad took Donnellan's side against a college tribunal, encouraging him to fight for his innocence. The case went to the Old Bailey and Donnellan was acquitted. Conrad himself became something of a celebrity; the donnish, chain-smoking nobleman was widely quoted in the press when he made pertinent comments about the effects of the sexual revolution. 'When I was an undergraduate I think women could afford to say "No" when they meant "Yes". Now they can't. The more freedom a woman has, the plainer her sexual signalling has got to be.' Equally characteristic was his gently astringent aside, 'I think a woman who takes all her clothes off and gets into a man's bed is perhaps . . . unwise.'[16]

The Donnellan case was very public, but much of his good work with students was done out of the limelight. Conrad summed up his philosophy in a passage entitled 'The advice that I would give to the young', originally published in December 2003. It carries the echo of his speaking voice.

> If one is asked to play Polonius, it is best to begin where he did: 'To thine own self be true'. Your right to self-respect comes from being a human being: take it for granted and enjoy it. Being you is the only thing at which you will always be the best in the world. What you think is the only thing about which you will always know more than anyone else. You are the best judge of what you want—but good judges think twice. Remember you always look better than you do in the mirror. Expressions make faces, and a woman looking in the mirror is looking for faults. The face you see will be far less warm and attractive than the face seen by anybody that you like. If you do badly in an examination, remember that, even if the examiner was flawless, it was only your performance on the day. Exams are a cup-tie, and the winner one day may not be the winner another. Never let them write you off, and never write yourself off.[17]

Conrad must have said that before, dozens of times, to students disappointed with their examination results.

If we turn to the Russell historical oeuvre, it is immediately apparent that it was very concentrated in its range of interests. As a postgraduate, Conrad became dissatisfied with the usual list of 'The causes of the English Civil War', because, as he later commented, 'They did not appear

[16] Obituary in the *Daily Telegraph*, 15 Oct. 2004, p. 29.

[17] The passage, taken from *Country Life*, Dec. 2003, was reprinted on p. 13 of the programme for the Service of Thanksgiving for the Life and Work of Professor the Earl Russell, held at St Margaret's Westminster on 14 June 2005, and read by Susan Kramer, MP.

to be anchored by any logical link with the events which led up to it.' He added, 'It took me thirty years to come to terms with this insight.'[18] In the 1960s he wrote articles on aspects of the political and legal history of the period which struck him as problematical. Among them 'The Ship Money judgements of Bramston and Davenport' and 'The theory of treason in the trial of Strafford' were widely cited.[19] In 1971 he published his first book, *The Crisis of Parliaments: English History 1509–1660*, in the 'Short Oxford History of the Modern World' series.[20] It achieved considerable success as a thought-provoking university text book, as well as appealing to the general reader. More articles followed, one of them contributed to a volume edited by Conrad and entitled *The Origins of the English Civil War*. 'Parliament and the King's finances' challengingly argued that 'we have over-rated both the powers and the ambitions of early seventeenth-century parliaments', an insight which underlay all Conrad's later work. The volume was well received since it showcased much current research. 'The New Look has arrived', opined Sir Geoffrey Elton.[21] In 1976 the iconoclastic 'Parliamentary History in Perspective, 1603–1629' appeared in the journal *History,* attacking any notion of historical inevitability in the outbreak of civil war. Instead, Conrad argued that in the early seventeenth century, Parliament was not yet a powerful institution, but rather an irregular event. There was no division into two clearly defined 'sides', Crown and Opposition, but a fluid political scene in which men divided unpredictably according to the specific issue under debate, without prior ideological or party commitments. So, as late as 1629 and even 1637, there was no reason to assume that war would be the outcome of political disagreement.

The book that really made Conrad's name was his brilliant 1979 monograph, *Parliaments and English Politics 1621–1629*. 'Revisionism', as it became known by the late 1970s, was a very disparate phenomenon, advanced by a group of historians who did not all agree. It was not so much a programme as a collection of negative propositions. Probably the most important was its rejection of any dialectical framework for history and consequently its suspicion of any 'clash of opposites', either economic or cultural, as the mechanism of change. In English political and

[18] From the web-site of the History Department, King's College, London, quoted in *Comment*, Nov. 2004, p. 15.
[19] *English Historical Review*, 77 (1962), 312–18; *EHR*, 80 (1965), 30–50.
[20] Conrad Russell, *The Crisis of Parliaments* (Oxford, 1971).
[21] Conrad Russell (ed.), *The Origins of the English Civil War* (London, 1973), p. 92; G. R. Elton, review of *Origins of the English Civil War* in *Historical Journal*, 17 (1974), 213–15.

parliamentary history, a pioneering Cambridge thesis of 1953 by J. N. Ball, on the parliamentary career of Sir John Eliot, was followed in 1978 by *Faction and Parliament*, a ground-breaking collection of essays (including one by Dr Ball) edited by Kevin Sharpe.[22] The exploration of similar themes by H. G. Koenigsberger and Sir John Elliott had long impressed Conrad by their emphasis on the concept of multiple monarchies and their problems, so relevant to the British experience in the early seventeenth century. Despite the undoubted differences, Conrad later wrote that 'all versions of revisionism, like all brands of whisky, enjoyed certain broad similarities'.[23] He particularly attacked the twin contentions that the explanation for the political crisis of the 1640s lay in long-term social and economic change, and that as a result, the breakdown of the English polity was both pre-determined and unavoidable. Conrad's points emerged from his detailed account of the parliaments of the 1620s, since he insisted that the search for causes or explanations, before establishing the story, was premature and pointless. The course of events was worthy of study in its own right, and vital in avoiding the dangers of hindsight. Few historians had appreciated the extent to which the steady discovery of additional primary sources was undermining the chronological history of England from 1603 to 1660 written by the great Victorian historian S. R. Gardiner, whose magisterial volumes were still regarded as the essential starting-point for research. Conrad embarked on the ambitious project of constructing a new political narrative. He also pointed to the significant fact that outside Westminster, where they formed part of the legislature, most members of the Lords and the Commons were hard-working members of their local or county executive. These day-to-day duties took up much more of their time than did their service in relatively brief parliamentary sessions. Such multi-faceted men could not easily be encased in the twin straitjackets of 'government' and 'opposition'. This perception allowed him to incorporate a full understanding of the pioneering regional and county studies that were preoccupying other historians such as Alan Everitt and John Morrill. In his preface Conrad paid tribute to Elizabeth, who 'evening after evening', had listened to his reading of his drafts: the final version owed 'as much to her questions as it does to my research'.[24] His conclusion was that as inflation eroded the value of the Crown's income, and as the costs of military action spiralled

[22] Conrad Russell, *Parliaments and English Politics 1621–1629* (Oxford, 1979); Kevin Sharpe (ed.), *Faction and Parliament: Essays on Early Stuart History* (Oxford, 1978).
[23] Russell, *Unrevolutionary England*, p. ix.
[24] Russell, *Parliaments and English Politics*, p. vi.

steadily upward, the localist outlook of most members of Parliament, in both Lords and Commons, made them unwilling and unable to comprehend the genuine problems faced by royal government, particularly in a period of widespread Continental warfare which might threaten English interests. This was the real 'functional breakdown' (a phrase borrowed from Gerald Aylmer), rather than the classic Whig explanation of a House of Commons aggressively defending English liberties or the neo-Marxist depiction of a class struggle inexorably leading to victory for the rising 'middling sort'.

After reworking the 1620s, Conrad spent the next twelve years tackling the 'Everest' as he described it, of the origins of the civil war. Three books resulted. His collected essays, *Unrevolutionary England 1603–1642* was published in 1990 and included articles written in the 1980s. It also brought to a wider readership 'The Catholic Wind', published originally in a collection of essays not widely noticed. This posited the imaginary scenario that James II had defeated William III in 1688, and explored typical historical 'explanations' for the victory. Provocatively, Conrad argued that 'James II . . . was always on a winning wicket', with Europe-wide trends, such as the decline of representative assemblies and the triumph of resurgent Counter-Reformation catholicism, uniting to make King James not a fugitive would-be absolutist, but 'the first of the Enlightened Despots'. It was all the more lively since Conrad's ancestor Edward Russell was one of the seven who had offered the throne to William in 1688. A *jeu d'esprit*, the piece nevertheless devastatingly demonstrated that once the historian knows the outcome, it is all too easy to excavate supposedly 'deep-seated' and 'long-term' forces.

Also published in 1990 was *The Causes of the English Civil War,* a revised version of the Ford Lectures. It outlined a structural analysis reaching back to the Henrician Reformation, emphasising how growing religious division, not merely between protestantism and catholicism but also between various branches of protestantism, steadily permeated political conflict. It described the difficulties of Stuart rule over multiple kingdoms, where every problem was exacerbated by increasingly inadequate royal revenues. In many ways the book offered some conclusions to the whole project of Conrad's research on the causes of political breakdown in the first half of the seventeenth century. Yet it is not easy to read, immensely allusive and suggestive rather than clearly constructed, with a sense that sometimes the author saw his argument as provisional and debatable rather than wholly convincing. It also revealed Conrad's relative lack of interest in areas such as cultural, intellectual and literary

history, and the history of the court, which other scholars increasingly deployed to illuminate late Elizabethan and early Stuart society. More satisfactory was the magisterial account of *The Fall of the British Monarchies 1637–1642,* published in 1991. An extraordinary work of detailed research incorporating large amounts of new primary material, the book demonstrated Conrad's mastery of the day-by-day account, devoid of all hindsight. It also substantiated a new view of Charles I, already sketched in *The Causes of the English Civil War.* Instead of the cultivated, devout but ineffectual monarch of standard textbooks, here was an opinionated king at the centre of politics, an active protagonist in events, with a distinctive cluster of attitudes and personal characteristics (not least his devotion to his wife and children) that proved crucial in shaping outcomes. The book revealed how fruitfully Conrad had read the work of the new 'British' school of historians, including his friend Dr Jenny Wormald who particularly emphasised the unexpected impact of Scottish kingship and Scottish political ideas after 1603. The central theme was precisely what the title suggested: that it was the novel and perhaps insoluble problem of managing a multiple *British*, not solely English, monarchy that explained the outbreak of war in 1642. The Scots rebelled first, the Irish next, so the English were the last of Charles I's subjects to defy him. After 1637, the clash between Charles and the Scottish Covenanters destabilised the dynastic union established by James I in 1603, but perhaps more significantly, the outbreak of revolt in Ireland in late autumn 1641 destroyed the king's increasingly hopeful option of a dissolution of the Parliament. By summer 1641 Charles had achieved a nearly successful resolution of the political crisis which began in 1637, thereby winning many men back to his side: but the Irish revolt fractured the emerging consensus and provided the fatal catalyst of conflict. In this interpretation, the civil war might equally be seen as the result of an imperialistic attempt to enforce the political and religious hegemony of England within the British Isles, a theme going back to the early middle ages and continued by Oliver Cromwell. Perhaps most controversial was the claim made by Conrad at the outset, that 'England in 1637 was a country in working order . . . There is very little evidence in 1637 that any significant body of the King's subjects would have wanted to resort to revolution if it had been a practical possibility.'[25] Although critics considered that this approach greatly underestimated the tensions already present within Jacobean and Caroline England, the central argument was

[25] Russell, *The Fall of the British Monarchies*, pp. 1–2.

irrefutable: that it was impossible to explain the events leading up to the outbreak of war if they were seen within an enclosed, wholly English context.

Conrad continued to publish scholarly articles until 2002, the year of his retirement, which was also the year of his festschrift, *Politics, Religion and Popularity,* edited by Thomas Cogswell, Richard Cust and Peter Lake, all of them members of the IHR Tudor–Stuart seminar. In the preface they expressed their appreciation of the magnitude of Conrad's contribution, 'of the scope, ambition and achievement of the intellectual project on which he has been engaged, and which he has in different ways shared with us . . . even where we take issue with him, his work is an unerring guide to where the important issues and questions really are'.[26] With an introductory survey of Conrad's work followed by twelve essays, the book's contents ranged from court masques and sermons under James I, through the cultural and religious impact of visits to London enjoyed by country members of the Commons, to popular preaching and petitioning in the years just before 1642. Conrad was exceptionally moved by this volume which, he said, pleased him as much if not more than any of his own publications. As contributors we felt that the honour was ours. Conrad's last academic work emerged with the publication of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* in 2004. Four penetrating studies of leading seventeenth-century political figures, John Pym, John Hampden, Sir John Eliot and Francis Russell fourth earl of Bedford, displayed once again his mastery of the detailed politics of the period, while never losing a sense of the humanity, dignity and sometimes frailty and inadequacy, of those whose lives and concerns he so deeply understood.

In 1987, Conrad succeeded his half-brother John as the fifth Earl Russell. This led to a separate public career in which he resumed the political involvements of his younger days. As a Labour candidate he had contested South Paddington in the general election of 1966, and even considered giving up academic life and going into politics.[27] Thereafter, however, he became increasingly disenchanted with the party. In 1968 he was expected to stand as the Labour candidate for Mitcham and

[26] Thomas Cogswell, Richard Cust and Peter Lake (eds.), *Politics, Religion and Popularity: Early Stuart Essays in Honour of Conrad Russell* (Cambridge, 2002), p. viii. The volume also contains a valuable reference bibliography of the principal published writings of the honorand, compiled by Richard Cust and Elizabeth Russell.

[27] Professor Blair Worden kindly alerted me to a letter written by Dr Valerie Pearl on 16 Dec. 1966, among the papers of the late Lord Dacre (Hugh Trevor-Roper), relating a conversation in which Conrad told her that he intended in future to pursue a full-time political career.

Beddington, but decided against doing so, partly from pressure of academic work. The recent birth of his first child was also a consideration. Conrad admired Jeremy Thorpe, the leader of the Liberals, and during the election of 1974 he became convinced that British politics would never break free of its class-based slogans until the implementation of proportional representation. Only then, as he wrote later, could the British people 'stop looking for scapegoats and start looking for solutions'. Thorpe's party political broadcast on behalf of the Liberals persuaded Conrad to join the party. Consequently in 1987, on entering the Lords he went to the Liberal whips' office to offer his services,[28] and became Liberal (and later Liberal Democratic) spokesman for social security. Conrad acquired an encyclopaedic knowledge of the working of the social security system, housing benefit and other entitlements for individuals. He put this at the disposal of students and others who appealed to him for help, with great generosity and to very good effect. He mastered the complexities of welfare legislation and argued the cause of single parents, becoming an early critic of the Conservative government's Child Support Agency and foreseeing the inadequacies of its operations. He was also a strong supporter of women's refuges as essential in combating domestic violence. He brought his historical knowledge to bear on the Jobseekers' bill in 1995, pointing out that the legislative provision of a safety net derived from the Elizabethan Poor Law act of 1601, and not the Beveridge Plan. On another occasion he compared the practice of awarding peerages to businessmen who were substantial donors to political parties, to the corrupt sale of peerages in early Stuart England by James I and the Duke of Buckingham. He was a consistent champion of university students. Deeply distressed by the increase in student poverty, which he regarded as one of the most socially retrogressive trends of his lifetime, Conrad campaigned vigorously against the abolition of grants and their replacement by loans. He pointed to the adverse effects of top-up fees, and cited examples from personal knowledge of the paradox of undergraduates so tired by the long hours of work necessary to support themselves at university that they were unable to take full advantage of their expensive education. He also found time to write dozens of letters to the newspapers on these and other themes, and in 1993 published *Academic Freedom*, an attack on ill-conceived policies in higher education. He characterised them as 'a perpetual pressure to cut-price expansion, regardless of academic consequences', which inevitably undermined

[28] Michael White, *The Guardian*, 15 Oct. 2004, p. 31.

degree standards.[29] His last book, in 1999, was *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Liberalism*. He argued that the Liberals possessed the longest unbroken political traditions in the country, going back to his great-grandfather Lord John Russell, last of the Whigs. The book was well reviewed and sparked considerable public discussion.

By his sixties, Conrad seemed an increasingly eccentric figure, clad in a baggy old black suit and carrying his voluminous papers around London in supermarket plastic bags. He never mastered email or any other type of information technology, conducting his extensive correspondence by means of an elderly typewriter. On occasion he could be a worryingly erratic judge of people, both historians and politicians. Yet in the Lords he won great respect for his undeviating integrity and easily made friendships across party lines. He was critical of New Labour, and had a low opinion of Tony Blair whom he regarded as more or less a Tory, or even more disdainfully (quoting the spoof sermon in *Beyond the Fringe*) 'a *smooth* man'. In 1996 Conrad was chosen as the 'Highland Park'/*Spectator* Peer of the Year for his combination of learning and parliamentary skill, and he came top in his party when the elections to retain some hereditary peers in the Lords were held in 1999. He refused to defend the privileges of the 'hereditaries', but was committed to the Lords' role in scrutinising legislation and tempering the excesses of a government that could rely on a large majority in the Commons. He repeatedly opposed the growing use of broadly drafted 'skeleton bills' which governments could subsequently expand by regulation, a procedure which tended to reduce parliamentary debate to an irrelevance.[30] He served as president of the Electoral Reform Society and was a trustee of the John Stuart Mill Institute, as well as of the History of Parliament Trust. He was very conscious of his family's political inheritance. He drew the attention of visitors to Westminster to the statue of Lord John Russell in the lobby (where he often suggested his guests should meet him), and to the Victorian wall-painting of Lord Russell, condemned for treason by Charles II, bidding farewell to his stalwart wife Rachel. Serving in the Lords was another way in which Conrad reclaimed his Russell family background and his painful early years. He regarded himself as a champion of traditional Whig values, particularly the Whigs' detestation of abuses of power. He was an acknowledged expert on the history of the Upper House and frequently used historical quotations in his speeches.

[29] Conrad Russell, *Academic Freedom* (London, 1993), p. 107.
[30] Obituaries in *The Times* and *The Independent*.

Occasionally he lost his audience completely, but on form, he could be electrifying. On 4 May 2004, already ill, Conrad went to the Lords to fight against the asylum and immigration bill, in which he quoted the seventeenth-century Sir Thomas Wentworth's ringing denunciation, 'God deliver us from this arbitrary government.'[31] In the last year of his life, as a widower he found the House a comfort, almost a second family.

Sadly, Elizabeth suffered from cancer of the lung, which after an operation and a hopeful period of remission was followed by a fatal brain cancer in 2003. Her death left Conrad bereft, but gallantly, he attended the IHR Tudor–Stuart seminar on the evening of her funeral service. We stood in silence to honour her memory and share Conrad's grief. His already precarious health worsened; his emphysema increased until he was dependent on his oxygen inhaler, and he went into Middlesex Hospital on two occasions suffering from extreme breathlessness. His last academic appearance was at a conference jointly organised by King's College, London, and Somerset House in May 2004, to commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary of the peace treaty between England, Spain and Flanders signed at Somerset House in 1604. His paper, based on the French ambassadors' accounts, contained many flashes of the old brilliance. His last speech in the House of Lords was on 15 September, a three-minute intervention which deplored the English lack of interest in constitutional affairs.[32] It contained three historical references. Conrad died in hospital on 14 October 2004. The memorial service, held at St Margaret's Westminster on 14 June 2005, brought large numbers of historians, politicians, journalists and friends together to pay tribute. The Liberal Democrat shadow minister Baroness Hamwee recalled his cheery singing to other members of the party of a personally adapted song, 'Lloyd George *jailed* my father'.[33] Charles Kennedy, the Liberal Democrat party leader who attended the service, had already spoken to the press in praise of Conrad's contribution to the development of Liberalism in Britain, adding that he had found him 'a personal, political and intellectual rock of support'.[34] Dr David Starkey outlined Conrad's achievements as a historian and emphasised his kindness as a friend. The fund which Conrad founded to commemorate Elizabeth has been

[31] *The Guardian*, 15 Oct. 2004, p. 31.
[32] *The Independent*, 16 Oct. 2004, p. 56.
[33] Bertrand's unfounded and inflammatory suggestion that American troops would be used as strike-breakers in Britain led to a jail sentence in Brixton between May and September 1918. Clark, *Russell*, pp. 338–53.
[34] *The Guardian*, 15 Oct. 2004, p. 3.

relaunched as the Conrad and Elizabeth Russell Fund, and has become a general hardship fund for graduate students at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London. It is a fitting tribute to Conrad's achievements as a historian and to his lifelong concern for the welfare of young researchers in history.

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Note. I am grateful for information and personal reminiscences from many friends and colleagues in the University of London and elsewhere. I thank the Library, Eton College, for helpfully responding to my queries about Conrad's schooldays. I have also drawn on the informative (but occasionally inaccurate) obituaries which appeared in *The Times*, 15 October 2004, *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 October 2004, *The Guardian*, 15 October 2004, *The Herald* (Glasgow), 16 October 2004, and *The Independent*, 16 October 2004.