



COLIN MATTHEW

Judith Aronson

Henry Colin Gray Matthew 1941–1999

HENRY COLIN GRAY MATTHEW, historian and editor, was born on 15 January 1941 at 31 Island Bank Road, Inverness, the eldest son of Henry Johnston Scott Matthew, a consultant physician of note, and Joyce Mary McKendrick. The pursuit of medicine had been a strong family tradition; Matthew's great-grandfather, John Gray McKendrick, was a distinguished physiologist at Glasgow University and his grandfather, Anderson Gray McKendrick, was a medical statistician and epidemiologist based in India. With his father away in the war, Matthew received his mother's undivided attention during his early childhood in Edinburgh, and maintained with her a level of proximity never attained with his emotionally remote father. He later disappointed his father in choosing a non-medical vocation and it was left to his younger brother, Duncan, to keep the medical succession alive. Matthew was known to all by his second name Colin, a device that—for someone who later became so proficient at indexing and cataloguing—helped to distinguish him from his father, but his scholarly work always appeared under his initials H. C. G., mainly in deference to his mother's family line. Those were outward signs of early tensions that had a lasting effect both on Colin's personality and on his career trajectory. Notwithstanding, Colin remained in contact with his father, particularly in the latter's old age. Significantly, he later expressed admiration for the manner in which W. E. Gladstone, whose diaries he was to edit, had treated his own father.

Colin was brought up in an intense Scottish Tory Protestant milieu. It was a comfortable upper middle-class environment, but emotionally austere and occasionally severe, and it was a testimony to his independence of thought and to his temperament that he eventually shrugged off the

constricting impact of those initial experiences, and did not seek to replicate them with others. His gentleness, loyalty, delight in his family, integrity, and rock-solid support for friends and colleagues were among his most remarkable features and cannot be separated from his scholarly persona. Fortunately for him, for Oxford, and for historical scholarship, a relatively slow start to his professional academic life was mitigated by perseverance, serendipity and the confidence of his mentors and supporters, superimposed on a meditative intellect and a gift for thoroughness that matured into profundity. The very distance he increasingly maintained from the world of everyday constraining convention sustained a safe haven of originality. Colin's name will forever be associated with two of the most grandiose and ambitious publishing projects to be conceived and executed in the United Kingdom in the twentieth century: *The Gladstone Diaries* and the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Rarely had the University of Oxford witnessed such a sense of shock and grief upon his untimely and sudden death on 29 October 1999 at the height of his career, aged 58. In his funeral address, Sir Keith Thomas described Colin as 'one of the few wholly irreplaceable people in this university'.¹ The outpourings of praise and expressions of loss were a measure of a man, loved and respected, who combined the finest scholarship with the most generous of characters.

Colin's schooling began at the Edinburgh Academy, whose harsh, almost militaristic, climate and mistreatment of those entrusted to its care bequeathed to him a contempt for iniquitous authority and injustice, if nothing else. Those years reinforced his own shyness and sense of insignificance, and his suspicion of others' intentions, which he gradually overcame in later life. Wisely, his parents removed him in 1954 to Sedbergh, a public school in North Yorkshire, in which he was much happier and where he was partly coaxed out of his shell. The first among a number of significant mentors was the sixth-form history master Andrew Morgan, who exercised an inspiring influence over young minds and who had caught glimpses of Colin's character and ability. Morgan cultivated Colin's interest in history, while in parallel Colin developed an enthusiasm for literature, including Scott, Dickens, Ruskin and Trollope, as well as Balzac, discovered in the extensive school library collection; in one instance even writing home to his mother with a request for books that Morgan had asked to read. Morgan tapped into Colin's intellectual

¹ Sir Keith Thomas, Address at the Funeral of Colin Matthew, 4 Nov. 1999.

strengths, though he did not quite succeed in opening up the young pupil or in entirely augmenting his self-confidence. Some of Colin's internal energy was ploughed into sports, especially cross-country running—activities that, revealingly, he did not keep up once his intellectual vitality began to flourish in mid-life, with the exception of long walks with his children and the rather sedentary pursuit of angling. Colin also addressed the school debating society in which he played a major role; from being a tongue-tied outsider at Sedbergh he rose to become a prefect and head boy. He was, curiously, something of a disciplinarian himself, coming down rather heavily on his younger brother's 'slackness' when the latter joined the school in 1958. That training in outward self-possession may account for the later imperturbability of the otherwise retiring man, even when addressing an audience of 2,000 students on the occasion of receiving an honorary doctorate at McMaster University, Canada, in 1999.

Following Colin's good performance at A level examinations, he went on in 1960 to read modern history at Christ Church, Oxford, at the time yet another of the establishment institutions through which he seemed destined to progress, and with all of which he had a somewhat ambivalent relationship. At a future date, Colin referred to 'the extraordinary constitution of Christ Church—its balance between Church and State',² but he retrospectively mixed respect with a distance befitting his increasing egalitarianism and mistrust of hierarchy. At Christ Church Colin found another mentor in the person of the senior history tutor, C. H. Stuart, for whom he harboured a lifelong esteem, as he did for Morgan. Stuart focused on a Tory understanding of high party politics and on a narrow view of history as 'a body of material essentially known'.³ Still carrying the marks of a politically staid upbringing, Colin at first joined the student Conservative Association. Stuart instilled in him the importance of historical accuracy and the imperative of analytical sharpness. Through his tutor Colin retained a deep appreciation of institutions and traditions and a focus on political history. However, differences of approach to history between Stuart and Colin became evident and Colin began to pursue his own, broader and less party-political, line. That those growing differences did not in any way allay the unremitting combination of public obligation and private loyalty that Colin was to display towards

² Colin Matthew, Address at Charles H. Stuart's Funeral, Christ Church, 16 Nov. 1991, in *Christ Church Report*, 1991, pp. 37–41.

³ *Ibid.*

those who served him well is evident in his warm and personal memorial address for Stuart upon the latter's death in 1991.

Colin did reasonably well in his studies but had apparently decided not to go for a First, graduating with second class honours—at the time still undivided—in 1963. But he may have been as yet inadequately equipped for the assertive Oxford style. As a close colleague observed: 'His ruminative intellectual processes, the careful thought, were unsuited to the snappy demands of the three-hour examination.'⁴ Colin also wanted to get the best out of Oxford, frequently attending Oxford Union debates; among others, his abiding literary interests were channelled into stage-managing undergraduate plays, including a thespian visit to Germany on one occasion. With his usual meticulous eye for detail and curiosity about minutiae, to be employed so brilliantly in his later editorship of the Gladstone diaries, he expressed particular interest in the logistics of props. His enjoyment of the theatre became a lasting pastime, although I recall us both falling asleep during a marathon eight hour production of *The Greeks* at the National Theatre. Colin's undergraduate and, later, postgraduate days were also graced by a number of friendships he forged with future distinguished historians such as Boyd Hilton and Ross McKibbin.

Following his undergraduate studies, Colin made a decision that was to change his life in more ways than one. He enrolled at Makerere University College at Kampala, Uganda, obtaining a Diploma in Education, where he met his future wife, Sue Ann Curry, an American studying for the same diploma under the auspices of the Teachers for East Africa programme. They were then both posted to northern Tanzania, as part of a package agreement to teach British history for two years as education officers in the Tanzanian civil service, Colin at Old Moshi school and Sue at Machame school. That fortunate encounter, facilitated by Colin's Land Rover and finally cemented by their marriage in Indianapolis—Sue's home town—in 1966, produced an extraordinarily cohesive and supportive partnership and provided the very tonic he needed. It was Sue above all who transformed his gaucheness into affability, his introversion into hospitality, and his public stiffness into a capacity to relax and enjoy the company of family, friends and even strangers. The aptitude had always been there, but it needed a magic key to unlock it. Colin's African sojourn also added a new dimension to his Scottish unionist heritage. Alongside

⁴ Ross McKibbin, 'Matthew, (Henry) Colin Gray (1941–1999)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

a sense of Britain's importance and a realisation of the outreach of empire he now developed a lasting empathy with the underdog and with the economic plight of the developing African nations. It profoundly opened him up to human chords and tinctures previously unknown. His embeddedness in the physicality of the Scottish terrain—to which he would later return regularly—was paralleled by an arduous climb up Mount Kilimanjaro, a feat that retained a hold on family lore.

Back in Oxford, the Matthews moved into a house on the Woodstock Road before finally settling at 107 Southmoor Road, interspersed by a short stay in Elsfield, a village just outside the city. Colin first studied for a diploma in economics and politics before commencing on a D.Phil. thesis under the supervision of A. F. Thompson (and the short-term guidance of Maurice Shock when Thompson was on leave). It was no accident that Colin chose the *Liberal Imperialists* (published as a book in 1973) as his topic. The subject partly appealed to him as an instance of the high politics and the preoccupation with Britain's mission in the world that he had imbibed from Stuart, but also as a dying, and ultimately abortive, moment in the life of a progressive and radical tradition. How good men could endorse imperialism on principle was an intriguing issue for a scholar caught between the call of duty, an understanding of politics as the domain of the respectable, and a personal, though not always conscious, urge to be different. He believed the central challenge of the 'Limps' to be 'What part should the idea of the "national interest" play in progressive ideology',⁵ a question that unsurprisingly tied in his academic interest with his cultural hinterland. Tellingly, Colin described that dissenting yet patriotic Liberal interlude as 'unhappy'; in his first letter to me when still completing his thesis I was greeted as 'another moth drawn to the dying flame of liberalism'. But while abandoning hope of a resurrected Liberal party and anchoring his political allegiances resolutely with Labour, Colin regarded both on a broader time-scale as the British party of progress and social reform, to whose ideological mast he became firmly attached. *The Liberal Imperialists* was a substantively innovative but cautiously written study, attracting complimentary but few outstanding reviews, and in intellectual terms it was still a halfway house on the gradual road to self-discovery. It signalled Colin's longstanding interest in ideas as well as in the élites that bestrode the field of politics, though he was to express his dissatisfaction—echoed by some reviewers—that he had not linked them more closely together at the time. That interest

⁵ H. C. G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists* (Oxford, 1973), p. x.

always remained an undercurrent, resurfacing in an article on J. A. Hobson, Richard Cobden and John Ruskin, but never replacing Colin's fascination with the broad sweep of national history and with the mechanics of politics. Indeed, one project conceived in the early 1980s but never followed up was a proposed book to be entitled *The British Political Nation, 1832–1972*.

While completing his thesis, Colin secured a post at Christ Church that proved to be another turning point and a second stroke of luck when, now with a young family, he was casting around for employment in an academic world that was not enthused by the class of his undergraduate degree, nor overexcited by the subject of his yet unpublished thesis, meticulous though its scholarship had been. He was appointed in 1970 as lecturer in Gladstone Studies—designed as an underwhelming research post to assist Professor M. R. D. Foot in the massive task of editing Gladstone's diaries. Not the least of its attractions was its location in Gladstone's old undergraduate College rooms, which Colin—through Christ Church's generosity—took great pleasure in occupying for twenty-four years. Colin swiftly burst through the shackles of factotum and become the driving force behind the project, and in 1972 he replaced Foot, whose scholarly interests were now directed elsewhere, as editor. Volumes 1 and 2 had been edited solely by Foot, and although volumes 3 and 4 appeared under their joint names, it was Colin alone who contributed the first of his famous introductions to the diaries. Subsequently, the remaining ten volumes and the index were Colin's sole responsibility. In 1976 some alleviation of his academic prospects and joint role as breadwinner (Sue had embarked on her vocation as primary school-teacher, later head teacher, that was to make her an Oxford legend in her own lifetime) was afforded through his appointment as a Research Student (equivalent to a senior research fellow) at Christ Church. But a 'proper' tenured position was only secured at St Hugh's in 1978, when Colin was 37. Even then, it had been preceded by the gnawing doubts he had entertained as to whether he could compete with the rising stars of his discipline and by a rarely publicised anxiety about his future prospects, masked by the stoicism inculcated through his public schooling. In one case he withdrew his candidature when he became aware that a brilliant (and since then eminent) historian was applying for the same post.

Colin's election to a Tutorial Fellowship at St Hugh's as one of its first male Fellows, though not uncontested in the college's Governing Body, was to bear rich fruits for its history students. Colin's reserved and often quizzical manner, and his apparent want of ostentatious enthusiasm,

apart from the odd glint in his eye, were soon transformed into assets as the depth of his commitment to teaching and to the well-being of his students shone through. He was superbly conscientious as tutor, but he was far more than that. The warmth and kindness he had quietly begun to display towards others was reflected in a non-patronising and supererogatory pastoral role, in the care he lavished and the time he found for undergraduates and graduates alike. One would frequently find one of them, temporarily rendered homeless, as guest in the Matthew household—probably the most open in the city—sitting in the living room while Colin was nonchalantly engrossed in a newspaper as if that arrangement had been in place for years. His concern for his undergraduates, and his involvement with graduates and their career prospects, forged open-ended and enduring relationships. While he rarely mentioned his work at home—unless requested, when he would happily hold forth—he did convey his worries about this or that student's personal difficulties, or applaud their achievements, and would go out of his way to help them overtly or surreptitiously. The protégé had become mentor and was matching, indeed exceeding, the assiduousness of his much-admired role-models.

As had been the case at Sedbergh, Colin gravitated, almost unaware and certainly never graspingly, towards the core of college life. He occupied the post of Senior Tutor from 1983 to 1987 and Fellow Librarian from 1991 to 1997, and he was closely involved in the group which supervised the construction of the Rachel Trickett Building on St Margaret's Road. In the early 1990s Colin stood unsuccessfully as an internal candidate for the Principalship of the college, attracted by the administrative and reforming possibilities of the office. He persisted with characteristic stubbornness despite attempts by friends to dissuade him from considering a position to which his contemplative and often withdrawn nature, and aversion to small talk, made him temperamentally unsuited, to say nothing about the intrusion on his research time. In strange contrast with his superior organisational skills, Colin's spacious room at St Hugh's was cluttered with books and papers that filled every available space from floor to ceiling, requiring careful navigation from door to desk. It was another symptom of his imperviousness to external trimmings but also a symbol of the opulence of his intellectual world. Needless to say, he knew his way around exactly.

In parallel, Colin was drawn into the activities of the modern history faculty. Although in later life he became more adept at public speaking, he hardly ever gave faculty lectures, preferring seminars and classes

instead. He played a key role in the design of two new papers close to his heart, one on church and state in Victorian Britain, the other on late Victorian and Edwardian social policy but, as the topics indicated, always seeing those as conduits to the heart of his view of nineteenth-century Britain. He would chide those who, prey to their own secular interests, downplayed the role of religion in recent British history. While not himself religious or overly involved in the belief dimension of his historical subjects, he accepted the inevitability, possibly necessity, of the church as a cultural, political and social institution. The editing of the Gladstone diaries had brought out to the full his self-discipline, industry and capacity to conceive and carry out a complex intellectual and organisational project with vision and aplomb, while engaged in a host of other activities. Often writing early each morning before going to college, Colin was equipped with a disposition to work entirely without fuss, a trait all the more impressive when other responsibilities began to build up. He never shirked all those additional tasks, but took them in his stride as if no other course of action were imaginable. In particular, the lifelong thread of significance Colin accorded to libraries and to reading, not merely as instruments of individual research but as depositories of a national culture, was reflected in an accumulation of relevant offices. On a deeper level it may well have been homage to Gladstone's own extraordinary devotion to the written word, incarnated in the magnificent library of some 20,000 volumes at Gladstone's country residence, Hawarden. Colin was the literary director and vice-president of the Royal Historical Society; a curator of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and chairman of the Friends of the Bodleian. In those roles and in his membership of the London Library he saw himself as proselytiser and recruiter, channelling a quasi-religious fervour into the safeguarding of those secular temples, the real treasure houses of the land. He also chaired the publications committee of the Oxford Historical Monographs, was a member of the Royal Historical Manuscripts Commission, and served on the advisory editorial board of the Bertrand Russell collected papers, edited at McMaster University.

Belatedly, Colin's academic achievement and ability moved out of the still waters of normality to the rapids of exceptionality. The craft on which he found himself steering that course were the Gladstone diaries, whose editing and analysis have become one of the crowning accomplishments of recent British historical research. Through the diaries Colin discovered skills and disseminated insights that transformed the appreciation of the most important British political figure of the nineteenth

century. In so doing, he fine-tuned the writing of political biography as a complex interweaving of Gladstone's public and private persona; and he re-established biography as a form of national history, but one now based on immaculate and microscopic research of the highest order. Colin's virtuosity would transform a terse and staccato diary into a wholly human picture of the intellectual, moral and political cores of an unusually motivated, often single-minded, statesman, while reconceptualising historical biography as a means on which to hang the reconstruction of an entire era. To argue that Colin was fortunate in the individual he had been allocated to chronicle, a man already embedded in British historical mythology and blessed with the political longevity that ensured his dominance over the Victorian age, and in the source material at his disposal—an almost uninterrupted record with about 25,200 entries—would be seriously to undervalue the rereading in which Colin engaged and the profundity of his fusion of detail and grand narrative.

It took Colin a while to make his name through the diaries. To his bemusement, his first flash of fame was as decipherer of Gladstone's sign, at the margins of some diary entries, for flagellation, which the Victorian self-anointed moralist had inflicted on himself after his numerous clandestine 'rescue' meetings with prostitutes he apparently desired to reform. That news made headlines across the world, temporarily and wholly unexpectedly associating the rather decorous scholar with the cognoscenti of the *demi-monde*. Upon the publication of that section of the diaries, Oxford University Press had to design a special font for the whip sign. When stunning and formerly unpredictable success did eventually come relatively late in life, replacing the professional frustration and underachievement that Colin had to swallow in the initial years as the diaries' editor, it did not change him in the least. Remaining utterly devoid of airs, his modest disposition and matter-of-factness rose to the occasion, though in an uncharacteristic outburst Boyd Hilton recalls that upon Colin's election to a personal Oxford professorship in 1992 he thumped Hilton's bookshelves, declaring 'It'll show them!'⁶ Appearances to the contrary, there always remained a sensitivity to outside views.

The process of editing the diaries culminated in a truly magisterial biography that was not originally intended as such but that emerged out of the series of commentaries-cum-introductions that Colin wrote during

⁶ Boyd Hilton, 'Colin Matthew (1941–1999)', in P. Ghosh and L. Goldman (eds.), *Politics and Culture in Victorian Britain: Essays in Memory of Colin Matthew* (Oxford, 2006), p. 18.

most of his working life. To that monumental undertaking he brought self-discipline, a relentless yet balanced work rhythm, and the consummate care with which he handled his scholarly responsibilities. Looking back, Colin recalled: 'The introductions to the volumes were a challenge, being written rather quickly every four years or so whenever the text of each volume was nearly ready. This meant there were nearly 25 years between my first and last effort, while the interpretation they offered had to be consistent.'⁷ Consistent maybe, but Colin's touch became more assured and his voice more confident as the project unfolded. He exhibited a terrier's tenacity in pursuing any relevant aspect. The result was an intense and imaginative lesson in history and its methodology not only for Colin's readers but, in the course of preparing it, for Colin himself. If other historians quarrelled with this or that interpretation or slant, and they occasionally did, the volumes, separately and as a whole, were accorded a chorus of acclaim. In 1991 Colin was elected to a Fellowship of the British Academy, and later became its vice-president. Once reassembled in two-volume book form, with two new chapters on the period originally covered by Foot, the biography unsurprisingly won the Wolfson Prize for History in 1995. There could have been few similar 'dead certs'. That said, it was also a work so dense in detail that all but the most dedicated Gladstonians and professional historians would have dipped into rather than perused it. Uncompromisingly directed at the highest peaks of academic interest it was not, even when paperbacked, a biography to be picked up at an airport for light reading. Yet, for those who made the effort, the book was one of high drama, peppered with the occasional wit and ironic sensibilities of its author.

Colin, like all previous biographers of Gladstone, addressed the Grand Old Man's mutation from Tory to enlightened Liberal. However, he did so in a wholly original manner, by uncovering the crises and agonised introspection that not only accompanied, but preceded, the many moves in that direction, as if primordial psychological forces had gripped Gladstone and from which he had to seek relief in decisive political action. From Colin's *Gladstone* there emerges a stunning, and occasionally startling, portrait of that rare British phenomenon—an intellectual in the highest realms of politics and a moralist in a sea of expediency, grappling both with a visceral personal religiosity and a tormented sexuality. Colin was absorbed with Gladstone's riveting combination of a deeply moral and cerebral nature and his shrewd command of detail as a

⁷ Colin Matthew, 'Liberal with the Ink', *The Times Higher*, 12 May 1995.

practising politician, and he was particularly intrigued not just by the separation of Gladstone's private from his public life, but by the electrifying points of contact between personal fragility and public determination. That, at any rate, was the abiding image that Colin presented to the world of scholarship and beyond. It dispensed with facile generalisations that viewed Gladstone as quirky or insincere, translating through clear and elegant prose a subject of great, almost heroic, complexity into a very human and understanding depiction. Through Colin's own humanism, a distant and austere icon had been demystified.

Colin's Gladstone was also a harbinger of political modernisation. He was a populist in an enlightened sense, wise to the impact of direct appeals to the rising political classes, and to the role of the media. He was a politician of supreme professionalism, who had mastered financial and fiscal policy in all its particulars and at one superhuman point was simultaneously Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer. His bold attempt to change the British constitution on Ireland opened the constitution to further reform in the twentieth century. He was an impassioned forerunner of what is now known as 'ethical foreign policy' and he anticipated, albeit embryonically, the morality of the diminution of empire. He was a tireless campaigner and a fine orator, whose rhetoric both acknowledged and reflected the mixture of rational argument, passion and vision that was to characterise the new mass politics. His embrace of liberalism gradually took on the acceptance of a more tolerant religious and class diversity, although at some cost. In Colin's words, Gladstone 'recognised that Christianity had, by its assertion of individualism, dethroned the Aristotelian ideal of an organic civil society'.⁸ All of those Colin identified as crucial themes in the ascent of progressivism. Yet even as Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule was a quasi-devolutionary move ahead of its time, he turned in his final years obdurately away from the innovative political strategy of party programmes and was incapable of comprehending the more radical steps liberals were taking towards social reform. And he was impervious to the new social organicism beginning to emerge from the fringes of liberal political thinking or to the way in which his faith in free trade could incorporate those new ideas. Gladstone's was an organicism of tradition and adaptation, of thinking and acting, of the civic and communal integration of interests, but not of social interdependence promoted by a benevolent state. Here Colin may have been too generous about the case for the continuity that Gladstone bequeathed

⁸ H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1875–1898* (Oxford, 1995), p. 319.

the party he was so instrumental in shaping. But it was central to Colin's Weltanschauung that although—as a historian friend noted—his 'Whiggish (and Scottish enlightenment) sense of the continuity between past and present was in many ways unfashionable, [it] was one of the characteristics that gave his work its originality'.⁹

Out of a seemingly mundane set of lists of daily events and short comments that constitute the diaries—they were in effect an aide-mémoire—Colin constructed an elaborate, incisive and lucid account and interpretation, an exercise in applied erudition. As of volume 7 the text was amplified by an ingenious apparatus, adding to Colin's own notations and commentary on the memoranda Gladstone kept alongside his diaries, some of Gladstone's additional correspondence to which the diaries referred, and the Cabinet Minutes of meetings chaired by Gladstone. All those helped to bridge the gap between contemplation, discussion and execution. That feat of magnification while still heightening the resolution of the picture was no legerdemain, but the result of painstaking research, utter conscientiousness and integrity in linking measured assessment to miniscule fact, and the ability to penetrate the mind of his subject while paying due regard to the larger picture of national history that had always commanded Colin's allegiance. The index alone runs to almost 900 pages and, apart from thorough name and subject indexes (the latter a wonderfully entertaining and amusing read in its own right, with undertones of Pickwickian prose) it itemises the astounding record—entered daily by Gladstone himself—of his reading over 17,500 books. It justifiably secured the Wheatley Medal of the Society of Indexers in 1994.

Gladstone, unsurprisingly, became entwined both with Colin's private as well as public life. The Victorian statesman followed him home in the form of innumerable mementoes: plates, portraits, busts, jugs, puppets, clay pipes, and silk embroidery; and abroad, in the form of dwelling places, hotels, and vistas the Grand Old Man had occupied or enjoyed. Colin never saw that as an obsession; rather, Gladstone had become another close mentor and member of an extended family, whom one visited when passing through the neighbourhood, even warranting a special trip, and whose communications were preserved both out of fondness and respect.

If Colin was uncharacteristically in tears when writing up Gladstone's death and funeral, there was no parallel draining of his intellectual vigour.

⁹ Hilton, 'Colin Matthew (1941–1999)', in Ghosh and Goldman (eds.), *Politics and Culture*, p. 24.

Through the diaries his interest had turned to political rhetoric, on which he wrote a fine article and to which he had planned to return. The triumph of the Gladstone diaries, however, paved the way for another opportunity bathed in even more luminous national prestige. Some time before all the ink on the former project had been spilled, let alone dried, Colin was approached in 1992 by Sir Keith Thomas, then President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and Ivon Asquith, Academic Director of Oxford University Press, to consider taking on a joint project of the British Academy and OUP, underpinned by a governmental grant made over to the University of Oxford: a complete revision of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Colin consulted family and friends, seeking reassurance in his inclination to accept the offer. The advice he received was split, but those who encouraged him in that inclination had in mind his newly demonstrated organisational capabilities, his respect for a national ethos that the *Dictionary* encapsulated, and the formidable reputation he had established as an editor. Indeed, the extenders of the invitation regarded the immense task of seeing through a *New Dictionary of National Biography* contingent on Colin's agreement, there being no other obvious candidate in sight.

Colin accepted and immediately embarked on the task with extraordinary verve and boldness. The diaries had instilled in him a sense of historical purpose that he now brought to this new enterprise and he was attracted by the prospect of another grand panorama constructed out of discriminating detail. Told that the anticipated time to completion was twenty five years, his astonishing response was 'I'll do it in twelve'. Colin brought not only a natural leadership to the *NDNB* (ultimately published as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* or *ODNB*) but a fresh vision of its contents, its scope and its contributors. He chose 'to be wary, as well as curatorial, about the old' *DNB*,¹⁰ originally the brainchild of the publisher, George Smith, and Leslie Stephen. He praised Stephen for his 'absence of bombast', a trait Colin fully reproduced. But in an era of greater openness, and tolerance of private peccadillos, many memoirs needed to be rewritten or at least heavily revised. Moreover, Colin decided from the start on a far more expansive tapestry of national life than even Stephen's inclusive design had envisaged. True to Colin's 'organic' view of history and to his consideration for past scholarship, it was agreed that no existing name was to be dropped. But some entries of disproportionate

¹⁰ H. C. G. Matthew, *Leslie Stephen and the New Dictionary of National Biography* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 1.

length were trimmed (Queen Victoria, Gladstone's nemesis, was appropriately cut down to size) and the balance had to be tipped against the *DNB's* elitism and its cultural preferences, to say nothing of the contingency of the then available contributors. To that end, Colin also invited, by means of a broadly circulated questionnaire, suggestions from far and wide on individuals worthy of inclusion. A thorough search for women of note, whose achievements had been overlooked in earlier *DNB* volumes, was undertaken. Business people too required greater representation. There was also a place for non-existing figures of mythical or legendary significance that were enshrined in national culture—the very invention of history, Colin knew, also made history. In addition, Colin conceived a new class of group biographies, aimed at shedding light both on their members and on their common activity.

Importantly, it was decided to publish the *NDNB* in one go—it appeared on time, in 2004, in sixty volumes containing almost 55,000 entries, though sadly after Colin's death two-thirds of the way towards completion. The *ODNB*, as it had become, was steered deftly to its conclusion by his successor, Brian Harrison. It was a readable, stylish, unstuffy and often entertaining panoply of national life, intended by Colin as a great and easily accessible depository for the elucidation of the general public. Colin himself wrote or revised 778 memoirs, of which 141 were original replacements or new entries. Among those latter categories were all the monarchs who had died in the twentieth century (he had a sneaking admiration for the institution, if not for all its incumbents), many Victorian clergymen and theologians, diplomats, newspaper editors and journalists, civil servants, nineteenth-century historians, a fair sprinkling of Scots, and—in addition to Gladstone (and four other members of his family)—major post-Gladstonian and twentieth-century politicians such as Balfour, Asquith, Haldane, and Macmillan, as well as three individuals whose characterising description was heroine (Grace Darling), impostor (Thomas Geeran), and arsonist (Jonathan Martin). Colin's own predilections, but also his wide-ranging curiosity, were clearly reflected in those choices. One side-effect of Colin's work on the diaries had been an essay on Millais' portraits of Gladstone. He was consequently delighted to be appointed as trustee of the National Portrait Gallery, a highly useful link in the light of the innovative decision to illustrate the *ODNB* prolifically.

Colin's insistence on high professional standards transformed the *ODNB* mainly from the in-house generalist creation of its predecessor to a well-oiled machine that drafted in a far larger number of national and

international specialists, under the direction of consulting editors to whom were assigned specific periods or topics and, one level beneath them, associate editors in charge of smaller thematic blocks. There was always room, however, for trusted friends and, in one case, for Colin's knowledgeable and judicious aunt, Jean Gilliland, who had volunteered to assist on the Gladstone diaries for many years and, now in her eighties, was assigned to revise or write 87 articles. Colin was quaintly scrupulous about introducing a rule of secrecy on who was writing on whom in order, as he saw it, to forestall interferences in the work of contributors. The technical challenge was immense, yet it was produced with a minimum of hitches. To that end, Colin and the project director, Robert Faber, set in motion a massive computerisation programme, both to facilitate the editing process and as the data base for a future on-line version. Colin was aware of the ephemerality of historical judgement and an electronic version would allow for the requisite suppleness of which the paper edition was devoid; yet for that reason precisely, contributors were encouraged to include current assessments of their assigned biographees; their entries, too, would become part of the changing stream of historical understanding. Colin's conversion to computer literacy was no less than miraculous in view of his previous record. Annotations and comments on the Gladstone diaries had been stored in shoeboxes on 5" by 4" cards. As late as the mid-1980s, when literary director of the Royal Historical Society, he had expressed great disquiet—while one commissioned volume was being prepared—at the absence of the printed word, fearful that the text would be wiped out in an electric storm or, perhaps, just trickle off the disk. To the incredulity of his friends, that inveterate scribbler of little notes now re-emerged—guided by the experts of OUP—as an aficionado and prophet of new information technology.

The quasi-military efficiency with which the *ODNB* was conceived, structured and executed was in stark contrast to Colin's often shambolic appearance. He gained a certain reputation for wearing odd socks, battered hats and crumpled summer jackets in winter. Usually open-necked, an unfashionable tie was stuffed into his pocket for moments of sartorial emergency. For those approaching Colin from the back when still in his twenties, the expectation of encountering an elderly man was abruptly shattered by the youthful, smooth face under the untimely white hair. Even in his fifties the face had not caught up with the elapsing years and his phenomenal energy seemed boundless. But the atmosphere at 37A St Giles, where a dedicated team of some forty people—though often above that number—was located under Colin's supervision, was as far from

military as could be. Conversation at the morning coffee gathering could revolve around work or the latest cricket scores. Colin took care to treat staff as colleagues and friends—no doubt unconsciously under Sue’s quietly radiant influence, but by now also under his own momentum. An annual summer party at home as well as regular staff field trips and picnics—the Rollright Stones, Warwick castle and William Morris’s Kelmscott were among the destinations—punctuated the tight schedule. He always took his project secretary and personal assistant, Katherine Manville, out for lunch on her birthday. Nor did he ever fail to send each contributor a personal note of thanks for their memoir. Research institute, hothouse for budding talents, locus of a remarkable *esprit de corps*, 37A St Giles became one of the most unusual of Oxford’s many dispersed centres. The very transience of the printed project and of some of its personnel—once their particular task had been completed they would move on—lent it an ambience that had to be savoured while it lasted. Colin’s was an inspiring presence, leading not ostentatiously or forcefully, but by example, empathy and accessibility. He was first in his office in the morning and the last to leave. He was loyal and elicited loyalty. Despite the kudos that would have gone to the head of a less unassuming man, his natural humility in public and in private laudably continued to accompany his professional success. But while he never blew his own trumpet, he did so on every occasion for the *ODNB*. He toured extensively in the UK, in North America and in Australia, lecturing on its behalf. It was fitting, if tragic, that Colin’s memoir was included in his own great editorial venture.

There was another side to Colin and it was a side that many people encountered first. He could be brusque and curt, which some saw as stand-offish arrogance or dourness, when it was no more than a slight wariness and his habitual shyness. At other times aloofness merely covered an abstracted or otherwise engaged mind. One indication of that mulling-over process was a delay in responding to a comment or query, rather like the time-gap that used to characterise a transatlantic call. While others had moved on to another subject, Colin would suddenly break in with a measured observation relating to the previous conversation. Likewise, during the long weekends abroad taken regularly once or twice a year, he would without warning separate himself from wife and friends and meander down a side-alley, deep in thought or wrapped up in exploring a site of potential historical curiosity, to return rather surprised at the concern about his sudden disappearance. Colin’s detachment is wonderfully captured by John Goto in a computerised artistic photograph of the trustees

of the National Portrait Gallery. All the trustees are standing, looking at the paintings or conversing. Colin is the only seated figure in their midst, buried in a book, completely oblivious to those around him. But he had his pet dislikes and private contempt for certain individuals, mainly for those who had behaved shabbily or who were pretentious. When his patience with others ran thin, it could elicit a master-class in minimalist exasperation—a raised eyebrow, a quick roll of the eyes, a single damning sentence. When bored with them, he would simply walk away. He was also disdainfully unforgiving of the many contemporary politicians, mainly on the right of the political spectrum, who displayed lapses of integrity and honesty. Charitable as he was, he could also be greatly irritated by other scholars who free-rode on his meticulous Gladstone scholarship. On occasions such as those, flashes of contained anger would appear. But although Colin was neither gregarious nor light-hearted, and very serious about his principles, he could enjoy himself in company. True, at the annual Matthew household Christmas Eve party he remained in the kitchen, churning out large amounts of exceedingly potent eggnog, but he was always surrounded by groups of guests, especially the younger ones. His conversation over dinner was reflective and, when in the right mood, witty, cultured and entertainingly informative. He was not always averse to gossip, which he recounted with great amusement, or entirely above waspishness, for which his friends were thankful.

A generous amount of Colin's time was taken up with additional voluntary activities of a very diverse nature. He co-initiated a weekly Saturday morning meeting at the King's Arms, opposite the Bodleian. What began as a coffee break of young historians became a set that exchanged research ideas, discussed recent historical writing, or raised more general intellectual problems. Before it began to tail off, it embraced half a dozen of Oxford's nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians. Conversations with Colin's historian friends were crucial testing grounds and honing sites for his own work, and he always recognised that the diaries could not have been completed without their help. There was a passion about his non-academic as well as scholarly concerns. With a school-teacher for a wife, Colin was always willing to address schools, local historical associations, or lay audiences on historical matters, as well as produce occasional pieces for more popular publications, and it was entirely apposite that the Colin Matthew lecture for the public understanding of history, sponsored by Gresham College and the Royal Historical Society, was established in his memory. He was also a dedicated bagpipes player, whether as an undergraduate having 'good fun', a performer at Sue's

school, or accompanying her on New Year's Eve visits to the homes of schoolchildren, who listened in amazement at the doleful sounds emitted by that weird and often unfamiliar musical instrument (his deeply moving funeral aptly concluded with a solitary piper preceding the hearse around Christ Church's Tom Quad). Second-hand bookshops had a magnetic effect on him; he would often stagger out with a pile to be added to the tiny space still available on his study floor. In the last decade of his life he rediscovered photography, developing black and white negatives in the basement of his house with the usual dedication and perfectionism he brought to all his activities. His interest in memorial plaques and tombstones, his love of nature and of architectural curios, were buoyed up through that new passion.

Colin's political sympathies were focused on the local Oxford Labour Party, and he served for a while as chair of its North Ward branch. He was a staunch opponent of the fruits of Thatcherism, warning that the Conservatives were creating a state 'far less pluralist, more centralized, more draconian, more coarse, and more vindictive than that which they inherited'.¹¹ There could be a touch of rigidity about his politics, reflecting his perennial fidelity to institutions and his conservative ambivalence about change, and he remained a steadfast supporter of the Labour party even while colleagues left it during the tumultuous 1980s. A revealing window into Colin's public concerns may be found in his thrice yearly 'In Vacuo' contributions to the *Oxford Magazine* beginning in 1987. Most revolved around current education policy at national or university level, seeped in the lessons that constitutional history could impart. Colin carefully weighed various plans for university reform and advanced his own proposals. He also aired the concerns of the Bodleian. But the first Gulf War, the British taxation system, changes in Eastern Europe, mad cow disease, the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, and New Labour were also grist to his mill. Initially a strong opponent of what is now the European Union, voting against British membership of the EEC in the 1975 referendum, Colin's traditionalism was slow to dissipate. Whether this was a side-effect of his unease with strangers is difficult to say, but he was eventually weaned off that guardedness. That volte-face was caused in part through Sue's pro-European enthusiasm, in part through Gladstone's own example as frequent visitor to the Continent—eventually emulated by Colin himself. More importantly, referring to Gladstone's abandonment of a unitary state, Colin wrote that 'the

¹¹ Colin Matthew, 'In Vacuo', *Oxford Magazine*, Noughth Week, Hilary Term, 1988, p. 8.

European Union was based on just the sort of flexible and evolving constitutional arrangements which the Home Rule bills were intended to introduce'.¹² And following a visit to Andalusia in 1994, from which he returned greatly impressed by the revival of Spanish civic culture and by the EU funded motorway system, Colin observed: 'My generation—at school in the 1950s and at university in the early 1960s—thought almost without exception that Europe had much to learn from Britain: now one must draw the conclusion that, while Europe has something to learn from Britain, the reverse is equally or even more the case.'¹³

Colin's academic work notwithstanding, his family was his sanctuary and the core of his life. His constancy, tranquillity and equanimity were both nourished and felt at home. The strong complementarity of opposites with Sue gradually evolved into a profound and mutually enhancing bond, a powerful convergence of love, understanding and empathy. His children, David, Lucy and Oliver, were the focus of his deep affection and care. He was an admirable, if endearingly eccentric, father, quietly involved in every stage of his children's life, organising their birthday parties, reassuring in their teenage years, attending all parents' evenings at their schools, supportive in mundane ways of their activities and, surprisingly from their point of view, au fait with contemporary youth culture. He loved talking to young people and children, was interested in their lives, and treated them as his equals. They in turn were both fascinated and awed by the earnest yet unaffected impartor of curious facts that appeared unpredictably out of the blue. A non-interfering parent, he readily gave advice, but almost only when asked; encouraging his children to challenge received wisdom—as he did his students—and serving as lifeline in case anything was about to go badly wrong. Colin undertook the weekly shopping, helped by a bevy of forgiving shop-assistants who refreshed his spatial memory for where the goods were located, though he was notorious for entering a shop for one item and emerging with another instead. Treats for the children were often brought back in unconsumably large quantities. The annual holiday in Scotland, spent with immediate family, including his mother, and increasingly with hordes of his children's friends—necessitating the hiring of a minibus—was a time of resuscitation and pleasure. There Colin returned to the area of his early childhood, where his fondest memories of Scotland lay, for long walks in the hills, to which end he acquired—not without difficulty—navigational

¹² Matthew, *Gladstone 1875–1898*, p. 390.

¹³ Colin Matthew, 'In Vacuo', *Oxford Magazine*, Noughth Week, Trinity Term, 1994, p. 3.

and map-reading skills. It would not be hyperbole to observe that Colin secured the prize of a double first in life that very few attain: the heights of professional achievement and of family happiness. The famous lines from Goethe's *Faust* that Colin chose to dedicate to his family in the preface to *The Liberal Imperialists* sum up where his ultimate contentment lay:

‘Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie,
Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum’.

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Note: I have been greatly helped in the preparation of this memoir by Sue Matthew, in conversation and through the provision of numerous letters and papers. In addition, I am most grateful for the assistance of Ivon Asquith, George Garnett, Jean Gilliland, Ross McKibbin, Katherine Manville, David Matthew, Lucy Matthew, and John Robertson. Some of Colin Matthew's papers have been deposited in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.