GERALD AYLMER

Gerald Edward Aylmer
1926–2000

GERALD AYLMER, historian of seventeenth-century England, was born on 30 April 1926 at Stoke Court, Greete, Shropshire, the only child of Captain Edward Arthur Aylmer, DSC, RN, and his wife Phoebe (née Evans). His father was Anglo-Irish. The Aylmers—the name derives from the Anglo-Saxon Aethelmar, latinised as Ailmerus—had taken part in the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland. Sir Gerald Aylmer was Chief Justice of Ireland in the second quarter of the sixteenth century. After him came many high-ranking naval and military officers. Admiral Matthew Aylmer commanded the British Fleet during the War of the Spanish Succession and was made an Irish peer. The fifth Lord Aylmer fought in the Peninsular War and was Governor-General of Canada. The sixth was an admiral who had been with Nelson at the Nile. General Sir Fenton Aylmer won the Victoria Cross in India. Gerald's mother was descended from self-made South Wales business people, but there were two more admirals on her side of the family.

Gerald's great-uncle Willie, Lord Desborough, was the father of the First World War poet, Julian Grenfell, and a celebrated athlete: President of the MCC, the Lawn Tennis Association, the Amateur Fencing Association, and the 1908 Olympic Games. He stroked an eight across the Channel, climbed in the Alps, shot in India and Africa, twice swam Niagara and was elected an Honorary Fellow of Balliol. Another forebear was Rose Aylmer, whose beauty was celebrated in W. S. Landor's famous elegy:

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> Ah, what avails the sceptred race!
> Ah, what the form divine!

It might have been thought that, to Gerald, a firm believer in social equality, and one who himself declined public honours, this remarkable ancestry would have been irrelevant; and indeed he spoke rather disparagingly of some of his forebears, such as the fifth Lord Aylmer, who, at the age of 73, was sworn in as a special constable during the Chartist demonstration of 1848, only for the first woman he met to say to him, 'Much harm, *you'll* do, you old fool.'[1] In his last book, Gerald drily records that, if Samuel Pepys had had his way, Matthew Aylmer, then a captain, would have been hanged for dipping his colours to a Spanish admiral; in which case, he, Gerald, would never have existed.

Yet Gerald, who duly attended great-uncle Willie's old college and gave his son Tom the ancient family name of Bartholomew, was far from indifferent to his lineage. Just as many agnostics (Gerald among them) retained the moral earnestness of their Christian forebears, so this self-confessed egalitarian possessed the same integrity, sense of honour, and devotion to public service as his aristocratic ancestors. Gerald had all the gentlemanly qualities. He was honest, brave and courteous. Unshakeable in his adherence to principle, he was sensitive to constitutional niceties and had a sharp eye for injustice. A naturally passionate man, he kept a tight rein on his feelings; when occasionally allowed to escape, they were always expressed in a controlled and decorous manner. He was un-self-regarding to an almost ridiculous extent. As a member of the Historical Manuscripts Commission, he once received a complimentary copy of the Commission's latest publication, a calendar of the correspondence of the nonconformist divine Philip Doddridge. Gerald wrote back, expressing his thanks, but adding that, 'at £40, I do wonder whether it is a justifiable perquisite of office for all Commissioners to receive such a publication'. His scrupulosity was of a kind which seemed almost archaic in an age when self-interest and personal gratification were widely regarded as acceptable motives for action.

Gerald's rock-like dependability was all the more remarkable, because his childhood was unsettled. His father, as a naval officer, was constantly on the move, until settling in Dorset on retirement. When his parents were posted abroad, Gerald lived with his grandmother. He was sent to Beaudesert Park, a preparatory school in Gloucestershire, a sadistic insti-

[1] Lieut. Gen. Sir Fenton J. Aylmer, VC, *The Aylmers of Ireland* (1931), p. 264.

tution, where he was terrified and unhappy; then to Winchester, another harsh place, where daily cold baths were compulsory and the lavatories had no doors. A schoolfellow recalled him as 'large, fair, flabby and the least physically co-ordinated person I have ever known'. But he also noted 'a certain ponderous authority' and 'a hyper-active conscience'; and he added that 'he continually says things which widen my world'.[2]

Winchester was, for Gerald, a place of intellectual emancipation; it was there that he developed his scholarly interests and his increasingly left-wing views. He had always been notable for his independence of mind. At the age of four, he was overheard playing in a stream with his slightly older cousin. The cousin, as befitted a future admiral, was giving the orders. Gerald protested, in a manner which those who knew him in later years would have immediately recognised: 'You see, Iwan,' he told his cousin, 'some people have different thinks from others.' Gerald's thinks were indeed different, though he never lost hope that others might be brought round by reason. In April 1939, when he was thirteen, he wrote a letter to Adolf Hitler, warning him that any further act of aggression on his part would mean war; a youthful admonition which the Führer would have been well-advised to heed. At Winchester Gerald became convinced that social conditions in Britain were in urgent need of reform. He discovered Kingsley Martin's *New Statesman*, a powerful influence on his intellectual development thereafter, along with the writings of William Temple, who was a distant relation and had officiated at the marriage of his parents, and of R. H. Tawney, who would later become his graduate supervisor.

Throughout his life, Gerald was greatly moved by poverty and took a deep interest in African affairs and the problems of the Third World. In the 1950s, he and his wife were activists in CND, on the moderate, pragmatic wing; they went on three Aldermaston marches and Gerald spoke in Trafalgar Square. In the 1980s he was depressed by the way in which British politics seemed to have gone into reverse; in his last book, he compared the year 1979, when Mrs Thatcher became prime minister, to 1660, when hopes of a better world were quenched by the restoration of Charles II. In 1991 he gave a paper at St Peter's College, defiantly entitled 'Why I am still a Socialist', though the 'socialism' he expounded was of an exceedingly moderate kind. He accepted that capitalism was unequalled as a means of maximising wealth in the developed countries, but he felt that the profit motive and the market could in themselves never

[2] Thomas Hinde [Sir Thomas Chitty], *Sir Henry and Sons: a Memoir* (1980), p. 144.

provide adequately for health, education, welfare, culture and the arts, leave alone the preservation of the environment, the needs of the Third World and the interests of future generations.[3]

Gerald had originally been destined for the Navy, but after a few years at Winchester that career came to seem patently inappropriate. In 1944 he went up to Balliol College on a history exhibition. But it was wartime and, after one term at Oxford, he volunteered for the Navy, where he served for the next three years, as an ordinary and then an able seaman; by necessity rather than choice, for he would have liked to have been an officer. In retrospect, he was grateful for the experience. Years later, in a Presidential Address to the Royal Historical Society, arguing that the religiosity of seventeenth-century parishioners could not be measured by the quantity of communion wine consumed, he remarked that 'anyone who has served on the lower deck of the Royal Navy before the abolition of the rum ration will appreciate the fine distinction between "sippers" and "gulpers" ' (*Trans. Royal Hist. Soc.*, 5th ser. 37 (1987), 230).

The more ribald aspects of Gerald's naval career have been immortalised by his shipmate, the jazz singer George Melly. On shore leave in Gibraltar, Gerald was arrested when trying to crawl across the Spanish border: 'pissed as a newt and covered in mud, he . . . spent the night roaring out in a police cell that his father was an admiral'. Melly recalls his 'deep booming voice and magnificent laugh', his 'love of gossip' and their shared enthusiasm for the poems of W. H. Auden. He also remarks that there was 'a kind of dogged nobility about him, an admirable probity'. It was Gerald who helped to get Melly off the potentially serious charge of distributing anarchist literature on board one of His Majesty's ships, by discovering that parallel sentiments were expressed by George Bernard Shaw in works which were freely available in the ship's library.[4]

In 1947 Gerald returned to Balliol. One of his tutors was Christopher Hill, who became a life-long friend and whose view of the seventeenth century profoundly influenced his own. Gerald retained his intellectual independence, but much of his later work was essentially a response to issues which had originally been posed by Hill. Gerald is said to have been a 'self-contained, slightly reserved, hard-working' undergraduate. He took a First in Modern History in 1950 and then spent a year as Jane

[3] MS of unpublished paper given at St Peter's College on 19 Feb. 1991.

[4] George Melly, *Rum, Bum and Concertina* (1977), pp. 132, 118. Gerald appears (on the far right) of a photograph illustrating Melly's later article, 'The navy lark: what a gay time we had', *Sunday Times*, 3 Nov. 2002.

Eliza Procter Fellow at Princeton University, an experience which gained him new friends, notably Richard S. Dunn, historian of West Indian slavery and editor of the papers of William Penn, and, thanks to the teaching of Professor W. F. Craven, left him with an enduring interest in American history. Right into his retirement, Gerald continued to teach the colonial period to undergraduates. He was fascinated by 'the interaction of the New World environment with the social and mental heritage which the settlers took with them from the Old'; and in the early history of Massachusetts he saw a small-scale indication of the way in which a continuing Puritan commonwealth might have evolved in England (*Trans. Royal Hist. Soc.*, 5th ser., 36 (1986), 11).

On his return from the USA, Gerald took up a Junior Research Fellowship at Balliol. There, under the supervision of R. H. Tawney, whom he had met in 1950, through Archbishop Temple's daughter, a friend of his aunt, he completed his thesis, 'Studies on the Institutions and Personnel of English Central Administration, 1625–42' (1954). This work, which he characteristically described as 'a preliminary survey', 'limited, tentative, inconclusive', filled two volumes and 1208 pages. 'There are no short cuts in administrative history,' he remarks on p. 1143. 'The way has been long, the path narrow and the gate strait.' In response to the anguished protest of his examiners, the Modern History Board locked the stable door by prescribing that future D.Phil. theses should be subject to a word-limit. The story that the thesis had to be carried to the Examination Schools in a wheelbarrow is apocryphal, but it reflects the awe which Gerald was already inspiring in others.

In 1955 Gerald married Ursula Nixon, an illustrations editor at Oxford University Press, whose father, an army officer, was also Anglo-Irish. 'It was the cleverest and most fortunate thing he ever did,' remarked Christopher Hill. For the next forty-five years Gerald and Ursula were a true partnership: both possessed the same enormous energy, and the same generosity of spirit, but otherwise were very different in temperament, Ursula's practicality, common sense, warmth and outspokenness admirably complementing Gerald's discretion and initial reserve. She was closely involved in all his scholarly projects and an invaluable copy-editor. Gerald always wrote lucidly, but he could be ponderous and made frequent use of the exclamation mark; Ursula did much to lighten his prose style. They adopted two children, Tom and Emma.

Gerald spent the next eight years as an assistant lecturer (1954) and lecturer (1962) at Manchester University. It was a star-studded department, where he made lasting friendships, particularly with Gordon Leff,

Donald Pennington and Penry Williams. But he deplored the professorial autocracy and the lack of contact with the students, who were taught impersonally in large lecture classes. He attempted to teach in smaller groups; and, with Ursula, invited students to cider parties. He published an article, suggesting that those below the rank of professor should be allowed to take part in university government.[5] One of his professors referred to him as 'a trouble-maker'.

While at Manchester, Gerald published his thesis, condensed and rewritten, as *The King's Servants. The Civil Service of Charles I*. It was a magisterial study; and almost overnight it made Gerald a famous historian. Two years later, Eric James, who had taught Gerald at Winchester, and was now Vice-Chancellor of the newly created University of York, invited him to come as the first Professor of History, at the age of 36. It was an inspired choice.[6] Gerald's fifteen years at York were his heroic period. He created a new department, with a novel syllabus, new methods of examining, a relatively democratic system of government and an exceptionally gifted staff. Gerald had an eye for talent and made a series of imaginative appointments. York rapidly became what Manchester had once been: the nursery from which Oxford recruited its college tutors and other universities their professors. Gerald was an inspiration to his junior colleagues, respecting their opinions and working hard to foster their careers. He and Ursula were generous with hospitality and even financial help.

When problems arose, his attitude was philosophical. In January 1974, he wrote to a friend about

> next term's probable student troubles. Will the demands of student militants (e.g., to be able to change university syllabuses and examination requirements, not to mention the teaching that is on offer, as they go through the course) seem as self-evidently right and reasonable in a generation or two's time as (say) the working class having the vote, or equal rights for women seem to most of us today? Or is student power, as I would maintain, an aberrance rather than a progressive force? The trouble is that, as a liberal, one is conditioned to questioning one's own position and wondering whether one may not, after all, be wrong, which one's opponents, like other totalitarians, never stop to do.

Throughout his time at York, Gerald remained head of department, with control of finance, appointments and promotions, but the chairmanship and other offices rotated. At the regular departmental meetings,

[5] 'University government—but by whom?', *Universities Quarterly*, 13 (1958–9).

[6] Though his first choice had been Lawrence Stone, whose appointment appears to have been subsequently vetoed by the new university's advisers.

Gerald sat unobtrusively; only on rare occasions did a subsequent missive indicate that things had moved in a direction of which the founder disapproved.

Meanwhile he was consolidating his authority as a seventeenth-century historian. His textbook, *The Struggle for the Constitution 1603–88* (1963; 4th edn., 1975), written with admirable simplicity, established itself as an introductory guide to the constitutional conflict which he regarded as the central theme of the period. *The Interregnum: the Quest for Settlement*, which he edited in 1972, was a superior essay in a genre which would become increasingly popular with publishers over the ensuing decades, the collective volume comprising articles by different contributors all relating to a single theme. *The Levellers in the English Revolution* (1975) was a judicious selection of Leveller writings, prefaced by a fifty-page introduction which remains the best short survey of the subject. He edited a microfilm edition of *The Clarke Manuscripts at Worcester College, Oxford* (1979) and, with John Morrill, published *The Civil War and Interregnum: Sources for Local Historians* (1979). He was involved in the ambitious project of the Cornmarket Press to reprint all the Thomason Tracts; it got as far as thirty-four volumes of *Fast Sermons* and nineteen of the newspaper, *Mercurius Politicus*. He enlisted the present writer to help him in planning a multi-volume *Regional History of England*, but the venture collapsed when the publisher took fright.

Above all, his research into the administrative history of the mid seventeenth century was proceeding apace. He declined Eric James's invitation to become a Pro-Vice-Chancellor and in 1973 brought out the second volume in his trilogy, *The State's Servants. The Civil Service of the English Republic, 1649–1660*. Never given to hyperbole, Gerald now confessed to 'middle-aged caution', and the conclusions he drew from his vast mound of evidence were more tentatively expressed than ever. But he conclusively demonstrated that the republic's administration was infinitely more efficient than that of the old monarchy.

After fifteen years at York, it was time for a move. In 1977 he was tempted by the Directorship of the Institute of Historical Research. But Oxford exerted an irresistible pull. He seriously considered the headship of one college and was runner-up for another. So when his friend and former York colleague, the German historian, T. W. (Tim) Mason, persuaded the Fellows of St Peter's to offer Gerald the succession to Sir Alec Cairncross, he was already accustomed to the idea of returning to Oxford, and, though given only half an hour in which to decide, readily agreed.

There followed a particularly difficult period in Gerald's life. In 1979 St Peter's was still struggling for parity with other Oxford colleges. Established in 1929 as a sort of Low Church answer to Keble, it had become a full college only in 1961. It was strong in some subjects, but its endowment was small; its site was cramped; and its shortage of living accommodation, combined with the absence of a long academic tradition, did not make it easy to attract the ablest students. Gerald had every sympathy with the college's simplicity and unpretentiousness, but his Mastership was dominated by the need to acquire the resources with which to build more accommodation and endow tutorial fellowships. Courting benefactors is not work which everyone finds congenial. For Gerald, who tended to agree with Francis Bacon that the ways to enrich are many and most of them foul, it was at times even distasteful. Yet he launched the Fiftieth-Anniversary Appeal and, with the aid of his colleagues, secured the support of some notable benefactors. During his time as Master, the college greatly enlarged its student accommodation and made plans for a Law Centre, specialising in intellectual property.

Gerald's presence at St Peter's did a great deal for its academic image. Here was a major scholar who led by example, kept the College in touch with the world of learning, and was prepared to teach undergraduates and supervise researchers, while keeping up his own work. He published articles every year and produced for the OPUS series a judicious synthesis of the period in which he was most interested, *Rebellion or Revolution? England 1640–1660* (1986). Academic performance at St Peter's improved, though not as much as he would have liked; and, since results at other colleges were improving too, the college's relative position did not greatly change. As Master, Gerald was much respected by the junior members, who admired his fairmindedness, his firmness on such matters as noise and idleness, and his readiness, if it seemed necessary, to take their side against the Fellows. The junior members were the beneficiaries of the personal kindness and hospitality which he and Ursula so readily dispensed. His many graduate students were particularly devoted to him. Gerald was also deeply concerned for the college staff; the achievement in which he took most pride was that of having persuaded the Governing Body to raise their wages by twenty-four per cent in a single year.

Relations with the Fellows, however, were much less happy. Some individuals presented him with awkward personal problems; others proved temperamentally incompatible. Gerald showed much patience and forbearance. But after York, where he had the advantage of having appointed all his colleagues, he found it harder to adjust to being a

newcomer and only *primus inter pares*, among fellows whom he had not chosen and who were quick to question his judgement. He was a man of strongly held principle, who did not believe in concealing or finessing what he regarded as ethical issues, even though others saw them merely as practical problems. The emotional temperature rose; and there were some painful moments.

Yet when he retired from St Peter's in 1991, two years early, in order to have more time for his historical work, the achievement was plain for all to see. The college had outgrown its denominational origins, enhanced its endowment, extended its buildings, and made some excellent elections to the Fellowship. Within the university, Gerald was President of the local branch of the Association of University Teachers and a strongly committed Curator of the Bodleian ('the only University position that I have the slightest wish to hold', he wrote in a letter of 1985). The Keeper of Western Manuscripts recalled that 'his contributions to meetings [of the Curators] were marked by the same scrupulous fairness and generosity of spirit which characterized everything that he said and did. Proposals which came from the university administration he always measured by their effects on the library staff, and those which originated within the library by their effects on readers.' Gerald also contributed to the scholarly amenities of Oxford by helping to postpone the total disappearance of Thornton's bookshop, acting, with a colleague, as honest broker and negotiating its sale to a new owner.

In the historical profession at large, he was now an elder statesman. He was given honorary degrees by the universities of Exeter and Manchester. His extensive knowledge of public and private archives made him a natural choice as a Commissioner for Historical Manuscripts in 1978 and he chaired the Commission from 1989 to 1997. He was a friend and mentor to the Commission's successive Secretaries and kept a watchful eye open for the migration of seventeenth-century manuscripts. During his chairmanship, the reorganisation of local government called for repeated representations to government departments and meetings with ministers.

His strong faith in the value of collective biography made him an equally inevitable member of the Editorial Board of the History of Parliament Trust, for thirty years (1968–98). He chaired the Board between 1989 and 1997, a period which saw the appointment of a new general editor, the move to its own premises in Woburn Square and the extension of its activities to include the House of Lords (a development which he had long urged).

He was elected to the British Academy in 1976 and became an indefatigable attender at section meetings, taking new elections very seriously. Between 1984 and 1988 he was President of the Royal Historical Society, giving four Presidential Addresses on 'Collective mentalities and seventeenth-century England', in which he analysed the reactions of different groups—puritans, royalists, radicals and neutrals—to the Civil War and its aftermath. His discussions of these problems of allegiance and motivation drew upon a wide range of reading and were notable for their breadth of imaginative sympathy.

All these responsibilities meant innumerable journeys to London and long hours poring over agenda papers. To these tasks, he brought the qualities he showed throughout his life: scrupulous attention to business, self-deprecating modesty and constant concern for the welfare of the staff who kept these different organisations going. He was endlessly helpful to younger scholars and to foreign visitors. He made lecture tours to the USA, USSR, India and China. A diligent correspondent, he maintained his many friendships, while becoming guide and mentor to the young and not-so-young from many parts of the world. Under his and Ursula's protective wing, lame ducks could always find shelter. The title of his Festschrift, *Public Duty and Private Conscience in Seventeenth-Century England* (1993), alluded to his qualities as a man as much as to his historical interests.

When he retired, he and Ursula, though retaining a base in Oxford, moved to a handsome house near Ledbury, Herefordshire, filling it with an equally handsome collection of the books needed for his research. He continued with his historical work, publishing many articles and handing in the text of the final volume of his trilogy, *The Crown's Servants: Government and Civil Service under Charles II 1660–85*, only three days before his sudden and unexpected death in the John Radcliffe Hospital on 17 December 2000, when what should have been a routine operation went tragically wrong. Gerald would have appreciated the irony that his premature demise qualified him for inclusion in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, for which the cut-off point was 31 December 2000, and to which he had himself contributed a number of articles. He was buried in Llangrove, near Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire, where he and Ursula used to have a cottage, which they often lent to their friends, and where Gerald did some of his best work. His widow saw the manuscript of *The Crown's Servants* through the press, choosing the illustrations, correcting the proofs and compiling the index.

Gerald's large oeuvre can be conveniently divided into five main categories. First, there are the occasional studies which were stimulated by the institutions, people and places he encountered. Like many historians, he sought to make sense of his own experience by locating it within a longer temporal dimension. Perhaps his rootlessness as a child explains the tenacity of his local and personal loyalties and his desire to express them in his scholarly work. He discharged his debt to Winchester with an article on 'Seventeenth-Century Wykehamists' for *Winchester College: Sixth Centenary Essays* (1982). He commemorated his formidable Oxford friend, John Cooper, by editing, with John Morrill, a collected volume of his papers (1983), prefacing it with a sympathetic essay on 'J. P. Cooper as a scholar'; he also took over, expanded and completed Cooper's chapter on 'The Economics and Finances of the Colleges and the University, *c*. 1530–1640' for volume iii of the *History of the University of Oxford* (1986). He repaid his old tutor with an essay in Christopher Hill's Festschrift on 'Unbelief in Seventeenth-Century England'. He marked his long association with York by publishing a note on the location of the office of the secretary to the Council of the North, and by editing, with Canon Reginald Cant, a handsome collective *History of York Minster* (1977), to which he also contributed an essay on 'Funeral monuments and other post-medieval sculpture', rich in biographical comment on the persons commemorated.[7] He did much research into his adopted county of Herefordshire, giving close attention in *The King's Servants* to such local families as the Harleys and the Pyes, writing an article on the Interregnum rulers of the county (1972) and, with Canon John Tiller, editing and contributing to a collective volume on *Hereford Cathedral: a History* (2000). In the last decade of his life he turned to the history of his ancestral Ireland, with a study of 'The first duke of Ormond as patron and administrator'.

Above all, there was his hereditary link with the Navy. Towards the end of his D.Phil. thesis, Gerald declared his belief that the distinctive qualities of British government and society, its openness and its parliamentary democracy, long depended on the power of the Fleet to guard the narrow seas; and that in turn reflected the quality of naval administration; the victories of Drake and Nelson were won in the ordnance office and the naval dockyards. That was one great argument for studying

[7] On monuments to successive archbishops of York, he remarks: 'While his predecessor Sterne is portrayed in the process of waking and getting up, Lamplugh is fully on his feet, as if anticipating the General Resurrection. One can but hope such confidence is not misplaced.'

administrative history. Gerald contributed a chapter on 'Navy, State, Trade and Empire' to the first volume of the *Oxford History of the British Empire* (1998), in which he noted, in passing, 'the emergence of a naval tradition betwen the 1680s and the 1720s', the lifetime of his ancestor, Admiral Matthew Aylmer. He served on the Council of the Navy Records Society; and he planned a book on *The Royal Navy and the English State: Henry VIII to George III*, though in a letter of July 1989 he conceded that his was 'more likely to be a posthumous fragment'. Out of his studies in naval history came a particularly original piece on 'Slavery under Charles II; the Mediterranean and Tangier' (*English Historical Review*, 114 (1999)). This showed that English naval administrators in the later seventeenth century regarded it as perfectly acceptable to enslave Turks and Greeks captured at sea and force them to row in the galleys and to quarry stones with which to build the mole at Tangier. 'The slave *bagnio* or compound in downtown Tangier,' he remarks, 'must have been something like a concentration camp.'

The second category of Gerald's writings stems from his interest in seventeenth-century radicalism, the aspect of the period with which, like Christopher Hill, he was most warmly in sympathy. His book on the Levellers was accompanied by articles on their social origins, on Edward Sexby's attempt to export their ideas to the radicals of Bordeaux and on the relationship, if any, of their theories to those of John Locke. Gerald vigorously defended the existence of the Ranters against Professor J. C. Davis's contention that they were a contemporary fantasy. He discovered a previously unknown pamphlet by Gerrard Winstanley, *Englands Spirit Unfoulded*, in which the Digger leader rather surprisingly urged his readers to take the Engagement of loyalty to the Commonwealth. He wrote sensitively about Winstanley, commenting on 'his marvellously vigorous and evocative prose, his passionately sincere concern for the underdog, and his consuming vision of a better world'. He confessed that, though unmoved by the communism of Plato, More and Marx, he found 'a disturbing force and even relevance in Winstanley's vision'. This did not stop him from tracing, in another article (1982), the emergence in seventeenth-century England of the new definition of property as absolute individual ownership. But he continued to admire seventeenth-century radicalism for 'its amazing range, vitality and eloquence, which were not to be equalled, still less surpassed for many a long year' (*Trans. Royal Hist. Soc.*, 5th ser., 38 (1988), 25).

Thirdly, there are his general interpretative writings on the seventeenth century, notably the two text-books, *The Struggle for the Constitution* and

Rebellion or Revolution? In the opening paragraph of the former, he maintained that 'English seventeenth-century history has a special claim to be studied more thoroughly than most other periods'; this was because it saw the establishment of parliamentary government, which would become a model for many other parts of the world; because the American and French Revolutions followed the pattern of the English Revolution; and because England was almost unique in having no revolution in modern times because it had had one in the seventeenth century. He modified his view of the period in later years, in response to the writings of so-called 'revisionist' historians, who pointed out that the traditional governing classes picked up the reins again after 1660 and that Charles II moved back to monarchical absolutism in the last years of his reign. But he did not abandon it; confessing that he had come to realise that he 'was—after all—an old Whig (and one with some residual Leveller leanings too)' (*The Crown's Servants*, p. 5).

Fourthly, there are his essays in comparative history. Although never claiming any expertise outside the history of England, Ireland and colonial America, Gerald was always keen to set his findings into a larger picture. He wrote the article on 'Bureaucracy' for the companion volume to *The New Cambridge History* (1979); and in the early 1980s, he founded a discussion group of historians and historical sociologists, drawn from all over the country, with interests stretching from the fifth to the twentieth centuries. They met annually at St Peter's to discuss the history of state formation in England.[8] This was the origin of his article on 'The peculiarities of the English state' (1990). In an unpublished paper of 1995, he said that what he got out of these meetings, apart from the strong impression that the English state had been formed by the tenth century, was a growing conviction that more European comparisons were needed. He became closely involved in the European Science Foundation's project on 'The origins of the modern state in Europe', which led to the publication of a number of collective volumes.

Finally, there is the work for which Gerald Aylmer will be longest remembered, namely his trilogy on seventeenth-century office-holders. Based on a huge range of published and unpublished sources, and presented within a carefully considered analytic framework, these volumes are likely to remain an invaluable resource so long as seventeenth-century

[8] For a brief account of the group, see Derek Sayer, 'Gerald Aylmer and DGOS: In Memoriam', *The Journal of Historical Sociology*, 15 (2002). Many of the participants are listed in a footnote to Gerald's article, 'Centre and Locality: the Nature of Power Elites', in Wolfgang Leonard (ed.), *Power Elites and State Building* (1986).

England is studied. Gerald did not invent administrative history. On the contrary, it already had a distinguished pedigree, stretching from the six volumes of T. F. Tout's *Chapters in the Administrative History of Medieval England* (1920–31) to G. R. Elton's *The Tudor Revolution in Government*, which appeared in 1953, when Gerald was working on his D.Phil. thesis. But Tout and Elton were more interested in institutions than in people, whereas Gerald's concern was with the office-holders themselves as much as with the posts they held. In his view, administrative history required 'an approach which is at once rigorous in its handling of the source materials and human in its concentration on the part played by single individuals or small groups of men' (*Annali della Fondazione Italiana per la Storia Amministrativa*, 1 (1964), 20). His achievement was to bring to the history of bureaucracy the prosopographical approach, the study of collective biography, pioneered in Britain by L. B. Namier in *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (1929), and put to brilliant use by Ronald Syme in *The Roman Revolution* (1939).

Two other influences impelled Gerald to the study of bureaucracy. The first was the tradition of sociological work on the subject, from Max Weber onwards. Gerald regarded history as a social science (*The Struggle for the Constitution*, p. 17). He believed that administrative history was capable of being treated more exactly than many other forms of history and he saw his work as a step towards a sociology of institutions. He was particularly stimulated by the controversy which had been aroused in left-wing circles by the American political writer, James Burnham, author of *The Managerial Revolution* (1941), and by the Yugoslav dissident, Milovan Djilas, whose *The New Class* appeared in English translation in 1957.[9] These authors suggested that the true wielders of power were not the owners of property, but the managers and officials who controlled the state apparatus and the means of production. Gerald himself believed that 'larger plans for the improvement of our society are inseparable from the mechanics of government and from the personnel and methods of administration' (*The State's Servants*, p. 1).

The second and more immediate context was the controversy about the origins of the English Civil War which dominated the historiography of the 1940s and 1950s. In his Raleigh lecture of 1948, J. E. Neale had pointed to a deterioration of political morality and an enhanced compe-

[9] In 1959 Gerald met and had discussions with Djilas's exiled colleague, Vladimir Dedijer, Marshal Tito's biographer and former comrade-in-arms, who was then a Simon Research Fellow at Manchester University.

tition for office in the last years of Elizabeth I. A few years later, H. R. Trevor-Roper attributed the rise of the gentry, not to land management and entrepreneurial skills, as urged by R. H. Tawney and Lawrence Stone, but to the profits of royal office. In his view, the Civil War was a backwoods reaction by those gentry who felt themselves excluded from the pickings to be had at court. The controversy was marked by rhetorical brilliance and personal acrimony, but the evidence adduced on either side was distinctly impressionistic. Gerald's achievement was to move the discussion into a new phase by placing the subject of office-holding on a firm statistical base. He also provided a much-needed injection of scholarly humility.

When the *The King's Servants* appeared in 1961, it was its relevance to current controversy which attracted most attention. The book showed beyond any doubt that the Civil War was not a conflict of 'ins' and 'outs', rising and declining gentry. Although some families founded their fortune on office, it was 'impossible to identify the rising with the office-holding gentry'. At most, the profits of office may have amounted to a thirteenth of the gentry's total income. This was nothing less than a total demolition of Trevor-Roper's thesis, and it was all the more effective for being carried out courteously and unpolemically.

The book's achievement, however, transcended this local context. It offered a definitive account of the structure of royal administration and a profusion of carefully presented statistical and biographical facts about the officials of Charles I—their social origins, their mode of entry and terms of service, their sources of income and their political allegiance. Gerald showed how offices were acquired, not by merit, but by one of the 'three Ps'—patronage, patrimony or purchase. Posts were regarded as private property, rather than as an opportunity for public service, and, if below the very highest offices, were usually held for life. Salaries were slight and officers depended upon fees, perquisites and other indirect profits of office. The distinction between accepted practice and 'corruption' was not easy to draw. Office-holding was thus 'a conservative vested interest', acting as a brake on royal action.

With *The State's Servants*, Gerald reached the part of the story in which he had always been most interested, namely the administrative impact of the English Revolution, to which *The King's Servants* had been merely the necessary prologue. In its organisation, this second volume closely resembled its predecessor. It began with a lucid description of the administrative structure, in this case one of immense complexity, because of the proliferation of committees during and after the Civil War. Then

came a discussion of the officials themselves, their mode of appointment, terms of service, remuneration and length of tenure. This was followed by a social analysis of selected administrators, together with miniature biographies of representative individuals. Finally, there was an assessment of the impact of the bureaucracy upon the population at large.

Though surrounded by characteristically Aylmerian qualifications, the conclusions were clear. The Revolution led to considerable changes. Fewer offices were held by members of the upper classes and careers became more open to the talents. Sinecures, absenteeism and venality were reduced. Fees were regulated and salaries increased. The result was a higher standard of professionalism and administrative probity. There were scandals, but, given the immense sums of money which changed hands during these years, through land confiscation and heavy taxation, the lack of evidence for large-scale corruption is striking. Though stressing that the reforms of the Interregnum were incomplete, Gerald suggested that the effect of Charles II's restoration was to delay serious administrative reform for 150 years.

The Crown's Servants was shorter than its two predecessors but organised in much the same way, though with the additional feature of a group portrait of office-holders at ten-year intervals. Once again, it was founded on a huge range of sources. Once again, there was a fascinating range of biographical detail, linked by sagacious commentary. But the book's overall impact was less dramatic than that of the two previous volumes, partly because some of Gerald's findings had been anticipated in articles by Sir John Sainty in the 1960s, partly because his own conclusions were very unemphatically presented, but chiefly because the situation he describes was itself rather confused. In many respects Charles II's regime saw a reversion to the practices of the pre-1640 era, but in others it continued the reforming work of the Interregnum. 'Charles II's servants were more upper-class, less puritan, less self-made, and less committed to ideals of public service than the men of 1649–60' (p. 269). But in some areas of the administration there was a shift away from life tenure, a trend towards higher salaries in lieu of fees and perquisites and a move to greater professionalism. By the end of the reign, the administrative foundations for Britain's rise to world power had been laid, though the necessary fiscal reconstruction would occur only after 1688.

These three books were supported by a great many articles on aspects of the subject, including an essay on 'Place Bills and the Separation of Powers' (1965) and a Prothero lecture of 1979, which surveyed the 'extraordinary patchwork' of eighteenth-century administration, a mix-

ture of 'old and new, useless and efficient, corrupt and honest'. Like all Gerald's work, his writings on administrative history were marked by clarity, scrupulosity and even-handedness.

Few historians leave a more solid achievement behind them, and scarcely any of those who do take on administrative responsibilities. Gerald was able to do so much because he was a ferociously hard worker. He did not work out of neurotic compulsion, but from self-indulgence. His work was meat and drink to him, and he loved it. At the same time, he had an overwhelming sense of duty and self-discipline. Even when out for a walk he would set himself targets: a distance to be covered, a landmark to be reached. I remember, on a car journey through Herefordshire, catching sight of him. It was an appalling Sunday afternoon, with strong winds and drenching rain. There, on the rough bank on the side of the bleak Ledbury bypass, in a raincoat and with his khaki bush hat pulled over his eyes, undaunted by the weather and the fast-moving traffic, was Gerald, head down, striding into the wind and rain; he had decided on a walk and it was to be taken, regardless of the weather.

As he grew older, his great height and craggy body made him look like a gnarled old tree. At meetings, he would sit with his head bent over his papers, in a posture which only his exceptionally long neck could have made possible, apparently asleep or lost in private reverie. Then, suddenly, his deep voice would break the silence with an observation of magisterial profundity, which revealed how thoroughly he had been pondering the issue in question, and, as often as not, decisively resolved the matter. He delivered his public utterances with his chin on his chest, his eyes half-closed and his visage expressive of some strange internal agony. But what he said invariably carried authority.

He never used the past to show off, but treated historical figures with the same courtesy and consideration that he extended to colleagues, students and strangers, always giving them the benefit of the doubt until proved wrong. Neither did he ever affect a posture of omniscience, but constantly reminded his readers of the limits to what was or could be known. In a letter of 1982, he wrote, 'as you know, I have a slight anti-intellectual streak, agreeing with Richard Cobb that the cleverest people don't always make the best historians. Very clever people are more likely to be tempted to impose their own interpretations on the facts than less bright people (such as myself) who are unlikely to have novel interpretations to which they wish or need to make the facts relate.' As President of the Royal Historical Society he could refer casually to 'historians of greater intellectual penetration, as well as wider and deeper scholarship

than myself' (*Trans. Royal Hist. Soc.*, 5th ser., 39 (1989), 18). When he dissented from other scholars, it was always 'with the greatest respect'.

From anyone else, this might have been humbug, but Gerald's modesty was genuine. It sprang from a deep awareness of the imperfections of human nature and a certainty that the passage of time will make all our hopes and works obsolete. In particular, he knew that historical writing could never be more than provisional. At the end of his D.Phil. thesis, he observes that history is a collective endeavour: each writer depends on the work of those who have gone before; and the most to be hoped is that our work will in its turn be useful to those who come afterwards. The only certainty is that posterity will find it, in one way or another, inadequate. He reproduced these sentiments in *The King's Servants*, adding the dispiriting observation that 'rare indeed is the historical wine which improves with keeping'.

Fortunately, Gerald did not succumb to the gloom which this philosophy might have induced. For all his *gravitas*, he was excellent company. He could be very witty, with a splendidly ironic sense of humour, a warm laugh and a keen eye for the grotesque. He was very convivial and loved good food and drink. He inspired affection in an extraordinarily diverse range of people.

He has been commemorated by the establishment of an annual Gerald Aylmer Lecture at the University of York and an annual Gerald Aylmer seminar organised by the Royal Historical Society and The National Archives.

KEITH THOMAS
Fellow of the Academy

Note. The letters by Gerald Aylmer quoted in this memoir are in the writer's possession and will eventually be deposited in the Bodleian Library. Details of most of the works cited can be found in the 'Select Bibliography' by William Sheils of Gerald Aylmer's writings up to 1990, in John Morrill, Paul Slack and Daniel Woolf (eds), *Public Duty and Private Conscience in Seventeenth-Century England: Essays presented to G. E. Aylmer* (Oxford, 2003). The same volume contains three biographical essays: Christopher Hill, 'Gerald Aylmer at Balliol'; Gordon Leff, 'Gerald Aylmer at York'; and Austin Woolrych, 'Gerald Aylmer as a scholar'.

The entry on 'Aylmer, Gerald Edward (1926–2000)' in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) is by Penry Williams. There are obituaries in *The Daily Telegraph*, 29 Dec. 2000; in *The Guardian*, 29 Dec. 2000 (by Austin Woolrych); in *The Independent*, 30 Dec. 2000 (by Barrie Dobson); in *The Times*, 10 Jan. 2001; in *The*

Bodleian Library Record, 17 (2001) (by Mary Clapinson); in *The Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 22 (2001) (by Christopher Kitching); and in *History Workshop Journal*, 52 (Oct. 2001) (by Patricia Crawford).

In compiling this memoir I have been greatly helped by Mrs Ursula Aylmer and by many of Gerald Aylmer's friends and colleagues, including Dr Lawrence Goldman, Dr Christopher Kitching, Dr Anne Laurence, Professor Henry Mayr-Harting, FBA, Professor John Morrill, FBA, Professor Paul Slack, FBA, Mr William Thomas and Mr Francis Warner.