



JOHN PLUMB

John Harold Plumb 1911–2001

SIR JOHN PLUMB, who died on 21 October 2001, having celebrated his ninetieth birthday two months before, had been in ill health for some time — but in rude health for a great deal longer. To his friends, and also to his enemies, he was always known as ‘Jack’, and he invariably published over the uncharacteristically tight-lipped by-line of J. H. Plumb. On both sides of the Atlantic, the many obituaries and appreciations rightly drew attention to his memorable character and ample wealth, to his irrepressible vitality and unabashed delight in the good things of life, to the light and the dark of his complex and conflicted nature, and to the ups and downs of his professional career. They also stressed his equivocal relationship with Cambridge University (where he failed to gain an undergraduate scholarship, but was Professor of Modern British History from 1966 to 1974), his nearly seventy-year-long connection with Christ’s College (where he was a Fellow from 1946 to 1978, Master from 1978 to 1982, and then again a Fellow until his death), and his latter-day conversion (if such it was) from impassioned radical to militant Thatcherite. And they noted the human insight and sparkling style that were the hallmarks of his best work, his lifelong conviction that history must reach a broad audience and inform our understanding of present-day affairs, and his unrivalled skills in nurturing (and often terrifying) youthful promise and scholarly talent.¹

¹ Throughout these notes, I have abbreviated Sir John Plumb to JHP, and C. P. [Lord] Snow to CPS. For JHP’s obituaries, see: *The Guardian*, 22 Oct. 2001; *Daily Telegraph*, 23 Oct. 2001; *The Times*, 23 Oct. 2001; *Washington Post*, 23 Oct. 2001; *New York Times*, 23 Oct. 2001; *The Independent*, 27 Oct. 2001. For an earlier, and vivid evocation, see N. McKendrick, ‘J. H. Plumb: A Valedictory Tribute’, in id. (ed.), *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Thought and Society Proceedings of the British Academy*, 124, 269–309. © The British Academy 2004.

At the height of his powers and the zenith of his fame, Plumb was indeed a commanding figure, both within academe and also far beyond. He was as much read in the United States as in the United Kingdom; he was a great enabler, patron, fixer and entrepreneur; he belonged to the smart social set both in Mayfair and Manhattan; a race horse was named after him in England and the stars and the stripes were once flown above the US Capitol in his honour; and he appeared, thinly disguised but inadequately depicted, in the fiction of Angus Wilson, William Cooper and C. P. Snow. For Plumb was never easy to pin down: he was a complicated, cross-grained and contradictory character, who was both a vivid presence yet also an elusive personality. At his Balzacian best, he radiated warmth, buoyancy, optimism and hope; but in his more Dostoyevskian mode, he was consumed by doubt, loneliness, envy and disappointment. And his often searing self-knowledge was matched by an ignorant unconcern about the effect of his own personality on others that would have been almost endearing in someone less difficult than he so often was. 'It may not be apparent to many of you', he observed at one of the dinners arranged to honour his eightieth birthday, in a remark that exemplifies both these traits, 'but I have never been a happy man.' Of course he hadn't been; but how could he have believed that this was news to other people?

Yet in all the column inches of celebration and censure, evocation and exasperation, one important aspect of Plumb's career was repeatedly ignored and overlooked: for while his life was an unusually long one, his productive period as a significant historian was surprisingly, almost indecently, brief. He was born in Leicester on 20 August 1911, but did not publish his first major work, *England in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, 1950), until he was already thirty-nine. There followed two decades of extraordinary activity, as books, articles, essays and reviews cascaded from his pen in torrential abundance. But when he published *The Death of the Past* (London, 1969), it turned out to be a more aptly named book than anyone could ever have guessed, for it also signalled that his serious, lasting scholarly activity was almost over. He would live for nearly another third of a century, becoming more wealthy, more famous, more disappointed and more bad-tempered; he would dabble in other subjects, and continue to exhort and inspire the gifted young; but (to borrow his own later words of censure on the Cambridge History Faculty, which applied

in Honour of J. H. Plumb (London, 1974), pp. 1–18. For a later, more astringent appraisal, see J. Black, 'A Plumb with an acerbic aftertaste', *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 16 Aug. 2002. For a more positive analysis see T. Hunt, 'Professor Plumb and the victory of reason', *The Times*, 17 Jan. 2004.

more plausibly to himself), 'nothing exciting, nothing original, nothing creative' appeared in print with his name attached to it.²

I

The slow beginning is perhaps easier to explain than the later, lengthening, lingering diminuendo. For Plumb was an outsider who came up the hard way, it took him a long time to get his career launched and to gain the necessary academic momentum, and the belligerence and the combativeness (to say nothing of the bruises and the scars) to which this gave rise remained with him all his life. Not for him the comfortable circumstances, the family connections, the metropolitan sophistication, the public-school education, the Oxbridge scholarships, and the immediate college fellowships that were enjoyed by those confident, privileged members of the upper middle class, who would form the backbone (but not always provide the spine) of the inter-war generation of intellectuals to which Noel Annan would later give the name *Our Age*.³ Plumb's background, by contrast, was provincial and proletarian: Arnold Bennett rather than Bloomsbury. His father worked on the shop floor of a local shoemaking factory, and he himself remembered the lines of Cannock Chase miners queuing up for bowls of soup during the General Strike in 1926, when he was journeying to Wales to look at the castles.

But for all his humble origins, he managed to obtain a place at Alderman Newton's, the local Leicester grammar school, where he was taught by an inspired history master, H. E. Howard, who was a considerable (and controversial) figure in the town, and was Plumb's first mentor and patron. Howard was radical in his politics, uninhibited in his sexual appetites, and full of hope for the young people who gathered round him. Part of Howard's inspirational teaching method consisted in the seemingly unpredictable bestowal of excessive praise alternating with devastating censure, a technique which Plumb would later use to such good—and often disconcerting—effect with his own pupils in Cambridge. But it was clearly a tough apprenticeship. At the end of one lengthy disagreement, lasting until three o'clock in the morning, and ending outside the gates of the town gaol, Howard dismissed Plumb thus: 'Sir, you've

² JHP, *Collected Essays*, vol. i (London, 1988) (hereafter *Ei*), p. 370.

³ N. Annan, *Our Age: English Intellectuals Between the Wars: A Group Portrait* (New York, 1990), pp. 3–18.

misunderstood your facts, you've misread your psychology, you've got a third-rate mind, and you're probably impotent. Good night.⁴ But Howard also discerned in Plumb unusual gifts of curiosity and creativity, insight and imagination, which initially inclined him to be a writer of fiction (he was especially enamoured of Proust), and which would eventually become the outstanding features of his history. Plumb remained loyal and grateful to Howard all his life; he dedicated the second volume of *Walpole* to him; and when Howard was forced to flee the country in the early 1960s to avoid prosecution for molesting and seducing young boys, Plumb and his Leicester friends rallied round to look after him.⁵

In an appropriately love-hate sort of way, Leicester was very important to Plumb—as a powerful formative influence, but also as the place from which, urged on by Howard, he very much wanted to escape. (He was briefly engaged at this time, but his fiancée dumped him for a local policeman.) And it was at Leicester that Plumb made friends with C. P. Snow, who would later immortalise Howard as George Passant in his *Strangers and Brothers* sequence of novels. For the young Jack Plumb, eager, ardent and ambitious, Snow was an influential and an exemplary figure, and they became lifelong allies. Both were determined to get out of the provinces and make their way in the great world beyond; both saw themselves as far-left radicals, struggling against established opinion and entrenched elites; both disliked metropolitan condescension, and 'the stuffed, envious and self-righteous'; both were fascinated by the human condition and by the impact of personality on power and of power on personality; and both were inclined to use such similar (and revealing) phrases as 'time of hope' and 'we've had a victory'.⁶ In their years of achievement and fame, Plumb matured into a much better writer than Snow: his prose was more buoyant and colourful, he could capture a character in a phrase or a sentence, and he was unrivalled in his capacity to set a scene and evoke an atmosphere. But in the early days of their friendship, Snow was very much the older, dominant, senior figure (he had been born in 1905), blazing the trail, pointing the way, making his career.

Snow left Leicester for Cambridge in 1928, to pursue scientific research, and Plumb was determined to join him as soon as he could. But although he won an undergraduate place to read history in the following year (no mean achievement in those days for a provincial grammar school

⁴ McKendrick, 'Valedictory Tribute', p. 5.

⁵ M. Drabble, *Angus Wilson: A Biography* (London, 1995), pp. 108–9, 183, 379; Snow MSS, 166.8: JHP to CPS, 14 June 1961; 166.10: JHP to CPS, 20 Jan. 1963.

⁶ Plumb MSS, Snow file: CPS to JHP, 26 Jan. 1955.

boy), he was not given the college award to which he felt himself entitled, and which was essential if he was to make ends meet. He was, in short, a scholarship boy—but without a scholarship. So ended in defeat his first attempt to get to Cambridge, and he did no better the following year. It was a rebuff that went so deep that Plumb's relations with the university would never be easy, and although he later became settled and famous there, he would never feel fully comfortable or accepted. (Perhaps this was also because he never quite got over his first visit, to sit the scholarship exam, when he had shown up in a bowler hat, only to discover that it was the headgear of college porters, but not of would-be undergraduates.) Meanwhile, he was compelled to remain becalmed in the provinces and he took an external London degree at the fledgling University College, Leicester. This was scarcely a stimulating or nurturing environment, and the first-class honours Plumb eventually secured (an event unprecedented in the history of the place: no wonder the college, when it became a university, gave him an honorary degree) was a tribute to his determination no less than to his talent. Only then, in 1934, was he finally able to get out of Leicester and into Cambridge.

Thanks to his friendship with Snow, who had been elected a Fellow in 1930, Plumb secured admission to Christ's College, where he began research into the social structure of the House of Commons in the late seventeenth century. His supervisor was George Macaulay Trevelyan, then Regius Professor of Modern History and (after Howard) the most influential academic figure in his life. At that time, Trevelyan was completing his great trilogy on *England Under Queen Anne* (London, 1930–4), in which parliament and party politics featured prominently, and this made him the ideal mentor for Plumb, although it is not true, as is sometimes alleged, that he was Trevelyan's only research student.⁷ Their personal relations were not close: Plumb was understandably unsure of himself, Trevelyan responded with his inimitably intimidating amalgam of 'barking shyness', and they met infrequently. But Plumb greatly admired Trevelyan's national histories and sympathetic biographies, he imbibed his view that historians should write with style and grace for a broad public audience, and (no doubt urged on by Snow) he dared to hope that he might one day succeed him as Regius Professor. Although Plumb was for a time attracted by other approaches to the past, he remained convinced that Trevelyan was the greatest historian (and the greatest man) he had known.

⁷ Plumb MSS, Snow File: CPS to JHP, 2, 10 July 1934; D. Cannadine, *G. M. Trevelyan: A Life in History* (London, 1992), pp. 114–19, 217.

After the Second World War, he wrote an appreciative account of his work (*G. M. Trevelyan*, London, 1951), and he also edited a Festschrift, *Studies in Social History* (London, 1955), for Trevelyan's eightieth birthday.⁸

Soon after he began his research, Plumb encountered the second historian who was to be a powerful, but more equivocal, influence on him, Lewis Namier, who had recently published two path-breaking books, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London, 1929), and *England in the Age of the American Revolution* (London, 1930). By careful, painstaking study of the parliamentary constituencies and of ministerial manoeuvrings, Namier had undermined some of the key props to the Whig interpretation of the past, so beloved of Trevelyan and his great uncle, Lord Macaulay. In particular, he insisted that George III was no tyrant or unconstitutional monarch, and that the party labels 'Whig' and 'Tory' were largely meaningless at a time when faction was the dominant mode of political organisation, and when men were motivated by naked ambition rather than ideology.⁹ Plumb could scarcely ignore this powerfully articulated interpretation, and in his dissertation he vainly struggled to reconcile Trevelyan's belief in the two-party system with Namier's scornful dismissal of it. For the next twenty years, Plumb was much in thrall to Namier's view of the eighteenth century, but it was not an easy accommodation. For while both of them were outsiders, who were additionally disadvantaged by difficult and troubled temperaments, Namier was deeply conservative in his politics, whereas Plumb, like many of his contemporaries, who were appalled by what was happening in Nazi Germany and despaired of the domestic political scene, was actively embracing Communism.¹⁰

The third figure he encountered early in his time as a Cambridge research student was Herbert Butterfield of Peterhouse. He was ten years older than Plumb, had been elected a Fellow of his College on graduation, had never needed to take a Ph.D., and was the coming man in the Cambridge History Faculty. In the thirties, he also made his name by attacking the Whig interpretation of history, but during the 1950s, he would become Namier's most severe and sustained critic.¹¹ Inevitably, this meant Plumb and Butterfield were drawn to each other, as much to argue

⁸ Plumb MSS, Trevelyan file: Trevelyan to JHP, 3 Dec. 1934, 9 July 1955.

⁹ L. Colley, *Namier* (London, 1989), pp. 50–68.

¹⁰ Plumb MSS, H. S. Hoff file: JHP to Hoff [undated, c.1937].

¹¹ H. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London, 1931); id., *George III, Lord North and the People, 1779–80* (London, 1949); id., *George III and the Historians* (London, 1957).

as to agree, and for over half a century, they enjoyed a love-hate relationship, each simultaneously appalled and bewitched by the other. Plumb was baffled by Butterfield's religious commitment, repelled by his right-wing politics, captivated by his delight in paradox and perverseness, intimidated by his cleverness, and envious of his professional standing. Butterfield came to admire Plumb's literary gifts ('he could pile up a beautiful paragraph, add colour to a scene, provide thumbnail sketches of individuals'), but never felt he wrote history at the highest level of intellectual distinction, conceptual sophistication or scholarly accomplishment.¹² During the 1960s, when Plumb achieved his greatest professional successes in the Cambridge History Faculty, and also suffered his greatest professional reverses there, it seems likely that Butterfield was even handed in both promoting him and in thwarting him.

Thus stimulated, intimidated and not-a-little confused, Plumb duly completed his Ph.D. in 1936, when it was examined by Sir Keith Feiling and Harold Temperley. As he himself later admitted, it was an immature piece of work, lacking confidence and authority: the analysis of parliament was entirely derived from Namier, and took up the majority of the dissertation; the shorter second part gave an account of the Convention Parliament, and contradicted itself on every other page about the existence of party; there was no introduction, no conclusion, and (literally) no thesis; and there was little sign of the great and famous historian he would later become.¹³ Nevertheless, with Trevelyan's help and encouragement, Plumb worked up some of the material into an article on the elections to the Convention Parliament of 1689, which was accepted for publication by Temperley in the *Cambridge Historical Journal*; but then Butterfield took over as editor, and his response was far from encouraging: 'I'm personally disappointed', he wrote, urging that Plumb should 'take much more trouble' with any future work he did. The article was eventually published, but Plumb's self-confidence was severely damaged, he made no effort to revise the dissertation for publication, and he found it hard to continue with his researches. Indeed, his only other published work at this time was a history of his father's firm, which he completed in 1936, and which was strongly on the side of the downtrodden workers

¹² Butterfield MSS, 241/3: draft *Times* obituary of Plumb, eventually published with modifications.

¹³ JHP, 'Elections to the House of Commons in the Reign of William III' (University of Cambridge, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1936), esp. pp. 238–50.

against the exploitative bosses.¹⁴ Beyond that, he was more interested in fiction and, encouraged by Snow, he wrote several novels, but they failed to find publishers.

'As soon as possible', Plumb told Snow in 1937, 'I shall get out of academic history into writing, journalism, etc. — life on my own terms.' Yet this was not to be. He applied for university jobs in a desultory sort of way, indulged in love affairs with members of both sexes, and was generally depressed and dispirited.¹⁵ But, until he was elected to the Ehrman Fellowship at King's College in the summer of 1939, Plumb lived a hand to mouth existence from undergraduate teaching—not for Christ's (he was not considered distinguished or senior enough for that: in those days a Ph.D. was a badge of inferiority rather than a passport to preferment), but primarily for Girton and Newnham. For someone who was eager to catch up, both personally and professionally, and who knew there was a great deal of it to do, this was a fretful and frustrating period on the margins of Cambridge life. 'I seem to have wasted a lot of my time', he admitted to Snow at this time.¹⁶ He was a member of one of the less smart colleges, his mentor was little esteemed by the rising generation of historians, and he never made it socially with such fashionable figures as Dadie Rylands. For Plumb was short of stature and unprepossessing of appearance, he was made to feel his provincial inferiority (boots and shoes and co-operatives, indeed!), and although well qualified as both a bisexual and a Communist, he was disappointed not to be elected to the Apostles, the University's most exclusive (and secret) society.

These slights, too, Plumb never forgot—or forgave. Hence the wounding tongue he had initially cultivated in self-defence against public-school arrogance and high-table condescension. Hence (in part) his life-long dislike of Anthony Blunt, who had once invited Plumb to his exquisite rooms in Trinity, but ('I don't know if I didn't smell right, or what') had never asked him again. And hence his subsequent, determined pursuit of social acceptance, public fame and worldly success, far beyond the poisoned-ivory tower. But hence, too (and this remained, to the end of his days, one of his most winning qualities) his later determination to promote the careers of talented young historians, who might thereby enjoy the early opportunities he felt he himself had been unjustly denied. For

¹⁴ JHP, *Fifty Years of 'Equity Shoemaking': A History of the Leicester Co-Operative Boot and Shoe Manufacturing Society Ltd* (Leicester, 1936); *Ei*, pp. 29–44; Plumb MSS, Historians file: Butterfield to JHP, 10 July 1937; Trevelyan file: Trevelyan to JHP, 22 May, 22 Oct. 1937.

¹⁵ Plumb MSS, Snow file: JHP to CPS, 30 March 1937.

¹⁶ Plumb MSS, Snow file: JHP to CPS, 25 March 1937.

the Second World War meant his own career was held up again, as he was plucked from King's, having scarcely taken up his Fellowship, to join the code breakers at Bletchley Park. Unlike the much younger Harry Hinsley, Plumb did not cut a glamorous figure, and he consolidated his reputation for being as good at making enemies as friends among his academic contemporaries. But despite his radical politics, he was also beginning to appreciate the good things of life, having been introduced to claret by his college tutor, Sydney Grose, and during his time at Bletchley, his taste for fine wine was further developed when he lodged with Anthony Rothschild.

II

By 1945, Plumb had, as he saw it, 'wasted' nearly ten years of his life, and this was something he never ceased to regret and resent, especially as younger people started catching him up. By now, he had learned how to charm and to captivate, to bully and manipulate: 'my effect on people', he admitted to Snow, in an earlier display of self-ignorant self-knowledge, 'is very odd'. But he was still not fully convinced that history was his 'true *métier*': 'I envy you your purpose', he wrote to Snow in August 1945, 'I still search for mine.'¹⁷ At the end of the war, he returned to King's, where he hoped his position might be made permanent. But with Keynes's support, Noel Annan had already been elected a fellow (and also an Apostle), and Plumb spent several anxious months before he was welcomed back to Christ's as a fellow in May 1946, at the not-exactly tender age of thirty five. As a bachelor don (he had again been engaged at Bletchley, but the relationship petered out when the code-breakers went home), he resided in what would become increasingly splendid rooms above the chapel in first court, and though he would much preferred to have stayed at King's, he became a loyal and lifelong college man. During the next twenty years, Plumb was Director of Studies in History, Tutor, Steward, Vice-Master and Wine Steward; he once came within a single vote of becoming Bursar (a strange ambition for someone whose self-image was always that of a creative writer rather than a bureaucrat); and he was a long-serving member of the College Council.

But while Plumb was abidingly grateful to Christ's for providing him with 'the rope ladder which leads from the suburbs to the stars', his temperament was ill-suited to its consensual and claustrophobic

¹⁷ Snow MSS, 166.1: JHP to CPS, 24, 29 Aug. 1945.

collegiality. 'Back in this hellish hole', he ruefully told Snow in 1952, 'I hate it.'¹⁸ Indeed, his acerbic tongue (especially at Governing Body meetings and postprandial combinations) and his scornful agnosticism (he deliberately ran his bath water to coincide with chapel evensong), made him many enemies. One such was Canon Charles Raven, who was Master from 1938 to 1950, and whom Plumb despised as a 'cheap and vulgar character': 'I'll get him and hurt him sooner or later.' A second was Lucan Pratt, the Senior Tutor, against whom Plumb waged a ferocious campaign, forcing him to resign from overseeing college admissions in 1961.¹⁹ Most importantly, there was Professor Alex Todd, who had been elected a fellow in 1944, and for half a century, Plumb and he were bitter college rivals. This was partly academic: the arts versus the sciences. It was partly political: Plumb, though no longer a Communist, remained a radical, whereas Todd was a Scots Tory. It was partly personal: for unlike Plumb, Todd was dour, apparently untroubled by doubt—and also very tall. And it was partly professional, as Todd garnered with seemingly effortless and inexorable ease all the glittering prizes that he himself aspired to win: a knighthood and a peerage (would he, Plumb wondered, take the title 'Lord Christ?'), the Nobel Prize and the Order of Merit, the Mastership of the College, the Presidency of the Royal Society, and the chancellorship of a provincial university.²⁰

While Todd spent most of his time in his university laboratory and on committees in London, Plumb became an outstanding teacher of undergraduates, and among his earliest college pupils were Rupert Hall, Eric Stokes, Neil McKendrick, John Thompson and John Burrow. By the mid 1950s, he was also supervising a succession of gifted research students, including John Kenyon, Brian Hayes, Ester Moir and Brian Hill. No historian of Plumb's generation spotted talent so unerringly, or helped launch so many brilliant and varied careers; but being mentored by Plumb was not for the squeamish, the second-rate or the faint-hearted (they were soon ruthlessly cast aside). Having learned his lessons from Howard, Plumb got under their skin, found and probed their weaknesses, tore their work to shreds, and then lavished them with fulsome praise, wrote them dazzling references, and exerted himself mightily on their

¹⁸ Snow MSS, 166.5: JHP to CPS, 11 Jan. 1952.

¹⁹ Snow MSS, 166.2: JHP to CPS, 15 Jan. 1948; 166.8, JHP to CPS [undated, c.1961].

²⁰ Snow MSS, 166.9: JHP to CPS, 10 April 1962. I have discussed the relations between JHP and Todd (and also CPS) in D. Cannadine, 'The Age of Todd, Plumb and Snow: Christ's, the "Two Cultures" and the "Corridors of Power"', in D. Reynolds (ed.), *Christ's: A Cambridge College over Five Centuries* (forthcoming, 2005).

behalf. Thus chastened, intimidated, alarmed, unsettled, stimulated, exhorted and supported, many of his protégés eventually went on to write bigger, better books than Plumb himself—something which caused him satisfaction but also, and increasingly, consternation. He liked his pupils to do well, and took real delight in their successes; but in later life, he was visibly disconcerted when some of them started doing better than he himself had done.

Plumb's election to a Christ's fellowship was accompanied by his appointment as a University Assistant Lecturer in History, and for the next twenty years he was a star performer at the podium—theatrical, witty, irreverent, iconoclastic, and drawing a large and appreciative audience—even though he endured agonies of apprehension beforehand. But he was out of sympathy with the right-wing religiosity of many of his colleagues, and in 1949 he was joined by Geoffrey Elton, who soon became as much his rival in the faculty as Todd was in the college.²¹ Both were outsiders, both were small men, both were fundamentally unhappy and insecure, and both were often abominably rude—especially to (and about) each other. For they were very different historians, who were intent on practising, preaching and promoting very different kinds of history. As a pupil of Trevelyan's, Plumb intended to write for a broad public audience, and urged his protégés to follow their own interests in whichever directions they lead. But Elton despised what he regarded as Trevelyan's patrician amateurishness, he concentrated on narrow, technical issues concerning the Tudor government and constitution, and he expected his graduate students to work on limited topics in sixteenth-century history, which would only be of interest to fellow scholars. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Plumb and Elton were constantly in competition for promotion and preferment, they clashed on appointments committees as they pushed their respective protégés hard for the same jobs, and their animosity was further intensified by the fact that Plumb bought claret, whereas Elton drank whisky.

A College Fellowship, a University Lectureship, a string of outstanding pupils: these were the foundations of Plumb's late-starting but soon to be vividly flowering academic career. 'The years are getting shorter', he had told Snow in 1948, 'and yet there is everything to be done.'²² In particular, he needed to write, though he hated waiting for the reviews to come in, and he never forgave or forgot hostile notices. Much more than

²¹ *Ei*, p. 165.

²² Snow MSS, 166.1: JHP to CPS, 1 Jan. 1948.

in the 1930s, eighteenth-century history was dominated by Namier, who was now at the height of his fame and influence in academic and government circles (Harold Macmillan was both his publisher and patron). In Cambridge, Butterfield was confident enough to criticise Namier for his lack of interest in ideology and in popular politics, for his misunderstanding of party, and for his mistaken interpretation of George III's kingly conduct.²³ But Plumb had still to make his reputation as a Hanoverian historian, in which endeavour Namier's imprimatur was by now essential, and during the early 1950s, he worked hard to obtain it. Urged on by the Master, he considered revising his thesis for publication. He undertook to edit the volumes covering the period 1688–1714 in the recently revived *History of Parliament*, Namier's grand project in his final years. He produced two technical, scholarly pieces on quintessentially Namierite subjects: the cabinet in the reign of Queen Anne and the county politics of Leicestershire. And he took every opportunity to praise Namier for the brilliance of his scholarship and for the originality of his interpretations.²⁴

Yet in 1956, he told Snow that 'I stand for something quite different to the Namier school'; and so, in a sense, he did.²⁵ The true Namierite believers imitated the great man by writing detailed accounts of short periods of political history, which paid no attention to party, ideology, or to the broader world beyond Westminster, and which made no impact on the general reading public. However much he deferred to Namier, Plumb had no intention of joining them: he decided against publishing his thesis, he withdrew from the *History of Parliament*, and in two measured but critical reviews, of books by J. B. Owen and R. W. Walcott, he expressed serious reservations about the Namierite methodology in the hands of lesser scholars.²⁶ More positively, Plumb's main concern was to write history of a high academic standard, and fully informed by recent research, which would also reach a broad general readership. His first book, part of the new *Pelican History of England*, did precisely that, surveying the century from 1714 to 1815 in twenty-four brief but arresting chapters,

²³ See the works cited above in note 11.

²⁴ Plumb MSS, History of Parliament file: JHP to Namier, 15 Nov. 1951; Namier to JHP, 9 May 1952; JHP to Namier, 5 June 1952; *Ei*, pp. 45–96; JHP, *England in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, 1950), p. 216; *id.*, *Men and Places* (London, 1963), pp. 43–66.

²⁵ Snow MSS, 166.6: JHP to CPS, 28 April 1956.

²⁶ R. W. Walcott, *English Politics in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1956); J. B. Owen, *The Rise of the Pelhams* (London, 1957); J. Brooke, *The Chatham Administration, 1766–68* (London, 1956); I. R. Christie, *The End of Lord North's Ministry, 1780–82* (London, 1958); *Ei*, pp. 100–8; Plumb MSS, History of Parliament file: JHP to Namier, 13 Feb. 1956.

which clearly owed much to his Cambridge undergraduate lectures. It was followed by his short life of *Chatham* (London, 1953), which vividly evoked his manic-depressive temperament and the triumphs and setbacks of his political career, and which provided the most compelling account of this flawed yet mesmeric figure since Macaulay's famous essay. Then came his Hogarthian group portrait of *The First Four Georges* (London, 1956): it insisted that 'the monarchy was the mainspring of political life' in the eighteenth century, and it depicted the Hanoverian sovereigns as rather commonplace men who were caught up in extraordinary circumstances.²⁷

All these books were written with a verve, brio, zest and élan that were unusual among university lecturers and professional historians, they abounded in broad panoramas and memorable vignettes, they showed real insight into people and places, they brought the past vividly alive, and they sold in considerable quantities throughout the English-speaking world and also in foreign translations. They were, in short, the very antithesis of Namierite 'technical' history, and owed much more to the Trevelyan templates of national narrative histories and sympathetic biographies. But the insight into character was all Plumb's own, and so was the scintillating style. Here he is on Walpole's ineffectual efforts to muzzle the young William Pitt: 'as well might he attempt to stop a hurricane with a hairnet'. And here he is on George III in his mad and sad old age: 'a pathetic figure in his purple dressing-gown, with his wild white beard and hair, totally blind, totally deaf, playing to himself on his harpsichord and talking, talking, of men and women long since dead'.²⁸ (Attentive readers might also have noticed the extraordinary fury of much of Plumb's language: *Chatham* is preoccupied with anger, hatred, revenge and above all *rage*, while *The First Four Georges* depicts Hanoverian England as a nation characterised throughout by violence and aggression.) At the same time, Plumb was writing essays for *History Today* and other periodicals, on subjects ranging from Chatsworth to Cecil Rhodes, Sir Robert Walpole's wine to Georgian Bath, and he was also beginning to review in the weeklies and the quality newspapers.²⁹

But his chief literary preoccupation during these years was his full-dress biography of Walpole (*Sir Robert Walpole*, vol. i, *The Making of a Statesman* (London, 1956); vol. ii, *The King's Minister* (London,

²⁷ *Ei*, p. 45; JHP, *The First Four Georges* (London, 1956), p. 10.

²⁸ JHP, *Chatham* (London, 1965 edn.), p. 13; id., *First Four Georges*, p. 146.

²⁹ Many of these essays were collected in JHP, *Men and Places*.

1960)).³⁰ The enterprise was conceived on a lavish scale, its planned three volumes owing something to Trevelyan's Garibaldi trilogy, with each of them prefaced by a panoramic survey ('Walpole's England', 'Walpole's Europe', 'Walpole's Empire') which was clearly indebted to Macaulay's *History of England*.³¹ Drawing heavily on the Cholmondeley papers at Houghton and on Archdeacon Coxe's earlier life, it was Plumb's only major work of sustained scholarly research, and he was much assisted by R. W. Ketton-Cremer (on the Norfolk background) and by Snow (on structure and organisation).³² The first volume brought Walpole to the threshold of power in 1722, and offered a major re-interpretation of his part in the South Sea Bubble, and the second traced his personal rule down to the Excise crisis of 1733, and provided new information on his building and collecting. Much of the conviction of the books derived from Plumb's close identity with his subject—the conquest of provincial obscurity, a delight in politics, patronage and manipulation, a pleasure in food and wine, pictures and porcelain, and a certain parvenu vulgarity. 'The more that I have come to know this great man', he observed, 'the stronger has my admiration grown. His imperfections were many and glaring. He loved money; he loved power; he enjoyed adulation and hated criticism. But in everything that he did, he was richly varied and intensely human.'³³

In general, the books were well received, and they attracted widespread attention. A. L. Rowse and C. V. Wedgwood praised them highly. John Owen and Richard Pares were enthused. Trevelyan (and, up to a point, Butterfield) thought they proclaimed Plumb's emergence as an historian of the first rank. Snow was ecstatic: 'it makes so many of our early hopes come true'. And Plumb himself finally felt that he had 'begun to make a bit of a reputation'.³⁴ But not everyone was impressed, and least of all those for whom it signalled an end to Plumb's involvement with tech-

³⁰ See also JHP's preliminary writings: 'Sir Robert Walpole and Christ's College', *Christ's College Magazine* (1951), pp. 4–6; 'Sir Robert Walpole and Norfolk Husbandry', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 5 (1952–53), 86–9; 'The Walpoles: Father and Son', in id. (ed.), *Studies in Social History: A Tribute to G. M. Trevelyan* (London, 1955), pp. 179–207.

³¹ J. P. Kenyon, *The History Men: The Historical Profession in England since the Renaissance* (London, 1983), p. 232.

³² W. Coxe, *Memoirs of the Life and Administration of Sir Robert Walpole*, 3 vols. (London, 1798); JHP, 'Robert Wyndham Ketton-Cremer', *Christ's College Magazine* (1970), pp. 172–3; Plumb MSS, Snow file: CPS to JHP, 27 March 1956, 2, 8 April 1956, 26 Jan. 1959.

³³ JHP, *Sir Robert Walpole*, vol. i, *The Making of a Statesman* (London, 1956), p. xiii.

³⁴ J. B. Owen, *English Historical Review*, 72 (1957), 318–31; R. Pares, *Cambridge Historical Journal*, 13 (1957), 88–91; G. M. Trevelyan, *The Sunday Times*, 30 Dec. 1956; H. Butterfield, *Time and Tide*, 7 April 1956; Plumb MSS, Snow file: CPS to JHP, 1 Jan. 1956; Snow MSS, 166.6: JHP to CPS, 10 July 1957.

nical, scholarly history. Namier's lengthy review was more précis than praise, and thereafter relations between them cooled considerably, as the acolyte turned apostate.³⁵ Romney Sedgwick thought the volumes highly derivative: *Coxe et praeterea nihil*; John Brooke summarised them as 'Macaulay with a dash of Freud'; and A. J. P. Taylor wondered why Plumb found Walpole an admirable man.³⁶ There were also more specific criticisms. Plumb provided little serious analysis of how Walpole dominated parliament or ran the Treasury, and phrases such as this were no substitute: 'his instinct directed him with the sureness of an arrow to its target—to power absolute and undivided'.³⁷ The handling of Walpole's foreign policy, and his discussion of the exceptional complexities of European diplomacy, did not commend itself to the experts. And as in much of Plumb's work, the volumes were stronger on evocation than analysis, the prose was often more scintillating than the (often torpid and monotonous) events being described, while the paragraphing and punctuation were (as in almost all his writings) idiosyncratic and erratic.³⁸

Nevertheless, the publication of these two volumes established Plumb as the leading authority on English history for the years 1660–1730, and in 1957 Cambridge awarded him a Litt.D. in recognition of his by now substantial oeuvre. Yet as Trevelyan appreciated, but Namier regretted, Plumb was in many ways, and by conscious choice, not a conventional academic historian at all. He had written only occasional learned articles for what are now termed 'refereed journals', he had refrained from publishing his pre-war Ph.D. dissertation, and he never attempted a scholarly monograph. He had little time for history's professional organisations, or for academic conferences or postgraduate seminars, or for the arcane output of university presses. He considered many of his colleagues to be dull, petty, myopic and untravelled, with limited social horizons, and with no interest in (or capacity to afford) the finer things of life—and he did not hesitate to tell them so. And although his own work concentrated in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, he was unusually widely read in other periods, cultures and civilisations, and he deplored the

³⁵ L. B. Namier, *The Spectator*, 6 April 1956; Butterfield MSS, 531: JHP to Butterfield, 6 May 1956. Namier had told Plumb 'I mean to give you all the praise you deserve'. He gave scarcely any. See Plumb MSS, History of Parliament file: Namier to JHP, 9 March 1956, 6 April 1956.

³⁶ R. Sedgwick, *The Listener*, 19 Jan. 1961; J. Brooke, *New Statesman*, 13 Jan. 1961; A. J. P. Taylor, *New Statesman*, 21 April 1956; *The Observer*, 15 Jan. 1961.

³⁷ JHP, *Sir Robert Walpole*, vol. ii, *The King's Minister* (London, 1960), p. 3; G. R. Elton, *Political History: Principles and Practice* (London, 1970), p. 35.

³⁸ H. Pitt, *Time and Tide*, 20 Jan. 1961; P. G. M. Dickson, *Oxford Magazine*, 15 June 1961; E. Hughes, *History*, 47 (1962), 76–7.

increasingly rigid demarcation lines that were growing up between political, social and economic history. He was undoubtedly (and often intimidatingly) *clever*, but as befitted a novelist manqué, it was an *intuitive* rather than an *intellectual* form of cleverness. The historian's purpose, he would later write, was 'to produce answers, in the form of concepts and generalisations, to the fundamental problems of historical change in the social activities of men'. But in his own rattling narratives and vivid evocations of character, this was something he himself rarely attempted—except once, and very successfully, and then again, but with much less happy or complete results.³⁹

As a 'literary' rather than a 'scientific' historian, Plumb scorned the Eltonian pieties which clothed mundane scholarly activity and academic hack work in the sacerdotal, pretentious and exclusive garb of truth and righteousness and virtue—and humbug. Like Trevelyan, he believed passionately in history's broader public function and deeper social purpose, and more than any writer of his generation, this gave him a powerful sense of mission and a vivid sense of *audience*. History should be written, he believed, not just (and not primarily) for fellow academics, but to educate, to enlighten, to entertain those whom Hugh Trevor-Roper once called 'the laity': in short to be an integral part of the broader national culture of the day.⁴⁰ And he further believed that history had a message which it was the historian's duty to proclaim: namely that for the majority of people living in the 'affluent society', things were getting better and better and better. History, for Plumb, spelt *progress*: material improvement, economic modernisation, social advancement, political reform, secular gain, enhanced freedom.⁴¹ Hence, in his own work, a lack of sympathy with losers, religion, tradition, nostalgia and for the practitioners of conservative politics. And hence, in a covertly aspirational and autobiographical way, his absorbing interest in the rich, the powerful and the successful—and if they had difficult temperaments (Chatham, George III), or lived well (Walpole, George IV), then so much the better.

Thus Plumb on the past; but thus, also, in many ways, Plumb on Plumb. His researches in the great Whig houses brought him into closer contact with the rich and titled whose company he relished and whose acceptance he increasingly craved. *Chatham* had been dedicated to the Rothschilds, and the first volume of *Walpole* to Lord and Lady Cholmondeley, and Plumb soon became a frequent visitor to Houghton, their stately pile in

³⁹ JHP, *The Death of the Past* (London, 1969), p. 106.

⁴⁰ H. R. Trevor-Roper, *History, Professional and Lay* (Oxford, 1957).

⁴¹ *Id.*, p. 171.

Norfolk, and to other country houses. And as his royalties increased, he bought pictures, collected silver, amassed porcelain, drove fast cars, and clad himself in stylish garb. He built up the finest private wine cellar in Cambridge, was a founder member of the Bordeaux Society, and was elected to the Saintsbury Club. And he was a fiercely competitive sailor, presiding over regular gatherings of his Cambridge protégés and Leicester friends on the Norfolk Broads. Despite his still-radical politics, he had no interest in the studied unostentation of the quiet rich. His college rooms were magnificent, he acquired an interest in a mill in the south of France, and he bought an old rectory at Westhorpe in Suffolk, where he entertained lavishly and did most of his writing. Like Snow, Plumb had come a long way from Leicester, and as his career gathered momentum, his earning power increased, and his public reputation consolidated, he became admired and envied, and an object of anecdote, gossip and speculation, in ways that few other historians were important or interesting enough to be.

Plumb first appeared in fiction in a short story by Angus Wilson entitled 'Realpolitik', and published as part of *The Wrong Set* (London, 1949). The two of them had become friends at Bletchley during the war, and Wilson depicted Plumb as John Hobday, a sparkling (and bullying) young museum director, ruthlessly weeding out the dead wood among the (increasingly worried) staff. In the following year, he was portrayed by William Cooper (who had read Natural Sciences at Christ's, became a schoolmaster at Alderman Newton's, and whose real name was Harry Hoff), in *Scenes from Provincial Life* (London, 1950). Tom (surname withheld) is a young, red-haired, Jewish accountant, who is intelligent, high-spirited, and with a formidable personality. He sees himself as 'a great understander of human nature, a great writer, a great connoisseur of the good things of life, and a great lover'—of both men and women.⁴² (Plumb himself by now seems to have settled down to intense liaisons only with men: but he was ferociously secretive—and unhappy?—about his private life.) Soon after, Cooper rendered his friend again, as the eponymous character in *The Struggles of Albert Woods* (London, 1952). Woods is humbly born in the provinces, but overcomes these obstacles to make a brilliant career as a scientist. He is also socially ambitious, in thrall to the aristocracy, and craves honours. His singular characteristics are energy, enthusiasm—and rage. And he spends his life struggling with his own temperament—and also with other people's. It was a shrewd,

⁴² W. Cooper, *Scenes from Provincial Life* (London, 1950), esp. pt. i, chs. 1 and 5; pt. iv, chs. 4 and 5.

perceptive and prescient portrait, which may explain why Plumb and Hoff subsequently fell out.⁴³

III

The 1960s were Plumb's golden decade, and in more senses than one. 'Your time is coming', Snow told him towards the beginning, 'one can smell it in the air.' 'I have a strong suspicion', Plumb agreed, 'that the tide is with us.'⁴⁴ So, indeed, it was, as the sixties seemed to offer the prospect of a brave new world, and not just in Britain, but in America too, where a revived and rejuvenated history might play a central part. The death of Namier in 1960 lifted a great weight from Plumb's shoulders, gave him the freedom and the confidence to think more imaginatively and creatively about the past, and thereafter he became much more critical of Namier in print, scorning his myopic methodology, his political conservatism, his love of tradition, and what he believed to be his veneration for Edmund Burke. Plumb had no time for what he now dismissed as this 'rubbish', and he had even less time for the Master's rigidly imitative protégés, dismissing John Brooke as a 'rat-like, poor, depressed, Ultra-Tory Namierite hack'.⁴⁵ As these remarks suggest, and notwithstanding his increasing financial and social success, Plumb's radicalism remained unabated during these years, when it was as easy for him to dislike Namier's scholarly conservatism as to deplore Macmillan's political conservatism. Indeed, when a suitable opportunity presented itself, he was happy to do both at the same time, as in one review in *The Spectator*, where he scorned both the old, faded, elite history (as practised by Namier or Elton), and its audience: 'those who had nannies, prep-schools, dorms, possess colonels and bishops for cousins, and now take tea once a year on the dead and lonely lawns of the palace'.⁴⁶

The 1960s were also the decade when Plumb's friendship with Snow reached its apogee. When Snow delivered his 'Two Cultures' lecture, dividing the world into reactionary humanists and progressive scientists, Plumb was willing to accept such a characterisation, but also encouraged his friend to consider a possible third culture, peopled by demographers,

⁴³ W. Cooper, *The Struggles of Albert Woods* (London, 1952), pt. i, chs. 1 and 2; pt. iv, ch. 5.

⁴⁴ Snow MSS, 166.7: CPS to JHP, 11 May 1960; 166.10, JHP to CPS, 11 Sept. 1963.

⁴⁵ *Ei*, pp. 10–19, 24–8, 108–12; Snow MSS, 166.7: JHP to CPS [undated, c.1961–2].

⁴⁶ JHP, *The Spectator*, 16 March 1962.

sociologists, economists, political scientists and social historians, who took a broader view of the past than Namier, and embraced a much more optimistic interpretation of the Industrial Revolution than the Marxist-pessimists.⁴⁷ When Leavis attacked Snow, in his famously vitriolic denunciation of the 'Two Cultures', Plumb rushed to his friend's defence, berating Leavis in the correspondence columns of *The Spectator* for his 'senseless diatribe', full of 'folly', 'arrogance', and 'sheer blind ignorance'. 'We must smash the influence of this man as remorselessly as we can', Plumb told Snow.⁴⁸ And when Labour won the 1964 general election, Plumb's elation knew no bounds. 'I admired Wilson throughout the campaign', he told Snow, 'and now admiration borders on idolatory.' 'The whole government', he continued, 'is moving with a pace and certainty that I never expected.' It was 1906 or 1945 all over again: a time of hope when the final defeat of the forces of tradition and obscurantism seemed at hand. Snow duly became Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Technology, and this brought Plumb for the first (and only?) time close to the corridors of power. Plumb was delighted, and urged Snow to come down to the next feast at Christ's, so he could 'rub Todd's nose in it'.⁴⁹

Throughout the sixties, Plumb enjoyed unprecedented success in the college and the faculty. He taught his most dazzling undergraduates yet, among them John Vincent, David Blackburn, Geoffrey Parker, Roy Porter, and Simon Schama; he attracted rising stars from other colleges, including Quentin Skinner, Norman Stone and Jonathan Steinberg; and the research students continued to flock in, such as John Beattie, John Money, Paul Fritz and Clive Holmes. In the faculty, he was made a Reader in 1962, given an *ad hominem* Professorship four years later, and he was a noticeably brisk chairman of the faculty board from 1966–8. (Even Elton, it was claimed, by some admiringly, by others disapprovingly, did not have time to say much.) And recognition was extended from beyond Cambridge. He delivered the Ford Lectures in Oxford in 1965, he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy three years later, and he became an Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1970. In addition, he was appointed a Syndic of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, and a Trustee of the National Portrait Gallery, appropriately following in the footsteps of Macaulay

⁴⁷ Snow MSS, 166.9: CPS to JHP, 24 May 1962; JHP to CPS, 1 July 1962, 7 Dec. 1962; 166.10: CPS to JHP, 3 Sept. 1963.

⁴⁸ JHP, *The Spectator*, 30 March 1962; Plumb MSS, Snow file: CPS to JHP, 7 March 1962; Snow MSS, 166.10, JHP to CPS [undated, c.1962].

⁴⁹ Snow MSS, 166.11: JHP to CPS, 19 Oct. 1964, 11 Nov. 1964; *Ei*, p. 190.

and Trevelyan. By now, Plumb was well on his way to becoming a minor member of Britain's 'great and the good'. But it was also in these years that he discovered America, reached a bigger audience on both sides of the Atlantic, and made his most distinctive and original contribution to writing history.

In 1960, with the encouragement of Richard Hofstadter (whom he had met in Cambridge in 1958–9), Plumb went to Columbia University in New York as a visiting professor, and he was so captivated by the place that he vainly tried to arrange to divide his time between Cambridge and Columbia thereafter. He discovered that he was better known in the USA than he had realised, he delighted that 'the committed active intellectual is a figure of respect', and he was taken up by such Kennedy supporters as Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.⁵⁰ For the rest of his life, America brought out the best in Plumb, and five of his seven honorary degrees would be awarded there. Freed from the social slights and professional rivalries of Cambridge, he became more relaxed, more buoyant, more confident, more hopeful; he admired a country which was a product of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which rewarded self-improvement and celebrated self-help, and which felt neither guilt nor resentment at fame and success; and he fell in love with New York, where he made many grand friends (eventually including Pat Moynihan, Brooke Astor and Ben Sonnenberg), and where he later had the use of an apartment high up in the Carlyle Hotel. During the next twenty years, he visited the USA at every possible opportunity, he lectured in virtually every American state, and he was much in demand as a writer. Indeed, his work was as likely to appear in the *New York Times*, the *New York Review of Books* or the *Saturday Review* on one side of the Atlantic as in *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Spectator*, or *The Observer* on the other.

Plumb's jaunty, accessible style was ideally suited to the requirements of the higher journalism, and he prided himself on writing to length and meeting deadlines. He reviewed an astonishing range and number of books—in British, European and American history—and he also wrote extensively on current affairs providing (to borrow a title from the regular column he published in the *Saturday Review*) 'historical perspectives' on contemporary events. To re-read these essays nearly forty years on is to be reminded just how unsettling the sixties were, how vividly Plumb caught the contradictions of the time, how broad were the historical

⁵⁰ Snow MSS, 166.10: JHP to CPS, 19 March 1963; JHP, *Collected Essays*, vol. ii (London, 1988) (hereafter *Eii*), pp. 180–9.

insights he brought to bear on them, and how liberal were his social and political attitudes. He deplored the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy, he admired Lyndon Johnson's 'Great Society' programme but feared the worst in Vietnam, and he was dismayed at Richard Nixon's triumph in 1968. He thought New York 'the most remarkable city built by man', 'a city to love and a city of which to be proud', and he relished its daring, its bold experimentation, and its inexhaustible capacity for self-criticism; but he also regretted its crime (he was once mugged on Brooklyn Bridge, but made more money from selling the story than he had lost at knife-point), its poverty and its violence.⁵¹ Yet he remained convinced that liberalism was triumphing on both sides of the Atlantic, that (his notion of) history had an important part to play in this advance, and that there was a greater concern with social justice, with the poor, the sick and the deprived, than ever before.

Plumb's talents were also now much sought after by publishing houses, which hoped to benefit from his unique blend of academic expertise, professional contacts, social connections and public renown. He became historical adviser to Penguin Books, European editor for Horizon, editor of the *Fontana History of Europe*, and general editor of the Hutchinson *History of Human Society*—a dazzling portfolio of appointments, which also gave him considerable powers of patronage. At Penguin, he steered a host of books into paperback by such leftish authors (shades of his own Communist past?) as Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, E. H. Carr and E. P. Thompson.⁵² At Fontana, he gave commissions to upcoming grandees such as John Hale, J. H. Elliott and Olwen Hufton, to protégés such as Geoffrey Parker and Norman Stone, and also, slightly oddly, to Geoffrey Elton, whose *Reformation Europe, 1517–1559* (London, 1963) was the most successful book in the series. And at Hutchinson, he brought a large variety of wide-ranging projects to fruition, which treated the past in a much more imaginative and inclusive way than narrow-minded Namierite or Eltonian history, among them C. R. Boxer on *The Dutch Seaborne Empire* (London, 1965) and *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire* (London, 1969), J. H. Parry on *The Spanish Seaborne Empire* (London, 1966), Donald Dudley on *The Romans* (London, 1970) and Raymond Dawson on *Imperial China* (London, 1972). Together, these series raised Plumb's profile (and his income) still further, and in the heady days of the sixties, they were avidly read, both by the general public

⁵¹ *Eii*, pp. 229–35.

⁵² E. J. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London, 2002), p. 306.

and by the unprecedented number of history undergraduates on the new and expanding university campuses on both sides of the Atlantic.

But Plumb was also busy with his own writing and publishing projects. His creative energy and intellectual curiosity were at their peak, and in a post-Namier, post-Macmillan world, he eagerly turned his attention to what seemed the much more vital and relevant issues of the sixties. What purpose could the past serve in the brave new, secular, radical, scientific, modernising world that was now coming into being on both sides of the Atlantic? And what sort of history should historians now be writing? These were pertinent questions, and Plumb had many reasons for wishing to answer them convincingly. As a student of Trevelyan's, he believed that history must be an integral component of the national culture, and thus must be sensitive to the changing national mood. As a friend of Snow's, he was anxious to make the case for history having more in common with the progressive sciences than the reactionary arts. As a supporter of Harold Wilson, he was eager to show that the study of the past could be mobilised to underwrite and validate a modernising political enterprise. And as someone who aspired to follow Trevelyan as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, he was determined to establish his position as the most publicly (and politically) engaged historian of his day.

'I've produced a lot', he told Snow in 1960, 'but I've still got, I think, another five to six years of really hard work before I break through.'⁵³ He set about realising these objectives in a clutch of influential and interconnected works. The immediate result of his involvement with American publishing was the *Horizon Book of the Renaissance* (New York, 1961), in which he brought together a remarkable array of talent (including Kenneth Clark, Jacob Bronowski, Garrett Mattingly and Hugh Trevor-Roper) to write about one of history's most remarkable eras, and himself contributed a series of linking essays on Milan, Rome, Venice and Florence. The book was his first venture outside his own area of expertise; it sold better than anything he had previously published, and made a great deal of money.⁵⁴ Two years later, he published *Men and Places* (London, 1963), the first of several volumes of collected essays, which brought together many of his most sparkling occasional pieces and reviews, on subjects as diverse as the American Revolution and Brighton Pavilion. And in 1969 he wrote a major study of Winston Churchill as an historian, which was one of the earliest and most influential reassessments of the

⁵³ Snow MSS, 166.7: JHP to CPS [undated, 1960].

⁵⁴ Plumb MSS, Trevor-Roper file: Trevor-Roper to JHP, 3 Dec. 1961.

great man which began to appear soon after his death. It opened with a *fortissimo* evocation of Blenheim Palace, it explored Churchill's passionate belief in the Whig interpretation of the English past, it stressed how he always saw himself as an historical personality and heroic figure, and it examined both his family biographies and his personal histories with a critical insight and an imaginative sympathy which remain unsurpassed.⁵⁵

By then, Plumb had already published *Crisis in the Humanities* (Harmondsworth, 1964), which he edited and introduced, and which addressed head on the question of how arts subjects might (and must) 'adjust to the educational and social needs of the modern world'. In his opening manifesto, Plumb took off from Snow's hostile characterisation (in 'The Two Cultures') of literary intellectuals as reactionary, irresponsible and self-absorbed. Dominated as they were by such people, Plumb insisted, it was small wonder the humanities were in crisis. 'They must', he urged, 'either change the image they present, adapt themselves to the needs of a society dominated by science and technology, or retreat into social triviality.' 'Old, complex, tradition-haunted societies', he went on, in a characteristically vivid and arresting turn of phrase, 'find change as difficult to make as rheumatoid arthritics to move.' 'What is needed', he concluded, in words that Snow himself could have written, 'is less reverence for tradition, and more humility towards the educational systems of those two great countries—America and Russia—which have tried to adjust their teaching to the urban industrial world of the twentieth century.'⁵⁶

As for history itself, on which Plumb also wrote the substantive chapter, the challenge was clear. For many academics (and this was clearly a hit at Namier and Elton), it was merely a self-enclosed world, an intellectual pastime, obsessed with scholarly technique and nothing else. Yet the real justification of history was its broader public purpose: to record, explain and celebrate progress, both material and intellectual, especially with reference to 'industry, technology, science'. If historians accepted their obligation to describe and explain the past in this way, and if they broadened their range of interests beyond mere narrow politics, they would give their contemporaries a greater understanding of the present, and also an increased control over the future, and their rejuvenated discipline would thus fulfill its prime social function 'in government, in administration, in all the manifold affairs of men'.⁵⁷ Here Plumb was flinging down the gauntlet, and making

⁵⁵ *Ei*, pp. 226–52.

⁵⁶ JHP, 'Introduction', in *id.* (ed.), *Crisis in the Humanities* (Harmondsworth, 1964), pp. 7–10.

⁵⁷ JHP, 'The Historian's Dilemma', in *id.*, *Crisis in the Humanities*, pp. 24–44.

a case very similar to that which E. H. Carr had recently advanced, namely that the purpose of studying history was to 'enable man to understand the society of the past, and to increase his mastery over society in the present'. It was, of course, anathema to those on the right, and to Geoffrey Elton in particular. Indeed, his *Practice of History* was as much a reply to Plumb as to Carr, denouncing his belief in history as progress, and also a guide to our own time.⁵⁸

Having sketched out a revived and relevant future for the humanities in general and for history in particular during the sixties era of white-hot Wilsonian technology, Plumb provided a specific example of how this could be done in *The Growth of Political Stability in England, 1675–1725* (London, 1967), derived from the Ford Lectures which he had given in Oxford, at the invitation of Hugh Trevor-Roper.⁵⁹ From one perspective, this was his best and most influential work of history, where he successfully sought for the only time in his career to address, define and solve a big and serious problem: how did the revolutionary England of the seventeenth century become the stable England of the eighteenth century? He had been brooding on this question ever since his days as a research student, and at one level the book represented his mature efforts to reconcile the world of party rage and strife that Trevelyan had evoked in *England Under Queen Anne* with the non-party world that Namier had found in the late 1750s.⁶⁰ In depicting pre-1714 England as a nation locked in bitter political disputes between Whigs and Tories over foreign policy, religion and the succession, he advanced a much more trenchant critique of Walcott than he had felt able to do a decade before, accusing him of 'mistaking genealogy for history'. In giving attention to the size of the electorate, and to popular protest, he cast his eye much more widely over the political scene than Namier ever did. And in stressing the success with which Walpole managed to calm and close things down, and move England towards becoming a one party (and eventually a no-party) state, he provided a more convincing historical context for situating and understanding his hero than he had been able to do in the two volumes of biography.

⁵⁸ E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 55; G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (Sydney, 1967), pp. 41–50.

⁵⁹ Plumb MSS, Trevor-Roper file: Trevor-Roper to JHP, 5 Nov. 1963. For a fuller discussion of this work, see D. Cannadine, 'Historians in the "Liberal Hour": Lawrence Stone and J. H. Plumb Re-Visited', *Historical Research*, 75 (2002), 316–54.

⁶⁰ JHP, *The Growth of Political Stability in England, 1675–1725* (London, 1967), ch. 5, is called 'The Rage of Party'.

But in addition to offering a major re-interpretation of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English history, *The Growth of Political Stability* was also a tract for the times, for its broader concern was to explore the complex relations between inertia and change in the past, and to tease out some contemporary implications. Like many sixties historians, Plumb explained change with reference to long-term social and economic forces, topped off by political action—usually leading to revolution, but just occasionally, as in this case, leading to stability. As Plumb saw it, stability did not just happen: it was not, as Namier and his friends believed, the inevitable, Burkeian result of tradition, custom, and slow evolutionary development. On the contrary, it was the outcome of deeply rooted economic and social forces, which were realised and made actual by specific political decisions, taken and implemented by particular political actors. As Plumb presented it, the achievement of stability was thus a relatively rare thing in human history (as in 1930s Mexico, 1950s Russia and 1960s France), which ought to be of interest to contemporary governments and policy makers around the world. Indeed, by globalising and universalising his case-study in this way, he was making the strongest claim for the ‘relevance’ of the past to the problems of the present.

But there was also a more explicit domestic agenda, which was simultaneously (and predictably) anti-Tory and pro-Labour. The true villains of the book were Bolingbroke’s post-1714 Tories, whom Plumb dismissed as culturally xenophobic, religiously bigoted, economically backward and politically maladroit, and as taking flight from the challenges of the present in the comforts and delusions of the past. In an oft-quoted passage, which owed more to rhetoric than detail, Plumb exulted in the demise and defeat of the forces of conservatism:

The Tory Party was destroyed, destroyed by its incompetent leadership, by the cupidity of many of its supporters, by its own internal contradictions; weakened by its virtues and lashed by events, it proved no match for Walpole; feeble, divided, lost, it failed . . . to provide an effective barrier to Walpole’s steady progress towards a single-party State. By 1727, Tories were outcasts, living on the frontiers of the political establishment; denigrated as political traitors, they were permitted little more than minor local office. By 1733, . . . Toryism as far as power politics at the centre was concerned, had become quite irrelevant.⁶¹

⁶¹ JHP, *Stability*, p. 172.

Thus the Tories in the 1720s and 1730s: perhaps also (the inference was plain) the Conservatives in the 1960s and 1970s. But while the Whigs had successfully overwhelmed the Tories, and thereby established political stability, this was far from being a happy ending. For they had thereby created what soon became an inert political culture, based on patronage and place, rather than merit and worth, which for the next two centuries, 'failed to adjust its institutions and its social system to the needs of an industrial society'. Hence, too, the nation's current difficulties. Once again, the implication could scarcely have been clearer: it was high time that these long-overdue reforms and adjustments were made, and Wilson was the man to make them.⁶²

The Growth of Political Stability was an audacious way to link Queen Anne's England with Harold Wilson's England, by solving a specific and substantive historical problem, but which also insisted that what happened in the English past was of contemporary global interest, and which simultaneously validated and reinforced a modernising domestic political agenda. Plumb regarded it as 'my best work, better than Walpole, more original and more profound', and this was the general verdict.⁶³ Among reviewers, the book was praised for introducing a new concept into historical inquiry; for specifying and solving a particular problem which, once he had defined it, seemed both obvious and crucial; for bringing clarity and recognition to a period of English history which in recent decades had been both confused and neglected; for combining an awareness of long run change with an appreciation of the importance of politics and personalities; and for making the politicians, the planners and the policy makers more aware of what a complex, problematic and unusual thing 'stability' actually was. But there were also critics, who came mostly from the right and from Oxford. Did this 'modish new look' significantly advance things beyond the 'traditional interpretation' of Trevelyan's era? Was stability suddenly brought about as a self-conscious and deliberate political act? Did patronage have the marked effect of subduing the opposition that Plumb claimed? Was it right to inflate the peaceful change of dynasty and government into a world-historical scenario about the creation of stability? And what, exactly, did 'stability' mean, how did it 'grow', and how valid was the concept?⁶⁴

⁶² See *Ei*, pp. 113–49, for further extensions (and contemporary implications) of this argument, esp. p. 149: 'Conservative forces continued to dominate English life in spite of universal suffrage. Not until 1945 did Britain have a really radical government.'

⁶³ Snow MSS, 166.12: JHP to CPS, 31 Jan. 1967.

⁶⁴ Cannadine, 'Historians in the "Liberal Hour"', 340.

These were good questions, and as such, they were also a measure of the book's stature and significance, but they would not be seriously addressed until the political and intellectual climate fundamentally changed. Meanwhile, and having demonstrated the renewed relevance of imaginatively conceived history to Wilson's white-hot world, Plumb offered some more general reflections on this subject in *The Death of the Past*, based on the Saposnekow Lectures he delivered in New York, early in 1968.⁶⁵ His aim was to outline the place and purpose of history in a society where tradition and obscurantism were (thankfully) in retreat, where secular progress was in the ascendant, and where historians must engage with 'the new scientists and technologists, the men who man or run the power stations and computer services'. For Plumb, 'the past' had been misused in earlier centuries—by religion, by genealogy, by kingly cults, by ancestor worship, by myth and legend—to sanctify elite dominance and authoritarian regimes. Such 'doom-laden', 'ghost-haunted', 'backward-looking' attitudes had resulted in 'bigotry, national vanity and class domination'. But the growth of scholarly, scientific history, combined with the transforming impact of the industrial and technological revolutions, meant a new and better society had recently come into being: urban, democratic and meritocratic, which rejected the old 'past' of custom, precedent, faith and unreason. Accordingly, the purpose of history was to speed this discredited 'past' on its way to oblivion, and to give humanity confidence in its progress and possibilities: in short, to give people 'social hope' in a 'forward-looking, scientifically-orientated' world. The past had been for the few, and was dead; but history was alive, and for the many.⁶⁶

The Death of the Past was Plumb's last systematic statement of his belief in history as progress and progress as history, and it was also an impassioned reaffirmation of his view that the subject must serve a broad public purpose and reach a broad public audience. His arguments were also buttressed by a formidable range of learning, from the ancient Middle East to imperial China, which must have owed much to his editorial work for the *History of Human Society*. But even more than with *The Growth of Political Stability*, not everyone was convinced. Those on the right (among them Herbert Butterfield and Maurice Cowling) did not share his view that the use of 'the past' to justify hierarchy, religion and inequality was necessarily bad. And there was a more general anxiety that

⁶⁵ For other sketches and elaborations of the same argument, see *Ei*, pp. 288–90, 358–62.

⁶⁶ JHP, *Death of the Past*, esp. pp. 14–17, 24–5, 42, 56–7, 65, 104–7, 142–5.

Plumb was seeking to hijack historical scholarship to underwrite a radical, democratic, secular, technological, urban, modernising agenda which not everyone shared.⁶⁷ And so, although it was widely reviewed and translated, the book was less successful than Plumb had wished. This was partly because of the limitations of the argument; but it was also because the book's quintessentially sixties brand of secular, liberal hope, for which it offered uncompromising historical validation, was already becoming out of date by the time it appeared. In Britain, there was devaluation, the end of Wilsonian optimism, and the election of Edward Heath; in the United States there were protests against the Vietnam War, the humbling of Lyndon Johnson, and the triumph of Richard Nixon; and in this changed and darker climate, *The Death of the Past* resonated much less effectively than it would earlier have done.

For Plumb, as for many on the left, the sixties had begun with unprecedented optimism, but ended much more somberly, and in his case, these political disappointments were reinforced by professional rebuffs. For his great ambition during the 1960s was to be elected to an established chair in Cambridge, and in this aspiration he was twice thwarted. In the History Faculty, no less than in his college, Plumb had offended many people, and when the opportunities presented themselves, they did not hesitate to take their revenge. He was passed over for the chair of Modern History in 1965 (which went to Charles Wilson), but this was as nothing compared to his disappointment about the Regius chair. He had hoped to get it in 1963, when on the retirement of David Knowles it had gone to Herbert Butterfield.⁶⁸ This was never a realistic expectation, but his chances were much better four years later: he was the most highly profiled historian in Cambridge; he was as well-known in America as in Britain; there was (he believed) a sympathetic government; he did everything he could to promote his case; and he enlisted Snow in his support. But in the end, it went to Owen Chadwick, who was a decade younger than Plumb (those ten 'wasted years' once again!) and his rage and disappointment knew no bounds. 'I am very sorry to see the news of the Regius', Snow wrote consolingly. 'But does it really matter much? Your books will be read for a long time, and you've made a name. What more do you really want?' For the rest of his

⁶⁷ Butterfield MSS, 241/3: draft review of *Death of the Past*; G. Leff, *History*, 56 (1971), 326–7; M. Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 394–9.

⁶⁸ Plumb MSS, Snow file: CPS to JHP, 6 March 1963, 30 April 1963, 23 Oct. 1963; Snow MSS, 166.10: JHP to CPS, 12 April 1963.

life, both personal and professional, Plumb would vainly attempt to answer that question.⁶⁹

IV

Like many sixties liberals, Plumb found the seventies an unhappy and uneasy decade, as right-wing reaction, in the shape of Heath and Nixon, was then replaced by left-wing incompetence, in the form of Wilson–Callaghan and Carter. ‘About this country’, he wrote to Snow in 1972, ‘I despair. For me, the Labour Party is in near ruins. Heath gives me goose-flesh. At times, I doubt whether I shall be able to vote at all next time.’ And his beloved America seemed no better, where campus riots, urban terrorism, soaring inflation, drug abuse and political corruption presented unprecedented ‘threats to social order and stability’.⁷⁰ Increasingly repelled by the contemporary world, Plumb sought consolation in the bosom of the very establishment he had previously taken such delight in denouncing. He was elected to Brooks’s in 1972, he was a member of the Wine Standards Board from 1973–5, and he mobilised his friends, especially Snow, in the hope of obtaining a title.⁷¹ But although his name originally appeared on Harold Wilson’s infamous ‘Lavender list’ of resignation honours in 1976, it was subsequently removed, along with that of Asa Briggs, on the grounds that they were both distinguished enough to be recognised by other prime ministers, whereas for Wilson’s (sometimes suspect) cronies, this was their last opportunity.⁷²

Instead of getting Plumb the peerage he so ardently craved, Snow bestowed on him a fictional ennoblement as Lord Ryle in his novel *In Their Wisdom* (London, 1974)—an uncharacteristic piece of Snowvian wit, this, for if there was one thing Plumb certainly knew how well to do, it was indeed to rile. Like Plumb, Ryle was a product of the provinces, and a wholly self-made man, who has travelled upwards through many layers

⁶⁹ Plumb MSS, Snow file: JHP to CPS, 8 Dec. 1967; Snow MSS, 166.16: CPS to JHP, 8 Dec. 1967.

⁷⁰ *Ei*, pp. 309–47; *Eii*, pp. 169–254; Snow MSS, 166.14: JHP to CPS [undated, c.1972]

⁷¹ JHP, ‘The World of Brooks’s’, in P. Ziegler and D. Seward (eds.), *Brooks’s: A Social History* (London, 1991), pp. 13–24; Plumb MSS, Snow file: JHP to CPS, 7 Feb. 1975, 7 June 1976; Snow MSS, 166.15: CPS to JHP, 7 Feb. 1975; JHP to CPS, 8 Feb. 1975; 166.16: JHP to CPS, 8 Jan. 1976, 13 Jan. 1977.

⁷² B. Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London, 1992), pp. 686–90; P. Ziegler, *Wilson: the Authorized Life of Lord Wilson of Rievaulx* (London, 1993), pp. 494–8.

of society. Like Plumb, he is an 'historian by trade, inquisitive by nature'. And, like Plumb again, he was also very well-off:

Comfortable professional jobs over a lifetime, but that didn't explain it all, or nearly all. Histories which had sold well, especially in America, and used as text books. Consultancies with publishers. Investments which had started early, for a poor young man.⁷³

Ryle's temperament was more equitable and less conflicted than Plumb's: but both of them, during the 1970s, were brooding on old age and worrying about national decline. Such a mood of pessimistic bitterness may also explain why, when Anthony Blunt was unmasked as a Communist and a traitor, Plumb launched a sustained and ferocious attack to expel him from the British Academy. But there was clearly more to it than that. How far did those social rebuffs of the thirties still rankle, and how far did he want to cover his own Communist (and homosexual) tracks? Even admirers of Plumb like Isaiah Berlin were appalled: 'This wasn't *odium academicum*: it was *odium personali*.'⁷⁴ But in the end, Blunt was obliged to resign, and Plumb felt vindicated.

Although he had largely given up supervising undergraduates when he became a professor, Plumb continued to lecture in the Cambridge History Faculty during the early 1970s, and to supervise graduate students. Indeed, this last generation was a vintage one, including as it did John Miller, Derek Hirst, John Brewer (who produced the most cogent critique yet of Namier's treatment of the 1760s), and Linda Colley (who exposed the severe limitations of Plumb's largely rhetorical dismissal of the post-1714 Tory Party and appreciated his 'generosity and historical verve' in supporting iconoclasm directed against himself). But he was increasingly bored with what he had earlier described as the 'time-consuming hack-work of academic life—the endless supervisions and lectures and examinations', and with no prospect of further promotion, and with many of his most gifted protégés kept out of junior appointments by Geoffrey Elton, he resigned his professorship early in 1974.⁷⁵ The faculty gave him an appropriately splendid farewell dinner, and he was not unmoved by the 'very nostalgic evening'. But he was also 'glad . . . to see the back of them', and he spent much of the remainder of the decade as a visiting

⁷³ CPS, *In Their Wisdom* (London, 1974), esp. ch. 4.

⁷⁴ M. Carter, *Anthony Blunt: His Lives* (London, 2001), pp. 491–3; K. Dover, *Marginal Comment: A Memoir* (London, 1994), pp. 212–20.

⁷⁵ *Ei*, p. 187. L. J. Colley, *In Defiance of Oligarchy: The Tory Party, 1714–60* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 8.

professor in Texas and New York, and even toyed with the idea of moving permanently to America. Meanwhile, some of his students gathered together to produce a Festschrift: *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Thought and Society in Honour of J. H. Plumb* (London, 1974). It was a dazzling line up of Christ's based historians (including Hall, Kenyon, Skinner, Burrow, Supple and Stokes), and if its remit had been extended beyond the college and beyond Britain, it could easily have been three times as big.⁷⁶

As for Plumb himself, his original intention, on reaching his sixtieth year, was to write 'two or three decent-sized books', and in this endeavour he was much encouraged by Snow.⁷⁷ But the Regius rebuff was such a blow that his creative career was ended almost as prematurely as it had been belatedly begun. The titans of his generation (Southern, Hobsbawm, and Chadwick in England, Van Woodward, Bailyn and Gay in America) were scholars (to borrow one of his own phrases) of 'elephantine stamina', who kept working and kept writing well into their seventies and eighties.⁷⁸ But having got so near the top, and having been tripped at the final hurdle, Plumb's reaction was to quit the race, leave the stadium, and give up the serious writing of history almost completely. To be sure, there was another book of essays, *In The Light of History* (London, 1972), which ranged from 'The Royal Porcelain Craze' of the eighteenth century, via historical reflections on riots, clothes and the family, to evocations of the Victorians and Edwardians.⁷⁹ But despite his claims that he was actively working on it, the third volume of *Walpole* never appeared: he did not wish to kill off his hero, and he had become increasingly aware of the shortcomings of the first two instalments. He had also intended to write a study of *The British Seaborne Empire, 1600–1800*, to accompany those by Parry (Spain) and Boxer (the Netherlands and Portugal) in his *History of Human Society*, but it was never even begun, and the whole series soon fizzled out.

Instead, he flirted for a time with a new project, the spread of leisure in eighteenth-century England: thereby putting forward a social-history concept to match the political-history concept he had propounded in

⁷⁶ Snow MSS, 166.13: JHP to CPS, 25 Aug. 1970, 6 Dec. 1973.

⁷⁷ Snow MSS, 166.13: JHP to CPS, 20 Aug. 1970.

⁷⁸ *Ei*, p. 233.

⁷⁹ Butterfield urged that it showed JHP's 'thought can lack a certain resonance . . . he is so satisfied to be in tune with prevailing trends': Butterfield MSS, 251: Draft review of *In the Light of History*, published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 Nov. 1972. In fact, by then, JHP no longer was.

The Growth of Political Stability. Social history, he had opined in his introduction to the Trevelyan Festschrift, was the field 'in which the greatest discoveries will be made in this generation', and he now seemed determined to deliver on this promise.⁸⁰ It was also, in some ways, a natural extension of his earlier work and opinions: on his discussion of prosperity and spending as long-term forces making for early-eighteenth-century political stability; on his essentially optimistic view (contra Leavis) that the Industrial Revolution had improved material life for the majority of the people; and on Walpole and the four Georges as builders and collectors. But now, he planned to face the subject head on, and produced preliminary lectures and exploratory essays on children (changing attitudes, better schooling, more books, games and toys), on the commercialisation of leisure (newspapers, libraries, novels, music, concerts, assembly rooms, shopping and theatre), and modernity (horse-breeding, dog shows, auricula cultivation, carnation growing, scientific societies and public lectures).⁸¹

Like the opening survey chapters in *Walpole* and *The First Four Georges*, these articles were vividly panoramic, and also contained much new material. But thereafter the enterprise stalled. To be sure, Plumb had always been good at setting a scene and evoking an atmosphere; but by the 1970s, social history could no longer be written on the basis of anecdote and example alone. It needed to be more rigorous, more interdisciplinary, more in touch with the burgeoning social sciences. But while he had advocated these new subjects in the sixties, Plumb had never truly mastered them. As a result, he was far from happy in dealing with long-term social and economic change; he lacked the necessary quantitative and economic skills to demonstrate why, how and when domestic demand had grown; he often confused demand with taste and fashion, and did not relate them convincingly to supply; the idea of 'social emulation' as an impulse driving demand was not properly developed; he never explained where the increased money necessary to power this process had come from; and unlike 'stability', the concepts of 'leisure', 'commercialisation' and 'modernity' were too vague to sustain the enterprise. Nor was it altogether clear how great or how irreversible were the changes he was

⁸⁰ JHP, 'Introduction', in id., *Studies in Social History*, p. xiv.

⁸¹ JHP, 'The Public, Literature and the Arts in the Eighteenth Century', in P. Fritz and D. Williams (eds.), *The Triumph of Culture: Eighteenth-Century Perspectives* (Toronto, 1972), pp. 27–48; id., *The Pursuit of Happiness: A View of Life in Georgian England* (New Haven, 1977); id., *Georgian Delights* (London, 1980); N. McKendrick, J. Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1982), pp. 265–334.

postulating. 'The gates to happiness', he concluded one of his essays, in words which well conveyed these uncertainties, 'had been opened, but only narrowly; they were not wide open for all and sundry, yet they could not, in Britain, be closed again.'⁸²

Put more positively, this meant that Plumb had sketched out a subject which was only taken up in earnest, and dealt with in a manner appropriate to its many complexities, by a later generation of scholars.⁸³ But this was not the only sense in which the enterprise was ahead of its time. At one level, Plumb's interest in horse-breeding and flower-growing might be seen as expressing his revulsion with and escape from a dismal decade characterised by Heath's three day week, and Callaghan's 'winter of discontent'. But in stressing the importance of individual consumers rather than collective producers, in emphasising 'trickle down' economics as an agent of generally enhanced prosperity, in approving of the less well off aspiring to the lifestyles of their betters, and in drawing attention to the importance of the free market, Plumb was also sketching out arguments which anticipated many of the things that Margaret Thatcher would say about Britain in the 1980s. Indeed, if Plumb had seen this project through, he would not only have completed a major lifetime scholarly oeuvre: he would also have provided significant historical validation for Thatcher, and 'Georgian go-getters', though less immediately resonant than 'Victorian values', might have become one of the slogans of her time; and his latter-day incarnation as a card-carrying Thatcherite would have been all the more credible (and all the better recognised?) as a result.

But instead of completing his leisure-commercialisation-modernity project, Plumb moved his attention higher up the social scale, from the bourgeoisie to the monarchy, and wrote the scripts for *Royal Heritage: The Story of Britain's Royal Builders and Collectors* (London, 1977), a sumptuous, seven-part television series, from medieval sovereigns to the present day, which was presented by Huw Weldon and appeared in 1977, the year of Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee. At one level, this was *The First Four Georges* writ large: with character-sketches of kings and queens, descriptions of their castles and houses, and glimpses of their pictures, furniture, books and stamps. At another, it urged that 'each society,

⁸² JHP, *Pursuit of Happiness*, p. 28. For a powerful critique of this approach, see B. Fine and E. Leopold, 'Consumerism and the Industrial Revolution', *Social History*, 15 (1990), 151–79.

⁸³ See, especially: J. Brewer and R. Porter (eds.), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1993); A. Bermingham and J. Brewer (eds.), *The Consumption of Culture, 1600–1800: Image, Object, Text* (London, 1995); J. Brewer and S. Staves (eds.), *Early Modern Conceptions of Property* (London, 1995); J. Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1997).

from the middle ages to the present time, has created an image of monarchy which has given a sense of coherence and often of purpose to the nation at large'—not quite the view of things that he had taken in his earlier, radical days.⁸⁴ At yet a third, it provided Plumb with unprecedented opportunities to socialise with the royal family and he took full advantage of them. The programmes, and the book derived from them, were highly lucrative, and they also made him better known with the general public than he had ever been before. But the division between writer and presenter meant that they lacked the unifying individual vision of Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* or Alistair Cooke's *America*, and although it had some interesting things to say about the culture of royalty over a millennium (and, sometimes, the lack of it), the series earned him little scholarly respect, and a great deal of academic envy.

By now, Plumb's days as a serious historian were over, but he had not entirely abandoned his academic interests and ambitions. He became a Trustee of the Wolfson Foundation, established the Wolfson History Prize, and ensured that a disproportionate number of his friends and protégés were awarded it. He was chairman of the Centre for East Anglian Studies at UEA from 1979 to 1982, and a member of the Council of the British Academy during the same period. He was greatly disappointed not to become its President (as with the Regius chair, the position went to Owen Chadwick), but his belligerent intransigence over the Blunt affair can hardly have helped. And so, once again, his hopes were turned back to Christ's College, where he had long since become a Life Fellow. He retained his rooms and kept his cellar, he remained on the College Council, and he continued to take an interest in the brightest history undergraduates. And he still cherished the ambition that he might become Master, even though he was only slightly younger than Lord Todd, who had been elected unopposed in 1963, and who was determined that Plumb should not succeed him. But Todd was obliged to retire in 1978, and Plumb eventually won a controversial election, fully worthy of the college in which Snow had set *The Masters*. Todd was against, doing 'everything that he decently, indeed, almost indecently, could' to stop it, the Bursar was opposed, and so was the Senior Tutor. But Plumb got there in the end. 'I don't believe', Snow told him, with a rare combination of tactfulness and

⁸⁴ J. H. Plumb, *Royal Heritage: The Story of Britain's Royal Builders and Collectors* (London, 1977), p. 10.

truthfulness, 'anyone else who had expressed his temperament so freely could have made it.'⁸⁵

As with his Professorship, the Mastership of Christ's was something Plumb had very badly wanted. But it came too late, his term of office was of short duration, he had cold feet about taking it on ('too much pectiness in a place like this'), he was often unwell, and he did not always seem to enjoy it.⁸⁶ But he threw himself wholeheartedly into what he knew must be his last appointment, chairing all the college committees, insisting on high academic standards, and raising substantial sums of money. And although it was brief, his Mastership was undeniably brilliant: the 'treasure-stuffed' Lodge, known as 'Jack's Palace', was splendidly decorated, his lavish parties delighted the undergraduates, his superb food and wine attracted his smart friends from London and New York, and he took particular pleasure in entertaining Princess Margaret ('time for another of my Cambridge jollies').⁸⁷ But he was too authoritarian for some Fellows' tastes, and once again, he aroused (and relished?) admiration and disapproval in equal proportions. As he had earlier written of Walpole, whose painting by Charles Jervas dominated the reception rooms of the lodge: 'He gloried in his power, spoke roughly if not ungenerously of others, and let the whole world know that he was master.'⁸⁸ On his retirement in 1982, Plumb was knighted, and thereafter became publicly known as 'Sir John' rather than 'Sir Jack', because, as he portentously explained, 'the royal family do not like diminutives'. But while he was glad to have been recognised at last, it was not the peerage he craved.

V

The last twenty years of Plumb's life were increasingly lonely and unhappy. By this time, with the Labour Party interminably (and almost suicidally) unelectable, he had long since abandoned his earlier left-wing beliefs, and had become an ardent admirer of Margaret Thatcher. 'There

⁸⁵ Snow MSS, 166.16: JHP to CPS, 31 Oct. 1979; Plumb MSS, Snow file: CPS to JHP, 17 Oct. 1979. Gorley Putt, the Senior Tutor, feared (Diary, 14 June 1977), 'a reign of venomous and vengeful partiality, which could make Christ's an uncomfortable home for any but his [i.e. JHP's] cronies and creatures'.

⁸⁶ Snow MSS, 166.16: JHP to CPS, 22 June 1978.

⁸⁷ Gorley Putt Diary, 11 Oct. 1978.

⁸⁸ JHP, *Walpole*, vol. ii, *The King's Minister*, p. 331.

is', he opined, when confronted by his apostasy, 'no rage [that word again!] like the rage of a convert.'⁸⁹ As a self-made provincial, who hated metropolitan condescension, who believed in hard work, self-help and wealth creation, who adored the freedom and opportunities of America, and whose work on leisure had anticipated some of her own views of the economy and society, this was not a wholly implausible re-invention. But as befitted the biographer of Walpole, Plumb also had his eye to the main chance: perhaps the hoped-for peerage might yet materialise? And so, in two volumes of collected essays, linked by an autobiographical commentary, he claimed that he had been a Thatcherite before Thatcher.⁹⁰ (He also paid off many scores against his Cambridge enemies, especially Elton and Chadwick, and reaffirmed his faith and delight in America.) But the sincerity and completeness of his convictions were widely questioned by the true-blue-rinse brigade, the books were not well received by academics, they did not appeal to the general public, they were uncharacteristically un-sure-footed in their tone and pitch, and this project, like the peerage, got no further.⁹¹

By this time, Plumb was putting most of his (still considerable) energy, and much of his (still expanding) fortune into his social life, where he hoped he might become the 'Chips' Channon of his day. (As a result, his diaries and some of his correspondence will remain closed for many a decade.) To his unconcealed delight, he had been invited to the wedding of the Prince of Wales and Lady Diana Spencer (he was a regular visitor to Althorp during the days of Raine), and even after ceasing to be Master, he still entertained Princess Margaret and her entourage in lavish style. As a single, available man, and as someone who kept a good table and now had time on his hands, Plumb was well placed to play a supporting part in the matriarchal soap opera of the House of Windsor. But it was hard and sometimes humiliating work. Sitting up into the small hours on Mustique with Princess Margaret was not an obvious way for anyone else to enjoy themselves, and he was never as fully accepted in these exalted circles as he liked to claim. 'Funny little man, Plumb', the late Lord Spencer once remarked. But he was far more in thrall to this world than anyone of his once-sceptical and radical intelligence should ever have been. Indeed, by the mid 1980s, the scion of the suburbs had trans-

⁸⁹ *New York Times*, 23 Oct. 2001.

⁹⁰ *Ei*, p. 156.

⁹¹ M. Cowling, 'The Sources of the New Right', *Encounter*, Nov. 1989, p. 8. See also two reviews of *Ei*-ii: J. P. Kenyon, *Times Literary Supplement*, 23-9 June 1989; J. C. D. Clark, *English Historical Review*, 105 (1990), 989-91.

formed himself into an almost parodic version of a crusty clubland member: deaf, purple, snobbish, choleric and reactionary—more Evelyn Waugh than Arnold Bennett. ‘Most people in old age’, one colleague correctly observed, ‘become caricatures of themselves. With predictable unpredictability, Jack has become a caricature of someone else.’

One sign of this was that the darker side of his temperament became ever more in evidence. This was partly a matter of age and ill health: minor strokes, prostate trouble, and a broken back—indignities and discomforts which he bore with stoical courage and often unappreciated fortitude. But he also came increasingly to feel that his career (to borrow one of Snow’s more ponderously knowing phrases) had never quite ‘come off’. His resentment at those ‘wasted years’ before 1945 intensified as he grew older; and he railed ever more against those in the faculty and the University who he felt had kept him down and out. He had ample justification for such views, having held real power only for two years as chairman of his Faculty Board, and for four years as Master of his college. Yet like Snow, and as his own writings on Walpole had shown, Plumb had never really understood power, or known how to get it, or quite how to wield it. He once observed that Todd hungered ‘for the trappings of power like a sex-starved adolescent for girls’.⁹² But this was a serious misjudgement: Todd, like Butterfield and Chadwick, knew exactly where it lay—in the colleges and departments of the university, and in the corridors of power in London—and he grasped it and wielded it with assurance and determination for many decades. Plumb, by contrast, thought he might achieve the same ends by entertaining Princess Margaret. ‘The way to the “Headmistress”’, he told a baffled and sceptical Roy Strong, after a right royal dinner at Brooks’s, ‘is through her sister.’ ‘Whatever is he after?’, Strong wondered. ‘Endless lunches and dinners and Princess Margaret for the weekend won’t get him anywhere.’ It was a damning, but also a very shrewd, remark.⁹³

Just occasionally, Plumb could still give reminders of his earlier buoyancy and warmth, as in *In Search of China* (Cambridge, 1986) (on porcelain: ‘Master the scholarship; never begrudge a dealer his profit’), and in *Vintage Memories* (Cambridge, 1988) (on claret: ‘Petrus is a Gothic wine, Lafite pure Palladian’), but these were no more than autobiographical vignettes.⁹⁴ His many protégés, who by now occupied senior positions in

⁹² Plumb MSS, Snow file: CPS to JHP, 26 Jan. 1955; Snow MSS, 166.9: JHP to CPS, 7 Dec. 1962.

⁹³ R. Strong, *The Roy Strong Diaries, 1967–1987* (London, 1997), p. 283. I am grateful to Sir Roy Strong for permission to quote from an unpublished entry in his diary.

⁹⁴ JHP, *In Search of China* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 13; id., *Vintage Memories* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 10.

the great universities of England and America, dedicated their books to him and rendered thanks and homage; but all too often, he seemed incapable of returning their affections. He might (like Isaiah Berlin in Oxford) have become the doyen of his faculty and his university, but the appointment of Geoffrey Elton to the Regius Chair in 1983 in succession to Owen Chadwick only increased his feelings of alienation and disappointment, to which he gave full and ill-judged vent in the first volume of his collected essays. And while he was one of the grand old men of his college, a generous benefactor to it, and a great fund-raiser for it, his implacable hostility to Lord Todd, and also to his own successor in the Mastership (whom he much disliked, and lost no opportunity to criticise), meant he was too bitter to play the part of elder statesman. 'The true creators', Plumb had opined, in his introduction to the Trevelyan Festschrift, wrote history 'to ease the ache within'; perhaps, at a deeper level, he had given up on the past because for him, the therapy had never actually worked. And how often, in these later years, did he recall the closing words of the second volume of *Walpole*: 'The future would bring the death of friends, the decline of powers, age, sickness and defeat'?⁹⁵

Plumb's sunset years were further darkened because his earlier writing on the eighteenth century became the object of intemperate attack by members of the new Thatcherite right, who questioned the sincerity of his latter-day conversion to their cause, and who never forgave him his fashionable sixties opinions. Urged on by Geoffrey Elton, and claiming to be donning the mantles of both Namier and Butterfield, the young J. C. D. Clark assailed Plumb with a ferocity that had not been seen in academe since the 'storm over the gentry' and the 'standard of living' controversies of the 1950s: for being too teleological, too whiggish, too secular; for giving insufficient attention to the church, the aristocracy and the monarchy; for over-stating the contrast between the revolutionary seventeenth and the stable eighteenth century; for failing to explain how patronage and place were the essentials of Walpolean power; and for being himself at the centre of a web of academic patronage from which others had been ruthlessly excluded.⁹⁶ There was some, though not much, truth in these charges, especially insofar as they concerned Plumb's delight in progress, disdain for religion, and his unsatisfactory treatment of Walpolean power. But even in his radical days, he had hardly been a figure to neglect

⁹⁵ JHP, 'Introduction' to *Studies in Social History*, p. xiii; id., *Walpole*, vol. ii, p. 333.

⁹⁶ J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice During the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge, 1985); id., *Revolution and Rebellion: State and Society in England in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1986).

aristocracy and monarchy (vide *The First Four Georges*), it could scarcely be denied that Stuart England was more turbulent than Hanoverian England, and Plumb had never been as invincible a patron as some imagined, least of all in Cambridge itself.⁹⁷ But like many bullies when paid back in their own coinage (Geoffrey Elton was another, when berated by David Starkey), he was visibly disconcerted by the savagery of these assaults, and was at a loss how to reply.⁹⁸

Yet at the same time that Plumb was subjected to these late-in-life attacks, and in a manner that was both indirect and ironic, his own career was now reaching its supreme culmination—not so much because of anything he himself was still doing, but rather through the endeavours and accomplishments of his most outstanding and illustrious protégés: among them Roy Porter, who was writing even more prolifically than Plumb had during the 1950s and 1960s; Simon Schama, whose best selling books, television series and New York fame eclipsed anything Plumb had ever achieved; Quentin Skinner, who was appointed to the Regius Professorship of Modern History that Plumb had vainly coveted; and Neil McKendrick, whose long tenure of the Mastership at Gonville and Caius made him a college proconsul in ways that Plumb at Christ's had never quite been. At one level, this gave Plumb enormous pleasure, triumphing over his enemies at one remove, and ensuring that his influence would live on. But he also became deeply resentful of his most successful students, who had once been his clients, but who had subsequently gone on to achieve more than he had. One protégé who fared less well was J. P. Kenyon, who in later life transferred his scholarly allegiance from Plumb to Elton, reviewed the collected essays critically, and wrote appreciatively of Jonathan Clark. Kenyon died too young in 1996, and Plumb wrote a devastating obituary in the *College Magazine*: 'a deep sense of despair . . . a journey to nowhere . . . he deserved the highest honours but he failed to reach them'.⁹⁹

As old age and infirmity took their toll, Plumb ceased to be able to travel—to his beloved New York, to France, or even to London. He sold his rectory and most of his cellar, and resigned spectacularly from the Bordeaux Society on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary dinner. Confined to the college, and ever more enraged and frustrated, he became

⁹⁷ JHP's last work on monarchy was *New Light on the Tyrant George III* (Washington, DC, 1978).

⁹⁸ Cannadine, 'Historians in the "Liberal Hour"', pp. 343–50.

⁹⁹ JHP, 'John Philip [sic] Kenyon', *Christ's College Magazine* (1996), p. 71; J. S. Morrill, 'John Philip Kenyon, 1927–96', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 101 (1999), 441–61; Plumb MSS, USA Letters File F–K, Kenyon to JHP, 1 Oct. 1988.

a high-table hazard, whom Fellows took pains to avoid, and guests encountered at their peril. But during the 1990s, he finally realised what had become his two most deeply cherished ambitions, outliving his great rivals in the college (Todd died in 1997), and in the faculty (Elton died in 1995) with ample time to spare. But these were pyrrhic victories: like so much in his life, they had come too late to give him real pleasure or satisfaction, and they carried with them inevitable intimations of his own mortality. By turns colourful and controversial, complex and conflicted, Plumb was a wholly unique and genuinely original character, sometimes splendid, generous, and irresistible, sometimes maddening, outrageous and impossible—a small man who in every other way was larger than life, and who (as he had written of Chatham, and as William Cooper had written of Albert Woods) was locked in a titanic struggle with his own temperament, in which everyone who got near him was eventually caught up, and which was never resolved, but only ended, with his death.¹⁰⁰

VI

As befitted someone so familiar with the darker side of life, who had spent many insomniac hours confronting the long and lonely reaches of the night, Plumb had brooded extensively on what he regarded as the comic-cum-cruel finality of death, and his will had been through many iterations. True to his lifelong unbelief, and to his fundamental unease with himself, he was buried at a private, secular funeral at Westhorpe in Suffolk, having expressly forbidden the presence of any guests or mourners, or the holding of a social gathering or a memorial service in the college chapel. He had no wish to give the dwindling band of his enemies an opportunity for public gloating at his demise, and he had no confidence that his remaining friends would want to mourn and mark his passing. This latter feeling was wholly genuine—and also utterly mistaken. He had made many enemies, and his greatest days were long since over: but it *had* been an extraordinary career, he had often (though not invariably) been a force for good, he had done interesting and original and important work, he had changed many people's lives for the better, and his admirers and protégés would have wished to render thanks and pay a final tribute—perhaps best expressed in these lines from

¹⁰⁰ JHP, *Chatham*, p. 157; Cooper, *Struggles of Albert Woods*, pt. iv, ch. 5.

Walpole, which bear repetition as Plumb's own epitaph: 'in everything that he did, he was richly varied and intensely human'.¹⁰¹

The true extent of Plumb's wealth, and the details of his benefactions, were awaited with the same mixture of enthusiasm, interest, expectation, anxiety, trepidation and distaste that he had so often aroused and provoked in the heady days of his power and fame. The furniture, the books, the pictures, the silver and the porcelain from his college rooms were sold at a remarkable auction held in Cambridge in May 2002. His total estate amounted to £1.4 million, which was slightly less than Lord Todd's, and substantially less than many people had expected.¹⁰² After a limited number of bequests (to friends, to his driver, and to the College staff), the residue was applied to a charitable trust, of which Christ's was to be the principal beneficiary. Plumb's darker side died with him: the rages, the rudeness, the resentment, the regrets; the life so often lived (as he had written of Namier) at odds with his own nature—and with other people's, too.¹⁰³ But his happier, sunnier, warmer, more creative, more exuberant, more expansive side lives on: in his books, which still captivate with their high-spirited prose and unexpected insights; in his students and protégés, ensconced in high positions on both sides of the Atlantic, who will never forget his unique brand of inspirational (and often intimidating) magic; in his considerable and carefully nurtured archive, which will not reveal its innermost secrets for many years to come; and most lastingly in Christ's College, which is both a poorer and a richer place without him.

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¹⁰¹ JHP, *Walpole*, vol. i, *The Making of a Statesman*, p. xiii.

¹⁰² Cheffins, Sale Catalogue, *The Sir John Plumb Collection* (Cambridge, 2002).

¹⁰³ *Ei*, p. 100.

