



DONALD COLEMAN

Donald Cuthbert Coleman 1920–1995

DONALD COLEMAN was perhaps the outstanding economic historian of the remarkable group of ex-servicemen who came to the London School of Economics in 1946, dubbed ‘the liveliest intellectual cohort of our time’,¹ which formed a band of economic historians that fanned out across the country to colonise the newly-founded Economic History Departments which were a feature of the discipline’s ascendancy in the 1950s, although he himself stayed put in London for the next two decades. As the separate Economic History Departments began to vanish in the 1980s, casualties of cuts in university finances and changes in academic fashions, Donald Coleman, by this time in Cambridge, remained the outstanding, outspoken, exponent and articulate defender of the ‘real economic history’ he had absorbed at the LSE and helped to shape and develop subsequently. He was a central, highly influential, figure in the narrative of what he felt had been the rise and decline of economic history; and in reality left behind a following of former students, and colleagues, who will undoubtedly ensure that the decline is only apparent and that the subject, adapting to trends in methodological fashion and successfully digesting what is useful from new approaches, will survive and flourish.

This economic history that he stood for, practised so productively and incisively, and defended so robustly, was transmitted by his teachers,

¹ Neil McKendrick and R. B. Outhwaite, eds., *Business Life and Public Policy: Essays in honour of D. C. Coleman* (Cambridge, 1986), Preface, p. vii. The cohort included Sidney Pollard: see *ante*, vol. 105, pp. 513–34; and also Ralph Davis, later Professor of Economic History at Leicester University, Walter Minchinton, later Professor of Economic History at Exeter University.

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above all by Jack Fisher, and was drawn straight from the founding texts of the Economic History Society. These were the guiding principles of Coleman's scholarship: no history without theory; no simply descriptive writing, which was mere antiquarianism; and also, no ideological manipulation of the evidence. On occasion, when being dismissive of both mindless story-telling and arid number-crunching, he referred to his style as being 'analytical narrative'.

I

There was, indeed, no early indication that Donald was to become an academic of any kind, let alone an economic historian. Born in January 1920, he seldom talked in later life about his father, Hugh, an income tax inspector, or his mother who was in his eyes an obstinate and irrational Christian Scientist. He spent his childhood in Walthamstow, where he learnt to despise suburbia and to defy his parents' wish to send him to boarding school, instead attending Haberdashers' Aske's School, then in Hampstead, as a dayboy, and leaving when he was 17. He then worked as an insurance clerk in the City from 1937 to 1939, and had been accepted to enrol as an evening student at LSE in October 1939, presumably to take an accountancy course, when the war swept him into the forces instead. He tried to volunteer for the RAF but was rejected because he was mildly colour-blind, and so ended up in the army, at first commissioned into the Royal Warwickshire Regiment but quite soon transferring into the Royal Artillery, serving in a Medium Regiment, where as he said he acquired a great deal of useless knowledge about 5.5-inch guns. He went to North Africa in 1943, when the 17th Medium Regiment, RA, was formed, which went with the 8th Army to Italy in early 1944, where he was an OP [observation post] officer, at times observing the fall of shot from a spotter plane. Later in 1944 his northward move in Italy was interrupted for a while when he was seconded to a unit which monitored elections in Greece. He returned to Italy in time to end the war at Vercelli, midway between Milan and Turin, where the regiment was quartered in a barracks boasting a theatre. There the first recorded instance of Donald's musical and managerial talents took place, when along with his fellow-officer David Watson he organised a revue to entertain the troops. Shortly afterwards the regiment was moved to Pesaro on the Adriatic coast, where they occupied the opera house and with Donald as director staged a bigger and better revue, which went on tour to Cattolica, Rimini, and

Milan, until demobilisation began to decimate the cast. In early 1946 they moved to the south of Naples, and Donald was appointed to manage the Hotel Tramontano in Sorrento, which was an officers' rest camp, and he went straight from there to LSE in the autumn of 1946.

II

It was with this last experience fresh in his mind that the first-year undergraduate informed his tutor, Nicky Kaldor, that he no longer needed to learn economics, having done that while running a chain of requisitioned hotels in Italy at the end of the war—that at least was what Donald the raconteur liked to tell his own students in later years, conjuring up a vision of a self-taught military Forte rapidly reviving the run-down Italian hotel industry. He later described his decision to go to university after six and a half years in the army as a 'gamble' which he took, without giving much thought to what kind of career it might lead to, because of the pure chance that he had been left a small legacy by a 'romantic great-uncle whom I had never met' and the offer of sharing a flat in Baker Street with a friend.² The B.Sc. Econ. degree, for which Coleman had enrolled, motivated as he put it by an earnest but unfocused concern with the economic and social issues of the 1930s, at that time had a compulsory first-year course including economics, international history, and economic history, with choices for specialisation to be made for the final couple of years. It seems that it was at the time of this decision that Donald, along with the rest of 'the liveliest intellectual cohort of our time', was drawn to economic history, in his case partly through the influence of the towering figures of the School's recent past, R. H. Tawney (by 1946 retired but still frequenting the Senior Common Room), and Eileen Power (who had died in 1940), and partly through the presence of the distinguished and very varied talents of the active panel of LSE economic historians of the time, T. S. Ashton, H. L. Beales, Eleanora Carus-Wilson, and A. V. Judges—who was succeeded as Reader in Economic History by F. J. Fisher in 1948. Jack Fisher, an outstanding teacher, supervisor, friend, raconteur, and critic, was to be the paramount influence on Donald's academic life, an intellectual father figure who excited the characteristic paternal effects of almost simultaneous admiration, imitation, resentment, and opposition. Donald's

² D. C. Coleman, *Dons: A Memoir of L.S.E. and Cambridge* (unpublished typescript, 1994, deposited in Cambridge University Library), chap. 2, pp. 1–2.

portrayal of Jack Fisher as ‘sardonic, witty, convivial and with a remarkable capacity for bursting pretentious bubbles’ could well have been applied to himself too.³ Thus Donald increased the stakes in his ‘gamble’ by turning his back on the more vocational alternatives of specialising in theoretical economics, applied economics, government, or accountancy, all of which, contrary to the popular image of the School at the time, were rather conventional and conservative subjects, while economic history was if not an invariably left-wing subject one which was excitingly radical and nonconformist.

So, in 1949, Donald took a brilliant first, at which point ‘no course of action other than to go on to do research seemed remotely worthwhile’⁴—although it also seemed like another reckless gamble, since research and a doctorate were not a job ticket—and no supervisor seemed possible except Jack Fisher, who steered him towards the 1660–1760 period as being untrodden territory for economic historians, and towards the economy of Kent in particular because local history furnished readily manageable Ph.D. topics and anyway ‘it had never been tackled before; the source materials were near at hand; and Kentish beer was good’.⁵ He completed his Ph.D. thesis on ‘The Economy of Kent under the Later Stuarts’ in the remarkably short time of two years, an achievement which earned him appointment to a lectureship in ‘industrial history’ at LSE in 1951. He never saw fit to publish his thesis, regarding it as an apprentice’s exercise in the techniques of historical research, but its subject matter was an important contribution to the fulfilment of Ashley’s enthusiasm for local history as the most rewarding field for the future of economic history on the grounds that ‘local history, from its very nature, is bound to be largely economic’, a line of advance being pursued in the early postwar years through several other regional studies which sought to enlist the specificity of local evidence to illuminate the more general processes of economic development.⁶ Research, in diligent transcription of seventeenth-century tax returns and port books in Chancery Lane and in ‘a succession of lucky dips into the documentary bran tub’ in the Kent County Record Office in

³ D. C. Coleman, *Dons: A Memoir of L.S.E. and Cambridge*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, chap. 2, p. 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, chap. 2, p. 9.

⁶ W. Ashley, ‘The Place of Economic History in University Studies’, *Economic History Review*, I (1927), 5. One thinks of the work of W. H. B. Court, A. H. John, W. E. Minchinton, Edward Hughes, T. C. Barker, J. R. Harris, W. H. Chaloner, J. D. Chambers and others as setting the 1950s context of a local and regional focus for economic and industrial histories.

Maidstone, was not an unrelentingly high-minded pursuit. From time to time he would be joined by Ann Childs 'and week-end country walks were taken in alleged pursuit of the long-vanished Wealden iron industry: an agreeable exercise later to be dignified with the name of industrial archaeology'.⁷

Coleman was appointed as a lecturer in 'industrial history' as part of a scheme to inject some civilising influences from the humanities into the curriculum of engineering students from Imperial College, a tall order made somewhat more attainable by his witty and racy lecturing style. The requirement to teach industrial history, as a distinct sub-branch of economic history, was the incentive to turn away from the Kentish material of his Ph.D., which in that essentially agricultural county was largely about brewing, charcoal iron, gunpowder, some textiles, and some paper, to tackle an entire manufacturing industry. The result was *The British Paper Industry, 1495–1860* (Oxford, 1958), a book which deliberately challenged the conventional idea of the industrial revolution by adopting its own technology-driven periodisation, with the adoption of the steam-driven Foudrinier paper-making machine after 1800 making virtually no impression on an output curve that moved gently but steadily upward from the adoption of water-powered rag-shredding mills at some indeterminate point in the later middle ages, but rather disappointingly with an administrative rather than an economic ending, the abolition of the paper duties in 1860, well before the wood-pulp revolution. A sceptical, irreverent, attitude to established orthodoxies was to be a hallmark of Donald's scholarship, but at the time this book was received by some with marked lack of enthusiasm or appreciation of its implications for a general re-interpretation of Britain's industrial history, Minchinton remarking rather oddly that 'the total picture produced is deficient in the attention devoted to the part played by the businessman in the evolution of the industry . . . [it is] a landscape largely without figures'.⁸ Others somewhat condescendingly recognised it as 'an excellent book of its kind', and it was left to David Eversley in *Business History* to see the penetrating and highly original nature of 'Mr Coleman's discussion of the nature of industrial change and the validity of the concept of an industrial revolution' as the wider and intellectually important implications of the study of what on the surface was a small and relatively insignificant industry

⁷ Coleman, *Dons*, chap. 2, p. 12.

⁸ W. E. Minchinton, review of *The British Paper Industry*, in the *Journal of Economic History*, 19 (1959), 432–4.

when set alongside the economic historians' staples of cotton, woollens, iron and steel, and coal.⁹

Looking back in the 1980s, Jack Fisher claimed that 'Donald became the obvious candidate for appointment to a new lectureship in industrial history that had been established at the L.S.E.', while Donald himself recalled that it was Lance Beales, in the course of one of his informal seminars in the White Horse, who suggested he should apply for the post, and that Ashton, who was on the appointing committee, had not thought of him for the job but saw no harm in his applying. In the 1950s, Fisher continued, 'when students were less cosseted than they are now [1986], teaching duties at the School were light and, in any case, the demand for industrial history was small. Donald was able therefore to concentrate on writing and editorial work and he rapidly established his reputation through his books on Banks and on the paper industry, through a stream of important articles and book reviews, [and] through his activities from 1952 to 1961 as English editor of the *Scandinavian Economic History Review*'.¹⁰ His first article, 'London Scriveners and the Estate Market in the later Seventeenth Century', had indeed been accepted by the *Economic History Review* before his appointment as a lecturer, and was published in December 1951.¹¹ The first scholarly account of the mechanisms of the early modern land market and its professional structure, this linked into H. J. Habakkuk's classic article 'English Landownership, 1680–1740',¹² and was an offshoot of Donald's work on Kent, where the financier Sir John Banks had been busily purchasing land. A full-scale book on Banks was to follow in 1963, foreshadowed by his chapter on 'Sir John Banks, Financier' in the volume of *Essays in the Economic and Social History of Tudor and Stuart England* edited by F. J. Fisher (Cambridge, 1961). The 'stream of articles' in the 1950s was developed out of the Kent thesis, with considerable further research, and featured contributions on the naval dockyards and the paper industry, with an emphasis on his interest in questions of the paramount importance of labour supply in the early modern economy in the absence of technologies or technological changes requiring appreciable amounts of fixed capital. The early culmination of this interest was his celebrated article on

⁹ D. E. C. Eversley, review in *Business History*, 1 (1958–9), 106–8.

¹⁰ F. J. Fisher in the Preface to Neil McKendrick and R. B. Outhwaite, eds., *Business Life and Public Policy* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. viii–ix. Coleman, *Dons*, chap. 2, pp. 16–17.

¹¹ D. C. Coleman, 'London Scriveners and the Estate Market in the Later Seventeenth Century', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser. IV (1951), 221–30.

¹² H. J. Habakkuk, 'English Landownership, 1680–1740', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 1st ser. X (1940), 2–17.

‘Labour in the English Economy of the Seventeenth Century’, which succinctly outlined a labour-centred model of the pre-industrial economy, with a trenchant side-swipe at ‘that misleading and cumbersome port-manteau, that unnecessary piece of historical baggage—the idea of “mercantilism”’.¹³ His analysis of the views of contemporary writers and of the content and purposes of contemporary laws and regulations on labour and wages in terms of the character of the labour-intensive, ‘backward’, economy of the seventeenth century—which he compared to the third-world economies of the twentieth century, a trick no doubt derived from talk with Jack Fisher—has stood the test of time and subsequent research—perhaps most notably the massive work of historical demography of the Cambridge Population Group, which confirmed Donald’s speculations about sixteenth- and seventeenth-century population trends. The economy which he described, with its necessarily considerable dependence on child labour because of the demographic structure, its inherent features of irregularity and seasonality of employment with long intervals of idleness, and strong leisure preferences induced by the extremely limited array of consumer goods, except for beer, on which any increased money income might be spent, was in marked contrast to the received wisdom of an economy shaped by laws and regulations which reflected adherence to some nebulous concept of a ‘mercantilist system’.

Coleman’s abrupt and provocative dismissal of ‘mercantilism’ was later somewhat softened in a more moderate and extensive statement of the case against the concept, in ‘Eli Heckscher and the Idea of Mercantilism’ in 1957, which gracefully acknowledged Heckscher’s scholarship and the great contribution his research had made to the history of economic thought, while firmly adhering to the arguments refuting the existence of any such ‘mercantilist system’. In his much-used 1977 textbook, *The Economy of England, 1450–1750*, Donald told students not to bother with mercantilism which, he explained, had

given rise to debates about its existence, nature or value as a conceptual tool. That this should have happened is not a little due to its origins in the mind of the first great systematizer of economic ideas, Adam Smith. Most of Book IV of his *Wealth of Nations* of 1776 is concerned with what he saw as the principles and practice of something which he called the ‘mercantile system’. He regarded it, in part at least, as a creation of merchants and manufacturers shaping the course of State economic action to their own ends, to the advantage of

¹³ D. C. Coleman, ‘Labour in the English Economy of the Seventeenth Century’, *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser. VIII (1956), 280–95, esp. p. 295; reprinted in E. M. Carus-Wilson, ed., *Essays in Economic History* (3 vols. 1954, 1962), 2, 291–308.

producers and the detriment of consumers. Thus born as the brain-child of an economist, the concept in its life has been abused by historians, mishandled by economists, transmuted into *Merkantilismus*, and variously paraded for praise or blame, by anyone seeking historical illustrations for the latest nostrum in political economy. Guides to the debate exist. It may now therefore be sensible to move on to consider the topic of [the State and its Impact] without further reference to mercantilism as such.¹⁴

This, only slightly modified in his 1980 article ‘Mercantilism Revisited’, remained his position, and although it has proved hard to wean undergraduates from a tendency to fall back on ‘the mercantilist system’ in their essays as a substitute for thought, the concept has irretrievably lost its intellectual respectability.¹⁵ Meanwhile in the 1950s and 1960s Coleman extended his enquiries into many aspects of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century industry, and built up an impressive expertise in the history of the early modern textile industry in particular, with a whole sequence of articles: *The Domestic System in Industry* (Historical Association, 1960); ‘Economic Problems and Policy’ (F. L. Carsten, ed., *New Cambridge Modern History*, vol. V, 1961); ‘Countryside and Industry’ (A. Cobban, ed., *The Eighteenth Century: Europe in the Age of Enlightenment*, 1969); ‘Politics and Economics in the Age of Anne’ (D. C. Coleman and A. H. John, eds., *Trade, Government and Economy in Pre-Industrial England*, 1976); *Industry in Tudor and Stuart England* (Economic History Society, 1975); ‘Growth and Decay during the Industrial Revolution: the Case of East Anglia’, *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 1967; ‘An Innovation and its Diffusion: the New Draperies’, *Economic History Review*, 1969; ‘Textile Growth’ (N. B. Harte and K. G. Ponting, eds., *Textile History and Economic History*, 1973).

The indiscriminate proliferation of ‘industrial revolutions’ in the academic literature, a label attached to thirteenth-century fulling mills, to the 1540–1640 century by Nef, to post-1868 Japan or post-1870 Germany, had also received a civilised reproof in another much reprinted article, ‘Industrial Growth and Industrial Revolutions’, an article which urged economic historians to confine the term to the classic Industrial Revolution—although Donald prudently omitted to attach any precise dates to that, since the advent of Rostow’s 1780 take-off had just taken

¹⁴ D. C. Coleman, ‘Eli Heckscher and the Idea of Mercantilism’, *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, V (1957), reprinted in James A. Gherty, ed., *Economic Thought: An Historical Anthology* (New York, 1965), and in D. C. Coleman, ed., *Revisions in Mercantilism* (1969). D. C. Coleman, *The Economy of England, 1450–1750* (Oxford, 1977), p. 173.

¹⁵ D. C. Coleman, ‘Mercantilism Revisited’, *Historical Journal*, 23 (1980), 773–91.

the edge off the conventional 1760–1860 dates—which had seen the transformation not of one industry but of an entire economy and society. Presciently, he observed that diligent number-crunching might produce an ‘index in which even the classical industrial revolution can be made if not quite to disappear at least to appear as no more than a small change in the industrial growth rate’.¹⁶ In similar vein, years later and after he had retired, Coleman rather more pointedly deflated a new concept ‘rattling around in the corridors of economic history’ in his trenchant article on ‘Proto-industrialization: A Concept Too Many’, in which this new-fangled and half-baked theory that domestic, putting-out, industry flourished in harsh mountainous regions and paved the way for the transition from feudalism to capitalism by stimulating real mechanised industrialisation was dismissed as an exercise in which ‘the familiar findings of various scholars [are] dressed up in long words and sociological finery’.¹⁷ Subjected to empirical testing the concept simply disintegrated: many industries never had a ‘putting-out’ phase; some were capitalistic from the start; many regions once prominent in ‘proto-industrial development’ never moved on, but subsequently de-industrialised and reverted to agricultural economies. It was a devastating critique, although a few proto-industrial believers refused to renounce their faith. Never one to tolerate sloppy thinking or pretentious theorising and model-building that ignored or swept aside inconvenient evidence, or overlooked the work of earlier scholars, Coleman’s critical pieces, while decisive, were always constructive and instructive, witty and readable, so that he contrived to praise the proto-industrialisers for stimulating much thought and research on early modern economies, just as he had admired Heckscher while thinking mercantilism misguided.

III

By 1958, when the arrangement with Imperial College for teaching industrial history to engineers was terminated, Donald Coleman had established a national and international reputation as a leading historian of the early modern English economy, a reputation which carried him to Yale for the

¹⁶ D. C. Coleman, ‘Industrial Growth and Industrial Revolutions’, *Economica* (1956), reprinted in Carus-Wilson, *Essays in Economic History*, 3; D. S. Landes, ed., *The Rise of Capitalism* (New York, 1965); and A. Maczak, ed., *Genoza nowozytniej Angli* (Warsaw, 1968).

¹⁷ D. C. Coleman, ‘Proto-industrialization: A Concept Too Many’, *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser. XXXVI (1983), 435–48, esp. p. 446.

1957–8 session and to a Readership in Economic History at LSE in October 1958. This had been achieved by hard work and light teaching duties, but the seven years as a lecturer had not been all research and writing. In 1950, before landing a job, he had acquired from a commercial artist friend a large third-floor flat, 90 Charing Cross Road, just north of Cambridge Circus, five minutes walk from the British Museum, ten from LSE, and twenty from Chancery Lane, with a brothel opposite which later had a fire when, Donald fondly related to students he entertained in the flat, you could smell the burning tarts. Ann Child, whose 1936 marriage had never been happy, finally separated from her husband in 1948 and married Donald in 1954. Ann carried on working for a West End solicitor for some time, and their two salaries meant that they enjoyed a life style of theatres, ballets, operas, and Soho restaurants somewhat superior to that of most university lecturers in the 1950s. The flat was remembered by generations of economic history undergraduates and graduates from LSE as a place of good talk and gossip, good wine, and bacon and eggs (sometimes more elaborate meals) always cooked by Donald. It was also, roughly between 1955 and 1959, something of an academic salon where an informal group, with a fluctuating membership that included Jack Fisher, Ralph Davis (1915–78, FBA 1973), George Holmes (1927–, FBA 1985), David Joslin (1925–70), Peter Mathias (1928–, FBA 1977), and Lawrence Stone (1919–98, FBA, Corresponding, 1983), ‘used to meet for lunch and thereafter read papers and discussed the topics in an uninhibited fashion. The meetings . . . testified to the current zeal for a subject which seemed then to have endless promise.’¹⁸ The idyll of Charing Cross Road began to fade when smitten by their American experiences Donald and Ann first of all bought a car in 1958, then a cottage at Dedham in 1959, and finally Over Hall, Cavendish, in Suffolk in 1961—using it for weekends and vacations until Soho in the 1960s lost its village atmosphere and became a sleazy tourist trap, the enthusiasm not for burning tarts but for sweeping them off the streets bringing with it ‘a dreary rash of strip joints’, so that disenchantment led Donald to quit Charing Cross Road in 1970 for a flat in Woodford, in the once-despised suburbia, conveniently en route for Cavendish. This, as he said, shifted his centre of gravity from London to Suffolk, although he resolutely claimed that it ‘in no way represented a pursuit of rural bliss’.¹⁹ Over Hall was, however, destined to become one of his absorbing occupations in later life.

¹⁸ Coleman, *Dons*, chap. 3, p. 15.

¹⁹ Coleman, *Dons*, chap. 5, p. 9.

Donald spent another thirteen years at LSE after 1958, eleven as Reader and the last two holding a personal chair as Professor of Economic History, and they were as productive, although he did not find them as enjoyable, as the previous twelve. The book on Sir John Banks came out in 1963, preceded by a chapter in Jack Fisher's collection of *Essays in the Economic and Social History of Tudor and Stuart England* in 1961; there was an unexpected article on eighteenth-century museums in 1959, and the major article on the New Draperies in 1969. This displayed his command of the technical details of the manufacturing processes and product differentiation and nomenclature of the whole range of 'old' and 'new' draperies of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century western Europe and Italy, and their adoption in some but not all of the English cloth-making regions, perhaps in such great detail that his general message about the enormous difficulties of defining and identifying 'new products' and the economic contexts that give rise to their 'invention' and conjured up consumer demand for them, necessary but commonly ignored ingredients of credible models of economic growth, was not widely noticed.²⁰ By 1969 Donald and Michael Thompson were the joint Editors of the *Economic History Review*, in which this article appeared—and he left the editorial pruning and polishing strictly to his fellow editor alone. His earlier editorial experience had been as joint English editor, with Jim Potter, an LSE friend and colleague, of the *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, the result of a chance meeting with some Swedish academics when as an undergraduate he spent a couple of months in the summer of 1952 doing some English language teaching in Sweden to earn a bit of pocket money.²¹ So when Professor Söderlund started that journal in 1953 and wished to make sure that its English was idiomatic he turned to Donald and Jim, and they acted together for the next ten years, during which Donald had occasion to make many trips to Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, and acquired a reasonable reading knowledge of Swedish. His appointment as an Editor of the *Economic History Review* in 1967 was an altogether less casual affair, and followed a period when he had served the *Review* for three years as the author of the early modern section of its annual review of periodical literature, becoming a well-known figure in the Economic History Society. He worked with Max Hartwell (Editor, 1960–8) for a year, and then Michael

²⁰ D. C. Coleman, 'An Innovation and its Diffusion: the "New Draperies"', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser. XXII (1969), 417–29.

²¹ The date is that given in Coleman, *Dons*, chap. 3, p. 16, but he was mistaken in believing that he was still an undergraduate in 1952. David Watson's recollection is that he and Donald spent two months in 1951 teaching English to some Swedish schoolteachers at Falsterbo, near Malmö.

Thompson joined him in 1968, performing as the second or 'junior' editor until he retired from the editorship in 1973. In 1968, during the 'troubles' in LSE the editors operated as the '*Review* in exile' as Donald was pleased to call it, from the History Department of Bedford College in St John's Lodge, Regent's Park. In those wonderful surroundings they hatched the new policies which converted the *Review* into a quarterly (previously it had three issues a year), and abolished the Editorial Board, a group of five elder statesmen which never met and whose advice was never sought—all articles which fell outside the editors' own fields of expertise were independently refereed, the referees being chosen ad hoc and not from the Editorial Board panel. Donald was a model editor. The reputation of the *Economic History Review* had never stood higher, and it could claim to be the leading journal in the field in which not only all aspiring economic and social historians in Britain were eager to be published, but also many from elsewhere in the English-speaking world, and many of the more ambitious European scholars as well. Jack Fisher, in a wonderfully barbed remark, said that 'There are those who believe that, under his rigorous and even autocratic editorship, the *Review* reached a level from which it has since declined.'²²

While Donald enjoyed his editorial years and was not averse to being the centre of attention at Economic History Society conferences he otherwise consistently avoided involvement in administration or in institutionalised gatherings of societies or associations, sticking firmly to the informal socialising of the pub. At the same time he was increasingly disenchanted with LSE, which for him had ceased to be an almost magical place of exciting ideas, intellectual leadership, good talk, and good companionship, and had degenerated into a place of incompetent administration, conflict between academics and bureaucrats, disruptive students, and lazy colleagues. There were student riots in the School in 1968, ostensibly over the iron security gates which radical students claimed were turning the building into a prison or a fortress, confrontations which Donald put down to poor management. He had detected increasing alienation of staff from students in the 1960s, for which he blamed the administration's policy of allowing lecturers to opt out of first-year teaching and making promotion entirely dependent on publications, sending off a blistering letter in 1965 denouncing the School's rulers for deliberately disparaging the prime purpose of university teaching.²³ In turn, he alienated the School's Director by daring to write to *The Times*

²² Fisher in Preface to McKendrick and Outhwaite, eds., *Business Life and Public Policy*, p. ix.

²³ Coleman, *Dons*, chap. 4, p. 6.

without seeking permission;²⁴ he quarrelled rather publicly with the School's Librarian; and he became disillusioned with the lack of leadership and downright incompetence of his mentor, Jack Fisher, as nominal convenor of the Economic History Department. It was therefore without regrets that he took the chance of quitting LSE in 1971 for Cambridge, having twice before turned down attempts to lure him there, in 1956 and 1962—the second attempt underwrote his threat to resign his Readership at LSE over the Library issue—by accepting the offer of the Chair in Economic History at Cambridge, unexpectedly vacated by the sudden death of the forty-five year old David Joslin in October 1970.

The following year, 1972, he was elected to the British Academy, and although he characteristically mocked himself for consenting to join the great and the good of the academic establishment he actually greatly appreciated this recognition, and he rapidly became a warm supporter of the Academy. He served as Chairman of Section 9, as it then was (the Economists and Economic Historians), from 1982 to 1986, and as Chairman of the Records of Social and Economic History Committee, 1977–90, having joined that committee in 1975. This project, for publishing expertly edited editions of original sources, fitted neatly with his methodological empiricism and emphasis on the historian's commitment to documentary evidence, and it was especially appropriate that he was instrumental in securing the Josselin Diary (ed. Alan Macfarlane) for the New Series, a volume which has been the best-seller of the whole series. In all a dozen volumes were published under his chairmanship.

IV

The University of London, and LSE, had already recognised Donald Coleman's increasing stature by conferring on him the personal title of Professor of Economic History in 1969. In spite of his strained relations with the School's authorities, and his consistent refusal to join either academic cabals or committees, this recognition could hardly have been denied, because the 1960s had seen his 'spectacular rise to eminence as a business historian'.²⁵ The rise was, in fact, less unexpected than this remark implied, since it was based on the twin foundations of Donald's

²⁴ *The Times*, 4 Feb. 1959. The letter was about a tendentious opinion poll on the nationalisation of the steel industry; see Coleman, *Dons*, chap. 4, p. 10.

²⁵ Fisher in Preface to McKendrick and Outhwaite, *Business Life and Public Policy*, p. ix.

expertise in textile history, and his interest in the long-term processes of industrialisation, which dated back to the early years of his career. His first stab at questioning the orthodox version of the 'classic' Industrial Revolution had been in his history of the paper industry, and concern with the Industrial Revolution provided one of the organising themes of his text-book *The Economy of England, 1450–1750* (Oxford, 1977), which was to see in what ways political, social and intellectual, agrarian, commercial and industrial change in England produced a 'divergence' from the experience of other European countries which led to industrialisation beginning in England in the eighteenth century rather than elsewhere in Europe. He found it mainly in the build-up of disposable income, rising agricultural productivity, the growth of extra-European trade, increasing levels of economic activity in the Midlands and North of England—'a moving frontier of the internal economy'²⁶—with more buoyant levels of demand, a greater urban and non-agricultural population, and more diverse manufacturing industry. In short the book explored the apprenticeship to the Industrial Revolution.

Although a declared empiricist and dedicated to empirical research in documentary sources he had deep knowledge of the conceptual debates which had encompassed all discussions of industrialisation as an historical phenomenon and was widely read in the relevant continental scholarship. All the items in his principal collection of articles, published in 1992 under the title *Myth, History and the Industrial Revolution* (Hambleton Press) . . . 'hinged upon "one historical phenomenon"'.²⁷ The first eponymous essay is the most perceptive study in English of the historiography of the Industrial Revolution.²⁸ He used historiographical analysis as a means of explaining the ways in which different interpretations, embodying widely different concepts—some explicit others much less articulated—lay hidden behind the same terminology, inviting confusion when their implications were revealed. One of his principal objections to 'proto-industrialisation' theory was that it brought such conceptual confusion, as he saw it, to the pre-eighteenth century debate ('industrialisation before industrialisation'), while so much use of the same term had added to terminological and conceptual confusion both chronologically and in different contexts—the industrial revolution 'of the late bronze age', that of the thirteenth century, of the period 1540–1640, the second,

²⁶ D. C. Coleman, *The Economy of England, 1450–1750* (Oxford, 1977), p. 199.

²⁷ D. C. Coleman, *Myth, History and the Industrial Revolution* (1992), p. xi. [hereafter *MHIR*]

²⁸ First published, in briefer format, by the University of London in 1989 as the Creighton Trust Lecture of 1989.

and subsequent industrial revolutions *et al.*—their profusion flourishing in inverse proportion to their conceptual specification. Popularising the term spelled ‘dangerous multiplicity’. This was, at heart, a vigorous defence of the empirical and historiographical identity of the English Industrial Revolution.

The depth of reading into these debates brought home many ironies. Continental romanticist thought and nineteenth-century Marxist scholarship had embodied the notion whilst it remained ‘obstinately absent in the country which experienced the phenomenon’ until the 1880s. This stubborn English refusal to hitch the reality of what was happening in Britain to any scheme of teleological historicism—least of all German—was then overborne by the sensitivities of social conscience and the eventual absorption of continental Marxist thought when legitimised through Fabian socialism and the Labour Party. This was the Industrial Revolution as social disaster. But irony piled on irony; paradox on paradox. Only when the industries upon which the Industrial Revolution had been based were collapsing did the interpretation swing from catastrophe to achievement. And the final irony—which Donald Coleman took grim satisfaction in stressing—was that the Industrial Revolution became an icon of ‘collective, organised, commercialised nostalgia for the imagined past’. In the ultimate humiliating takeover it passed into the hands of the heritage business—its obsequies attended by ‘cohorts of steam-railway buffs, canal restorers, cotton-mill conservers, industrial archaeologists and tourists galore . . .’²⁹ Here is Donald Coleman in his most stringent and trenchant mode, enjoying the demythologising of false gods and uncritical beliefs which had entered the pantheon of popular belief with historical fashion. He also had withering scorn for more recent attempts to promote an enterprise culture by invoking the ‘values’ of the Industrial Revolution and the myth of Adam Smith’s supposedly unequivocal support of the free-market.³⁰

Donald Coleman’s own beliefs were sometimes less prominent than his castigations of false nostrums offered by others. But the essence was clear, both in his general statements and writ large in his monographs in industrial history. ‘On its technical side’, he wrote, ‘the industrial revolution was the first major and large-scale success in man’s efforts to apply his growing mastery of natural forces to economic production. It

²⁹ *MHIR*, p. 32.

³⁰ D. C. Coleman, ‘Adam Smith, Businessman and the Mercantile System in England’, *History of European Ideas*, IX (1988), 161–70; *MHIR*, chap. 7, esp. pp. 162–3.

transformed this country in a way in which no country had ever before been transformed . . .³¹ Much of the historiographical confusion lay in the fact that the concept of the Industrial Revolution was strictly speaking a metaphor for a complexity not otherwise describable. While sectors of the whole could be measured the totality had ‘unmeasurable qualities’ far beyond the component parts.³²

Despite an inescapable degree of subjectivity involved in interpreting the past in our own way—hence the attention he always paid to historiography—solid foundations were possible. The nature and extent of the subjectivity had to be contained within the bounds of ‘. . . an accepted scholarly discipline, controlling accuracy and consistency, the critical use of research and the presentation of results’.³³ Beyond exposing absurdities, pretensions, and uncritical single-cause assertions historical research pursued the ‘far more important goal of incorporating contemporary perceptions into the framework of retrospective analysis’.³⁴ And there were objective, testable conclusions to be drawn from the English ‘classical’ Industrial Revolution. Here, Donald Coleman affirmed the positive case: he was in the canon of T. S. Ashton at the LSE rather than the more sceptical F. J. Fisher (whose student he was). ‘In a context of unprecedented population growth’, he wrote, ‘. . . in spite of the dislocation of labour which it involved, in spite of the hardship to many, a vast amount of far more regular employment came into being in the course of the nineteenth century than had ever been known amongst the unemployed masses of the pre-industrial world. New jobs came into being, new categories of employment opened up, new skills replaced old skills. The skilled mechanic did not “survive” the industrial revolution, he was created by it.’³⁵

In his view social and intellectual changes were integral to the transformation—a ‘vital conjunction of changes in which population growth, large-scale and extensive industrial investment and the remarkably pervasive effects of the application of science to industry’.³⁶ With his work on the paper industry and Courtaulds over the very long term he was in a strategic position to make these judgements. To this was added a

³¹ D. C. Coleman, ‘Industrial Growth and Industrial Revolutions’, *Economica*, ns XXIII (1956), 1–22; reprinted in *MHIR*, p. 61.

³² *MHIR*, p. 42.

³³ *MHIR*, p. 40.

³⁴ *MHIR*, p. 41.

³⁵ *MHIR*, p. 60.

³⁶ *MHIR*, p. 61.

particular interest in the role of government and war in stimulating 'new' industries, which he explored in a detailed case-history of the development of nitro-cellulose and cellulose acetate for aircraft 'dope' at the time of the First World War. ('War Demand and Industrial Supply' in J. M. Winter (ed.) *War and Economic Development*, Cambridge, 1975).

V

Donald Coleman's expertise in textile history led to an invitation from Frank Kearnton, Chairman of Courtaulds, to write the history of the business, envisaged on a large scale with all the expectations of professional research—for publication, 'warts and all'. Commissioned publications in business history, a large genre, fall into two sharply polarised groups: the very large number of glossy centenary volumes (excoriated by Donald Coleman himself at his most virulent—as being read only by other business historians and the occasional executive of the firm looking to see if there were any possible grounds for a libel action.) Too many were useful to scholars only for some piece-meal data or picturesque detail, being devoid of analytical context. On the other side stood a small group of serious works of scholarship by historians worthy of their profession. Fortunately their number has grown since the Courtauld history. This began in 1961/2, two volumes (to 1941) being published in 1969 and the third (1941–65) in 1980. They at once put Donald Coleman at the head of this select band for a feat of scholarship as impressive in its own field as the business which it recorded. Only Charles Wilson's *History of Unilever* (2 vols. 1954) was a comparable predecessor—and this was less documented and analytical—with a comparable immediate successor, W. J. Reader's *History of ICI* (2 volumes, 1970, 1975). Courtauld's history stood out, and still does. Courtaulds offered splendid opportunities to the historian because it embodied in microcosm the wider evolution of industry and business world-wide: from local family firm to the professionally managed multinational company; from London silversmiths to East Anglian silk-makers and then from silk to rayon and a succession of new artificial fibres. Courtaulds were typical entrepreneurs of the Industrial Revolution in a non-typical English industry—the protected, undercut, always import-threatened silk industry challenged by cotton, languishing in East Anglia but with Courtaulds prospering against the wind of the time by concentrating on the safest and most uniform mass upper-class market in silk—mourning crapes. When the firm took the English rights

for viscose in 1904 the basis was laid for its transformation into an international giant. This was the crucial move to the unlimited horizons of low-cost artificial silk as the luxury of the rich became the necessity of the poor. A traditional textile firm was transformed into an international manufacturing chemical business, conjured into existence on the basis of a modern technology remote from any conscious search for a substitute fibre. From this point Courtaulds entered a world of international consortia in viscose and cellulose acetate, leading patent negotiations in the world market, forging international market-sharing agreements as the concomitant of marketing international patent rights, and setting up manufacturing plants in France, Germany, Italy, and the United States (from 1909).

All this was delineated with magisterial authority in the three large volumes. It was, indeed, an objective, quantified, and critical history. As a condition of accepting the invitation Donald Coleman had access to all the internal and surviving family documentation and exercised his freedom vigorously—setting out clearly, for example, the inter-war international cartel arrangements and the monopoly profits in the great rayon boom of the 1920s. He ‘commented and quoted . . . with perfect freedom . . . in so far as the laws of libel permitted and with an unwillingness to cause gratuitous offence . . .’. This assertion was made of the final volume (for 1941–65) where many executives in the bruising battle of the ICI takeover were still very much alive. ‘Some of my judgements’, was the mild comment, ‘may not be very agreeable to some people.’ The point went to the heart of the issue: ‘If business history is to lay claim to serious regard it must include analysis of loss as well as gain, of mistakes as well as victories.’³⁷

At the root of long-term business success, he saw human effort. It was fashionable at the time the book was being written to decry ‘entrepreneurship’, excluded almost by definition from a perfectly competitive economy (as current neo-classical theory assumed), but to those seeking to understand enterprise in the real world it was different. ‘The entrepreneur’, concluded Donald Coleman, ‘having been exorcised by abstractions, has reappeared through the back door. He insists upon intruding into the model.’³⁸

In the long-running debate over the failings in the British economy after 1850, especially over the issue of ‘entrepreneurship’, Donald

³⁷ D. C. Coleman, *Courtaulds*, vol. 3 (Oxford, 1980), pp. v–vii.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

Coleman's principal contribution was his seminal article 'Gentlemen and Players', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. XXVI (1973), pp. 92–112. This brought social and cultural influences, discounted by many relative to 'real' economic variables, back to centre stage as one cause of weak management in British business. Social advancement, he argued, had always been a driving motive in society (before, during, and subsequent to the Industrial Revolution) and the oldest social division was that which distinguished gentility from the common people. The Industrial Revolution had been driven by 'those who were not gentlemen' but subsequently business and industrial leaders succumbed to the values of the surviving elite and 'too many of the revolutionaries became too busy becoming gentlemen'. The rehabilitated public-school ethos (confirmed for those who went on to the ancient universities) produced a 'gentlemanly club' style in many boardrooms—illustrated by an analysis of the Courtauld directorate. Not the least weakness of this sectional English (and only English, he emphasised, not British) culture was the absence of a scientific tradition, expressed in the absence of science in the education received by the English elite. This was a recurrent theme for Donald Coleman. Thus a fatal link was forged between the 'educated amateur' and the 'practical man' which excluded professionalisation for the elite, with dire consequences. Of its nature this thesis is difficult to quantify, but the case was argued critically, yet strongly, with a long historiographical excursus into the concept of the gentleman. With the subsequent growth of interest in 'business culture' the issues put forward in 'Gentlemen and Players' remain on the agenda.

Donald Coleman's wide interface with business and businessmen—as author, adviser, assessor, and arbitrator—brought potential conflicts of loyalties. Much of his personal character is revealed in the respect (if not always the affection) he won from all parties. An adviser or arbitrator has to make judgements between or against fellow academics yet maintain their confidence. This is a common predicament, or course, for senior academics but the interface between academe and business has its special sensitivities. As an author he maintained academic independence and professional objectivity against company opinion but yet kept the goodwill of those in charge of the business. This was particularly the case with volume three of Courtaulds but the same principles governed his work as adviser to British Petroleum, British Rail, the Brewers Society, Schrodgers and other firms who had commissioned histories from academic historians. The respect of businessmen was won in the first instance by their awareness of his high status in his own world but then confirmed by their direct experience

of his professional judgement and personal style. It was a matter of their perception of him and his of them. He was intensely interested in the practical and financial world of his day and sympathetic in principle to all manner of those who made it work. This was an important basis of his own perception: he had respect for achievement and admired success attained through hard work, commitment, intelligence, and insight—meritocratic success. He appreciated and was appreciated by the more reflective leading businessmen he encountered—such as Arthur Knight, Frank Kearton, David Steel, and Peter Walters. Perhaps he felt that his own talents might have won him advancement in the business world and that he might have enjoyed success there—as he had done in the army.

VI

The qualities he respected in others Donald exemplified himself. He was against privilege (unless privilege had been won by effort and merit); he was against posturing and pomposity in whatever manifestations: social, aesthetic or political, and in matters academic, intellectual or methodological. He was his own master when identifying what he thought was flummery or pretentiousness and without reticence in saying so. Up to the limit of what *he* decided was an objective judgement he was outspoken in his views. He did not pull punches, whether for reasons of sentiment, a misguided (in his view) sense of obligation or loyalty or historical continuity or personal friendship: he gave his views and explained them without fear or favour. Given this lack of reticence personal friendships were often conditional upon his opinions. He was an implacable opponent of any lack of professional standards, casualness or mystification which obscured objective judgement. He treated his colleagues (and superiors) on a par with others. He had a long memory, he was not particularly forgiving and hence created a reputation as a strong—if not a hard—man of astringent, acerbic views, forthright, sometimes over-resonant, and on occasion pompous in style but never in content. He was always willing to have these exacting standards applied to his own work and actions. Yet there was also personal sensitivity and sentiment present, if seldom revealed in a public stance. He earned the unremitting loyalty and the affection of his research students. Those able to earn his respect, even if not matching his standards, were fortunate in the warmth of his response.

With both work at LSE and life in London losing their attractions Donald Coleman's move to the chair in Cambridge and to a Professorial

Fellowship at Pembroke College brought greater professional and personal satisfaction. Life in Cavendish, at his spacious old vicarage and handsome garden became increasingly congenial—‘Cavendish-les-deux églises’ as Negley Harte dubbed it. Here was the right ambience for entertaining friends and colleagues (Donald, as in London, always cooking the meals). The cellar remained ample; his large collection of records, tapes and discs produced at will the music he loved. He worked enthusiastically until almost the end in the garden bringing nature to heel. Rufus, the inscrutable large ginger cat of immense age, known to so many economic historians, needed solace. Donald mellowed in this context, becoming more relaxed, showing kindness and generosity to all his visitors, devoted in his caring for Ann as she became more frail, and more generous even in his judgements of the failings of others. Being a Fellow of Pembroke he found more congenial than being a professor in the university and, until his final illness, he was increasingly drawn into the life of the college, particularly drawn to groups of the younger fellows, as they were to him.

He took early retirement from the Chair in 1981 (but not from his fellowship). Undergraduate teaching was becoming more tedious and lecturing a painful duty which he saw no reason to endure further. By contrast, Cavendish offered greater delights, the greatest of which professionally was the opportunity of working uninterruptedly in his upstairs study encompassed by his library. Ann, as always, undertook his secretarial work. He was not to be tempted into becoming chairman of the History Faculty Board, as he had previously declined the nomination of the Presidency of the Economic History Society—some disenchantment had spread there also. Nor did he agree to become a candidate for the headship of a Cambridge college.

Already in his inaugural lecture at Cambridge in 1972 he showed his disquiet over ‘What has happened to Economic History?’ (the title of the lecture), giving a statistical demonstration of the rise and fall of its popularity as a school and undergraduate subject since 1945, and attributing its declining appeal to the then recent fashion for reducing all economic history to the sophisticated number-crunching of the econometric historians and their mathematical models borrowed from economics.³⁹ In 1987 he elaborated on this theme with his history of economic history, *History and the Economic Past. An account of the Rise and Decline of Economic History in Britain*. A dispassionate analytical narrative of the founding fathers of economic history as a distinct discipline, this progressed into a

³⁹ D. C. Coleman, *What has happened to Economic History?* (Cambridge, 1972), esp. p. 27.

passionate exposure of what Donald saw as its decline from the point at which Lawrence Stone had announced a return to narrative history in 1970, the econometricians attempted a quantitative take-over of the subject, and the craze for social history captured many journals and university departments, a subject which had become 'a meaningless catch-all term' embracing labour history, demographic history, psycho-history, family history, women's history, magic history, mentalités, crowds, sports, crime, literacy, and children, and offering exciting and seductive articles on witchcraft, musical taste, menstruation, and rituals, in contrast to the 'unexciting offerings typically to be found in the pages of the *Economic History Review*'. Disillusionment with the Economic History Society, whose 'annual conferences long resembled little more than festive gatherings of the clan' and whose 'aura of Pangloss' had stifled intellectual thrust and innovation, was coupled with disillusion with his own achievement in business history, which had come to seem pointless because economists took no interest in business history and business schools largely ignored the growing body of scholarly histories of individual businesses.⁴⁰ Maybe this pessimistic assessment was no more than a case of old men remembering a golden past and regretting the shortcomings of the present, but it was a sad set of reflections on which to sign off. The sense of gloom may have passed, for in 1992 Coleman concluded a long review article on 'New Business History for Old' by claiming that 'there is hope for a more promising future in Britain for this very important subject, building upon a combination of conceptual analysis and archival research', a confident restatement of his abiding definition of serious historical work.⁴¹

His firm academic priority was to write, while responding to invitations to help and advise. He remained always accessible to his research students and kept their unswerving loyalty. His own commitment to the Pasold Fund for textile history continued until two years before his death, being Governor from 1977 and Chairman from 1985 to 1993. He spent some of his final year in reading Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, his choice of the Pasold Fund's presentation to him in thanks for his services to the Fund. 'I can enjoy to the full', he wrote of Gibbon, 'its remarkable mixture of wit, irony, clarity and percipience which regularly brings pretentious humbug tumbling to the ground. It is not too difficult

⁴⁰ D. C. Coleman, *History and the Economic Past. An account of the Rise and Decline of Economic History in Britain* (Oxford, 1987), esp. pp. 110, 114, 117, 140, 145.

⁴¹ D. C. Coleman, 'New Business History for Old?' *Historical Journal*, 35 (1992), pp. 239–44.

to think of some suitable cases for the Gibbonian treatment today.⁴² In Donald's time he had himself been a fine dispenser of the Gibbonian treatment. His productivity was remarkable. Apart from the many books and shorter pieces cited in this memoir he had published 8 detailed survey articles and 61 book reviews by 1984. Twenty of these reviews, 13 of the 27 articles, and 4 of the surveys appeared in the *Economic History Review*. There is a full bibliography of his publications before 1986 in *Business Life and Public Policy* (Cambridge, 1986). He died from cancer after a long painful illness on 3 September 1995.

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Note. This text incorporates many comments and written observations about Donald Coleman by himself, and by his friends and colleagues. Coleman wrote a book-length autobiographical piece, *Dons: A Memoir of L.S.E. and Cambridge* in 1994, now deposited in Cambridge University Library. His fellow-gunner, David Watson (who by chance later came to live near him in Glemsford) provided information on the war years, 1943–5. Amongst his academic friends and colleagues who have provided material are: Negley Harte obituary in the *Independent*, 9 September 1995 and in *Textile History*, 27(2), 1996, pp. 127–31; entry in *Who's Who*; contributions read at the memorial service in the chapel of Pembroke College, Cambridge on 3 February 1996 by Julian Hoppit, Peter Mathias, Clive Trebilcock, Daniel Waley, Oliver Westall, Richard Wilson; N. McKendrick, and R. B. Outhwaite, editorial preface in *Business Life and Public Policy: Essays in Honour of D. C. Coleman* (Cambridge, 1986).

⁴² Quoted in Negley Harte, 'Professor Donald Coleman: An Appreciation', *Textile History*, 27 (1996), 131.

