



ROY PORTER

Wellcome Library, London

Roy Sydney Porter

1946–2002

I

WHEN ROY PORTER DIED on 4 March 2002, he had been recognised as an original, prolific and influential historian for a considerable time. He had been preternaturally productive for about three decades; in addition to his numerous and diverse writings, he was a frequent broadcaster and public speaker. Many people knew about him, his writings and ideas far beyond the confines of academia. He was both public historian and public intellectual. Roy worked prodigiously and with a special kind of energy. Since he published so much, it is tempting to list his achievements and to stress the sheer volume of work he produced. But to do so would miss the defining features of the man and of his legacy. In assessing his impact and paying just regard to his ideas and their influence, it is necessary to grasp the drives that lay behind this extraordinary and inspiring man. In writing this memoir I have had in mind those features of his life and work that seem to me to have been most fundamental; they provide the threads that were woven into his existence. I am thinking especially of his work ethic, his dedication to his students, his energy, his attachment to his roots, his capacity to bring people together, to positively exude encouragement and to embrace the tawdry, ugly and desperate parts of humanity's past as well as its more elegant and elevated manifestations.

The broad contours of Roy Porter's life are familiar. Born on 31 December 1946, his early days are briefly sketched, and in moving terms, in his Preface to *London: a Social History* (1994). From a modest working-class background, he was admitted to Christ's College, Cambridge in 1965, and

joined the talented group of historians for whom Jack Plumb was a powerful patron. A stellar student, he stayed in Cambridge for fourteen years, the last seven as Director of Studies in History at Churchill College. The second part of his career, between 1979 and 2001, was spent in his beloved London, at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, which no longer exists in the form he knew it. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1994. When he died he had recently loosened his ties to the Wellcome, not least to spend more time with his adored fifth wife, Natsu Hattori, whom he acknowledged as the love of his life in book dedications. An only child, who was utterly devoted to his parents—his mother survived him—Roy did not himself have any children.

Roy's career was indeed meteoric; for example, he became editor of the major journal *History of Science* while still in his twenties, a post he discharged with distinction and held for an astonishing twenty-nine years.¹ In undertaking such duties, Roy was efficient, imaginative and affable, as he was in the numerous projects he had on the go at any given moment. Many of these were collaborations; like the men of the Enlightenment he wrote about with notable compassion, he believed in betterment through cooperation. In 1982 he published a spirited, readable and influential volume on the eighteenth century in the Penguin Social History of England series.² It depicts a dynamic, exuberant period, qualities that he himself manifested. His success was possible thanks to a happy blend of exceptional energy, high intelligence, lively writing, strong curiosity and a honed instinct for attractive, timely subjects.

II

Roy's approach to history and to his professional life, like his awesome productivity, may be understood in terms of deeply felt values. Roy was a worker, who believed in the importance of academic labour, and felt little tolerance towards those who, in his view, had failed to grasp the value of honest, hard toil. He loved life in all its variety, chaos, confusion and richness. He believed it was the task of historians to embrace these qualities, to recast the past in a form that could be grasped by readers without losing its complexity and vitality. Roy believed in generosity as a guiding princi-

¹ *History of Science*, 41 (2003) part 3, number 133 is *In memoriam Roy Porter*.

² Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, 1982); a revised edition appeared in 1990.

ple of life in general and of academic life in particular. He was the master of a number of kinds of generosity. Early in his career he gave many wonderful parties, bringing people together and generally dispensing good cheer, along with food and drink. Thus he was as much cook and nurturer as intellectual and communicator. Roy was perpetually urging people to meet each other and exchange ideas, and bursting with lists of names drawn from his encyclopaedic memory. He wanted to give opportunities to others, to encourage them, to foster their writing, speaking and publishing activities. We should, he made clear, simply get on with it, in a pulling up socks kind of way. Self-pity was not indulged. Roy strove to see the best in others, was keen to collaborate, to give feedback on work, to spread goodwill and, if at all possible, to please others. From the beginning, eager for comments, he shared his own work in draft with many colleagues and students, and distributed his publications as gifts. Nonetheless he remained a private man, whose complex emotional life was known to only a very few. He once shared with me the culture shock he experienced on arriving in Cambridge. The fact that he managed his own two cultures with such integrity is deeply significant. Even his manifest professional achievements defy brief description.

While it is vital not to idealise someone so cruelly cut off in their prime, it is just as important to recognise how rare many of Roy's qualities are in professional life. While he knew many grand people, and was after all a protégé of Jack Plumb, he gave a great deal of his time to those at the beginning of their careers, as he did also to those who felt professionally vulnerable and marginalised. Scholars all over the world remember his kindnesses, his modest, unfeigned enthusiasm, his willingness to take on tasks others found tiresome or demeaning. There is no doubt that Roy was driven, but he was also blessed with self-knowledge. Furthermore, complacency was foreign to him. He had already moved on to the next tasks, hence pride and self-satisfaction played no part in his frenetic working life.

III

To gain an understanding of Roy Porter as a historian, however, one has to attend not just to the unusual personal qualities he brought to his work but also to its content. And his choice of subject matter was shaped, at least in part, by sympathy, a concept of considerable interest to anyone with the sophisticated understanding of eighteenth-century thought that

Roy possessed. He worked on topics of many different kinds, sometimes focusing on periods, at others on people, places, texts, themes or methodological problems. It seems that he was attracted to those who suffered in some way—the mad, for instance—and his work on the eighteenth-century doctor George Cheyne, who wrote about gout in the 1720s, could illustrate the point. Cheyne, whose *The English Malady* (1733) he edited, was a prominent physician, although not a discoverer, inventor or pioneer: he suffered from serious ill health himself.³

Roy started out as a historian of geology and came to medicine only later. And it was not only the eminent historian of eighteenth-century England, Jack Plumb, who shaped his education. He was also taught by Quentin Skinner and the radical historian of science Robert M. Young, while he learned the history of geology from Martin Rudwick. His doctoral thesis became his first book, *The Making of Geology: Earth Science in Britain 1660–1815* (1977). The operative term here is ‘making’. Roy showed how one specific science was formed through historical processes. There was nothing predetermined or inexorable about such transitions, which took place, the volume reveals, over a long period of time. In tracing the making of a scientific field, in insisting that it was a construct, Roy was addressing lively debates in the history, philosophy and sociology of science concerning the nature of natural knowledge. He was also asserting that the history of science is part of history: ‘the history of science is continuous with ... economic, social, political and intellectual history’.⁴

Later he demonstrated how the same could be said for the history of medicine, and he deserves considerable credit for helping to put it on the map of general historians. By its very nature medicine prompts the curiosity of most people. Here we can appreciate the wide impact of Roy’s writings about medicine and health in the past—they established the history of medicine broadly conceived as both of interest to the general public and fully integrated into the discipline of history. Through his work on science and medicine Roy hoped to attract and engage practitioners in these areas. There were many ‘old docs’ at the Wellcome Institute, whom he warmly helped and encouraged. He would have none of the facile polarity between supposedly enlightened professional historians and Whiggish practitioners. Yet he was himself fully aware of and sensitive to historiographical trends, and in so many respects a pioneer. Roy has some-

³Roy Porter (ed.), *George Cheyne: the English Malady (1733)* (London, 1991); Roy Porter and G. S. Rousseau, *Gout: the Patrician Malady* (New Haven, NJ, and London, 1998).

⁴Roy Porter, *The Making of Geology: Earth Science in Britain 1660–1815* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 9.

times been presented as not theoretically attuned. It is true that he did not present himself as ideologically *parti pris*, and he was indeed highly critical of Michel Foucault on empirical grounds. But it does not follow that he was uninterested either in the political issues that underlie historical practice or in the conceptual frameworks that historians deploy. On the contrary, his critique of Foucault reveals just these concerns. He minded that people bought into a Foucauldian perspective uncritically, when a sharp historical understanding of the history of madness and psychiatry revealed how the English case simply does not fit with Foucault's model. Similarly he was sceptical about the discontinuities Foucault posited.⁵

It was characteristic of Roy's penetrating historical eye that he could spot fashions and trends before they took hold, and develop them as ways into larger historical phenomena. Rather than despising fashion as epiphenomenal, he took it to be a source of historical insight. Diseases that came in and out of focus were grist to his mill. In other words, Roy possessed historical flair, a nose for important, and fun, topics. This account might suggest a historian who was diverted by amusing and entertaining themes. While Roy certainly did respond warmly to an astonishing array of historical questions, he possessed a fine critical mind. Always historiographically acute, Roy had a strong grasp of the philosophical issues that historical practice necessarily generates. His critique of Michel Foucault is a case in point. His engagement with Foucault reminds us of the centrality of the history of mental illness in his writings. He wrote extensively on the subject, and with a kind of humanity that deserves recognition and respect. This underlay too a remarkable book which he co-edited with Sylvana Tomaselli on rape.⁶ It may be trite to put it this way, but Roy was genuinely interested in the human condition in all its forms. He relished challenges and was often reluctant to say 'no' when yet another invitation was issued to him. When asked, as he frequently was, why he took on so much, he would say simply, 'I was asked, they wanted me to ...'.

One of the most striking features of Roy's work was his attention to language. This is clear in the witticisms and allusions that pepper his writings, in the striking metaphors he used, and his care in casting his thoughts into clear and memorable forms. Just as notable is his engagement with literature. This was a man who loved and often reread *Tristram Shandy*, who appreciated the potential of literary works to nurture historians'

⁵ Colin Jones and Roy Porter (eds.), *Reassessing Foucault: Power, Medicine and the Body* (London, 1994).

⁶ Sylvana Tomaselli and Roy Porter (eds.), *Rape* (Oxford, 1986).

imaginations and to shed light on past mentalities, and who was an excellent close reader, perhaps inspired by his contact with Quentin Skinner. Here again we find two characteristic features of Roy's thinking: his acceptance of, even relish for, subversion, comedy and satire and his commitment to engaging with as much as possible of what human societies have thrown up without casting himself into the role of moral arbiter. This is precisely the value of his work on quackery, which developed an approach we would now take for granted:

I shall take as quacks the broad spectrum of those operators who were typically pilloried as such; and in doing so, this being a work of history, the term will convey neither blame nor praise. He (or she) was called a quack who transgressed what those in the saddle defined as true, orthodox, regular, 'good' medicine. . . . quacks [were] those who drummed up custom largely through self-orchestrated publicity; who operated as individual entrepreneurs . . . and who depended heavily upon vending secret nostrums.⁷

In such apparently straightforward claims there is a particular approach to the history of medicine, one that has become so commonplace that there is a danger of forgetting how innovative his way of thinking about early modern medicine was. In the case of the eighteenth century in particular, medicine was generally taken to be in decline—there was a dearth of discoveries and big new ideas. When a progressivist history of medicine prevailed, the period was passed over in relative silence, deemed a dull interlude between Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood and the development of pathological anatomy. Roy was altogether more generous and more historiographically sophisticated in attempting to capture the textures of medical activities and ideas in the eighteenth century. Starting from the assumption that prominent doctors of the period, such as William Hunter, Thomas Beddoes, and Erasmus Darwin, deserved our attention even if they were not scientific innovators, Roy was able to show how culturally significant they were, probing the precise nature of their historical importance.

IV

Roy was a brave scholar. It is hard for most of us to grasp his range or to fully appreciate his boldness. An excellent example is his massive tome *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind*, first published in 1997. My understand-

⁷Roy Porter, *Quacks: Fakery & Charlatans in English Medicine* (Stroud, 2000), p. 11.

ing is that he intended the main title to terminate with a question mark. Its subtitle, *A Medical History of Humanity from Antiquity to the Present*, suggests a breadth of understanding that is truly formidable. He knew how to tell a story, how to paint big pictures, trace patterns and conjure up the textures of the past. He found patterns and made generalisations with enviable verve. Roy was also happy to comment, to sum up with a tinge of scepticism. As he pointed out in the last two sentences: ‘Medicine has led to inflated expectations, which the public eagerly swallowed. Yet as those expectations become unlimited, they are unfulfillable: medicine will have to redefine its limits even as it extends its capabilities.’⁸

The volume focused on medical thinking and medical practice, about which he could be ironic and critical. Indeed much of his work was from ‘the patient’s perspective’, a notion that will be linked forever to his name.⁹ This particular enthusiasm stems from his commitment to social history, and more particularly to a form of it that does justice to the lives of so-called ordinary people. It was nurtured by his wide reading—fast, voracious, and open-minded—in all genres. In fact his interest in how patients viewed their conditions and those they employed to help them was all of a piece with his interest in every form of medical practice, no matter how kooky it appeared in retrospect. He possessed the most lively sense of the range of medical activities, of the importance for historians of being sensitive to the diversity of health-seeking behaviours. His concern with patients and with the varied practices of those from whom they sought assistance were two sides of the same coin.

I take from Roy’s work on quackery his understanding that these matters were and are always relational. The very concept ‘quack’ only makes sense if there are other groups with whom they can be defined by contrast. But the term itself is not stable, and those most wedded to orthodoxy could be vulnerable to the very same accusation. The study of quackery is thus an exceptionally deft way of exposing medical fault lines. The result is a heightened sense of the fragility of medical status, expertise and efficacy, of contests over health and its providers. To convey all this effectively, we need to be thinking about economics, markets and consumption

⁸Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: a Medical History of Humanity from Antiquity to the Present* (London, 1997), p. 718.

⁹Roy Porter, ‘The patient’s view: doing medical history from below’, *Theory and Society*, 14 (1985), 175–98; Roy Porter (ed.), *Patients and Practitioners: Lay Perceptions of Medicine in Pre-industrial Society* (Cambridge, 1985), chaps. 1 and 10; Dorothy Porter and Roy Porter, *Patient’s Progress: Doctors and Doctoring in Eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge, 1989), especially Part II: Patients.

at the same time. Practitioners, whatever their education and skills, needed to make a living. No matter how orthodox they proclaimed themselves to be, they too had wares to sell, even when there wasn't a pill or potion in sight. Negotiation and contestation in markets is a fruitful way of approaching many aspects of the history of medicine, one which Roy's training in social history made him particularly well qualified to pursue.

There was nothing doctrinaire or preachy about Roy, who never sought to build an empire or create a school. His insistence that historians recognise patients and 'quacks' did not imply that professions and institutions were unimportant. Thus he wrote about the history of psychiatry and mental hospitals, as well as about madness and the mad, fully recognising that these were distinct, if interrelated categories. His remarkable work *Madness: a Brief History* (2001) demonstrates the point. It is remarkable not just because it covered so much so well in a short book, but because Roy negotiated with grace the political minefields that anyone writing about such a delicate and raw topic must cross.

If Roy was notably benign and generous, this does not mean he was uncritical. He could be extremely funny about the shortcomings of those with whom he worked. Beneath the capacity to exude bonhomie was a shrewd understanding of his fellow human beings, especially of their capacity to deliver the goods. This was a valuable skill, given the huge number of collaborations in which he engaged. For instance, he edited and co-edited many volumes of essays, the majority of which were on new topics or approaches. Particularly notable is the suite of books he edited with the distinguished historian of science Mikuláš Teich. These were comparative in nature: each one took a big theme—such as romanticism, drugs and narcotics, or the scientific revolution—and brought together essays upon its manifestation in different settings.¹⁰ The mentality that underlies this, as so many of his other projects, is worth emphasising. I have already noted his exceptional feel for good subjects. Roy co-edited a volume on *Medicine and the Five Senses* before most historians caught on that the senses could provide a generative optic for their field.¹¹ He consistently demonstrated a generosity of embrace. If considering the Enlightenment, for example, a subject about which he wrote exceptionally well, we should think about Russia and Spain, not just about France and

¹⁰Roy Porter and M. Teich (eds.), *Romanticism in National Context* (Cambridge, 1988); *Drugs and Narcotics in History* (Cambridge, 1995); and *The Scientific Revolution in National Context* (Cambridge, 1992).

¹¹W. F. Bynum and Roy Porter (eds.), *Medicine and the Five Senses* (Cambridge, 1993).

Scotland.¹² These works are highly accessible. He aimed high and got the best people he could, but what they produced could be used by undergraduates. They are veritable treasure troves of ideas. Roy possessed an outstanding capacity to generate fresh projects and to share them with others. The point is made with feeling. When he assigned me a specific task in the book he co-edited about William Hunter, the eighteenth-century Scottish collector and medical man, it changed forever the ways I worked and the subjects I tackled.¹³ While he may not have anticipated the lasting impact his invitation would have, it was characteristic of the creative way in which he put people and subjects together.

V

Roy delighted in reaching wide audiences, as the wonderfully readable *Blood and Guts* shows.¹⁴ He practised public history long before the term was common in the United Kingdom. Indeed I think he saw it in moral terms. We, those of us who are privileged to work in universities, *should* share our knowledge and enthusiasm with anyone who is interested. This is why, early in his career when it was possible to do so, he travelled extensively to schools, associations and societies to speak about his work. His recognition of the potential of satirical prints to engage audiences and afford fresh historical insights reinforces these points.

Those encountering him for the first time could not help but be struck by his distinctive personal style, with his open shirts, rumpled trousers and jackets, gold jewelry and stubble. They would quickly be won over by his charm, erudition, and cheerfulness. I have heard it said that a distinguished American academic—a woman—considered him the sexiest man in London. No memoir of Roy would be remotely satisfactory without a discussion of sex, a subject that was, if I may put it this way, close to his heart. His writings on the history of sexuality were innovative and influential.¹⁵ It was a subject he could tackle with wry humour and without a

¹²Roy Porter and M. Teich (eds.), *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge, 1981); Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (Harmondsworth, 2000).

¹³W. F. Bynum and Roy Porter (eds.), *William Hunter and the Eighteenth-Century Medical World* (Cambridge, 1985).

¹⁴Roy Porter, *Blood and Guts: a Short History of Medicine* (London, 2002).

¹⁵See, for example, Roy Porter, 'A touch of danger: the man-midwife as sexual predator', in G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter (eds.), *Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment* (Manchester, 1987), pp. 206–32.

shred of prudery. In this, as in other respects, he was a liberated man. Roy genuinely liked and appreciated women, nurtured their careers, and took immense pleasure in their achievements. These qualities cannot be taken for granted, and it is greatly to his credit that he applauded all success, and did so much to ensure that others enjoyed as much of it as possible.

Everyone who knew Roy has a favourite anecdote about him.¹⁶ One of mine comes from the time I stayed with Roy and his first wife, the writer Sue Limb, as a despondent and somewhat lost Ph.D. student. Getting up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, I discovered Roy, hard at work at the kitchen table. This occurred forty years ago, but I seem to remember he was reading Aristotle. His capacity for work is deservedly legendary. But so is his capacity for many kinds of fun. We can be entirely confident that he would have greatly enjoyed knowing that if, a decade after his death, you google 'Roy Porter', a butcher in Lancashire and an American jazz drummer also come up. What might surprise him, however, is how many of his books can still be obtained from the Amazon website, how many students read and appreciate his work, and how deeply he is missed.

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Note. I am especially grateful to Sylvana Tomaselli for recent discussions about Roy, and to many other colleagues and friends with whom I have shared memories of him. Above all, I acknowledge Roy Porter as my teacher, friend and mentor, to whom I owe the most profound debt, one of which I am constantly reminded. A full bibliography of his writings can be found in Carol Reeves, *Professor Roy Porter: Bibliography* (246 pages, 2003) in the Wellcome Library <http://encore.wellcome.ac.uk/iii/encore/record/C__Rb1578834__Scarol+reeves__Orightresult__X4?lang=eng&suite=cobalt>.

¹⁶Some are recounted in Roberta Bivins and John V. Pickstone (eds.), *Medicine, Madness and Social History: Essays in Honour of Roy Porter* (Basingstoke, 2007), pp. 228–35.