Biographical Memoirs of British Academy Fellows

Professor Peter Marshall FBA, *who has just completed a five-year stint in editing the memoirs (extended obituaries) of Fellows of the British Academy, explains their fascination, and reveals some of the highlights in the most recently published volume.*

MEMOIRS OF deceased Fellows are one of the Academy's oldest publishing ventures. They appeared for many years in annual *Proceedings of the British Academy* volumes which also included the lectures given under the Academy's auspices. From 2002 memoirs and lectures have been published in separate volumes. The Academy takes a proper pride in its memoirs, regarding them as constituting 'a chapter in the intellectual history of Britain'. For their numerous aficionados, reading the memoirs is an annual treat. Having closely read the volumes for the last five years as the person providing editorial assistance in their production, I have not the slightest hesitation in endorsing both claims: they are both a major contribution to national biography and, taken as a whole, are a great pleasure to read.

The writer of a memoir, who need not be a Fellow, is chosen by the section of the Academy to which the deceased Fellow belonged. Certain desirable criteria are indicated to the person chosen. The most important is that a memoir is intended to be more than an *éloge*, paying no doubt thoroughly merited tribute to the subject's scholarly eminence. Although the tone is likely to be generous, the memoir should still aim at a fair critical assessment of the subject's achievements. Above all, memoirists are encouraged to write about their subjects as people as well as scholars. Activities outside academe can be of great interest. In the last five years, for instance, people dying in their eighties are likely to have been caught up in war in their twenties and to have had stories of distinguished military service or of fortitude in captivity or under persecution. While analysis of scholarship is of course the central part of a memoir, those who write them are strongly urged to try to make the text as accessible as possible to non-specialists. The memoirs are ideally intended to be read not only by the subject's peers in his or her discipline but by an intellectually sophisticated lay readership, consisting in the first instance of the fellowship as a whole. The balance between obscurity and unacceptable simplification is not, however, an easy one to strike. Trying to edit memoirs concerned with disciplines far removed from one's own is a chastening as well as an enlightening experience. I have had to reconcile myself to accepting that however patiently a courteous economist, for example, tried to respond to my request to clarify 'the Homogeneity Postulate by which nominal variables cannot have real effects', there was no way in which this well intentioned but ignorant lay person was ever going to get the point. Difficult as it may be to put into effect, the aspiration that a memoir should be accessible to scholars across the humanities and the social sciences is still an important

Figure 1: *John Wymer (1928–2006).*

Clive Gamble's memoir explains: 'Our photograph shows him in his familiar trilby hat, holding aloft a small handaxe during a visit to Swanscombe in 2004. The professionals from Quaternary science, archaeology and human palaeontology, as well as a large number of independent archaeologists who surround him, are there because of him. He once wrote of his hope that his work "may inspire some to search for palaeoliths themselves, and it would be a dull person who could not enjoy the thrill of finding a handaxe and considering who held it last".'

distinguishing feature of British Academy memoirs.

In due course – this being an academic enterprise, it is not absolutely unknown for that term to be measured in decades rather than in years – the memoir will make its way back to the Publications Department of the Academy. After it has undergone copy editing that is both rigorous and sympathetic, it is sumptuously published, with an appropriate portrait as illustration, through the Oxford University Press.

The make-up of the memoir volumes of course depends on the accidents of mortality. In addition to the life of the political biographer, Ben Pimlott, of which an extract appears on the next page, the current volume, which came out in March of this year, contains accounts of three philosophers of the highest distinction, Stuart Hampshire, Peter Strawson and Bernard Williams. From the Strawson memoir we learn not only something of his 'unequalled contribution to all the central areas of theoretical philosophy', but that one of his recreations was playing 'a military game … which involved lead soldiers and artillery, and extraordinarily complicated rules'. John Wymer (Figure 1), who became 'the greatest field naturalist of the Palaeolithic', never went to university. He learnt his first archaeology through family visits to gravel pits around the Thames. Philip Grierson, 'the foremost medieval numismatist of our time, or indeed perhaps of any time' was a collector as well as a scholar. Largely from what he saved from an academic salary, he acquired about 20,000 pieces, conservatively valued at being worth £5 to £10 million and was able to 'to claim that he had the second or third best collection of any European country', usually only exceeded by the holdings of the particular national museum. He was also addicted to what he called 'movies', films featuring 'such luminaries as Sylvester Stallone, Jackie Chan, Steven Seagal and Arnold Schwarzenegger', which he collected with somewhat less discrimination than he showed to medieval coins. One of the most striking of the lives in this volume is that of Hugh Trevor-Roper, Lord Dacre (Figure 2). The author explores not only the well known contrast between Trevor-Roper's prolific output of superb essays and his apparent reluctance to complete major scholarly projects, but he also reveals a sharp contrast between the public impression of an 'imposing, often intimidating figure, resolute, fearlessly and at times mercilessly articulate, ever ready to pass epigrammatic judgements' and to engage in controversy, and a personality afflicted by depression and uncertainty. 'Plagued by a sense of his own oddness and awkwardness, he felt blighted by his difficulty in making emotional contacts and by his involuntary retreats from the expression or reception of private feeling'.

Biographical Memoirs of Fellows, VI (*Proceedings of the British Academy*, volume 150) was published in March 2008. For more, see www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/

Figure 2: *Hugh Trevor-Roper (1914–2003).*