GEOFFREY BEST

Geoffrey Francis Andrew Best

20 November 1928 – 14 January 2018

elected Fellow of the British Academy 2003

by

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Restless and energetic, Geoffrey Best moved from one subject area to another, establishing himself as a leading historian in each before moving decisively to the next. He began with the history of the Anglican Church from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, then moved by turns to the economy and society of Victorian Britain, the history of peace movements and the laws of war, European military history and the life of Winston Churchill. He was similarly peripatetic in terms of institutional affiliation, as he moved from Cambridge to Edinburgh, then Sussex, and finally Oxford. Although his work was widely and highly praised, he remained self-critical and could never quite believe in his own success.

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GEOFFREY BEST

Few historians write their autobiography, but since Geoffrey Best did *A Life of Learning* must be the starting-point for any appraisal of his personal life.[1] It is a highly readable text—engaging, warm-hearted and chatty like the man himself—but inevitably it invites interrogation. For example, there is the problem of knowing when the author is describing how he felt on past occasions and when he is ruminating about those feelings in retrospect. In the latter mode he writes that he has 'never ceased to be surprised by repeatedly discovering how ignorant, wrong and naïve I have been about people and institutions, and still am' (p. vii). Those last three words suggest that his search for self-knowledge was only partially successful, but at least the journey gives double meaning to the word 'Learning' in the title. There is also something unusual in a book which abounds in self-exposure yet is thin on self-analysis. He deflects the reader away from religion with the comment 'I am too cautious a historian to write much about that, and too conscious of my own shortcomings to pretend to know the secrets of men's hearts' (p. 19), yet in a book mainly about himself this looks like evasion. An alternative explanation might be Best's wish, also evident in his academic writing, to avoid being didactic. Hence perhaps his reluctance to explain the decision to leave Cambridge in the first of his unanticipated career moves.

> The position being so advantageous, not to mention privileged, I almost surprised myself by abandoning it, and certainly surprised those colleagues who had been pleased to see me there ... I have never ceased to wonder about the mix of feelings and attitudes that was in my head then, and even now I cannot clearly separate them or calculate their respective weights. Not wishing to bore the reader with overmuch introspection, I shall simply allow those feelings and attitudes to appear in the course of the narrative. (p. 117)

In many ways Best's reticence is appealing but it jars with a persona that was outwardly frank and open. Besides, it is surely the task of a historian to weigh multiple causes rather than simply list them.

And what is one to make of the anecdote about a junior colleague who, wishing to move to another university, requested a reference? Best considered him 'difficult' yet did not want to write too harshly.

> I sought to imply, without absolutely stating, his personality defects. Years later, a ... professor of history at that same university … told me that this man had been 'a disaster' and he took me to task for having written an untruthful reference. 'But couldn't you read between the lines?', I asked. No, he said, he couldn't and nor could anyone else. 'You wrote a *good* reference', he insisted. I have never ceased to wonder what I should have done. (p. 169)

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[1] G. Best, *A Life of Learning: Selective Memoirs of Geoffrey Best* (Oxford, 2010). Page references that appear in brackets in the text all refer to this volume.

By wondering what he should have done, Best focuses on a mundane moral issue, but he ignores the more interesting question of why he had failed in his attempt to write between the lines. Being a patently benevolent man, it might be that comments which seemed barbed to him appeared anodyne to others? Or it might be that recipients of his letter, knowing his high moral scruples, could not believe that he would write disingenuously. Without some such degree of introspection the anecdote seems trivial, yet Best's is by no means a Pooterish volume. He put it in for a purpose while leaving the reader to decide what that was.

Best worries that he may sometimes have been presumptuous in using 'the precious word "friend" when I might better have written "colleague with whom I enjoyed friendly relations"' (p. 229). Certainly, he was very much a 'people person' whereas he does not seem to have identified strongly with places, a trait that might have had something to do with the footloose nature of his career, which was one of its most striking characteristics. He cannot be said to exude deep feeling even when writing about Edinburgh, though he loved that city best and was happiest there. Nor was there any equivalent of Rankin's Oxford Bar, for wherever he resided the most important place was home: Hardwick Street in Newnham; Ormidale Terrace in Murrayfield; St Anne's Crescent, Lewes; Buckingham St, Oxford. He was immensely hospitable and loved having friends and acquaintances to stay or eat.

His first home was in Osterley in west London where he was born in November 1928 to Fred and Katie, the former a middle-ranking civil servant. 'Our society was quite lively and cultivated in its way—plenty of outdoor sports, good swimming pools, seaside holidays every summer, public libraries, evening classes, social clubs, amateur theatre and music, not to mention half a dozen cinemas within easy reach—but it was not cosmopolitan and it was decidedly *middle* middle class' (p. 22). This is the social historian writing analytically, but when he describes how his family felt at the time, he deploys the concept of orders rather than class. 'Most of the Osterley men we counted as friends and chatted to after Church on Sunday mornings were Civil Servants too … There was a strong *esprit de corps* among them and the self-respect of being in national service, following a code of honour and discipline parallel to that governing the armed services' (p. 14).

He remembers being 'a notably happy boy, not positively spoilt but cherished by everyone' (p. 5), meaning extended family members, neighbours, and the maid. However, being separated by eight and twelve years from his older brother and sister, he was self-contained and somewhat solitary. He enjoyed getting out and about on his bicycle, in part because when he was seven his father developed symptoms of bowel and bladder cancer, causing the house to smell like a hospital ward. When Fred died, the then 12-year-old Best was packed off to stay with family friends and was not told the awful truth until after the funeral was over. 'Perhaps because I was given no opportunity to express grief', he reflects, 'I never felt any.' He then adds, with characteristic self-reproach: 'Or was I naturally deficient in the appropriate emotive faculties, as I sometimes wonder whether I am now?' (p. 6). Fred had died too young to qualify for a civil service pension, and Best was mortified when his mother moved from their 'really desirable detached house' to a smaller abode, which she nevertheless stuffed with lodgers, in large to part to find the money for private school fees for the youngest and most academic of her children. Rumour had it that she had once been capable of merriment, but the early loss of a much-loved 4-year-old daughter and Fred's prolonged demise had had a deadening effect on her personality. She 'had much benevolence in her but there were obstacles in the way of its expression'. 'Thrifty and careful', self-denying, and furiously hardworking, she 'set everyone else's interests above her own', and then created tension by drawing attention to her own martyrdom. Best makes no effort to conceal the guilt that he feels in retrospect. He notes that she not only stumped up his public school fees but also paid for luxuries such as fencing equipment and the appropriate team blazer—'and I was too self-absorbed and spoiled to inquire about it' (p. 51).[2] His inability wholly to love his mother seems bound up with reservations about himself. 'She had a way that I unthinkingly inherited, of looking for someone to blame when things went wrong … I can't help wondering to what extent my own irrationalities, fetishes and obsessions have their sources in the wholly loving and well-meant attentions of a super-conscientious but … Victorian-minded mum'—'Victorian' here implying an addiction to self-discipline, self-denial, convention, and respectability (pp. 6–7). Katie Best bequeathed another significant trait in that her ambition for her son fed his own ambition for himself, though the latter was often camouflaged by a modest and self-deprecating manner.

Best attended a couple of local prep schools followed by Colet Court in 1939 and St Paul's in 1941. The distinguished old day school had been evacuated to Crowthorne in Surrey for the duration and had had to reinvent itself as a makeshift boarding school. Best writes about these years happily enough but without any obvious nostalgia, though he does note his fondness for acting and talent for impersonating female characters. He describes himself at 14 as 'ingenuous, innocent, and a bit girlish', 'priggish' and 'hung up about sex'. St Paul's return to London in 1945 coincided with a 'powerful waking-up', a hormonal reveille that left Best with 'girls on the brain', but this was followed by a much more satisfying final year during which, as well as exercising responsibility as a Prefect, he conducted a series of chaste relationships with girlfriends, partied at will, frequented theatres, concerts, and dance-halls, and explored the metropolis. Looking back, he puts a characteristically negative spin on this phase of his life: 'Perhaps I had at last matured enough to be worth serious befriending' (p. 44). His relationship with his mother hit a high point in these years, although his newfound 'taste for the higher things in life' made him ever more 'acutely embarrassed … about living in a suburb'. Looking back, he speculates that this 'silly' notion might have had something to do with reading Lewis Mumford's *The Culture of Cities* (pp. 37, 51).[3] Others might speculate that it had more to do with befriending boys from the Surrey plutocracy.

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[2] Not conventionally sporty, Best developed (and retained) great prowess with the sabre and once reached the finals in the Public School Fencing Championship.

Best writes coolly about his teachers and is scathing about the stand-in head of History, whose tedious note-taking lessons forced him to study by himself. So why did he decide in the course of his School Certificate year to abandon a long-held intention to read Classics at university and to study History instead? 'It was one day, indeed one moment … that the future course of my life was determined, and my academic journey wrenched off the so far predetermined Classics track' (p. 33). It would be easy on the basis of the memoir to concoct a less dramatic sounding narrative. He liked Latin but Greek not very much and many of his 'particular friends' were intending to read History. A story of how he gradually saw the light and went on to become one of the country's leading historians would make for a positive and entirely plausible narrative, but it is not the story Best chooses to tell. Instead, he recollects an incident in which the master who taught him Greek slapped him on the side of the face for some minor foolery in class.

> I was not hurt—the slap was not very hard—but I was embarrassed and mortified and, however unreasonably, apprehensive. This man was scheduled to be my Greek teacher through the whole of the coming year... It was impossible to believe after this that he would like me. Why should I go on with Greek … and with *him* as its daily teacher when there was a way out … I decided to switch channels, to leave the Classics and to go instead for History. (p. 34)

This decision to read History was the first in a series of apparently precipitous and impulsive changes of direction, yet it receives no further comment. It is, however, characteristic of the memoir that Best should emphasise the negative factor behind his decision, but it creates a misleading impression, for it means that a man whose personality could mostly be described as 'glass half-full' is recollected as though through a 'glass half-empty'. The slap was also a lucky one for sixth-form History was to be greatly enlightened by the return from active service of the distinguished numismatist Philip Whitting to the headship of the department. Best acknowledges more than once that he had ‘by far the most influence on me of any of the masters in my last years at school’ (p. 48).

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[3] 'His [Mumford's] animus against the life of the suburbs is truly extraordinary and has to be read to be believed.' G. Best, 'Education, empire and class: growing up in a new London suburb in the 1930s', in G. Davison, P. Jalland, and W. Prest (eds.), *Body and Mind* (Melbourne, 2009), pp. 116–33.

School was followed by two happy years’ National Service in the Army, when he got to see a bit of regional Britain, though frustratingly not the world. He enjoyed the ribaldry of the barrack room and being fit he found the arduous period of basic training congenial. He particularly relished the complete absence of ‘class distinction’ among lads from many different backgrounds. Not only was there was no need to be embarrassed about Osterley, but better still was the fact that no one teased him for his own posh accent. Reflecting on that experience prompted him much later to ‘wonder whether there was not actually as much class-consciousness in circulation as class-minded historians suppose there should have been’ (p. 53). It may also be hazarded that, as someone who was conscious of fine moral distinctions and fretful about the possibility of doing the wrong thing, simply being told what to do came as a relief. Happiest of all were the ‘halcyon days’ during which he was deputed to the Royal Army Education Corps and acquired his first experience of pedagogy (p. 60). His new head of department was to become a lifelong friend, the ‘pencil-thin, buck-toothed, spectacled’ Alec Cheyne (a future ecclesiastical historian). The latter had much greater difficulty in looking and feeling military than did Best who, always a natty dresser, wore his uniform with some pleasure.

Owing to a muddle over his discharge, Best went up to Trinity College, Cambridge one term late in January 1949. With a College and a full State Scholarship to support him, he was no longer dependent on his mum. He worked hard, but not at the expense of having ‘a jolly good time’, and his ‘high spirited’ and sometimes ‘silly’ social life continued where it had left off at St Paul’s (pp. 81–3). He kept up with his fencing, joined numerous clubs, was a leading light in the Trinity Historical Society and cultivated a number of the friends who were to matter most to him in life, including Tony Jay and Richard Mayne whom he had also known at school. Among his new friends were the historians John Elliott, Derek Beales and the ‘ever dear to me’ John Walsh, as well as the Latin scholar Ted Kenney with whom he liked to spout and invent passages from *Pickwick Papers*. As well as friends, Best had by now acquired many of the personal characteristics that would remain with him. He was somewhat mercurial and could occasionally be grouchy, but he did not hold grudges, and mostly he veered between amiable and jolly. Ever since his Army days he had been unable to see a piano without wanting others to join him round it for a sing-song. He had a fine light tenor voice and middle-brow musical tastes with a particular predilection for Victorian ballads. In company he emphasised his considerable height by invariably standing ramrod straight. In conversation he was unfailingly courteous, but he had a strangely staccato manner of talking. He also had a disconcerting habit of switching subjects very suddenly, and he would call on his wide reading and retentive memory to quote poetry out of the blue. All this, together with a talent for mimicry and a disposition to giggle, made for individuality and a mild eccentricity, but his Etonian friend John Elliott detected a certain naïveté, the sign of a slight outsider who longed to be more integrated, while the historian of Nonconformity David Thompson detected 'a certain fragility which was concealed by cheerfulness'.

Unlike his time in the Army, Best once more became conscious of class distinctions and very aware that all his friends were from public schools. This, he insisted, was not by design. Public schoolboys 'coalesced naturally because we all felt carefree', whereas 'grim' grammar schoolboys 'were at Cambridge not to have a good time but *to work*' (p. 81). He cites the latter as 'a fact of life' and proven by the example of a future Edinburgh colleague who was an ex-grammar school workaholic. As a sociological observation it seems strangely insubstantial but may be explained by the fact that he socialised exclusively in Trinity and Magdalene, the two colleges where grammar school types were so few as to constitute a veritable 'other'. More worrying was his acute consciousness of having himself been a 'scholarship boy' at St Paul's, which meant that he was not 'obviously stamped with the "public school" manner' (p. 89). Still officially domiciled with his mother, it did not help that she had moved to increasingly smaller and dingier homes, the current one in Isleworth. Best described this as 'a sort of mother-trouble … To put it with dramatic licence, at Trinity I consorted with princes, but my homeland was peopled with Pooters' (p. 84).

Best was 'Churchy' throughout his life but mainly for social reasons and out of parental duty. Both his own parents had come from Baptist families but in Anglican-dominated Osterley they had '*slid* into membership of the Church of England'. They went to Church on Sundays, subscribed to pew rents, and said their prayers at night. It was a strong, simple, charitable, and undogmatic faith, but looking back it seemed to Best to have been too bound up with middle-class virtues such as conformity, self-reliance, and the denial of a 'more spacious and stylish existence' (pp. 19, 22). At St Paul's Best glimpsed something more appealing in the 'elevating, humanising, civilising influence, beamingly diffused' of the High Master Walter Oakeshott.

> Walter's Christianity was of that peculiar and wonderful kind, becoming rarer every year, that of Helleno-Christian humanism, the kind which traces a direct line through Plato, the neo-Platonists, John the Evangelist, Augustine, to George Herbert and Henry Vaughan … In a community where the dominant ethic discouraged weeping, it was salutary to see his tears when he had to announce the death of one of his most valued teachers. (pp. 32–3)

At university, however, and under the influence of his friend Simon Barrington-Ward, he fell in with a circle of young men gathered round the charismatic figure of the bursar of Magdalene Jock Burnet, an Old Pauline and former prep school master, whose piety was of a high Establishment type and whose influence, Best reflected later, had not been ‘entirely beneficial’.

> I was making efforts to be religious … [but] I now reckon that I was merely going through the motions, not really touched by his sort of faith at all. In fact, it might have been better for my spiritual life if I had fallen in with some Anglican Modernist or Broad Churchman, whose example would have mirrored the rational piety of the Enlightenment and the Liberal Churchmanship that I met in my research and who might have come closer to convincing and moving me. (pp. 89–90)

He blames this unsatisfactory spiritual episode on his susceptibility to ‘quasi-paternal or avuncular friendships’, but it also reflected a general passivity in spiritual matters.

Academically Best’s time at Cambridge went very well, though unusually he got more out of lectures than supervisions. This meant that, unlike many in his close and competitive circle, he was assiduous in attending the former and in taking copious notes, possibly suggesting that he was a grammar school boy at heart. He learned much from his lecturers, though he was not someone who could ever have assimilated what he learned from Kenneth Pickthorn—‘that good teachers need not be popular or even likeable’ (p. 69). With regard to his working methods,

> Early on, I decided to set an arbitrary limit to the quantity of my reading. I worked out that the amount to read in preparation for the exams, if I were to have time for recreations as well, should bear some relation to what I was going to have to write in the exams. Since I would not be required to write more in relation to each course than could be written in three hours, I told myself I need not go on endlessly reading for any subject that did not really engage me and … that a few books well understood would serve me better than a lot of books superficially studied. (p. 74)

Having secured a Starred First Class in Part I of the Tripos, Best achieved a simple First in Part II, hardly a disgrace but still a blow to his pride. One explanation might be that the type of strategy described above is more effective in Part I than in Part II, where a more detailed and scholarly approach is likely to pay off. Best’s own explanation is that he took Part I at the blissful height of a four-year relationship with a Mary Cockburn, his first serious girlfriend, whereas this had fizzled by the time he took Part II.

Best now began research under the guidance of his undergraduate director of studies George Kitson Clark, a man who would become his ‘guru’ and also godfather to his eldest son. He had been tempted to take up the history of art, having been fired by attendance at the extra-curricular lectures of Nikolaus Pevsner and Ernst Gombrich. Architecture—Victorian in particular—was to remain a lasting passion. But, as Kitson Clark pointed out, there were few academic openings in that line and he did not have the private means to enter the curatorial world. Instead, he embarked on a political history of the Whig Party of 1832–68, but fairly soon discovered that another research student, Donald Southgate at St Andrews, had beaten him to the topic.[4] Kitson Clark then suggested 'Church and State in English Politics, 1800–1833' and Best happily agreed, having enjoyed Norman Sykes' special subject 'Church and State 1689–1715'.

Except for a failed attempt at his own college, Best did not try for junior research fellowships and accepted the post of senior history master at Marlborough College to begin after his research studentship ran out in 1954. Since he admits to having had a strong (albeit half-suppressed) desire to become a don, this refusal to compete for what was effectively the only kind of post that could have led to his being a don probably reflected a fear of not succeeding. Then wholly unexpectedly opportunity knocked, that is to say Owen Chadwick, the Dean of Trinity Hall whom Best had never met, knocked on his door and invited him to apply for a research fellowship at Trinity Hall, in part (Best modestly suspected) in order to keep out another candidate who was a Communist. He accepted the position in 1955 and became a teaching fellow one year later after being appointed to a University Assistant Lectureship. And to complete his happiness he fell in love with and married Marigold Davies, who was younger than Geoffrey but with more worldly experience, and whom he described as 'lively', 'intelligent', 'pretty after that Renoir fashion I particularly liked', and 'physically desirable'. Her father, a senior ranking officer in the Sudan civil service, laid on a spectacularly grand wedding in the West Sussex countryside. It was certainly a love match, though Best admits to having calculated at the time that his wife's cosmopolitan background would help him to 'escape from Osterley' (p. 100).

Best quickly transitioned from being merely one of Kitson Clark's many research students to acting as his 'lieutenant', 'disciple', and even (blowing two trumpets at once) the 'Huxley to his Darwin' (pp. 70, 92). Though undoubtedly influential, Kitson Clark was somewhat disparaged within Cambridge as a bluff and shouty Yorkshireman minus the accent, but he was honoured in other universities and especially in Oxford,[5] where his supervision of leading nineteenth-century British historians was a source of envy as well as admiration. They included not only Best but James Cornford, Harry Hanham, Peter Hennock, Royston Lambert, Oliver MacDonagh, Norman McCord, Roy MacLeod, Richard Shannon, Barry Smith and John Vincent. That so many of these were also exciting in the 'clever-clever' way approved in Cambridge sometimes provoked the comment that Kitson Clark could have been their supervisor in name only, and the point is an interesting one which would bear further investigation, but the qualities he did offer were hardly insignificant: capacious knowledge, seriousness of purpose, hard work, empathy, generosity, zest and spirit of inquiry (all of which, incidentally, rubbed off on Best). Kitson Clark's own writing at this time centred on the approach of Churchmen and Dissenters to Victorian social problems, while as a supervisor of research he famously presided over theses that focused on the bureaucratic 'revolution in government' during the second quarter of the nineteenth century and on those whom he called the 'statesmen in disguise' who made it happen.[6] This was whiggish insofar as it adhered to ideas of linear progress and reform, but conservative insofar as it emphasised the role of pragmatic problem-solvers rather than aristocrats and ideologues. And as it turned out, though somewhat unexpectedly, this idea provided the main context for Best's first major work.

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[4] D. Southgate, *The Passing of the Whigs 1832–1886* (London, 1962). Reviewing the book, Best was uncharacteristically churlish: 'Dr Southgate has done quite well with a virtually impossible task. A few may consider him unwise to have undertaken it', *British Book News* (1962), 817. [Here and in note 27 I infer Best's authorship on the basis of strong internal evidence but cannot positively prove it.]

[5] Oxford awarded Kitson Clark its highest accolade when it appointed him Ford Lecturer in 1960.

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Best did not publish his PhD dissertation as such but he filleted it for his first significant article, which effectively began the work of rescuing the Tory defenders of the Old Protestant Constitution in 1828–9 from the condescension of posterity. It displays his talent for writing in an elegant yet accessible style as well as a certain quirky daring (how many first-time untenured authors then would have risked footnoting a quotation as follows: 'I am sorry to say that I have lost track of the source of this remark. I think it was Van Mildert's'?).[7] He sent an offprint to Herbert Butterfield

> because your teaching about the 'seamless web' of history was one of the ideas that made most impact on me in my undergraduate days and that has contributed to the kind of approach to the problems of religion and society which I have attempted here. All these distinctions of 'political historians' and 'church historians' and 'economic historians' and so on seem so meaningless and I hope we shall be able to frustrate the classifiers![8]

Unfortunately, this ambition had to be postponed because of yet another wholly unexpected development. While he was wondering how to develop his thesis, he was (unknown to himself) recommended to the Church Commissioners by Norman Sykes as someone well fitted to write a history of that body and its predecessor, Queen Anne's Bounty. The attraction was that he would have access to the voluminous untapped records of those institutions, he would be able to incorporate much of his doctoral research and his work for the special subject, he would be able to write a much longer and weightier book than most first-time authors, and there was the opportunity (which he duly took) of publishing a study as definitive as ever a work of history can be. Reputationally it was bound to be beneficial. Against that, he might have been offered a bigger print-run with a shorter book, and he would probably have attracted more readers. It would also prove a challenge to weave a topic so obviously classifiable as 'church history' into a seamless web along with political, social, and administrative perspectives, and it is a measure of his achievement that he succeeded as well as he did in *Temporal Pillars: Queen Anne's Bounty, the Church Commissioners, and the Church of England*, which appeared in 1964 (Cambridge).

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[6] For example, O. MacDonagh, *A Pattern of Government Growth 1800–1860: the Passenger Acts and their Enforcement* (London, 1961).

[7] G. F. A. Best, 'The Protestant Constitution and its supporters, 1800–1829', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series (1958), 111, n. 5.

[8] Best to Butterfield, 14 July 1958, Cambridge University Library, MS Butterfield 531/B/84.

Queen Anne's Bounty (1704) was a charitable foundation whereby some of the revenues obtained from a tax on benefices was earmarked for the benefit of poorer clergy. It allowed the Church to limp through the eighteenth century, assisted by a general rise in agricultural prosperity, but it cleansed no stables and put in order no houses, hence the collapse of agricultural rents and incomes after 1820 led to a 'time of troubles'—grinding inequality of wealth within and furious assault from political radicals outside. Parliamentary intervention was inevitable and in 1835 the Church was delegated to newly chosen Ecclesiastical Commissioners, whose achievement would be to redistribute incomes within it and to transfer resources away from rural areas (and especially Cathedrals) in favour of newer industrial parishes. They also forced Church estates to adopt harder-nosed managerial practices, starting with the Tithe Reform Act of 1836. After 1850 this 'big, part-time amateur board' was replaced by 'a small, full-time, professional one', the Church Estates Committee, a body which Best effectively discovered. As a consequence of all this the Bounty sank out of the limelight, but it did not disappear. Perhaps Best's most brilliant piece of revisionism was to show that it quietly became the basic institutional foundation of the administrative side of the Church. In telling this story, which ended lamely with the amalgamation of the Commission and the Bounty in 1948, Best avoided Whig triumphalism. He emphasised the several false starts and occasional scandals over peculation and nepotism, and his heroes were either Conservative politicians such as Peel, Goulburn, and Graham, conservative clerics such as Bishop Charles Blomfield, or 'statesmen in disguise' such as John Shaw-Lefevre. Nevertheless, his message was that top-down intervention saved the Establishment and helped to create the 'more peaceful, prosperous, and professional' Church of the twentieth century.

Reviewers of *Temporal Pillars* were many and almost uniformly positive. They praised its ambition, erudition and originality, and often compared it not unfavourably with Christopher Hill's monograph on the economic problems of the seventeenth-century Church. Some were bowled over by Best's mode of writing: 'an attractive style that combines sauciness and whimsy with professional attention to detail' (Charles Elliott), 'happy *aperçus* and epigrams, at times verging on the lyrical' (Horton Davies). Looking back, it now seems safe to say that the book's conceptual sophistication and coruscating insights *would have* proved seminal had it not been for a subsequent falling away of interest in institutional history, not helped by the fact that Best himself never followed up on the topic. Stephen Taylor, who was in some sense his successor, valued the book as representing a step change from Sykes' work in terms of sophistication, and also for the crucial insight that institutions like the Church were not mere objects of political debate but also sites within which politics took place.[9] The book was also very important to Arthur Burns in what he calls 'the rather curious dual guise of Aunt Sally and benevolent uncle'.

> I used Best as a foil for most of my arguments about the dangers of adopting what at the time I would have called a utilitarian understanding of reform … which ignored the importance of mood music around initiatives, and the things that could be achieved without money but which still had measurable impacts … At the same time however, the work remains for me a model of the kind of history I realised I wanted to write partly through reading it—a sympathetic and critical history of an institution used as a window onto a wider society… It was I am sure an inspiration to us all in bringing money into dialogue with policy, and with its temporal ambition of situating the Victorian Church in a longer history.[10]

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By the time *Temporal Pillars* appeared in print in 1964, Best was no longer in Cambridge, having 'surprised his colleagues' by moving to Edinburgh three years earlier. Objectively the decision made sense, but it happened very suddenly after Alec Cheyne wrote from Edinburgh to inform him that a British History Lectureship was in the offing. Temperamentally afraid of failure, Best often preferred to seize opportunities rather than put himself forward in competition. Still, it is clear that he was already considering a move before Cheyne wrote and if his friends failed to realise this it was probably because his invariably positive demeanour and well-integrated social skills drowned out the tummy rumbles of discontent that were also a part of his make-up. So why did this man who had long wanted to be an Oxbridge don and who in tandem with Marigold had 'lived and dreamed nothing but Cambridge for years' (p. 136), suddenly give up on Fenland?

For a start he was afraid that Cambridge might give up on him, since his five-year University Assistant Lectureship was due to run out in 1961. The post had been intended to be tenure-tracked, but once it became clear that there were too many

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[9] Stephen Taylor to Boyd Hilton, 12 May 2019.

[10] Arthur Burns to Boyd Hilton, 24 April 2019.

Assistant Lecturers chasing too few permanent jobs, it was announced that there would have to be ‘a certain amount of elimination at the Assistant Lectureship level; and the Faculty Board considers that this is desirable’.[11] Best will have read these brutal words, but all he says in the memoir is that Professor David Thomson of Sidney Sussex warned him that he was likely to be one of the unlucky ones. Besides this prudential consideration, he was feeling increasingly restless anyway. His son Simon believes that an exciting year spent as a Harvard Choate Scholar at the other Cambridge (1954–5) opened his eyes to wider intellectual horizons than were available locally. It made Cambridge seem old-fashioned and parochial and quite simply not ‘a proper city’. High Table was becoming irksome, especially since ‘food after all was only fuel [and] wine never meant anything to me’ (p. 136),[12] and it took up time that he would have preferred to spend with his young family. He also felt guilty because Trinity Hall had been desperate to elect a young bachelor who would ‘live in’ and perform pastoral duties. Although he and Marigold experienced almost nothing but kindness, Best was conscious that he had unintentionally let the college down. This bears, incidentally, on a story which went mildly viral long before Best included it in his memoir—Kitson’s response to the news that Best was to marry: ‘I knew this would happen sooner or later and frankly I am sorry it is not later’ (pp. 102–3). Best sees this outburst as a symptom of misogyny, but it’s more likely that Kitson was embarrassed because he had reassured Trinity Hall that Best would remain a ‘good college man’ for the foreseeable future.

A deeper motive still was rooted in his passion for justice. He referred to the ‘structural unfairness’ of a system that allowed Trinity Hall to grant dining-rights to withered has-beens while withholding Fellowships from two University officers whom it employed to teach. As he told Lord Annan, ‘It came as a shock to me, about 1957, when I was pushing thirty, to realize that I was an Insider in a little world where many were Outsiders. What a masterful system, that could conceal such sociological truth from a not un-bright (but admittedly at that date unpolitical) new member until he was that old! Bah!’[13] Recalling his disgust in the memoir, he wonders aloud whether he might have ‘picked up a bit of … the collectivist ideology of the later ’40s’, or alternatively whether he was becoming ‘rather priggish’ (p. 118). More likely he was reacting against a prevailing hypocrisy that affected men he otherwise liked and admired:

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[11] David Knowles, ‘Needs of the Faculty during the Quinquennium, 1957–62’, History Faculty Board Minutes, 10 May 1955, Cambridge University Library MS, Hist 1/1/6.

[12] Simon Best is puzzled by this comment since it seems to negate his father’s Epicurean side. Was Best perhaps striving too hard to find reasons for his decision to leave Cambridge, as he almost certainly did later on after leaving Edinburgh?

[13] Best to Annan, 23 May 1993, King’s College Archives, Cambridge, NGA 5/1/82.

'I once heard Owen Chadwick describe some dangerous and scandalous colleague as "a lovely man". Bah again!'[14]

'There is less humbug about this university than there was about Cambridge. Not that I don't love Cambridge, nor that I am not often sorry that I felt I had to go.'[15] Best felt no such ambivalence about Edinburgh, which he seems unequivocally to have loved, though when the time came he just as unequivocally left. He responded warmly to the fabric of the city, its masonry, its musical life, its hills and the surrounding countryside, and he participated enthusiastically in choral and amateur dramatic societies. His children all did well at school, while Marigold found satisfaction as a secondary school language teacher and leading light of the city's active 'Spanish Circle', a group devoted to the study of Hispanic culture. They soon gave up on worship at St George's West Presbyterian Church, where the incumbent Dr Murdo McDonald gave 'a very pretty display of oratorical fireworks but overdid it once, when he swung his arm across his chest so hard that he gave himself a bout of coughing',[16] but he appreciated the more liberal Episcopal Church of St Columba's by the Castle. Even there he remained 'churchy' rather than devout and appeased his Christian conscience less by prayer than by good works, serving soup for example to down-and-outs in the Grass Market.

He got on well with most of his university colleagues including Alec Cheyne (of course), Denys Hay, Owen Dudley Edwards, Paul Addison, Harry Dickinson, Christopher Smout and Harry Hanham, among others. He even rubbed along happily with Arthur Marwick, despite the two having to share an office and despite the fact that Marwick's 'principal social interests were drink and women'. They recognised each other as party animals who would be miserable at each other's parties (pp. 158–9). Amiable and complaisant, Best did not involve himself too closely in departmental politics. He quite often changed his mind on issues and therefore was unpredictable, but he successfully made the first-year British history course more thematic and more intensive.[17] Ultra-conscientious in all his academic and pastoral duties, at first he felt slightly overwhelmed by the lectures he had to deliver to 'a class of 200 or more first year lads and lasses, boisterous and noisy, and moreover rather overdoing the traditional Scottish students' strongly independent attitude towards their teachers. Towards all their teachers, that is, except the Professors. If a man is only labelled "Professor", he is regarded as divinely inspired.'[18] Happily the Truth revealed itself to Best just four years later when he competed for and was elected to the Richard Lodge Chair of

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[14] Best to Annan, 23 May 1993, NGA 5/1/82.

[15] Best to Hugh Plommer, 17 November 1961, Cambridge University Library, MSS Add 9367/11/B/213.

[16] Best to Plommer, 10 November 1962, Cambridge University Library, MSS Add 9367/11/B/216.

[17] Private information: Stewart Jay Brown, Harry Dickinson, Owen Dudley Edwards, Alvin Jackson.

[18] Best to Plommer, 1 March 1962, Cambridge University Library, MSS Add 9367/11/B/214.

History at the relatively tender age of 37. This was some promotion. Active, enthusiastic and happy to gad about, the new Professor was always willing to externally examine and accept invitations to speak, whether it was to top-rated academic conferences or to local bodies and school societies. He had already begun to develop an international reputation through indefatigable service on the editorial board of *Victorian Studies*, based in Indiana (1958–71), a post secured through the offices of Kitson Clark. His fascination with the Americas continued with visits to—and multiple contacts made in—Harvard, Chicago, Washington, Toronto, Bloomington and especially Boston, where he formed what was arguably his most devoted friendship (lasting more than sixty years) with the medievalist Giles Constable. After he had worked as a locum professor for a semester in Chicago, Bill McNeill offered him a permanent Associate Professorship there at $16,000 a year: 'Had we not felt so settled in Edinburgh, I might have sought to persuade Marigold to take the plunge' (p. 171).[19] Since Best admitted to feeling 'timorous' when he walked through parts of the South Side, he would surely have been much less comfy in the Chair than the Irish American New Yorker Emmet Larkin who took it instead, but the offer was yet another token of his growing international esteem.

The Lodge Chair was a reward for constant publications, of which two should be mentioned here. *Shaftesbury* was published in 1964, the same year as *Temporal Pillars*. Characteristically elegant and uncharacteristically short, it was widely welcomed as a long overdue attempt to make sense of that morally alpha-gamma 'Great Victorian'. Best's verdict was as usual judicious: 'although a society with too many Shaftesburys would be a fearful experience, one without any would be far worse'.[20] (Perhaps he was thinking of Mary Whitehouse.) As good a judge as Stewart Brown considers that his remains the 'best' and most 'brilliant' biography of that statesman.[21] As was fashionable in the 1960s, the approach taken was essentially secular and political. Shaftesbury's sudden adoption of philanthropic politics circa 1830 was attributed less to compassion pure and simple for the unfortunate than to a desire to sabotage 'satanic millowners', check the growth of manufacturing industry and so stave off a destructive urban dystopia. It was a way of aligning the evangelical Shaftesbury with those High Church opponents of concessions to Catholics and Dissenters whom Best had studied in his doctorate.

If *Temporal Pillars* had made Best's reputation, the best-selling (and still in print) *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851–1875* (London, 1971) made his name. The protean nature of the survey meant that it cannot be reduced to a single theme, but if any one argument dominated, it was the increasing salience of middle-class respectability of the sort that had robbed his own family background of spaciousness and style. Here Best anticipated by almost two decades the crux of F. M. L. Thompson's argument in *The Rise of Respectable Society* (1988). The book was widely praised as the best of three inaugural volumes of a Weidenfeld & Nicolson series on British social history, and even a dissentient had to admit in the argot of the day that 'some readers have clearly been "sent" by this book'.[22] Fans included Barry Smith, who thought that it revivified a tired and formulaic genre by embracing 'sociological ideas', and by incorporating a much broader cast of characters including women, children and felons.[23] Olive Anderson praised 'the imagination, curiosity, and scepticism, strong ideas, abundant knowledge, and explicit ignorance, which together make up a finely idiosyncratic piece of historical writing. Despite its moments of over-exuberance, this is a book which will convert the heathen to the historical gospel and confirm the faithful.' In part a 'nostalgic' throwback from the economically determinist social history of the 1960s to the days of Clapham and G. M. Young, it was also 'a foretaste of what the best writing on social history will be like' when a synthesis between old and new social history has been achieved.[24] Anderson's phrase 'explicit ignorance' was apt for, whereas *Temporal Pillars* had been definitive, didactic even, *Mid-Victorian Britain* was tentatively argued with candid admissions of the many known unknowns.

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[19] It is not clear whether the Chicago offer came before or after his Edinburgh promotion.

[20] G. F. A. Best, *Shaftesbury* (London,1964), pp. 80–105, 129.

[21] G. B. A. M. Finlayson, *The Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, 1801–85* (London, 1981).

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It was a shock to all concerned when Best left Edinburgh in 1974 for a slightly less well-paid Chair at the University of Sussex.[25] At the same time he shut down on British domestic history and took up the study of war and peace. The switch of subject matter needs to be considered first because logically the change of field was more likely to have prompted the change of location than vice versa and also because it had been in his mind since at least October 1969 when, literally rolling up his sleeves before a Cambridge seminar audience, he ruefully announced his intention to turn into a Europeanist.[26] He was then just one month into a year-long Visiting Fellowship at All Souls, Oxford where, encouraged by Hedley Bull and Michael Howard, he mapped out a strategy for a comparative study of national styles of making war. While there he was also put in touch with, and was dazzled by, Pierre Boissier, the leading spirit of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). It may also be relevant that he and Marigold had engaged with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament's Aldermaston Marches, partly in reaction against the Vietnam War. Another factor was his warm friendship with George Kateb of Amherst College, whom he had got to know well during his Harvard year, and whose philosophical case for the possibility of a theory of utopia led Best to think that academic history could and should be useful and relevant. There are indications too that he felt the need to be stretched. Alluding in the memoir to the complex history of political thought, he confesses that most of his teaching had been in the 'mentally and morally less demanding subject of English Constitutional History … I was good at that' (pp. 97–8). It also seems likely, though he does not say so in the memoir, that he disliked the direction in which his traditional areas of study were travelling. The work of historians such as Kitson Clark, Asa Briggs and Harold Perkin was congenial because it related political action to social and economic structure, including 'class'. He was enthusiastic about John Vincent's *The Formation of the Liberal Party* (London, 1966), which for all its paradoxical brilliance struck him as 'Kitsonian' insofar as politics was explained with reference to social and cultural contexts. But then in the following year Maurice Cowling published his manifesto for a new and supercharged 'high political' history which focused on the importance of short-term tactical moves, and in 1974 A. B. Cooke and John Vincent produced *The Governing Passion* (Brighton). Best reviewed both these books with the greatest respect, but his comment that Cowling was 'better informed (and certainly more excited) than most historians about the actualities of party politics and cabinet government' was a clear hint that the new 'Cambridge School' of political history was not for him.[27] He might have reflected that his closest lifelong friend and joshing companion was one of the very finest practitioners of 'high political' history—Tony Jay, joint author of *Yes Minister* and *Yes Prime Minister*—but that was entertainment and Best's moral compass was causing him to think that historians should set their sights more solemnly. At the same time, the history of religion was discarding the political, sociological and institutional approaches that Best had taken in *Temporal Pillars*, and focusing instead on theological doctrines and ecclesiology. It would no longer be feasible to write nearly 600 pages on Church-State relations as he had done without mentioning the Gorham Judgment or baptismal regeneration. In a strikingly contrarian review of David Newsome's great book *The Parting of Friends*, he called for more psychology and much less theology: 'I have heard this … Tractarian story often enough … and some of what Newsome considers high principles and zeal seems to me priggishness and superstition.'[28] Nor can Best have welcomed Geoffrey Finlayson's *The Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury* (1981), which concentrated overwhelmingly on his theological preoccupations, mainly on the basis of MSS diaries to which Best had also had access. Victorian literature was another of Best's enthusiasms, yet he had to admit that he could not even comprehend some of the books written by his good friend George Levine of Rutgers (p. 170).

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[22] A lone hostile (and anonymous) reviewer in *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 September 1971.

[23] *American Historical Review*, 72 (1973), 107–8.

[24] *History*, 57 (1972), 445–6.

[25] It would have come as less of a shock if those concerned had known that, after receiving encouragement from an Oxford college, he had applied for a tutorial fellowship in 1971. In the event he was not elected, possibly because he was considered too old for the position and too elevated in status.

[26] Andrew Jones to Boyd Hilton, 4 and 6 November 2019.

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[27] *British Book News* (1966), 491–2, (1967), 723–4. [This note is subject to the same disclaimer as in note 4 above.]

In the memoir, Best observes that his change of subject matter led to 'the biggest crisis of his professional life'.

> It surprised everybody and was thought by some to be crazy... I was sacrificing a good reputation as a coming man—some were generous enough to say, *the* coming man—in Victorian studies in order to work up from the bottom in a foreign field. And I was serious enough about it to sell my fine collection of books of 18th and 19th century British history … My purpose … [was] to make sure that the continuing presence on my shelves of such dear old friends should not tempt me back to pleasures I was determined to forego. I was in fact experiencing a kind of religious conversion: in gospel terms, cutting off the limb that threatened to offend me. (p. 173)

If books could weave a satanic spell, how much more dangerous would be his continuing in a department where he had responsibility for British history. However, because he loved Edinburgh so deeply and because the decision to leave seemed so wrong in retrospect, he was probably driven to over-explain it in the memoir as a way of persuading himself that it had not simply been a mistake. He cites 'the upsurge in Scottish Nationalism' due to North Sea Oil and a growing resentment against academic Sassenachs, as well as his dismay at the growth of student disaffection arising out of anti-Vietnam War demonstrations (pp. 155, 165). Yet many former colleagues believe that both of these developments were exaggerated. William Ferguson was the focal point of a certain amount of anti-Englishness in the Scottish History Department, but that was institutionally separate and many prominent members of the History Department were English, including Paul Addison and Nicholas Phillipson. Nor was there much revolutionary fervour, as Best himself concedes, but he cared so much for his students that any seeming slight ingratitude may have made him cross. He liked to invite them (the rebels especially) to partake of his family's benign version of Dickensian domesticity and was horrified when a nice lad from 'industrial' Yorkshire politely declined on the grounds that Best was a 'class enemy' (p. 165). It was this growing social distance between staff and students, rather than outright disrespect, that disappointed him. His younger colleague Owen Dudley Edwards recalls that

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[28] *Historical Journal*, 12 (1969), 707–10.

> Geoffrey wanted to connect with students (and would try to use their slang) and he saw himself as their champion. Once in 1968 he helped to organise a meeting [to discuss grievances] during which Geoffrey made the error of referring to a 'very attractive young woman' who had just spoken. This might have been okay in 1960, but it was a little embarrassing in 1968. Although Geoffrey was still a young academic in the later 1960s, things were changing very quickly, and while everyone appreciated his kindness he was not as trendy as he may have thought.

This and some comments about the scantily clad shenanigans of the young indicate that Best had been born on the wrong side of the 'Sixties', a decade which he would surely have embraced wholeheartedly if only he had been ten years younger. As for being 'trendy', Best himself notes that for a while in the late 1960s 'I let my side-whiskers burgeon into mutton-chops' and in 1970 'I acquired the pink [corduroy] jacket … that startled my staider colleagues at Edinburgh but marked me out later as a promising Sussex man' (p. 152). In the previous year he had even dropped his three initials and begun to publish as 'Geoffrey' – all of which suggests that he changed intellectually and mentally *before* and not *because* he went to Sussex.

'Oh mis-judged move! Sussex from '74 to '85 … a garden of Eden with too many serpents.'[29] One important if mundane reason for relocating was the need to be closer to two ageing mothers and other elderly family members. Best was also frustrated by the fact that so many conferences, inaugurals and named lectures took place in the London-Oxbridge triangle,[30] and since Sussex was the most fashionable of the new universities, he may well have dreamed of a 'golden quadrilateral' forming in the near future. He much admired the humanist approach to international relations of the late Martin Wight to whose Chair he was succeeding, and he was attracted to the interdisciplinary approach being pioneered by Asa Briggs, whose departure for Oxford two years later must have been a blow. In the memoir, he duly acknowledges the many satisfying intellectual collaborations of these years and the opportunities for continued good works (such as prison visiting). On the other hand, it may not have helped that he was having to lecture on war and peace studies while still 'learning his trade' as it were, a dilemma faced by many junior lecturers but awkward for a self-conscious academic with 'Professor' before his name. However, by far the main problem arose after he became Dean of the School in 1980, just as the Sussex miracle came up against financial reality. Forced to administer 30 per cent cuts to the wage bill in the course of a year, he found himself harried mercilessly by radical and trade union elements on the staff, and at one particularly 'mulish' School meeting matters came to a crisis: 'At some point of the business and arguments I couldn't go on, broke down and left the room to weep tears of frustration and failure in the corridor' (p. 203). It was agreed that he should quit the Deanship and reduce his student contacts—'shrinking to the size of a part-time Professor' in his own maudlin words[31]—and shortly afterwards he accepted a generous early retirement package, thus helping to relieve the University's financial straits by ending his own career as a full-time salaried academic at age 56.

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[29] Best to Annan, 11 April 1992, KCC NGA 5/1/82.

[30] Best to Butterfield, 14 May 1971, Cambridge University Library, MS Butterfield 531/B/87.

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The Lees Knowles Lectures on 'Conscience and the Conduct of War, 1793–1871' constituted Best's first gig as a historian of Europe. Jack Plumb wrote at once to say how 'deeply impressed' he was by such 'brilliant' disquisitions on 'a fascinating and original subject' and offered to persuade Penguin Books to publish the promised book, though in the event *Humanity in Warfare: Modern History of the International Law of Armed Conflicts* (London, 1980) would appear under the Routledge imprint, mainly owing to Best's friendship with one of that firm's talent scouts, Andrew Wheatcroft. In 1976 Plumb sought to sign Best up for the 'Penguin Social History of Britain Series', an offer that would have brought him much wealth and many readers, but Best declined on the grounds that such an indulgence in former pleasures would amount to regression.[32]

Humanity in Warfare was the first and most important of Best's books under the new dispensation. It neatly complemented Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* (London, 1977), since that book was concerned with the morality of *engaging in* war whereas Best was interested in attempts to subject the process of *fighting wars* to something like Queensbury Rules: *jus in bello* rather than *jus ad bellum*. Key issues included the rights of neutrals and non-combatants, the ethics of invasion and occupation, possible justifications for collective reprisals, and the morality of deploying weapons of mass destruction, on all of which topics Best demonstrated strict impartiality, arguing for example that the British had 'behaved' worse in the 1914–18 sea war than the Germans. The first three sections of the book were historical, beginning with an account of what Best believed was an 'enlightened' eighteenth-century consensus on such issues as laid down in *The Law of Nations* by Emer de Vattel. That consensus broke down completely in the wars of 1793–1815, 1861–5 and 1870–1, but after that came serious attempts to re-establish rules, for example the ICRC, the first Geneva Conventions and the 1899–1907 Hague Conferences. These attempts shattered under the impact of total warfare and guerrilla terrorism in the twentieth century, on which topics Best shifted his ground from historical explanation to questions of law and morality.

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[31] Best to Plumb, 17 June 1982, Plumb Papers, Cambridge University Library.

[32] Plumb to Best, 8 May 1970 and 22 November 1976, Plumb Papers.

The following extract from a letter written by Best to Plumb shortly after publication makes sad reading.

> Reviews … are beginning to appear. So far, 2 plusses and one minus. The two plus reviewers had read it but hadn't seen (or were too nice to remark upon) its flaws; the minus one, John Terraine, had clearly *not* read much of it and had not a clue as to what it was really about, yet he had spotted or fallen on the heart of the flaws—that in the last resort, I have not come to terms with WAR and that my tin trumpet gives forth an uncertain note. I'm afraid that's true. I have come out of the 9 years writing with much more learning about war and the arguments made for and against it since the mid-18th century, but philosophically I am just jelly. Not many readers will notice this, perhaps, and it's all to the good if they do, because so far as the book is *more than History*, its purpose is to contribute to contemporary defence debate. I wish I could have thought it out better, but I couldn't. *It is the best I can do*, that's all.[33]

Terraine's review has not been located. It may well have resembled another by John Keegan, who acknowledged the historical scholarship but deprecated the optimism that drove Best to think that war could be made more civilised. He saw this as potentially vindicating warfare and as getting in the way of attempts at prevention.[34] Overall, however, *Humanity in Warfare* was reviewed much more widely than most academic works and almost always praised in the highest possible terms: 'A model of how [international law] scholarship ought to be undertaken' (*American Historical Review*); 'Excellent historic insights' (*Times Literary Supplement*); 'Refreshingly original' (*British Book News*); 'Equal parts of erudition, common sense, and an understated but pervasive moral concern' (*American Political Science Review*); 'A wealth of topics, materials, and ideas' (*Guardian Weekly*); 'A good book and not merely good, never done before' (*Political Science Quarterly*); 'Just about as close as possible to pitching a perfect game' (*Naval War College Review*); and this from a long review by A. J. P. Taylor: 'a volume replete with scholarship and brilliant presentation' (*London Review of Books*). As before, some critics thought the prose too 'juicy', too 'clever' and too 'mannered', but overall Best should have been gratified by the wide notice and almost universal praise, especially from Americans. Yet it is not entirely clear that he was. He makes hardly any reference to what was arguably his most important book in the memoir. Did he take Terraine's criticisms so hard that even Taylor's praise meant nothing to him? If so, there may have been more to his travails at Sussex than the slings and arrows of the radicals.

There is only space to mention his later books very briefly. *War and Society in Revolutionary Europe, 1770–1870* (London, 1982) launched the 'Fontana Series on

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[33] Best to Plumb, 17 September 1980, Plumb Papers (italics added).

[34] John Keegan, *Spectator*, 245 (4 October 1980), 22–3.

War and Society' of which he was also the general editor. One of its central themes is 'the militarisation of the citizen' as a phenomenon stemming from the French revolutionary wars. The conviction that civilians are 'not necessarily more humane than the military' was then picked up in *War and Law since 1945* (Oxford, 1994), which carried the analysis of attempts to humanise warfare down to the Geneva Conventions (Additional Protocols) of 1977. By linking the increased vulnerability of civilians in wartime to the impact of aggressive populist nationalism in starting wars, Best may have been tacitly acknowledging that appeals to civilians' self-interest might sound a more certain 'trumpet note' than appeals to humanity. He records that the book 'received favourable reviews in a variety of scholarly periodicals, reflecting the variety of particular readerships which I had hoped to reach: military people, students of international relations, contemporary historians and, of course, international lawyers' – before lamenting: 'How interested the [latter] really were in my work, I never could make out. I doubt if the book ever figured in in a law-degree reading list' (p. 224). His evident disappointment is distressing because, although lawyers probably did take little notice, others who valued history found his work liberating, fresh and significant – Barry Paskins, for example, praised his 'wonderful book' and 'wonderful judgement'. He was briefly buoyed when *War and Law* won the ICRC Paul Reuter Prize in 1997.

> It would alert people to the fact that I had recovered from the doldrums of the eighties; that I was not dead (as some people had supposed) but was alive and available again to be invited to give lectures and seminars and to go to conferences… Alas, it didn't work out like that. The book was applauded but no one called for the author. (p. 225)

In words not his own, he felt fated not to be fêted, partly because he had stuck neither to one institution nor to one last.

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After Lewes, the Bests had moved to London in order that Marigold might resume her career as a Spanish language teacher. This left-wing feminist had become committed to socialism during a visit to Cuba with the Global Quaker movement during Geoffrey's sabbatical year (1978–9) at the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington, a connection of which incidentally he was hugely proud. Geoffrey himself remained left-ish, but spoke increasingly of his wish to 'do' something, that is something 'more than History'. His connection with the inspirational Pierre Boissier during his All Souls year and his interest in the ICRC had stimulated a growing commitment to human rights. He associated closely with members of the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics such as Michael Howard, Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, and became involved in the International Institute for Strategic

Studies, especially during Robert O'Neill's directorship (1982–7). Since he also found a berth as an 'Academic Visitor' at the London School of Economics (1985–8), he succeeded in his desire both to undertake research and to be actively involved in policy debate, but the combination seems to have been very stressful for him, and he suffered a recurrence of an apparently psychosomatic asthmatic illness that had first manifested itself at Sussex in early 1982, that is during his second and disastrous year as Dean. This time the attack was considerably more severe. He was an inpatient at University College Hospital for about a month and was thought at one point to be only a week from death. He made a determined effort to relearn the art of breathing by means of the Alexander Technique and this, together with yoga, mindfulness sessions and very long walks led to a substantial recovery, though he was never to regain his old robustness.

During these years a certain tetchiness punctuated his customary bonhomie. It surfaced in his dismissive response to a request by his friend Noël Annan to supply some juicy anecdotes for a forthcoming book, *The Dons*.

> I used to take a certain interest in Oxbridge affairs and used to write a sort of history that included them; but that all ended twenty years ago! If one is occupied with a re-education in international relations and the history of warfare, and writing more and more about the world since 1945, and moving in red brick and metropolitan circles rather than Oxbridge ones, there's no way in which one can keep up with whatever's being written about, or said about, the two ancient universities, even if one particularly cared, which I can't say I any longer do.[35]

Fair enough, except that just two years earlier in 1988, and despite a valley climate that was wretchedly bad for asthmatics, he and Marigold had taken up residence in Oxford, where he remained for most of the last thirty years of his life, only to discover that donnish 'merits and defects are very much the same as they have been, time out of mind'.[36] In the memoir he never expresses any regret at having first left the Oxbridge world or provides any explanation of why he re-entered it, but he does reflect on his failure back in 1961 to appreciate 'the huge though intangible advantages I would forfeit by abandoning a post close to the inner circles of "the Establishment"' (p. 135). In Oxford he became a Senior Associate Fellow of St Antony's (1988–2005) in return for lecturing on the laws of war for the Philosophy, Politics and Economics degree. The International Relations section was under-staffed in those days and no doubt glad to make use of his skills, but Best makes it clear in the memoir that he felt slighted at never becoming anything more than 'an occasional hired hand' (p. 74), listed in *Faculty* documents but without mention in the far more prestigious *College* literature.

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[35] Best to Annan, 29 October 1990, NGA 5/1/82.

[36] Best to Annan, 11 April 1992, NGA 5/1/82.

He did not hide his feelings from close associates but others who knew him only at lunch in St Antony's had no inkling of his discontent, such was his continuing good nature, gregariousness and occasional ebullience. He continued in this role until after the age of 70, but then gave up mainly because of the drift towards postmodern analysis, which he admits he barely understood (p. 226).

As consolation he 'loved' the music, the ritual and the ceremony that dominated his worship, which now took place in Christ Church Cathedral. This was nothing like the 'enlightened' or 'humanist' religion that he had previously sought, but it was ever so nice. Then in 2003 he had the genuine gratification of being elected a Senior Fellow of the British Academy. Admittedly this came late, but Best straddled two different disciplines in each of which he was quite 'young' in terms of time spent on the job. Adam Roberts and Michael Howard pressed his case in what is now Section S5 (Political Studies: Political Theory, Government and International Relations) during 1997–9 but no formal proposal was made. Then in 2003 that section supported a ballot initiated by Roy Foster in what is now H10 (Modern History from 1850). The citation was incontestable: 'He has made a decisive intervention, and earned a major reputation, in several different fields, with works distinguished for their historical imagination, scrupulous research, and humane values.'

There was to be one last field. *Churchill: a Study in Greatness* appeared in 2001 (London) and *Churchill and War* in 2005 (London). The former was the first of several compact biographies to utilise Martin Gilbert's fourteen volumes of official *Life* and documents. Many good judges have placed it among the best of these: 'as engaging and literate a guide to the legend as one could hope for' (Richard Overy); 'refreshingly judgmental, always heartfelt and with a breadth of vision unknown to younger, more specialist historians' (Craig Brown). Some critics thought that Best overly endorsed Churchill's notion of his own greatness and that he was too exculpatory, for example with regard to the Dardanelles, but since others considered him too disrespectful of the 'British Bulldog' he probably got the balance about right. His approach is nicely exemplified in his assessment of the various reasons that were and have been put forward to justify the blanket bombing of German cities. He concludes that 'each reader must judge for himself' and yet, however dispassionate his analysis, no reader could doubt that he himself was highly sceptical. The book is also noteworthy for its calm and sonorous prose in contrast to the skittishness of some earlier works.

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'A sense of feebleness that has recurred throughout my life' (p. 94). This lament over his cowardice in not daring to become an architectural historian comes from *A Life of Learning*, a book in which the medium often contradicts a message that is rueful. For example, in recording how much he had enjoyed writing the Churchill books, he cannot forbear to add: 'as I had not positively enjoyed writing anything since *Mid-Victorian Britain*' (p. 227). Likewise, in referring to how as an undergraduate he had limited his reading to the extent deemed necessary for examination success, he comments: 'This practice of proportioning the amount of preparation to the size of the objective, I have recurrently followed ever since.' He then worries that he must appear 'superficial' to his 'really learned friends … who have not dodged about as much as I have and now have the satisfaction of being world authorities and having disciples of their own' (p. 74). Such passages suggest that he was gloomily preoccupied with his own feelings and reactions, yet the discursive ease of the prose conveys an altogether more upbeat and generous impression of a man with an appetite for new experiences and places, a fascination with meeting people and breaking new ground and a genuine concern for others, public and private. The abiding memory of so many younger scholars is of his kindness. Scores recall how warmly he welcomed them into a new department or wrote to congratulate them on their publications. Of course, many professorial buffers act like that, mixing their kindness with self-conscious condescension, yet there was nothing cosmetic about Geoffrey's goodwill, and remarkably he continued in that mode long after his own career had stumbled and despite the self-doubts that set in.

Having learned that he was fatally ill in 2017 he hid his cancer of the pancreas from Marigold and the children, breaking silence in just enough time for them to adjust. In keeping with his lifelong slightly oblique relationship with Christianity, his funeral celebrated nature and he received a woodland burial.

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