



LESLIE ROWSE

*Willoughby Gullachsen*

# Alfred Leslie Rowse

## 1903–1997

LESLIE ROWSE was a prolific historian who made every endeavour to ensure that he himself figured in the record of his own time. He published well over 100 books, three of them directly autobiographical, three others discursively so, as well as an essay on his favourite cat; most of his other publications abound with manifestations of his enthusiasms and his prejudices; he left voluminous diaries and memoranda of self-analysis, gathered his papers into an archive to facilitate the writing of his biography, and named his biographer<sup>1</sup> well beforehand to make sure it appeared promptly. Paradoxically, it would be easier to write his obituary notice if he had not made such minute preparations for his own enduring memorial, just as it would be more satisfying to give judicious praise to his books if he had not awarded them such boastful eulogies on his own account.

His boyhood, from his birth on 4 December 1903 at Tregonissey in Cornwall to his election to a scholarship at Christ Church in 1921, is chronicled in his charming, somewhat devious, yet rudely frank autobiography. The happy school with hardworking teachers, one of them outstandingly dedicated, singing in the choir at St Austell's church, poor but well-fed and warmly clothed, the peaceful scenery of countryside and sea—the picture is of an idyllic childhood, except that Rowse emphasises

<sup>1</sup> Richard Ollard, *A Man of Contradictions: A Life of A. L. Rowse* (1999). A masterly and definitive work, at once sympathetic and critical. It is much quoted in the following pages. A complete bibliography has just been published by S. Cauveren, *A. L. Rowse: a Bibliophile's Extensive Bibliography* (2000).

the darker side of relationships in his family, and insists too much on the handicaps which added to the glory of his achievement in breaking through into the world of Oxford and the intellectual establishment. He edited the school magazine and was chosen to play Malvolio in the production of *Twelfth Night* (from his photograph it is obvious why). When his father took him (unusually) to the chapel, where a bearded patriarch kept encouraging the preacher with charismatic outbursts, he joined in with Hallelujahs until his father suppressed him. He was never to be backward in putting himself forward and playing a role on whatever stage was available. At Oxford, he wrote poems, was active in the Labour Club, was patronised by Harold Acton the leader of the Aesthetes, and befriended by Lord David Cecil, worked to the point of undermining his health, got his First, and was elected to All Souls.

A glittering world of opportunities opened before him. Politics tempted; he reported on the Labour Party Conferences of 1934 and 1937 for the *Political Quarterly*, and stood as a Labour candidate in 1931 and 1935. It was to be characteristic of his whole career that when he adopted a project he made a book out of it. Perhaps *Mr Keynes and the Labour Movement* (1934) did the party some good among the intellectuals by demonstrating coincidences between the socialist ideal and Keynesian economic theory, but his *Politics and the Younger Generation* (1931) was briskly naive. Embrace the philosophy of Marxism, offer Russia our help in its 'experiment at once noble and exhilarating', abolish the House of Lords, disestablish the Church, replace the fellowship religion offers with Young Farmers' Clubs, Rotary, village institutes, welfare centres, and so draw out 'the deep emotional relationships that obtain among the working people', get rid of the idle rich, tax meals in expensive restaurants, abolish hunting and shooting, close half the pubs, discourage expenditure on sporting fixtures—did anyone ever ask Rowse, the declaimer against 'the idiot people', the frequenter of aristocratic country houses, the scourge of Puritanism, what he thought of his youthful enthusiasms?

Political ambitions faded and, in any case, Rowse had all the while been working towards a career as a scholar and writer, at first in literary studies, then finally as an historian. All Souls was a comfortable haven but with wide horizons, a place in which to form intellectual friendships, both inside and outside the college. In those days he did not quarrel with colleagues and was susceptible to their advice, which turned him towards the tract of English history he was to annex as his peculiar fiefdom, the Age of Elizabeth I.

In his second year at All Souls, he published a little book *On History*

(1927), showing an Olympian loftiness for one so young; there is 'the vast horde of researchers' subject to 'the tyranny of references', a sort of civil service providing back-up materials for the statesmen of the subject, the masters of literary style and interpretation. There was no doubt about the category to which the young fellow of All Souls proposed to belong, but he had to qualify to join that select company. Richard Pares overcame his reluctance to commit himself to frequenting the dusty gloom of the Public Record Office, while conversations in Common Room persuaded him to fix on a specific subject: the Reformation in his native Cornwall. In 1933 he returned to his literary ambitions, albeit with an Elizabethan slant, taking up Veronica Wedgwood's suggestion of a play on *Elizabeth and Essex*. George Bernard Shaw read the impossibly lengthy manuscript: 'the historian has the upper hand of the dramatist in this play'. Meanwhile, Rowse's researches in the Patent Rolls had turned up the story of an affray in London in November 1562 in which Richard Grenville killed a man; the Reformation in Cornwall was put on hold and, in 1937, Rowse published *Sir Richard Grenville of the 'Revenge': an English Hero*. Since there were no family papers, a tessellated pattern of diverse sources had to be constructed; with beginner's zeal Rowse had put in too much, but J. E. Neale persuaded him to rewrite in a less diffuse form. This is a biography illuminated by the affinity between author and subject. Rowse admired heroism, and from now onwards he was to be a patriotic historian; in real life and in recreating the past he was glad to forgive much to those who fought for England in war. He hated Puritanism; this was embarrassing to him since his greatest hero was Drake, who sailed against Spain with fervent Protestant conviction. But Grenville was different, and won a more sophisticated approval; like Elizabeth I and Rowse himself, what religion he professed was nominal, unreal. And there was the magic of the West Country, meaning more to him than even England itself in its proudest days. 'Surely', he says, in Grenville's last hours in the Azores amid the tumult of battle, 'he saw the cornfields, orchards . . . the wood of Combe, in the east the tower of Kirkhampton church . . . and in the west, the sea.'

Cornwall was the ideal subject for Rowse, the Reformation not; his aggressive scepticism meant that he would appreciate the social and economic consequences, but fail to comprehend the driving passions, the fanatical convictions. Luckily, another colleague was at hand to advise, and at Firth's suggestion he changed to *Tudor Cornwall*; it appeared in 1941, delayed by illness and a life-threatening operation in 1938. This was, as he later described it, 'total history'—the land, industry, trade,

seafaring, the structure of society, religion and the Church, political events and administrative details, rebellions and the keeping of order and, so far as evidence allows, bringing individuals to life against their social background. 'Son of man, can these dry bones live?' is the motto on his title page, and by the effigies on the tombs of bishops he muses on the possibility of really knowing them, or 'is the historian's quest but a chasing of shadows that for ever elude him?' Here were the traits which were to characterise his historical writing in the future. Interpretation begins from topography, buildings, the creation of the landscape, the churches and great houses revealing the inspirations of forgotten craftsmen and the accumulations of wealth that made their construction possible. There was then a 'new dynamic force . . . drawing together: Protestantism, the Western gentry, the sea', and the gentry is the class which counts, grabbing monastic lands, leading the overseas voyaging, saving the nation. The 'silly simple people' are only in the background, though he feels for their misery—like the tin workers, 'poor pathetic human beings', at the mercy of the weather and the usurers. Religion he hardly understands and he detests Puritanism; by contrast he has sympathy with the Roman Catholics ruined by recusancy fines, the clergy who conformed to whatever was prescribed from above to keep their offices and maintain their families, and the gentry who hastened to acquire ecclesiastical acres for the enrichment of theirs. And he is a Cornish man through and through—in the year after *Tudor Cornwall* was published, his masterpiece of autobiography appeared, *A Cornish Childhood*.

Here Rowse evokes the scenery in lyrical prose and portrays village life with its fairs, feasts, and *shivarees*; his family and local worthies are presented warts and all, though with an affection lacking in some of his later writings; his mood is mellow: the common folk are, as ever, foolish, but he allows them 'sincerity' and 'directness'; the creed of the Church of England is untenable, but from singing in the choir and familiarity with the liturgy, he had fallen in love with its aesthetic charm, its appeal to the emotions. True, he spent too long on what H. G. Wells called 'specialising in his disadvantages', and posed too ostentatiously as the intellectual who had risen above them—the calling of the school register reminds him of Jules Supervielle's *L'enfant de la haute mer*, and when he kisses a girl unenthusiastically under a lilac tree, he refers us to Alissa in Gide's *La Porte étroite*.

While these two Cornish books were going through press, the country was fighting a war for survival, a war in which Rowse could not join, his ill-health disqualifying him even from fire watching against bombing

raids. He contributed, as was his way, with his pen—a brilliant brief book on *The Spirit of English History* (1943), which the British Council took over for distribution abroad as propaganda. It aimed to explain the creation and continued existence of

This happy breed of men, this little world,  
This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
Or as a moat defensive to a house  
Against the envy of less happier lands,  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.

Geography, fortunate chances and the decencies of compromise had created this proud nation. The island situation invited raiders, but the encompassing sea prevented them from surging in with vast numbers, thus ensuring a beneficial mixture of racial types (if, for the sake of compression and patriotism there was a simplistic characterisation of imaginative and moody Britons, laborious and stolid Saxons and vital, electric Norsemen, this may be forgiven). We defied the malice of tyrants seeking hegemony over the Continent, and we were well-placed to take advantage of the discovery of America for expansion and of the independence of Latin America for trade. Fortunately, our Reformation was directed by the State and our Revolution was ‘achieved with the maximum of national unity’. We had noblemen who saw and served the national interest and knew the advantages of moderation in diplomacy, like Castlereagh and Wellington, who insisted on generous terms at the Congress of Vienna—unlike the German ruling class, who launched the First World War out of ‘an insatiable desire for their nation’s greatness’. Churchill is our most recent and greatest hero; the book is dedicated to him, ‘historian, statesman and saviour of his country’, and in a volume of essays in the following year, *The English Spirit*, there is a breathless chapter on his greatness.

The parallel between Elizabethan England and Britain in the 1940s was inescapable: Churchill and Elizabeth I, Hitler and the Nazi machine and Philip II and the forces of the Counter-Reformation, the smaller manoeuvrable British ships which defeated the Armada and the Hurricanes and Spitfires defying the Luftwaffe. Having made a beginning on the heroic Elizabethan Age, Rowse would surely return to it. In *The Use of History* (1946), designed to elevate the subject to the head of the arts curriculum, he defined his own ambitions, ‘to write the history of society as a whole’; even so, the backbone must be political history, for it is through institutions that men strive to control events. This kind of

historiography is found in Thucydides, Gibbon and Macaulay, especially Gibbon—except for one flaw: while he rightly rejects the supernatural, he fails to recognise the civilising role of Christianity. Having written ‘total history’ for Cornwall, Rowse would now do the same for the Elizabethan Age, with the *Decline and Fall* as his model and, a more recent example, G. M. Trevelyan’s *England in the Age of Queen Anne*, ‘a modern masterpiece’.

The first volume of this grand design appeared four years later. The preface declares that the reader will find ‘no parade of apparatus’, that being for the research slaves, authors ‘who do not know how to write a book’. There was also a revealing definition of the object of the historian, implying the overruling importance of style and artistry: ‘to coax, evoke, describe, rather than to explain’. *The England of Elizabeth: the Structure of Society*, was Rowse at his best, patriotic, enthusiastic, serene, the prejudices as always apparent, but not aggressively so, the discussion ranging over every aspect of human endeavour. His theme was ‘the electric charged moment that our people suddenly reached maturity’; the moment too, comparable only to the desperate struggle ended only five years ago in the defeat of Hitler, of our great national deliverance. Amid the detailed presentation of the working of the administration, the economic advance, the rising gentry, the tense settlement of the Church and the vast national involvement in the overseas adventures, two heroic figures stand out, Elizabeth herself, and Shakespeare. Each has its company of supporting figures, the patriotic aristocrats who saw the national interest and steered the queen, often in despite of herself, and the men of literary genius second only to Shakespeare—Jonson, Donne, Bacon, and Hooker. The inclusion of Hooker (though with the typically anachronistic qualification that it was a pity he never asked himself: ‘what if Christianity is not true?’) shows how Rowse was in his most genial mood about religion: ‘the Christian myth has been wonderfully creative, the most creative that Europe has ever known and is ever likely to know’; and descending from this lofty contemplation and knowing a good administrator when he saw one, he approved of archbishops Parker, Whitgift, and Grindal. There is even something to be said for the detested Puritans, for their ideal of ‘a people intelligent and disciplined’, before it collapsed into ‘just another campaign for power’.

The second volume, *The Expansion of Elizabethan England*, came out five years later. This was a theme enlisting the full enthusiasm of Rowse’s imagination—the heroic adventurers who changed England from ‘the most backward of the seaboard countries’ to the greatest: not just Drake

and the seamen, but also the investors, shipbuilders, Walsingham, the Queen herself—all ‘the elect spirits of the nation’. It was not ‘an empire gained in a fit of absence of mind’ but a ‘Protestant and national venture’. As a patriot, Rowse rejoices in the English superiority to other peoples—they waged war decently and their conduct of international relations was ‘civilised and humane’. By contrast, the Spaniards, brutal to the Indians and cruel in their religious fanaticism, were typified by the market place at Seville where, in the shade of a Renaissance palace and ‘the sumptuous pile of the cathedral’, heretics, including some English seamen, were burnt for their faith. The German colonists sold guns to the Indians, ‘a characteristic part they played’. So too with the Indians: if there is white blood in the veins of tribes around the English settlement ‘the colonists must have been scalped and eaten’. In original fashion, the story begins with an account of expansion on the near borders; with Scotland, where there is ‘a Balkan society’, a land of raiding, fortified towns and churches, ballads and bastardy; with Wales, incorporated in English life as never before under a Welsh dynasty, and as a consequence, increasing in riches and population. Then there is Ireland, an ‘anachronistic Celtic society in decline’, resembling England under the Heptarchy. Rowse approves of the conquest and colonisation of Ireland, strategically necessary and carried out by the same adventurers of the West Country who were to lead the way to the Americas. He is far from the naive Labour egalitarian now—enthusiastically supporting these men on the make, dunning the Queen for Irish land grants and plundering on the Spanish Main (or if they are churchmen, resorting to nepotism)—all to provide inheritances for their children and to build mansions for their ease.

To complete the *Expansion* story, there was one more adventurer to be chronicled: Raleigh, another man after Rowse’s own heart—old Devon family, getting rich by Irish grants, monopolies, confiscated estates and investments in privateering, a poet and historian, a soldier and seafarer. *Raleigh and the Throckmortons* (1962) dashed off when its author was moving away into literary studies, arose from the discovery (passed on by A. B. Emden) of Arthur Throckmorton’s diary, the Arthur whose sister Raleigh married in a clandestine ceremony. It revealed that a child was born and that Essex, an enemy, was mysteriously a godparent; otherwise there was little about Sir Walter, whose story and that of his wife’s family rarely interwove. The result was a patched up affair tacking together the routine life of a country gentleman with the biography of one of the famous Elizabethans. It was a lack-lustre portrait and marked a further stage in Rowse’s evolution into a writer of potboilers alongside his serious

historical studies, marked already by his translation of Romier's miserable history of France (1953) and two volumes on the Churchill family (1956, 1958)—the Churchill name ensuring they would sell. Even so, he had published four major works on the Elizabethan period and he gained election to the British Academy in 1958.

At the time *Raleigh* was published, Rowse was fifty-nine years of age: he was no longer the bright, eager young man of early All Souls days. Now, he was an establishment figure, and rich. 'There's nothing like money, I'm beginning to find—belatedly', he noted in October 1948. By then, his books were earning royalties, and his ambition to become a man of letters was fortified by the prospect of enjoying the life-style of a successful author. As a boy, he had admired the house at Trenarren, framed by camellias and rhododendrons and shaded by tall beech trees, with a distant view of the sea, and as he grew older, he talked to his father about his hope that they might one day be able to live there. At the age of thirty, he was still haunted by the dream: 'so much of my effort, working hard to make money and saving, is directed towards someday going there to live'. In 1953, his ambition was realised and he took up the lease, celebrating, as he celebrated everything, by writing—in this case an unpublished book on the house, the Hext family its owners, and how he was domesticating it with his pictures, his furniture, and his cats. To get the house and stay there required money, and with the practicality of his ancestry, Rowse mastered the art of making it by writing and lecturing, giving value for money and insisting on money for value.

Financial success was an additional stimulus to pride and the development of a fatal flaw in his temperament which was insidiously taking him over. Richard Ollard has chronicled the deterioration and done what can be done to explain it. Rowse did his duty, and more than his duty, by his mother, but describes her as cold, malicious and selfish, 'and from her', says Ollard, 'he inherited his evil, destructive egocentricity'. Twice he had felt the stirrings of deep homosexual affection, but had found no fulfilment; his sexual frustrations could be embarrassingly evident in his conversation. His egocentric drive fed on everything. If he was praised, he recorded it as a permanent testimonial never to be revised; if there was a nuance of gainsaying implied, he could not see it. If he met with contradiction, that was from plotting against him or sheer stupidity, the envious reactions of the third and second raters.

His withdrawal into his fortress of pride may be charted in a process of what he regarded as 'rejections'. Invited to apply for a Studentship at Christ Church, he was passed over. Allowing his name to go forward for

Warden of All Souls in 1952, and having administered college affairs efficiently in the interregnum, he lost to John Sparrow. John was no administrator, but his characteristics were his jokes and his friendship—Rowse was never a man for jokes, and friendship was becoming a lost art to him. He then found a second life-style in America, making money and receiving adulation, until in 1966 he fell out with the Huntington Library, where he had been accustomed to spend half of each year in sophisticated intellectual company. At All Souls, he had become an isolated figure. A fellow who saw a good deal of him in the late 1960s described him as having ‘a kindly side’ and occasionally saying ‘reasonable and even interesting things’, but ‘impossible to get close to, unless one simply played into his own interests and prejudices’. At breakfast, lunch and dinner he ‘put on the same old cracked record’, ‘council houses as fucking hutches, third-raters and bloody fools unable to see why he was right, the idiot people, the money he was making’. In 1973, his fellowship (extended for him to the age of seventy) ran out, and he retired to spend most of his time at Trenarren House in Cornwall, where he was locally revered, the notable Dr Rowse. Such academic friends as corresponded with him put up with his overweening self-esteem and denigration of others because they sensed his inner loneliness and saw that he himself was the chief victim of his outrageous performances.

The project of a ‘total history’ of the Elizabethan Age was brought to conclusion in 1971 and 1972 by the publication of the third and fourth volumes, under the title of *The Elizabethan Renaissance*. The first, subtitled *The Life of the Society*, was a panorama packed with picturesque details—the Court, the London merchants, the rising gentry, the common people. The second, *The Cultural Achievement* was another encyclopaedic survey, from drama, poetry, and music, the three glories of the age, to philosophy, historiography, navigation, medicine, all sorts of craftsmanship, and the cultivation of plants and the raising of domestic animals. These two books introduced new dimensions into the study of social history. Not only did Rowse use the literature of the period to throw light on social mores, he also used architecture—‘frozen history . . . no other art so fully expresses the society that created it’. He loved recounting the planning of the great country houses and reviewing their splendours, happy that the Elizabethans preferred building them to churches. So too, fashions in dress and portraiture characterise the lives of the great. While black and gold figured in court apparel in both reigns, in that of Henry VIII the solemnity was relieved only by green and tawny brown, while under Elizabeth, there were cherry and ruby, blue and silver,

white and ivory. The portraits of the courtiers of Henry VIII show the shadow of 'omnipresent danger', replaced under Elizabeth by 'an open-eyed worldly awareness'. In these two volumes Rowse was better disposed to the common people than usual, though they were, of course, ignorant and irrational. He proudly tells us how they were good trenchermen as against the starvelings of the Continent; their herbal remedies were superior to the deadly preparations of the professional physicians; he goes into untowardly enthusiastic detail about their hunting, hawking, angling, bull baiting, cock fighting, archery, and murderous communal football matches. There is a sort of 'merrie England' appreciation of the lives of the ordinary men—after all, from their ranks came the sturdy seamen who out-gunned the Spanish Armada. As for their religion, Rowse despised its 'moralism . . . earnestness and lack of humour'. To him, martyrs of any kind are tragic fools. His most hateful figure is the Jesuit Parsons, fat, pustular, 'his hands calloused with wire-pulling', exhorting decent Catholics to throw their lives away: 'the world is not a whit better for anything he . . . taught'. The author's preferences among the literary figures are instructive about his prejudices. Bacon, who 'got rid of intellectual junk' is admired, but not Donne, 'brilliantly gifted, fascinating to women and men friends alike, he was not a nice man'.

During the ten years separating the biography of Raleigh from these two volumes on social and cultural life, Rowse had made a new venture: with the panache of one of his fast heavily-gunned privateers sailing off to plunder on the Spanish Main, he launched into the vast competitive world of Anglo-American Shakespeare studies; there was a life of Shakespeare in 1963, one of Marlowe in 1964 and another on *Shakespeare's Southampton, Patron of Virginia* (1965). This rapid fire publication was possible only because of his unremitting industry, his facile pen and his technique of the broad confident sweep; only rarely does he juggle with a mosaic of fragmentary sources. He is a master of the portrayal of locality and milieu: the Stratford of Shakespeare's boyhood, the London street in Bishopsgate where he lived in his days of affluence; the Canterbury of Marlowe's family: the routines of the Elizabethan grammar school; the life-style of university students in Cambridge; the friendships and tensions in a company of stage players; the drunken court of James I. The contrast between the two dramatic poets is discerningly drawn: the one a university man, a classical scholar, a soaring poet, homosexual, reckless, atheistic, the other, not of the university but of a wealthier social class, a professional of the stage, heartily and bawdily heterosexual, the sophisticated inventor of women characters of the utmost charm and courage,

the good citizen who loves the comic oddities of his fellow men, adding to his borrowed plots Dogberry and Verges, Launce and his dog, Shallow and Falstaff. A common thread unites the three biographies, proclaimed in the preface of 1963 as an ‘astonishing discovery’: the earl of Southampton is the subject of the first 126 sonnets. It was an attractive possibility, no more. Dover Wilson led the critical attack, all the sharper because Rowse was claiming originality, failing to recognise those who had made the suggestion before. In April 1969, Veronica Wedgwood, an old friend, told Rowse that she considered the social distance between earl and playwright made the claim implausible. Three months later, she was awarded the Order of Merit, ‘my O.M.’, according to Rowse—from thenceforward their relations were distant. In 1963, Rowse had said categorically, ‘I am not proposing yet another thesis: the problem is solved, as is clear for all to see’. His mind retained its acuity, but his lunatic self-importance was subverting his scholarly judgement.

In proclaiming the Southampton argument with such finality, he had insisted we could never hope to go further and identify the ‘Dark Lady’. Alas, however, in *The Times* of 29 January 1973 he announced that he had solved the riddle. She was Aemilia Bassano,<sup>2</sup> of a family of Venetian origin settled in England as court musicians since the reign of Henry VIII; she had been the mistress of Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, the Lord Chamberlain, then in 1592 she had married a Lanyer. The identification was buttressed by two quotations from the manuscript journal of the astrologer Simon Forman; one, she ‘was browne in her youth’ (hence the Dark Lady); the other, her husband’s name was ‘William’, hence various cryptic allusions in the sonnets). On 10 May, *The Listener* published a letter from Mary Edmond: both passages were misreadings; ‘browne’ was really ‘brave’ and ‘William’ was ‘Millia’, Aemilia in abbreviation, and her husband’s name was Alfonso, as verified from the register of the church in which they were married. To get one quotation out of two wrong may be regarded as a misfortune, but to get both wrong looks like incompetence. Yet it would have been easy to escape with dignity—‘in the euphoria of discovery I misread . . . my best thanks to Mary Edmond . . . the quotations marginal to my argument’. But while avoiding repeating his errors Rowse refused to recognise them and bluffed and blustered until he found himself in the case of a hit-and-run driver who by failing to own up to a miscalculation has committed a crime, every passing day

<sup>2</sup> Good analysis and full bibliography in Susanne Woods, *Lanyer: A Renaissance Woman Poet* (1999).

increasing the difficulty of avowal; he showed himself ungenerous to a fellow scholar, and made himself a laughing stock.

The Aemilia Lanyer theory was attractive: she was a poet, and Shakespeare's actors came to be under the patronage of the Lord Chamberlain, but no evidence exists to show she had met Shakespeare, indeed, attention to the dates suggests it was unlikely. Rowse was not expert in the evolution of the sonnet form and its conventions, and the literary critics he despised published books (in 1974, 1977, and 1979) arguing that the Dark Lady Sonnets were parodies, imaginative exercises, the sending-up of received conventions. The heady moment of apparent triumph of early 1973 faded, leaving its author just another worker in the field of critical studies along with the others. This Rowse never accepted. He excommunicated everyone, even close friends, who turned down his identification, and since so many scholars were failing to do it for him, he boasted of his own greatness as a poet and historian who had solved the major problems of Shakespearian interpretation. At the end of his life, in the *Contemporary Review* (January 1996) he dismissively referred to 'a Miss Edmond, an antiquarian scholar' who had worked on the Bassano family deliberately to disprove him: 'this was impossible, of course, for it was never a theory, but a solid fact'.

At the time of his misreadings of Forman, Rowse was seventy years of age. Yet with frantic industry, perhaps desperate to reinforce his tarnished credentials, he kept on pouring out publications on Shakespeare—Shakespeare 'the man' (1973), 'the Elizabethan' (1977), his theatre, *The Globe* (1980), his portrait as deduced from the plays (1980), a 'Discovery' (1989), full of insights along with ranting against the critics who disagreed with him, and *My View of Shakespeare* (1996)—all in all, from the first biography of 1963 there were fifteen titles, as well as three volumes of 'annotations' (1978). The plays and their author were brought vividly to life in their historical context, and with a finely attuned ear Rowse guided his readers to appreciate the cadences of the verse and its appropriateness to the speaker and the occasion, and with psychological insight he interpreted the characters and their interrelations. And in 1984 he began to publish a modernised version of all the plays. It sounded like a philistine design derived from the author's skill at weighing up the possibilities of the market, especially in America, but in fact, the task was executed with sympathy and linguistic mastery. Rowse listed his rules, based on his specialist analysis of Elizabethan usages; get rid of plural subjects with singular verbs, double negatives, superfluous subjunctives, 'thous' and 'thees' and words that have changed their meaning (for example for 'let' now

read 'stop' or 'hinder'). But the overriding rule was that the poetry, rhythm and rhyme, comes first, and accents are added to ensure correct scansion. These are versions which every producer needs to have at hand. Rowse the historian, in spite of his boasts had failed to rout the literary critics, but as a lover of literature and a poet he had done more to popularise Shakespeare than all of them.

Historians tend to go on writing to the end of their days, though from retirement age they may feel entitled to slacken research and choose easier themes—an indulgence that his critics did not always extend to the ageing Rowse. True, among his prodigious output from the age of seventy onwards there were books that had best been left unwritten. The success of his *All Souls and Appeasement* (1961)<sup>3</sup> was a standing encouragement to reminisce further about his old college; he recounts improbable anecdotes, blatantly plagiarises the joke about 'these ruins are inhabited' and, isolated in his self-esteem, fails to recognise that there were scholars around him at least as distinguished as himself.

His six volumes of contemporary portraits of establishment figures and fellow historians are often acute and still more often unjust. Oddly, his condemnations reveal, that for all his ranting against Puritans, he was on the way to being one himself: he believes in the austere duty of unremitting work, and while his selfishness made him a cad in scholarly controversy, he was never, like Bertrand Russell, a cad in personal relationships—such conduct he censures unsparingly. The essays are judgemental, with the loftiness of implied superiority. Even so, if he wrote too much for his reputation, the publishers always wanted his books, just as, if he was given to scandalous *boutades*, the journalists were delighted to provoke them.

These ill-advised books were rattled off in the scanty time available between producing a dozen volumes of interpretation of Shakespeare, and almost as many popular histories, written no doubt to make money and out of a Stakhanovite pride in output, but also from the sheer pleasure of exercising his gift for educating and entertaining. He was the arch-communicator, the sage of what oft was said but ne'er so well expressed. His technique of quasi-popular scholarly writing—its superficiality and its skills, is exemplified in his *Homosexuals in History* (1977). He wanted

<sup>3</sup> Rowse records interesting conversations and rightly says most fellows were against appeasement. But the limitations of his knowledge are shown in an essay by D. J. (Charles) Wenden (Bursar 1970–90), to be published shortly.

homosexuality accepted as a legitimate life-style, conferring on its practitioners 'the tensions that lead to achievement'. His historical reading was extensive, but he had not consulted medical men, psychologists nor—needless to say, moralists and theologians. The prohibition of homosexual practice comes from Leviticus in the days of high mortality; now there is a population explosion, the rule lapses—an argument with its cogency, but simplistic. In his studies on the Elizabethan Age he showed awareness of the implications of the standard forms of address, the conventions governing relationships (so he could demonstrate the irrelevance of evidence supposed to suggest that Shakespeare or Elizabeth I were anything but heterosexual), but except for the one instance of the German Romantics, he was not concerned with these niceties when co-opting the great into his homosexual pantheon: Erasmus is there as surely as Oscar Wilde. The writing is lively—here a striking phrase—'Philip II had a fixed stare that disconcerted even St Theresa'; there, a rumbustious vulgarity—of Mary Queen of Scots and Darnley, 'whatever attraction she found in his codpiece, he had no headpiece'. No anecdote is missed and curious information abounds, even if not relevant: a mention of Himmler, 'friend of Dr Buchman of the Oxford Group'; of the Night of the Long Knives, 'The murders went on all Sunday, while the vegetarian Hitler gave a tea-party in the Chancellery garden'. The public expected Dr Rowse to air his prejudices and blow his own trumpet, and he did not disappoint them. He 'detested the twilight world of highmindedness'; he hated the Germans and proclaims their cultural inferiority. 'I am a working class man who has retained something of Marxism in my outlook.' Yet he is of the elite. Keynes has admitted that 'the crust of civilisation' has been created by 'the very few'—'a corroboration of all that I have been urging, unlistened to, ever since the thirties'.

The book on homosexuals constitutes a portrait gallery extending over four centuries, indeed, portrayal of character was Rowse's speciality, and most of his popular historical writings are biographies or biographical sketches. Crippled in his own sensibilities by blinkered self-importance and morbid self-analysis, he yet had an instinctive insight into the minds of men of the past, savagely critical when he chose to be so, but sympathetic when he sensed affinities with his own driving emotions. He saw himself in Simon Forman the fortune teller, rich through his profession but not accepted by his fellow astrologers or by the great, even when they were his clients; besides, his story, with the sub-title *Sex and Society in Shakespeare's Age* (1974) gave opportunities for depicting quaint aspects of low life and for putting forward the Aemilia Lanier thesis again, shorn

of the unacknowledged misreadings. *Swift* (1975), a genius deprived of the promotion and honours he deserved, sexually troubled, hating mankind, was close indeed to Rowse, especially since 'there was nothing he would not say', making him a 'wonderfully . . . universal writer'. Another poet, *Matthew Arnold* (1976), haunted by religious doubt, with a mission to educate and Cornish by his mother's side, was sympathetically presented. As for *Milton the Puritan* (1977), with his 'abnormally developed ego' Rowse, not surprisingly, says there is no harm in that if it is a spur to achievement, and his poetry rises to heights of incomparable grandeur. Even so, he is 'a consummate prig' and made ridiculous by his difficulties with women. Like the later *Reflections on the Puritan Revolution* (1986), a catalogue of vandalism, it is a book full of spleen, adding little to historical understanding. By contrast, Rowse identifies himself enthusiastically with the subject of his last biography (1989)—Colenso, bishop of Natal was a Cornishman from St Austell, who battled his way out of abject poverty to the university (not to Oxford, but to Cambridge), took a brilliant degree, brought enlightenment to his Zulu flock and risked his whole career by publishing works of biblical criticism that offended the establishment. In addition to these five biographies, there were three volumes of character sketches, *Eminent Elizabethans* (1983), *Court and Country* (1987) and *Four Caroline Portraits* (1993). Royalty is missing from the gallery, but in essays on the Tower, Westminster Abbey and Windsor Castle 'in the history of the nation', Rowse abounds in friendly loyal anecdotes.

Though scepticism about religion—and sometimes, positive hatred—was evident in all his books, Rowse had always recognised the cultural significance of Christianity in the evolution of civilisation, and the contribution of the national Church to English patriotism; when acting Warden of All Souls, he had been punctilious in attending chapel observances; while on his travels, he was a frequenter of church services, as if to complete the understanding of place and social environment which is a feature of his autobiographical writings. Two days after D-Day, appalled at the slaughter on the Normandy beaches, he came near to recognising religion as our only hope: 'perhaps I am at heart religious', he noted in his diary, 'what I want is a faith to believe in'. In his correspondence at the end of his life, he reverted to the theme: he envied believers. On 1 November 1993 (when he was, in his way, observing the eve of the Feast of his college) he described how he had wept on listening to a sermon in the chapel. 'If there is a Spirit behind the mystery, he is Beyond

us—on altogether too vast, too cosmic a scale. It is here that believers in Jesus Christ are most helpful. They, like you, can make a bridge.’

At the end of his life, for a moment, Rowse’s implacable self-assurance faltered: he feared that he could have made better use of his talents. It was easy to reassure him by rehearsing his achievements, though disconcerting that he sent off the letter for inclusion in his biography. Truth to tell, he had worked with fanatical industry all his days, had published books enough to load a cart and never a dull page in any—except for his poetry, for while he had a critical insight into the art of poetic diction and a splendid ear, the lyrical emotion—except in two or three poems—escaped him. He had made a learned, patriotic, and idiosyncratic contribution to our understanding of the Elizabethan Age. In his verse, short stories and historical writings (including a gem of local history writing on his own parish of St Austell, and breaking new ground with a study of Cornish emigration to America) he had celebrated and made famous his native Cornwall. In voluminous publications, he had brought the thrill of appreciation of literature, especially of Shakespeare, to many, and had fostered an interest in history for a whole generation of readers. Outrageous and wounding in controversy, he finished up being regarded as an eccentric who had added greatly to the gaiety of the nation, an impossible figure whose insults no one took seriously. Contemptuous of mankind, he was generous to individuals who had not crossed him, full of advice on how to write (from history to thrillers), on how to minimise taxation on royalties, and to choose crafty titles to sell well. In Cornwall, he was revered, and he loved to escort visitors around its monuments and scenic beauties. Among the ‘rejections’ he had endured, one long continued: agitate as he would, he could not get on the national Honours List—his contribution to the export drive by selling books in America would by itself have justified recognition. If there was a ‘conspiracy’ against him, this time it was not his ‘second-raters’; the first-raters must have been concerned. In July 1996, when he was 92, Rowse was all but incapacitated by a stroke. That autumn, with embarrassing haste, he was made a Companion of Honour, and he died on 3 October of the following year.

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