HENRY PELLING

Henry Mathison Pelling
1920–1997

Quintessential Pelling

At the end of 1965, the *New Statesman* competition—quite a national institution in those days—asked for 'an extract from Alan Taylor's history of the years 1946–66'. Taylor's volume in the Oxford History of England, covering the period 1914–45, had been published earlier that year, to widespread public appreciation of its ability to make recent events into real history in a terse and provocative style that was often incautiously termed inimitable. Unabashed, another Oxford don, far less renowned than Taylor, claimed the first prize for his adroit parody:

> In January 1965 Sir Winston Churchill died. He was given a state funeral—a distinction reserved for royalty since the Duke of Wellington. He had saved his country twice—once by vigour, in 1940; once by sloth, in 1951–4, when England could have joined the Common Market. It was to no avail. With his death, the last vestige of national greatness disappeared.[1]

This was written by someone who evidently knew Taylor well enough to catch his prejudices as well as his intonation; and the pastiche was sustained to the end without a false note, like *1066 and All That*, using satire to etch images that were not wholly frivolous.

> Rhodesia declared independence. The Queen gave the governor a decoration. The Conservatives, if anything, were keener 'little Englanders' than the government.

[1] *New Statesman*, 17 Dec. 1965, p. 982, for both passages quoted.

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> But there was not much in it. Still, there were the Beatles: if it had not been for them, no foreign schoolchild would ever have heard of England.

Henry Pelling took great pleasure in pocketing ten guineas for this contribution. It was a tangible reward, at 1965 prices, for all the homework he had put in. For this was not his only comment on Taylor's bestseller. The good-natured digs of the *New Statesman* were the distilled essence of a searching appraisal, published (unusually for that journal) as a review article in *Past and Present* a few months later. For many years his colleague at Oxford, Taylor found that he had ventured at his peril onto territory which Pelling had made his own, notably as a specialist on the history of the British labour movement. Hence a natural measure of professional reserve on Pelling's part: 'It is, I think, Mr Taylor's unwillingness to allow for the strength of social and political forces outside Whitehall and Westminster which constitutes the chief weakness of his book.' Though there might be general themes, such as the growth of state power, in Taylor's treatment, the 'staccato style of his narrative does not allow for a measured discussion of such matters'.[2]

What was long remembered of this review was not any frontal bombardment of Taylor's position but the sustained sniping on the flanks. Remarking 'that Mr Taylor himself, in reviewing other people's books, not infrequently regards factual errors as a criterion of general quality', Pelling opened up a finely calibrated small-arms barrage. 'Some [slips] of a larger size are due to Mr Taylor's unfamiliarity with economic and social history.' He was instructed accordingly. 'On electoral matters Mr Taylor is distinctly shaky.' The record was duly set straight. 'There are a lot of mistakes concerned with the Labour Party and its Members of Parliament.' Its social composition and constitutional arrangements were explicated. 'There are a number of mistakes in connection with the trade union levy.' This intractable topic had evidently provoked an exercise of historical imagination—'Mr Taylor manufactures an ingenious explanation of [an] imaginary fact'—which Pelling found it his duty to restrain and rebuke.

Yet it would be wrong to ignore the genuineness of the tributes to a book that Pelling well knew he could not have written himself. He reiterated that trivial errors of fact—'Too much importance should not be placed upon them'—were inevitable in such an enterprise, and were 'neither here nor there to those who read the book from cover to cover'. Pelling

[2] Henry Pelling, 'Taylor's England', *Past and Present*, 33 (April 1966), 149–58; all quotations in this and the next three paragraphs from this review article.

was not being ironical in calling for a second edition of the book—a corrected edition which would be 'not just a brilliant book, but also a reliable one—at any rate, if other reviewers take the trouble to point out the errors that they may find in their own departments of historical interest'. For users of the first edition, the listing of errata served as an obvious, useful public service rather than the inception of a private vendetta.

For Pelling, scholarship was more a collaborative process than a matter of competitive display. Not that he was unimpressed by the commercial success of the book, concluding with a Taylorian flourish that was virtually a rehearsal for the *New Statesman*: 'I shall not be surprised if the Clarendon Press, instead of financing learned books out of the sales of Bibles, begins to finance sales of Bibles out of the profits of Mr Taylor's volume.'

The episode was a classic clash between two fine historians: one a born writer with a gift for the striking phrase, his self-consciously radical public identity in tension with his schooling as a traditional diplomatic historian; the other a scholar with a distrust of hyperbole, his rather conservative mien belying his pioneering commitment to the study of history at the grassroots. Taylor's barbed riposte—'Mr. Pelling is a master of precision'—was subsequently blazoned on the jackets of Pelling's many books. These won the kind of esteem that mattered to him: the deep respect of his professional colleagues, primarily in Britain and the anglophone world and also notably in Japan. His oeuvre secured him a reputation as the foremost empirical labour historian of his generation.

Beginnings

Henry Pelling was born on 27 August 1920 at 4 Curzon Road, Prenton, Wirral, Cheshire. He had a brother John who continued to live in the area. Their father, Douglas Langley Pelling, was a Liverpool stockbroker; their mother, born Maud Mary Mathison, from whom Henry derived his middle name, was the daughter of a Birkenhead solicitor who was remembered in the family for having given F. E. Smith his first brief. Henry was sent to Birkenhead School at the age of six and stayed there for thirteen years till the summer of 1939. Meanwhile, at the end of 1938 he had journeyed to Cambridge to sit the entrance scholarship examinations and was elected to an open exhibition in Classics at St John's College, which was to provide him with not only an academic base but a home, on and off, over nearly sixty years. It seems that he

read Classics to please his parents, who envisaged young Henry following his grandfather into a legal career. When he matriculated at St John's in October 1939, the Second World War had broken out a month previously, and his undergraduate studies were to be overshadowed ever more heavily by wartime constraints. For two years he worked away with his usual efficiency and dedication, with the reward that he was placed in the First Class in Part I of the Classical Tripos in 1941.

At this point, as was normal at the time, Pelling's degree course was interrupted when he was called up for military service. He was commissioned in the Royal Engineers in 1942 and served as a tank commander in the Normandy campaign and the advance on Berlin, 1944–5. He never talked much about his war service, though it was not a forbidden topic. Late in life, asked about his holidays, he would drop into the conversation characteristically dry and understated allusions: 'It was the first time I had visited that part of Normandy since 1944.'

Pelling returned to Cambridge as an undergraduate in time for the great freeze of the winter of 1946–7, when shortages and rationing exceeded those of wartime. Robust ex-servicemen set their stamp upon the college. These were clearly of another tribe than Pelling, who retained vivid memories of conduct that he could barely fathom. Since open fires were then the only means of heating ancient college rooms, as he would explain in later years, undergraduates who had fecklessly gone through their own coal ration were then driven to imposing on others. This showed a shameless abandon that offended his sense of order and equity; he accepted privations with a stoicism bordering on zeal. His political commitments made him a strong supporter of the Labour Government under Attlee, Bevin, and Cripps. Pelling was in many ways the epitome of the age of austerity and perhaps thus its predestined historian.

It was when Pelling came back from the war that he made a decisive change of direction, abandoning Classics in favour of modern history. He gained First Class honours with distinction (a 'starred' First) in Part II of the Historical Tripos in 1947. Under war conditions, he had qualified for the BA in 1942; he took his Cambridge MA in 1947 (incorporated as an Oxford MA in 1949). It was soon clear that he had found his vocation as an historian, his interest in contemporary developments stimulated by his war experiences. The elegance and precision of dead languages had suited his style, and his own prose could often be lapidary; but he now began research on the early history of the Labour Party.

Pelling had no obvious model or mentor. He consulted (Sir) M. M. Postan, Professor of Economic History, about the idea of writing a his-

tory of the Communist Party; but in view of the anticipated difficulties over both sources and interpretation, Postan suggested research on the Independent Labour Party (ILP) instead. Pelling thus started with the plan of covering the ILP's history from its foundation in 1893 to its demise in 1932; the terminal date was successively cut off at 1918, then at 1906, finally at 1900, while the starting date was likewise pushed back to 1880, with the final title, 'The origins and early history of the Independent Labour Party, 1880–1900'. His research supervisor was the Professor of Political Science, (Sir) Denis Brogan, Fellow of Peterhouse. Here was a colourful, intuitive, extrovert polymath, who had indeed dashed off—on the hoof, under wartime conditions—a perceptive book, *The English People* (1943), but whose interests made him best known as a broad-brush interpreter of France and, above all, the USA through journalism and broadcasting. Pelling, with his usual courtesy, wrote: 'I had the good fortune to be supervised by Professor D. W. Brogan, and could draw upon his wide range of historical knowledge.'[3] But it is hard to think that Brogan had much specific input. The thesis was finished in an exemplary three years and awarded the Cambridge Ph.D. in 1950.

Pelling was undoubtedly drawn into the largely untilled field of labour history by his own political convictions, which he had no hesitation at this time in describing as socialist. Other notable labour historians of this generation were Marxist not only in allegiance but in methodology. For example, another Cambridge Ph.D. approved in 1950 was that by E. J. Hobsbawm of King's College, on 'Fabianism and the Fabians, 1884–1917'. But Pelling was an ethical, evolutionary socialist and, above all, an empiricist, determined that triumphalist myth-making should yield to exact scholarship.

The Origins of the Labour Party (1954), reshaped from Pelling's Ph.D. thesis, is a remarkable pioneering study of a subject typically enshrouded by polemic or myth. The variant socialist doctrines of the Fabians, the ILP and (perhaps best of all) the Marxist Social Democratic Federation are all spelt out with exemplary clarity and minute research into little-used archives. It is invaluable on then forgotten figures like H. H. Champion, and on obscure movements like John Trevor's Labour Churches. On the other hand, the emotional intensity of crusaders like Keir Hardie seemed rather less accessible. Half a century on, it remains a classic pioneering study, built to last.

[3] *The Origins of the Labour Party* (1954), p. vi.

If it is a book that still repays attention, it is not only for its dispassionate reporting of pathbreaking archival research, but because a close reading discloses a coherent view of class and politics. As Alastair J. Reid, Pelling's collaborator at the end of his life, cogently argues, this amounts to a more conscious and deliberate development of a sophisticated concept of class than is usually appreciated.

> Overall, then, we may say that Henry Pelling's approach to the history of the Labour Party combined elements of evolutionary materialism with institutional realism, a concern with leadership choices, the interaction with rivals and a non-rationalist psychology. It was this flexible package which enabled him to produce such a wide range of insights into popular politics in his subsequent work. Some of this was already evident in *The Origins of the Labour Party,* acknowledging as it did that underlying economic and social trends could be outweighed by other, more strictly political, factors and that the two mainstream parties were able to reconstruct genuine appeals even under a more democratic franchise.[4]

Here, then, was the foundation of much of Pelling's subsequent work, observing with a sympathetic but unillusioned eye the social and psychological circumstances that provided the grassroots context of political democracy. In the set-piece debate over the downfall of British Liberalism, Pelling was often—despite his own disclaimers—to be associated with a rigid class-driven mechanistic interpretation of these political changes, an approach which his own detailed research in fact did much to modify. The idea that history, even labour history, could be reduced to a unilinear or determinist 'class' dimension never held him in thrall. But his work stands secure when that of many of his more ideologically driven contemporaries has been undermined by subsequent research.

Oxford years[5]

It was a great triumph, but also a considerable uprooting, for Pelling in 1949 when, his Ph.D. still unfinished, he was appointed to a Fellowship and Praelectorship at The Queen's College, Oxford. The post had a varied ancestry. Pelling's immediate predecessor was a lecturer, the future

[4] Alastair J. Reid, quoted by kind permission, and substantiated in detail by the author's as yet unpublished paper, 'Class and politics in the work of Henry Pelling'.

[5] This section is closely based upon a draft kindly supplied by Professor Kenneth O. Morgan (Lord Morgan); though I have amended this and accept personal responsibility for the text as it stands.

Cabinet minister Edmund Dell, then a Marxist historian of the English civil wars, while down to 1939 the college's more recent history teaching had been in the hands of Godfrey, Lord Elton, a one-time protégé of Ramsay MacDonald who had gravitated to the far right. There was an obviously talented internal candidate, some five years younger, in F. M. L. Thompson, destined to become a distinguished Director of the Institute of Historical Research. Michael Thompson did not himself harbour a grudge at being passed over but some of his patrons and partisans among the Fellows of Queen's looked askance at a usurper imported from Cambridge, gratuitously thrust upon them.

It was thus not surprising that Pelling found it difficult to adjust to Oxford. For both personal and professional reasons, it took him some time to feel at home as a tutor in his new college. After all, his experience as a historian went back only a couple of years, and his expertise in the field covered as yet a narrow range; yet his remit covered both Modern History and Politics, and he was thus a member of two faculties. Moreover, he did not enjoy lecturing in the Schools, where his Attlee-like style was precise but lacking in inspiration. He always felt himself to be very much a researching don, with rather less interest in teaching undergraduates or taking part in college or university administration. He had to be pressed very hard to take on the post of Dean of Queen's for the year 1963–4, and he never agreed to become a university examiner in either of the faculties in which he served. On the other hand, he became a warmly committed supervisor of graduate students, many of whom became good personal friends.

As a member of The Queen's governing body, he was not immediately easy to get to know. His manner was retiring, almost ascetic. Some colleagues resented his unwillingness to take on college posts, and his tendency to leave the evening dinner table in hall earlier than other Fellows to get back to his academic writing. Most, however, found him to be a colleague of quiet kindness, a generous host on occasions, and a humorous observer of the more baroque aspects of the Oxford academic scene. He could be a lively conversationalist, often in a gossipy almost feline way, and had a great passion for puns. He enjoyed it when a guest at dinner sat between two dons named Frost and Boyling, the latter (so he claimed) the frostier of the two. When a Queen's don who researched in Old French inadvertently left his wife behind in Dover while driving back home from France (admittedly a bizarre piece of behaviour even in Oxford) Pelling's response was to invent a newspaper headline—'Old French leaves behind Old Dutch'. He was also an enthusiastic contestant

on the tennis court. He was charming towards colleagues' wives (especially the prettier ones). One young wife had the free use of his bath during the winter freeze of 1962–3. Such episodes suggest that at heart he was hardly the classic college bachelor of legend.

One of the doubts that surrounded his appointment at Queen's had been the fact that he had as yet no academic publications to his name at all, a situation unlikely nowadays under the rigours of the RAE. However this was to change dramatically in his sixteen years in Queen's during which he emerged as an extraordinarily prolific and authoritative historian of modern Britain, and especially of the early Labour Party and trade union movement.

Between 1954 and 1963 he published no fewer than nine substantial books, despite his complaints at the way that Oxford teaching duties ate into his time as a writing scholar. As a direct sequel to *The Origins of the Labour Party*, there was the volume, co-written with Frank Bealey, *Labour and Politics, 1900–1906* (1958). This was a close collaboration, made easier by the fact that both men were, for several months, living and writing in rooms in the same house in London. Their book took the story on in exemplary fashion down to the general election of January 1906 and the formal creation of the Labour Party. The incisive treatment of the hitherto unknown electoral 'Entente' of the summer of 1903 between the Liberal chief whip, Herbert Gladstone, and Ramsay MacDonald for the Labour Representation Committee was a breakthrough in understanding. These two monographs represented a fine scholarly achievement of permanent value; and Pelling was only deterred from producing a third volume on the period 1906–14 because he understood that this task would be completed by an American historian, Professor Philip P. Poirier.[6]

Pelling was unusual for his era in developing an interest in American history, notably at the University of Wisconsin, where he spent much time during a sabbatical year in 1953–4. This produced two of his books at Queen's, a very sound and unduly neglected one-volume survey of *American Labor* (1960) in the Chicago History of American Civilisation series and *America and the British Left: from Bright to Bevan* (1958). The

[6] Philip P. Poirier, *The Advent of the Labour Party* (1958) was published in the same year as *Labour and Politics* and covered exactly the same period. But Poirier never in fact fulfilled his ambition to produce a sequel. The result was that, while the two books duplicated each other as full scholarly histories of the Labour Party up to 1906, the subsequent period had to await the attention of a later generation of labour historians.

latter was a pioneering study of political interrelationships between American and British reformist politicians and movements in the near-century following the American Civil War. It would have been fascinating to have him follow this up later on, particularly to help bridge the yawning gap between British students of the New Liberalism and American historians of US Progressivism in the Age of Reform. But the gulf, psychological as much as scholarly, between a Henry Pelling and a Richard Hofstadter was too great. No 'psychic crises' or 'paranoid styles' ever intruded into Henry's work.

Most of his other books in this period, however, were brief surveys. Thus *The Challenge of Socialism* (1954) was a volume of documents with commentary. In writing *The British Communist Party* (1958), he was well aware that he was treading on contentious ground with political enemies ready to discredit his account. His response was typical: simply to check and double-check every fact, relying on empirical evidence to counter ideological prejudice. If this is not the recipe for an exciting read, neither did his *Modern Britain, 1885–1955* (1960) succeed in rising above the level of a workmanlike survey. When he later wrote, apropos Taylor, that 'for the newcomer to the subject, there is an absorbing story which will grip him as textbooks rarely can,' Pelling knew whereof he spoke.[7] His own effort, in a metier more difficult than it often seems, never became widely used. He did, however, became well known to generations of students through his *Short History of the Labour Party* (1961), which went through eleven editions in his lifetime, the last (1996) in collaboration with Alastair J. Reid. *The History of British Trade Unionism* (1963), commissioned for Penguin by Professor (Sir) John Plumb, was likewise updated many times. All are impeccably accurate and helpful introductions, but are written in a downbeat, sometimes pedestrian style and their total effect was unfairly to diminish Pelling's standing amongst his academic peers and much delayed his recognition by the British Academy. In the academic and ideological excitement associated with the rising field of British Labour History in the 1960s, historians often overlooked the fact that Pelling had brought new standards of meticulous scholarship, along with important new insights to a hitherto unexplored field. His history was always strictly non-partisan and objective and he made all too plain his distrust of flashiness or showing off.

[7] Henry Pelling, 'Taylor's England', *Past and Present*, 33 (April 1966), 151.

Return to Cambridge

Pelling's career was a prodigy of industry and dedication that perhaps took its toll. Though highly appreciative of female company, potentially uxorious, and fond of children, marriage never came off. He made lifelong friends, some of them formerly his pupils, but his own work always came first. His move to Cambridge in January 1966, to the new post of Assistant Director of Research in the History Faculty, acknowledged this priority. His unexpected departure from Queen's was greeted with much regret, and not only because it left the college with teaching difficulties for several months until his successor, Kenneth O. Morgan, was able to take up his post.

In Pelling's own words, in private correspondence, 'It is just that I wish to concentrate more than seems to be possible in Oxford on research and the supervision of research.'[8] He believed that he would put in far fewer teaching hours in Cambridge, perhaps misled by the title of a post—strictly more appropriate to a science department—which the History Faculty had opportunely appropriated as a covert means of appointing an extra lecturer, with the expectation of a normal lecturing stint. Some rueful disappointment here was compensated by Pelling's evident pleasure at returning as a Fellow to St John's College, which he had left sixteen years previously and where he found old friends and colleagues. He let slip at the time that one reason for his move was that St John's, unlike Queen's, made provision for life Fellowships; but this was said with a Pellingesque anti-sentimentalism that belied his own satisfaction at coming home. The fact is that he went on to occupy a succession of book-lined, paper-strewn rooms in various courts of St John's College until his death.

At Cambridge Pelling was no more successful than at Oxford in his lectures for undergraduates, who found them arid and lacking in any charismatic projection, least of all of the lecturer's own personality. This impression was natural enough, though some students who stayed on to do research themselves subsequently became connoisseurs of the subtly graded nuances in the Pelling register: dry, yes; dull, no; acerbic, occasionally; satirical, curiously often; self-mocking—sometimes difficult to be sure. He had many graduate students and was a Ph.D. examiner of formidable rigour, though also showing real kindliness towards younger his-

[8] A letter to Kenneth O. Morgan (in Lord Morgan's possession).

torians. One Japanese scholar, recognising a debt to his old supervisor, would bring him gifts quite exceeding the conventions of even Japanese courtesy—a camera was particularly appreciated. Seeking to alert one Fellow, who was about to travel to Japan, of the need to be prepared for such exchanges, Pelling thoughtfully reminisced about the protocol here: 'He gave me, on his last visit, a Sony colour television set with video recorder.' 'And what did you give him, Henry?' A fleeting smile, then: 'A small box of candied fruit.'

Henry Pelling always relished the idea of a good bargain. Another Fellow recalls, on visiting him in hospital shortly before his death, that he mentioned needing to send a letter to a particular colleague: 'Would I bring him an envelope and a postage stamp? Pause, while he licked his lips. Then: "A second-class stamp will be sufficient".' This was Pelling in a familiar and well-understood role, well-rehearsed too, and a character part for which he had natural advantages. But it was the same man who unobtrusively gave presents to the children of his friends, made up the recurring deficits in the college history society's funds, and could be relied upon to bring a couple of bottles of good champagne if asked to Christmas dinner.

Pelling was not mean, but he was certainly careful with his own money. Some saw it as an irony that the workings of the capitalist system fascinated him not only as critic and observer but (schooled by his stock-broker father) as investor too. His shrewdness in managing his investments was a source of gratification to him. Many people were surprised that his will was proved at £1,875,800.14; but it was totally in character that the estate was divided equally between his college and the Save the Children Fund. Moreover, he took particular satisfaction in his ability to capitalise on his understanding of the political system by betting, quite heavily, on election results, culminating in the 1997 General Election, on which he made his usual healthy profit.

Often considered insular in his tastes and experience, Pelling enjoyed travelling. He went abroad almost every year in the 1950s and 1960s, when currency restrictions were still irksome: to Yugoslavia, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Cyprus, or Spain (a favourite destination) for summer holidays, often in the company of a congenial colleague; and in the 1970s to Morocco, Romania, and a couple of further holidays in Greece. His academic contacts around the world led him further afield: in the spring of 1978 he went round the world, en route for a month's stay in Japan, with stops to meet colleagues in Delhi, Hong Kong, and Vancouver. His professional connection with the USA was fostered by

visits over a thirty-year period; the last was to the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington DC in 1983, during which he received an honorary doctorate from the New School for Social Research in New York.

This proved, however, to be his last transatlantic journey; and his foreign travel was to be increasingly restricted by his infirmities. The pace at which he had driven himself had slowed with his serious stroke in 1971, leaving him permanently scarred despite a resilient recovery; and after this he seemed older than his years. Always tall and wiry, standing an inch over six feet in his prime, he now became a stooped figure, sharp and birdlike. In 1975 he had taken the Litt.D. and in the following year had been promoted to a Readership (a sequence which he saw as cause and effect, in advice helpfully imparted later to any university lecturer who admired his scarlet gown at a formal feast). In 1980, however, seeing himself now as ‘a broken reed’, he decided to retire early from his university post. But he had no intention, of course, of relinquishing his Fellowship at St John’s.

A short break in his Fellowship nonetheless occurred. It was accidentally prompted by the high regard in which, especially in retrospect, he was held at The Queen’s College, Oxford, which appointed him to a Supernumerary Fellowship. This intended act of simple affection led to a curious constitutional dilemma. Statute XXIV of St John’s states: ‘A Fellow of the College shall vacate his Fellowship if he shall become Master or Fellow, other than Honorary Fellow, of any other College.’ But what Pelling had been offered was not an Honorary but a Supernumerary Fellowship of Queen’s, though he made light of the difference; moreover, he insisted on accepting. He thus staked his tenure—no trivial matter for a resident Fellow—on construing the statutes in a sense contrary to that understood by the college.

It was one bet that this master of terminological exactitude lost. His Fellowship lapsed: only to be restored shortly afterwards once Pelling had made the necessary amends by belatedly extricating himself from Oxford’s embarrassing embrace. He became junior Fellow at St John’s all over again. Some years later he amended his entry in *Who’s Who*, to list himself as *socius ejectus*. This was a reference to the style used by Thomas Baker, one of the College’s high Tory non-jurors, after finally being deprived of his Fellowship in 1717—a mordant and arcane allusion thoroughly typical of Pelling. The political twist was not lost upon him, nor the fact that Baker, for all his stiff-necked proclamation of principle, was nonetheless treated with discreet consideration by his college, which allowed him to occupy his rooms until his death.

In retrospect

Pelling could afford to rest on his laurels (even if he naturally refrained from doing so). He was gratified when a *Festschrift* in his honour was presented to him in the Combination Room of St John's: *The Working Class in Modern British History* (1983), edited by Jay Winter, one of his old pupils. But most of the contributors had not, in fact, worked under his supervision; and they hardly represented a party line on once contentious issues like the downfall of Liberalism and the rise of Labour. In short, there was no school of Pelling; and the research seminar that he ran for many years in Cambridge, first with Kitson Clark, then with Derek Beales, and latterly with Peter Clarke too, was likewise characterised by diversity and tolerance. Pelling's forte, as might be expected, was the wry, deflationary question rather than the inspirational insight; and sometimes, it must be said, the meetings needed efforts to animate them.

Pelling's own books contain no obvious masterpiece, sweeping all before it. Instead they represent an oeuvre that should be seen as a whole, as was argued when its significance was recognised, perhaps belatedly, by his election as Fellow of the Academy in 1992. Here stands a scholarly achievement in at least two fields. For, having made himself the unrivalled authority on the history of the labour movement, Pelling had branched out in the 1960s into the new field of electoral history. *The Social Geography of British Elections* (1967) was the result. This was a radical departure in his work, an attempt to apply the methods of Nuffield psephology to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It was perhaps only partially successful and too uncritical in its use of local newspapers. But the attempt showed much originality and boldness, and surely assisted in the more careful depiction of the tangle of forces that produced the decline of Liberalism and rise of Labour in the early twentieth centuries. Its statistical data has been much mined by later scholars and it remains an indispensable handbook to further research.

Curiously, Pelling saved his most exciting ideas, not for his big books, but for a series of trenchant essays, often originating as after-dinner talks or seminar papers. This was the origin of his influential volume, *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (1968). Each of the first half-dozen essays broached a theme which itself could—and was to—sustain subsequent research worthy of book-length publication. Though ruthless summary is inadequate to convey this properly, it may indicate the fertility, in their day, of Pelling's suggestions: that the working class were not

always enthusiasts for the growth of a welfare bureaucracy; that their religious commitments have been exaggerated; that the old Marxist standby of a 'labour aristocracy' is a concept too far; that the interests of trade unions have been more sectional than socialist; that imperalism was more populist than genuinely popular. If such propositions now sound like mere common sense, this is testimony to a long-term historiographical shift rather than to any lack of perception on Pelling's part, more than thirty years ago.

Pelling once confided in the 1970s that his earnings from royalties exceeded his academic stipend as Reader. Again, this was because he had so many books in print at any one time rather than because of a single bestseller. Still, his biography, *Winston Churchill* (1974), was the most commercially successful of his books, at a time when it was a lucky author who could secure a five-figure advance. Perhaps it is true that any book on Churchill will sell. Pelling was no natural biographer and here he found his talents less than perfectly matched to the subject. There were adroit exercises in demythologising particular legends, though no efforts at debunking the central achievements of a statesman whom Pelling fundamentally admired. He thought later that he had perhaps been too kind. For him, however, accuracy always out-trumped rhetoric, and this left him rather tone-deaf to important aspects of Churchill's life and impact.

Historiographically, of course, Churchill has found many of his detractors in recent years on the political right, and many of his defenders on the liberal left. Pelling may be said to fit this mould, choosing to finish his career with a sympathetic account of Churchill in relation to a 'post-war consensus' of which both of them approved. Pelling's membership of the Labour Party was maintained up to the 1970s; but he then became increasingly troubled by the contemporary role of the trade unions, whose history he had done so much to foster. He readily admitted that his sympathy for them had become diluted and talked of their 'over-reaching' power, especially after the 'winter of discontent' in 1978–9; and he started voting Liberal. He was a natural and early convert to the Social Democratic Party (SDP) as founded in 1981. But this involved no rethinking of his own stance as an historian; he remained an admirer of Labour Governments, it might be said, longer than he did of the Labour Party.

For an historian of the Labour Party, it was an irresistible challenge and opportunity, as soon as the public records became available under the thirty-year rule, to write a history of the Attlee Government. Unfortunately for Pelling, he was not the only one. His successor at Queen's,

Kenneth O. Morgan, had had the same ambition; and his fine book, *Labour in Power, 1945–51* (1984), published in the same year as Pelling's *The Labour Governments, 1945–51* (1984), frankly overshadowed it. Pelling's account, for all that, exemplified his ability to master mountainous archival research, brought to order through taut and concise exposition. Less successful, though a natural offshoot of this work, was his rather slight book, *Britain and the Marshall Plan* (1988) which had the misfortune to find itself almost wholly pre-empted by an altogether more substantial publication of the previous year.[9] None of this escaped vigilant reviewers. Indeed, some apprehension about Pelling's book had induced one of his younger colleagues to volunteer to read it shortly before publication, though practically the only amendment effected was to substitute a few chapter headings (for example, 'Dollops of Dollars' instead of 'From the aftermath of devaluation to the early months of 1950'). Pelling readily accepted but did not really applaud such meretricious salesmanship; he simply volunteered that he had seldom asked a colleague to read a manuscript for him; and he did not ask again.

After retirement, as planned, Pelling continued to live in St John's College. Naturally, he was a fixture at high table, always attentive to guests, especially to women who, in the early years of co-residence, might otherwise have felt over-awed or simply out-numbered. Pelling could reveal himself as a connoisseur of cliché, with an ironical twist that elevated the commonplace to a minor art form. His own image—rather dry, distinctly donnish—was tinged with self-awareness, to an extent that was sometimes difficult to discern. In the last three years, when he could no longer walk, due to a further stroke and a fall, he acquired an electric buggy, and the College installed a series of ramps, so that he could still get around and dine with the Fellows. Pelling continued writing 'my last book' on *Churchill's Peacetime Ministry, 1951–55* (1997) which—tenaciously, triumphantly—he saw to publication in his final months.

Henry Pelling's life had been his career, and his work was now done. He was obviously in decline: not so much mentally (though he became more difficult to engage in real conversation) as physically, with a degree of immobility which was beyond the best efforts of the College to compensate. He had been admitted more than once to the Midfield Lodge Nursing Home, near Cambridge, and it was there that he died on 14

[9] Michael J. Hogan, *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain and the reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947–52* (1987).

October 1997; the causes were given as congestive heart failure, ischaemic heart disease, hypertension and myocardial infarction.

Henry Pelling's funeral in the chapel of St John's College on 22 October became a great Cambridge occasion, remembered by many who attended. The coffin had rested in the ante-chapel overnight. The service began at 11.30 a.m., attended by a large number of Fellows and members of the History Faculty. The college choir sang the anthem, *Requiem aeternam dona eis Domine*. The psalm chosen for the commital contained the words, 'I heard a voice from heaven, saying unto me, Write. . . .' Among the six pallbearers were two former Masters of the College (Sir Harry Hinsley and Professor Robert Hinde), both of whom had first known Pelling as an undergraduate, and four Fellows, one of whom (Professor John Crook) had matriculated as another Classicist on the same day in 1939. The coffin was taken slowly through the thin autumnal sunshine to the Great Gate, thronged by now with old colleagues, sombrely impressive in their black gowns. The police had temporarily reversed the one-way traffic system to allow the hearse to depart down St John's Street to the crematorium. Henry's brother John Pelling turned at that moment, taking in the scene, and murmured, mainly to himself: 'Yes, yes, it's right that it should be here—this is where his life was.'

PETER CLARKE
Fellow of the Academy

Note. Obituaries appeared in: *Guardian*, 21 October 1997, by Peter Clarke; *Independent*, 21 October 1997, by Peter Linehan; *Daily Telegraph*, 27 October 1997, by George Garnett; *The Times*, 31 October 1997, by Kenneth O. Morgan.

There are no Pelling papers; his passports are in my possession; information on his academic career is held by St John's College, Cambridge. There is an instructive video: Henry Pelling interviewed by Ross McKibbin, *Interviews with Historians*, Institute of Historical Research (London), 1988. I am grateful to the following friends of Henry Pelling for information and for their comments on my draft: Stefan Collini, Peter Linehan, Ross McKibbin, Kenneth O. Morgan, Alastair Reid, Maria Tippett.