

A certain kind of English crime novelist might describe Anthony Fletcher, with restrained approval, as a certain kind of Englishman. That, born in 1941, he was shaped not in the golden age of that genre but in *the years* of post-war nostalgia for it, goes some way to accounting for the striking combination of traditionalism in his concerns with the fabric and institutions of English country life, and the increasingly radical individualism, not to say rebelliousness, of his sympathies and approaches. He came from just such a background as our novelist might have invented for him. His father was a distinguished scientist in government service, and in later life an antiquarian who pioneered the use of dendrochronology in dating medieval buildings; an uncle was a Labour MP and junior minister. On his mother's side soldiers and Anglican clergymen – including Richard Chenevix Trench, Archbishop of Dublin at the time of the disestablishment of the Irish church – abound; in the Merton room in which Anthony lived in his second year a plaque commemorates a Chenevix Trench killed in the Great War.

I met Anthony in early October 1959, two of Merton College's ten History freshmen eyeing one another with all the suspicion and unease of a first tutorial meeting. Alone among us he wore a tie (and out of doors, it became apparent, a scarf) in the colours of his old school – an unpleasing combination which quickly became familiar, since it denoted an institution whose alumni appeared peculiarly and unfathomably determined to advertise their association with it. In Anthony's case, however, I discovered that this was not for any of the reasons which first occurred to an admittedly slightly chippy outsider – not from social conformity, still less snobbery or exclusiveness, and certainly not as an expression of devotion to Wellington College, or the causes and values for which it stood. It was a disguise, and part of a larger disguise that he has always worn, not for deception but to avoid the appearance of distinctiveness, and with it distraction. He is not only an unassuming man, but one very focussed, very consistent, in his own quiet way even ruthless, in following his chosen path. It was ever thus: while others, like all freshmen, expected to talk through the night, Anthony invariably and silently disappeared at his regular bedtime; if the gathering happened to be in his bed-sitter he would retire for his bath and then to bed, while cheerfully bidding the rest of us to carry on for as long as we liked.

The most obvious mark of that independence is that Anthony belongs to no historical school, and can be identified as the student or follower of no great predecessor in seventeenth-century studies. He has no Ph. D. – and once shocked S. T. Bindoff, a notable devotee of academic pomposities, by declining to follow up a professorial intimation that he 'might be allowed' to embark on one. The Merton tutors, R. H. C. Davis, J. R. L. Highfield and J. M. Roberts, formed an outstandingly congenial and talented team, but none of them was especially interested in the seventeenth century. There was, of course, no shortage of great figures in the Oxford of the time. Christopher Hill, Hugh Trevor Roper, Lawrence Stone, John Cooper, were in their prime; Keith Thomas was a rising star; and Conrad Russell, still a graduate student in our first year, taught us Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (in Latin of course) and often shared our late-night coffee – not that his conversation kept Anthony out of bed. I doubt

that any of them influenced Anthony as much as W. G. Hoskins, whose seminar on Tudor economic documents he attended in his third year. Hoskins's *Making of the English Landscape* was among the not particularly impressive (that is, pretentious) collection of books I inspected on my first visit to Anthony's room, along with several volumes of Pevsner's *Buildings of England*, in their original Penguin-sized format, with shabby paper covers and minute soot-and-starch illustrations, and of the works of A. L. Rowse. In short, and with hindsight, his historical curiosity was already formed. It would be hard to think of a historian less like Anthony in personality and temperament than Rowse, but his deep and deeply romantic attachment to the English countryside had found an echo, and more than an echo.

It would be quite wrong to conclude that the road to *A County Community in Peace and War* (1975), *The Outbreak of the English Civil War* (1981), and *Reform in the Provinces* (1986) already lay open, or was mapped out. As an undergraduate Anthony had no thought of making historical research his trade – perhaps because it had long been a hobby for him – and, Hoskins notwithstanding, the sort of history for which he cared did not, in the early 1960s, beckon the ambitious. It was only in his final year that he decided to become a history teacher, and probably only the combination of his scholarly energy and the unusual opportunities created by the sudden and rapid expansion of universities in the wake of the Robbins Report on Higher Education (1962) that made him, after three lively years at Kings College School, Wimbledon, a university rather than a school teacher. For a short time in the mid '60s university departments – especially History departments – recruited rapidly while graduate education – especially in History – remained more or less static. Even so, a shortlisting on the basis of an article in the *British Journal of Educational Studies* and *Tudor Rebellions* in press (in a series designed mainly for sixth-formers) must count as a lucky break. It turned out that the luck was mostly Sheffield's. Expansion had brought to that department as to many others several enthusiastic and excellent young teachers. Anthony was remarkable among them not as a glamorous or charismatic figure – there were plenty of those about in '68 – but for the transparent sincerity of his interest both in his subject and in his students. He did not bother with showmanship, never believed in lecturing *ex cathedra*, and irritated some of his senior colleagues by his enthusiasm for small group teaching, an activity then associated, like sex, soft drugs and student demos, with the 'new' universities at places like York and Sussex. Students were captivated by his honesty, his perceptiveness, and his kindness – especially to those who lacked the intellectual self-confidence that some of his less sensitive colleagues were inclined to take for granted: when I mistakenly supposed that a fresher would be encouraged by advice to put in the waste paper basket the textbook from which she had carefully compiled her essay it was on Anthony's shoulder that she retired to weep.

For most of Anthony's time in Sheffield a system of study leave was a distant dream, and replacement teaching from any source not even that. Nevertheless, it was in those years, despite heavy teaching loads so enthusiastically shouldered, growing administrative responsibilities as his unfailing and unobtrusive efficiency was inevitably exploited, and the

pleasures and distractions of family life, that he laid the foundations of the three substantial books on which his first reputation was founded, and published two of them. All were based on extensive research in county as well as national collections and all appeared to combine an orthodox, regionally-based approach to 'mainstream' preoccupations with traditional, 'national' issues of politics and government and an increasingly distinctive identification of the issues themselves.

It is fair to suspect that the former quality contributed more than the latter to his appointment to the Chair at Durham, not at that time generally regarded as a hotbed of the new historiography. Certainly, accession to the professoriate might have engendered a degree of intellectual complacency, a sense that a chair hard won might be comfortably sat upon: it has been known to happen. That was not Anthony's way. The second half of his career was, by any standards, exceptionally taxing. In a succession of senior posts, at Durham, at Essex and finally as Director of the Victoria County History, he has suffered more than his share of interesting times. The quality of the students he met with at Durham, and the enthusiasm he inspired in them, are attested by the present volume, but he probably found the less traditional ambience and ethos of Essex more congenial. For the Direction of the VCH he was ideally equipped - too well, perhaps, for comfort. During his brief tenure he endowed it with a vision for the twenty-first century to match that of his great predecessors *in* the nineteenth, founded like theirs on the conviction that his fellow-countrymen and women deserved nothing less than the highest standards in scholarship, and scholarship of the highest standard nothing less than exposure to all his fellow-countrymen and women by the most accessible means available. Still more remarkably, he communicated that vision to the Heritage Lottery Fund so compellingly as to win for its realisation in his 'English Past for Everyone' one of the largest endowments that historical scholarship in this country has ever received.

In these years Anthony also became increasingly involved in the affairs of the discipline at national level, in a period when his courteous unflappability, his ability, and concern, to seek every view, and take as many of them as possible on board without losing direction, and to combine flexibility in inessentials with firmness when it mattered, were greatly at a premium. History and historians remain especially in his debt for the skill and determination with which, as chair of the History Benchmarking Group of the Quality Assurance Authority and of HUDG (History at the Universities Defence Group, now History UK), he fought to ensure that national benchmarks in History would define the coherent and adaptable intellectual structure appropriate to the discipline, rather than the quanta of information which the bureaucrats wanted, and succeeded in foisting on other disciplines.

While thus engaged Anthony has found time to redefine his historical interests not once but twice, and each time in ways which required him to come to terms with quite new areas of specialism, and with the modern, as well as the early modern period of British history. It might seem in retrospect that a move from community to family was a natural one,

much as it had been for Lawrence Stone, and certainly it is more likely that Anthony reached it by that route than through the theoretical debates which had been intensified through the '80s. Theory has never really been his thing, though his ability to make use of it, and to appreciate its capacity to point history in new directions, are fully apparent in the three papers which announced, in 1994, that he had set himself on an entirely new course. The implications and influence of that change are the concern of others in this volume, but it is worth commenting that the qualities which made it possible are those which have marked him out since he was an undergraduate – that he has followed his own path without regard for conventional demarcations of field, intellectual fashion or career advantage, led by his own curiosity, by a flair for spotting what might be done with neglected kinds of documentary evidence, and by his rootedness in certain traditions of English country society. Latterly the same instincts have led him to another and even more dramatic shift. *Reggie Chenevix Trench, commemorated on that plaque in Anthony's room at Merton, married a very remarkable young woman whose papers are leading Anthony himself down path he had never dreamed of, through the dying days of Anglo-Irish society to the wilder shores of the IRB and the Easter Rising.* It seems a long way from Tudor Rebellions. Or perhaps not.

R. I. Moore,
Newcastle upon Tyne, October 2006.

Latterly the same instincts have led him to another and even more dramatic shift. Reggie Chenevix Trench, commemorated on that plaque in Anthony's room at Merton, was his grandfather, and the brother of Cesca, the very remarkable young woman whose papers are now leading Anthony himself down paths he had never dreamed of, through the dying days of Anglo-Irish society to the wilder shores of republicanism and the Easter Rising.