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Colin Matthew (1941–1999)

Boyd Hilton

Sudden deaths are always shocking, especially when they result from wholly unsuspected natural causes. Even so, it is hard to convey the depth of the abyss felt by so many at the news that Colin Matthew had died. As Keith Thomas wrote shortly afterwards, 'a sense of shock and desolation ran through Oxford and was rapidly disseminated outwards to all the learned world. Colin Matthew was one of the few wholly irreplaceable people in this University. He played so central a role in the lives of so many of us that, at this moment, our feeling of loss is utterly overwhelming.'[1] In the many hundreds of letters sent to his widow, Sue Matthew, it is striking how often close colleagues recalled him in geological or navigational terms. 'An immovable rock.' 'His rock-like dependability.' 'A great rock of sense and purposeful ambition.' 'One of the fixed points on which to take bearings.' The fact that Colin should have died from a weak heart was in itself hard to take because it subverted the image of someone who seemed invulnerable. 'A fount of wisdom and good advice.' 'We relied on him.' 'We have lost our best man.'

Two-and-a-half years later historians of modern Britain suffered another devastating loss in Roy Porter. Both men died in their fifties after suffering massive heart attacks in a public highway while on or beside their bicycles. But if Roy brought Charles James Fox or Georges Danton to mind, Colin's image was in some ways more Cromwellian than cavalier. The Lord Protector's portrait held pride of place above the mantelpiece at home, and he named one of his sons Oliver. He was especially fascinated by the Victorians' own fascination with Cromwell,[2] and saw in it a clue to Gladstone's charisma, will power, and incorruptibility. In the first shock of grief friends and colleagues remembered Colin's own 'absolute integrity', his 'sense of justice', 'straightforwardness', and 'invariable faithfulness to a code of personal conduct and integrity of judgment'. It made him, one said, 'an unusual figure in the often feline academic world'. Such

[1] Keith Thomas, 'In Memoriam Colin Matthew', *Oxford Magazine*, 172 (1999), 6–7.

[2] He made significant contributions to the 'Nineteenth-Century Cromwell Archive' in the Bodleian Library.

comments hit the mark, but did not by themselves convey the mixture of the man, for the same friends in the same letters described him as tolerant, understanding, compassionate, sympathetic, generous, decent, funny, above all lovable, not characteristics conventionally seen as Cromwellian. His 'wry appreciation of the human comedy involved in any institutional occasion'[3] saved him from solemnity, while the integrity referred to was 'never displayed on his sleeve' or rammed down others' throats. Nevertheless, the key to his unique personality surely lay in the tension between these puritan and liberal sides.

The eldest of three siblings, his earliest years were spent happily with his mother and grandparents in Inverness. (The Highlands would retain a strong emotional pull for the rest of his life.) He later moved to Edinburgh where his father was a distinguished consultant physician. In later life he would often express disdain for that city's upper bourgeoisie and for the medical profession in particular, but such sentiments must be interpreted cautiously since his judgements were often severest about those to whom he felt the strongest tugs of loyalty. There was little ambiguity about his loathing of Edinburgh Academy, however, particularly its militaristic ethos and the harsh physical punishments meted out for academic shortcomings. Probably what embittered him was the perceived injustice more than the harshness in itself. There may have been a minor personal crisis at this time. At all events, in 1954 he was withdrawn from the Academy and sent to Sedbergh School, where the syllabus was less intense. Like many public schools of the day Sedbergh was tough and rather hearty, its ethos as rugged as that of the surrounding North Yorkshire terrain, and there was a heavy emphasis on sport, especially rugger and running. His house master (and also headmaster) Michael Thornely, who later became a lifelong friend, was somewhat bemused by his first meeting with the awkward 13½ year old, delivered by his father some hours ahead of schedule.

> Colin was very shy. He had never been south of the border before and I believe that his years at school in Scotland had not been altogether happy. I asked him whether he had a supreme contempt for the 'cursed Sassenach'; very dourly he replied, 'Well no, sir, not a *supreme* contempt', and relapsed into silence. Fortunately, my wife, as so often, came to the rescue, having somehow discovered that Colin was interested in puppets. Together they discussed puppetry and all its works until the arrival of the other 'new boys'.[4]

The words dour and shy recur frequently in memories of Colin at this time. Another epithet, one that has more resonance with those who knew him later, is sardonic. He had an 'impish' sense of humour, but was a fundamentally serious

[3] Obituary in *The Times*, (1 Nov. 1999).

[4] Michael Thornely, headmaster of Sedbergh 1954–75 and housemaster of school house 1954–67, personal communication. Colin's sense of his Scottishness was if anything reinforced by the move to Yorkshire. Addressing the school debating society five years later in support of a proposition that 'the Scot was the backbone of Sedbergh' (carried by one vote), he brought proceedings to a climax by announcing 'that he normally refused to argue with Englishmen, and merely laughed at their stupidity'.

boy who made up his own mind and spoke it. Wary, watchful, and not as yet perhaps very warm, he honoured tribal allegiances but tempered them with common sense.[5] He did not rag, probably because he thought it was pointless, and it can have been little surprise to his fellow juniors when he went on to become a prefect and head boy. He was not exactly a charismatic or heroic leader, but according to a close friend and contemporary, Jamie Bruce-Lockhart, he resembled 'a reliable judge whom others liked and above all respected'. There is much testimony from former fags as to Colin's kindness and consideration, though at least one junior remembers him as a strong disciplinarian, and we can be sure that he was never familiar. Fagging was indispensable, he informed the school debating society in 1959, since 'in schools without fagging there tended to grow up familiarity between senior and junior boys'. The comment lights up the minutes of an otherwise entirely predictable debate, and hints at an originality of perception which was later to become a hallmark, but in most respects Colin's own mindset was at this time fairly conventional. He threw himself into sport, and though lacking the talent of his father, who had played on the wing for Scotland, it is recorded that he 'never flinched a tackle'. His real forte was long distance running.

> He had a very particularly high bounce to his run, and seemed indefatigable. I can see him now in my mind's eye running on the back lanes and foothills of Sedbergh, a gaunt figure in a drenched blue jersey in pouring rain when we were prefects taking juniors on what were called 'House runs'. I, not being a good runner, would be at the back whipping up the slackers. Colin would lead from the front, pacing and testing the keenest. Then occasionally he would bounce back to the rear to see how the rest of us were getting on, only to disappear onwards into the streaming rain to catch up with those at the front again.[6]

Maybe he ran so hard for the same reason that Gladstone chopped trees. More likely he cultivated a reputation for keenness at games as a cover for what today would be called his feminine side. As in many such schools, Sedbergh's hearty and aggressive philistinism served (perhaps deliberately) to emphasize its odd pockets of sweetness and light. For Colin one of these was the school library with its fine collection of books donated by Brendan Bracken, an old boy. There was also the debating society, which he seems to have run single (not to say high) handedly for several months, and a small number of intellectual cliques. But above all there was the history sixth, run by his first true mentor, Andrew Morgan, who had fought successfully to distance his department, both physically and symbolically, from the main school by taking over a couple of cottages in which he daringly employed 'Socratic teaching methods'. In those days many of the best students stretched their sixth form years beyond A level to a seventh or eighth term in which they sat the Oxford or Cambridge colleges' scholarship examinations. It was also not uncommon for some boys, especially if they were prefects, to see out the school year even after they had secured their places at university. This meant several

[5] Jamie Bruce-Lockhart, personal communication.
[6] Jamie Bruce-Lockhart, personal communication.

months of delicious freedom, to be spent wisely or flippantly according to taste. Colin did well at A level, secured his place but not a scholarship to Christ Church, Oxford, and then opted to fill the shining hours by running the school and reading the collected works of Balzac, which he claimed was a deeply formative experience. He would always remain grateful to Sedbergh and to Morgan, while for his part Morgan judged Colin to be massively able but still a little lacking in flair. It was hard to be sure, however, for Colin did not reveal much, being often 'encapsuled in a tight, almost Calvinistic carapace of non-communication'.

> Yet, things were happening. Often they were sharp arrows of critical doubt about the wisdom or accuracy or logic of some proposition I had trawled across his bows. There was clearly a deeply questioning mind at work, but the encounters never developed into fruitful dialogue, still less to a relationship of personal warmth.

Eventually a close friendship would develop between master and pupil, but not until long after Colin had left Sedbergh.

The youth who went up to Oxford in 1960 was independent minded and resilient, but still reserved and at times even tongue-tied. He was immensely moved by the traditions, the grandeur, and the madcap charms of Christ Church, but he had nothing in common with the booming hearties of Peckwater Quad (very audible in those days), and it seems unlikely that his carapace softened much over the next three years. The senior history don was Charles Stuart, an expert in nineteenth-century Britain, whose teaching emphasized high political intrigue to an extent that was then becoming deeply unfashionable in the face of marxisant assumptions about the importance of material interests.[7] Colin always remained thankful to Stuart for the 'Namierite' grounding he received in the published correspondence and memoirs of the period, and it gave him confidence when he came to tackle Gladstone's political career. Despite his respect for Stuart as a tutor, however, he was unhappy about what he saw as the college's amateurish approach to academic work in general. In Stuart's view there was no point in striving officiously to turn a natural third-class man into a second-class one, nor any great shame when an unacademic but otherwise worthy and engaging undergraduate ended up with a Fourth. Such insouciance must have offended Colin's Scottish sense of the seriousness of education. He was also bothered by Stuart's insistence on holding out against the practice, adopted by most if not all other colleges, of laying on individual tutorials for the crucial third-year special subjects. Such matters did not help, but the real reason for Colin's failure to shine in the Schools examinations was his inability to be snappy or glib. Always he liked to chew on problems, venture solutions, and then withdraw and refine them. So, like the vast majority of undergraduates, he took second-class honours, and it must have seemed as though his Oxford career had come to a conventional end in 1963,

[7] The archetype was Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement* (London, 1959). Cambridge historians such as Maurice Cowling and John Vincent were to pioneer a revival of interest in high politics in the late 1960 and early 1970s.

when he went to Uganda to take the diploma in education at Kampala's Makerere University.

A much older person, who knew Colin slightly at the time, surmised that he went to Africa because he wanted to help the poor. That may sound uncharacteristically priggish, but the idealism is believable. The Scots had invested in empire emotionally (and often literally) for more than two hundred years, and Colin undoubtedly felt an obligation to serve humanity in some practical way. It helps to explain why John Buchan was one of his favourite novelists.[8] Officially employed as an educational officer in the Tanzanian civil service (1964–6), what he did in practice was teach the constitutional history of Britain to local students at a school in Old Moshi. One can be sure that he taught Magna Charta and the Bill of Rights from a Whig perspective, and with a full conviction of the utility of his lessons for a young country seeking to establish itself following decolonization.[9] Conversely, a fascination with Britain's ever-changing role in world history would later inform his scholarship, making it much less insular than that of most Victorianists. His African experience was formative in many ways, the most important of which was that he met his future wife, Sue Curry, who was teaching at Machame on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. This lithe and beautiful young extrovert from Indianapolis had a number of admirers, but she fancied Colin's Land Rover and she was amused when he turned up at her hospital bedside, where she was recovering from hepatitis, with a bunch of bedraggled flowers and Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*. They were married in America in 1966, and shortly afterwards set up home in Oxford, first in Elsfield (where Colin's ashes are buried, close by Buchan's grave), and then for nearly thirty years on Southmoor Road in Walton Manor north of Jericho, between Kingston Road and the canal. In 1968 Sue gave birth to David, after which Lucy and Oliver followed in fairly swift succession. It was at some point between David's arrival and Lucy's that Ross McKibbin and I got to know 'the Matthews'.

Many people have happy and fulfilling private lives, but his wife and children were so important to Colin, and so central to his developing persona, that they must be given pride of place in any memoir. An observant friend and colleague remarked that 'the Matthews' family life seemed a kind of miracle'. Another commented that it was 'as near to perfection as anyone can hope for'.[10] (Colin's own parents' marriage had ended in divorce.) 107 Southmoor Road was emphatically a home to have fun in, not a house beautiful. Later, once the children had gone off to university, some concessions were made to conventional taste in such matters as tidying up and decorating, but for the first two decades it resembled the state of nature. It was also the most open house I have known. Friends, colleagues, students, children of the neighbourhood, and animals of various sorts seemed free

[8] Alongside two other Scotsmen, Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson.

[9] Shortly after independence, Tanganyika and Zanzibar merged to form the nation of Tanzania in 1964. Colin remained to the end a keen member of the Britain–Tanzania Society, on behalf of which a collection of nearly £2,300 was taken at his funeral.

[10] Keith Thomas, 'In Memoriam', 6–7.

to wander in and out. More casual acquaintances, like people the Matthews had met on their frequent travels round the world, as well as people the Matthews had never met but knew someone they knew, seemed constantly to call. Admittedly, the deliciously informal atmosphere owed much to Sue's mid-Western background. It was (to paraphrase D. H. Lawrence) the golden softness of this woman's American flame of life that set the tone—a flame she later put to service as a primary school teacher and legendary head of St Ebbe's School—but in his own gruffer and more whimsical register Colin played his part. Sometimes he would shrug his shoulders smilingly, as if to acknowledge that he had no choice but to go along with his wife's flow. At all events he was a devoted father, both wise and indulgent. He joined in youthful activities with unaffected pleasure, and yet—thanks partly to a slightly abstracted air—managed never to seem *de trop*. I can see him now directing some children's game, absentmindedly turning music on and off perhaps, while at the same time holding forth with the adults present on history, politics, or whatever. He enjoyed games, physical and mental, and he loved talk. Once his children and their friends had turned into adolescents he liked to interrogate them, jovial and serious by turns, occasionally pontificating in a slightly sheepish way, but for the most part genuinely listening. He seemed to think that whatever he discovered about other people's lives and beliefs would enhance his own store of understanding. Eventually the children went about their ways, but the house retained its magnetic qualities for all sorts of people, while Sue and Colin helped to fill the void by an energetic regimen of opera and theatre going. So that, although they always appeared to be consummately relaxed, they never seemed to be still.

I suggested above that the key to Colin's personality lay in the tension between his puritanical and liberal sides. It would be a gross over-simplification to see the distinction in chronological terms. Nevertheless, he once told my wife in the matter of fact yet earnest way he had that he 'thoroughly disliked' the person he had been when young, and that Sue had 'transformed' him. And it may be significant that while in Tanzania he began to pick up some old threads. For example, he corresponded with his old history teacher, Andrew Morgan.

> He was now more open and communicative than I had ever known him. Was it Africa? Or was it Sue, who was already on the scene? I was chuffed that this reticent man who had never asked anything of me, now asked for the loan or gift of some of my paperback history books as they had virtually none in his college . . . I was delighted . . . to learn that the relationship at Sedbergh had not been as perfunctory and formal as I had thought.

It would seem that at last Colin began to feel good about himself, enabling him to acknowledge debts he long had been conscious of but had felt shy of expressing. But whether or not his personality changed, his appearance certainly did. He remained medium tall and fairly slim, with a smooth skin and slightly pink complexion, but shortly before I got to know him his hair had turned suddenly from badgerish to Old Testament white. He blamed a dentist who, he said, had been so

engrossed in conversation with Sue that he had forgotten to switch off the radiography machine in time. This characteristic dig at the healing professions might have been a joke. Still, the combination of his boyish face and bright white hair was an unforgettable one.

So joyous was Colin's private life, and so successful his later career, that it is easy to forget just how anxious and difficult Colin's early years as a professional historian were. After returning to Oxford in 1966 he embarked on a diploma in economics and politics, but soon exchanged that for research into late Victorian and Edwardian history. His doctorate, written under the deft supervision of A. F. ('Pat') Thompson, was completed in 1970 and published in 1973 as *The Liberal Imperialists: The Ideas and Politics of a Post-Colonial Elite*. As he saw it, Rosebery, Haldane, and Asquith had developed admirable, even noble, plans for domestic and imperial renewal, being far more humane than their Tory counterparts Milner and Kitchener, but they had failed owing to 'incompetence', 'bungling', and a 'lack of capacity for organization'. Ultimately the 'Limps' had lacked the Cromwellian gift for seeing things through. *Liberal Imperialists* is a fine book, but it was neither flashy nor modish, while the academic job market was drying up after the post-Robbins flash floods of the 1960s. Colin did not have a first-class degree, and he had lost years as a result of his time in Africa. When vacancies did come up, more often than not he failed to be shortlisted. At the eleventh hour, in 1970, a lifeline was thrown in his direction when he was appointed assistant editor to M. R. D. Foot on the Gladstone diaries project. This and the associated lectureship at Christ Church kept him in the game, but was widely regarded as a menial appointment with a limited future. He had not even been the front runner for the post, and got it partly because some of the other candidates were thought to be too highly qualified.

Charles Stuart chortled, the day after the appointment, 'if Foot thinks he'll be able to boss Matthew about, he's made a terrible mistake'. In fact it seems likely that Foot knew exactly what he was doing. In 1968 he had published the first fourteen years of Gladstone's diaries (down to 1839) in two exemplary volumes, but his own research interests were now directed towards twentieth-century warfare. The project languished, prompting interested parties at Christ Church, the Rhodes Trust, the Oxford University Press, and not least Lambeth Palace (whose incumbent has ownership of the diaries) to revitalize it. They can hardly have anticipated just how quickly Colin would do this. He was off like a horse out of a trap, enabling Foot to resign from the project within two years.[11] It had been a bloodless and perfectly amicable coup, but this did not stop some of Colin's friends from dramatizing it. We began to portray him as a man of Bismarckian steel, an iron editor prepared to topple anyone who stood in his way. It is possible that Colin secretly enjoyed this myth making, but he did little to stoke it, and

[11] Vols. iii and iv were published under joint editorship in 1974, but the riveting 56-page introduction was by Colin alone.

always spoke of Foot with respect. In 1976 Christ Church made him a research student (or senior research fellow), but still he had no security and the Gladstone project would not last for ever. Indeed, the faster he completed it the sooner he would do himself out of a job, but characteristically he did not allow this consideration to slacken his pace. Meanwhile he continued to be passed over for permanent Oxford jobs, a cause of some chagrin and agitation. It surely explains the impatience and even asperity which he sometimes displayed in those years, not with friends but in the wider academic community. He was rarely rude, but could switch off communication when he disapproved of someone, and this could be mistaken for aloofness or even arrogance. He was too stoical and perhaps too proud to moan overmuch about his career prospects, and it was only a much later incident that made me realize just how deeply frustrated he had been. In 1992 he was elected to a professorship, on which I congratulated him. He ruminated for a moment, as was his wont. Then he gritted his teeth, thumped my bookshelves, and said: 'It'll show them!' (I did not press him as to who, precisely, 'they' were.) The expression of pent-up resentment was wholly uncharacteristic and quickly passed over. Nevertheless, one can best appreciate how marvellous Colin's last eight or nine years were by recognizing the toll which his earlier struggles had taken.

The real turning point had come in 1978 when, at the age of 37, he had been elected to a Tutorial Fellowship at St Hugh's College. It was an appropriate appointment, for although he remained attached to Christ Church emotionally, and indeed physically since the Diaries continued to be edited from Gladstone's undergraduate rooms in Canterbury Quad, St Hugh's was much more suited to Colin's open-necked shirt style. (Later, when he became a public man serving on numerous London committees, he would keep a tie in his pocket to be assembled at the last possible moment.) It appealed all the more that he was among the first male fellows of St Hugh's, and he clearly relished the pioneering role. He became a notably conscientious and successful college tutor, balancing the academic and the pastoral with rare judgement, and served for a time as senior tutor. (Later, several of his colleagues hoped that he might become principal.) Meanwhile volumes v to xiv of the Gladstone Diaries came out in batches with a speed that took many academics' breath away—in 1978, 1982, 1986, 1990, and 1994. Although production standards were lavish, the operation itself was largely performed on a shoe-string and was initially low-tech, though when Colin eventually adapted to computers—slightly later than most—he quickly became both avid and expert. (This is evident from the extraordinary fourteenth volume in which a highly analytical index was supplemented by a 'Where was he?' and 'What did he read?'[12]) Another secret was his ability to inspire the loyalty, even devotion, of a succession of assistants and helpers. As an editor he had a knack of knowing just how much explanatory information to impart in footnotes—always there when

[12] It won the Library Association Wheatley Medal for an Outstanding Index in 1994.

the reader needed him, never overstaying his welcome. A major transition occurred with volume vii, which dealt with Gladstone's first premiership (1868–74) and in which Colin supplemented the diary with extensive cabinet minutes, memoranda, and several thousands of letters. It was the latter, rather than Gladstone's jejune record of daily events, that made it and succeeding volumes such utterly indispensable tools of research.

But most of all there was the series of masterly introductions. Honed and polished to a degree, but sonorous at the last, they established him as a consummate stylist. Alongside certain running themes, Colin took the opportunity to place each stage of his subject's career within a strong context of interpretation. If this method tended to emphasize discontinuities, it seemed entirely justified by Gladstone's restless and questing nature, his successive obsessions and enthusiasms. Volume iii tackled Gladstone's transition from extreme High Tory with quasi-Tractarian longings to the Peelite and proto-Liberal statesman. Volume v dwelt on the *étatiste* strains in Gladstone's thinking (provoked in part by a period of exclusion from office) and on his work as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Volume vii was about the first-time Prime Minister's sense that his career was approaching its conclusion, and his ability to 'maintain his traditions of private introspection and development, despite the press of public business'. Paradoxically, Gladstone seemed less concerned with the processes of governance than he had during the years of opposition in the 1850s, while his obsessions with Mrs Thistlethwayte and the Vatican estranged him from many of the processes of his own government and of the legislation that ensued. Volume ix saw Gladstone out of office once more, but belatedly moving to take the lead in the Bulgarian agitation. Colin's theme here—the subject of a projected separate study never completed—was Gladstone's role 'in shaping the form and style of British political communication for decades to come'. In volumes x and xii he focused once more on policy and especially on Irish Home Rule, but moved beyond the then current preoccupation with tactics to consider broader imperial developments. In this he was clearly influenced by contemporary debates on European federation and Scottish devolution.[13] These successive theme changes gave Colin's *Gladstone* a continuing excitement that would be difficult to sustain in a conventional linear biography. Most admirable of all, perhaps, was the conviction with which he melded the public and the personal. His most delicate assignment in this respect occurred near the beginning, in the Introductions to volumes iii and iv. Gladstone's rescue work with prostitutes was well known, but his urge for self-scourging was not. I remember Colin bringing a photographed page of one of Gladstone's diaries into the King's Arms and asking me to identify a squiggle shaped a bit like a lop-sided pi-sign. When I was unable to do so he said excitedly, 'It's a whip. Gladstone was a

[13] e.g. his surprisingly absorbing account of Gladstone's efforts to secure a just fiscal and financial relationship between the imperial and proposed Irish exchequers may have been informed by Margaret Thatcher's successful campaign for a rebate from the European Union.

flagellant!' I told him he was overwrought, but he was of course correct.[14] However, he wrote about the matter with such exemplary tact that a feature of Gladstone's persona which might have seemed risible (at best) merely added to the reader's sense of the statesman's complexity and greatness: 'Priggish and hypocritical he may have seemed to enemies, foolhardy to friends, but his struggles with his body and his conscience, when seen in the diary in the context of his religious, political and family life, cannot but seem noble.'[15] This and similar comments signified empathy, but left his friends uncertain as to whether Colin actually *liked* Gladstone. When the question was put to Sue recently, she did not answer directly, but revealed that when Colin read to her the passage that he had just written on Gladstone's death and funeral, he was unable to finish it because of the tears rolling down his cheeks.

Colin's two-volume analytical biography of Gladstone, based for the most part on his successive Introductions, was published in 1986 and 1995 and won him the Wolfson Prize for History. Gladstone looms so large in current historiography that it takes an effort to realize that forty years ago he loomed much less so. There was the official *Life* of 1903 by John Morley, the only person before Colin to have had full access to the diaries; there was J. L. Hammond's intellectual study *Gladstone and the Irish Nation* (1938); and there was Philip Magnus's conventional biography of 1954. In all three cases the theme was that of a man who started out in politics with extreme right-wing and High Church views and ended up as an ultra-Liberal. Both the first two authors emphasized the gradual nature of this development, but whereas Hammond described a process of sedimentary growth, Morley's vision was exactly the reverse. For Hammond the secret was Gladstone's emerging 'European sense', and his realization of 'the value and place of self-respect in the life of a nation'; for Morley skins of congenital bigotry simply peeled off one by one as he grew in experience and understanding. Magnus by contrast presented Gladstone's move across the political spectrum as a much jerkier process, and one interspersed by a series of 'mental earthquakes'. The only significant challenge to these three broadly Whiggish interpretations had come from John Vincent. In the latter's opinion, Gladstone suffered from 'a certain bareness of ideas', but despite or because of this inadequacy he was a supreme word spinner or 'casuist', qualities which enabled him to galvanize the public with 'visceral' rhetorical 'thrills' in the 1860s,[16] and to master the linguistic rules of the high political game in the 1880s.[17] Now Colin's intellectualist approach owed something to Hammond, but his unparalleled knowledge of Gladstone's writings enabled him to place the interpretation on a much more sophisticated basis.

[14] Subsequently two younger colleagues of mine discovered a similar squiggle in the manuscript diaries of Lord Morpeth. Further investigation revealed that it occurred every seven days and must have stood for 'Sunday' or 'Sabbath'.

[15] Introduction to vol. iii, p. xlviii.

[16] John Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party 1857–1868* (London 1966), 211–35.

[17] A. B. Cooke and John Vincent, *The Governing Passion: Cabinet Government and Party Politics in Britain 1885–86* (Brighton, 1974).

He accepted Magnus's idea of punctuated progression, but argued that the 'mental earthquakes' or explosive political initiatives only occurred as a result of intense and lengthy cerebral processes. For example, he argued that the young Gladstone reached his views on the proper ends and forms of government as a result of reading and reflecting on Plato and Aristotle. He resisted Vincent's interpretation, partly because it seemed cynical, but mainly because he was committed to the hypothesis that the political *rapport* between Gladstone and the bulk of Liberal voters was based on the latter's fundamentally rational understanding of political and social action.

And yet, paradoxically, Colin's great success in explaining Gladstone perhaps vindicates one element of Vincent's analysis. Although he wrote brilliantly on Church politics and religious culture, as evidenced by his essays on Pusey and the Oxford Movement,[18] theological doctrine was a subject on which I sometimes felt that Colin's antennae were slightly insensitive. In part this may simply have reflected an institutional preference. Whereas work on nineteenth-century Britain by Cambridge scholars such as George Kitson Clark, Owen Chadwick, Maurice Cowling, Edward Norman, Jonathan Parry, and Richard Brent has tended to privilege religious perpectives, the approach of Oxford historians has been predominantly secular.[19] Whatever the reason, Colin had some resemblance to Morley, of whom it was said that he was magnificently qualified to understand Gladstone in every respect except religion. That two historians should have plumbed the depths of the statesman's character so successfully despite this barrier prompts the reflection that A. B. Cooke and John Vincent may have been right after all (for I had not previously thought so) when they wrote that Gladstone was able to 'move rapidly from one world and atmosphere to another and perhaps incompatible one, forgetting for the time all the other contexts in which he operated'.[20] It suggests that he was religious without being introspective. Perhaps those who were born into early nineteenth-century evangelicalism could never be truly introspective, given that their thoughts were constantly fixed on their Maker, conceived as an external force. Gladstone's diaries are the account of a life spent tremulously in a situation of moral trial, but the only self-examination they contain is of a spiritual nature. Likewise, in his late autobiographical memoranda, Gladstone rationalized his past actions but gave little sense of what his younger self was feeling at the time. It seems certain that Colin (who was introspective without being religious[21]) mainly admired this later Gladstone, whom he saw as

[18] H. C. G. Matthew, 'Edward Bouverie Pusey: From Scholar to Tractarian', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 32 (1981), 101–24; H. C. G. Matthew, 'Noetics, Tractarians, and the Reform of the University of Oxford in the Nineteenth Century', *History of Universities*, 9 (1990), 195–225.

[19] Compare, e.g., Jonathan Parry's emphasis on religious issues in his account of Gladstone's First Government with Colin's emphasis on budgets, trade unions, land, foreign policy, and imperial issues. J. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven and London, 1993), 227–73.

[20] Cooke and Vincent, *Governing Passion*, 53.

[21] Which is not to say that he was aggressively anti-religious. He was brought up in the Kirk by his devout mother, who was a great influence on him; he accompanied his wife to church on special occasions; and he loved the cadences of traditional Anglican liturgy.

conventionally religious but no longer religiously obsessed as in earlier years, being far more preoccupied (as Colin was too in an intellectual way) with the scope of government action at home, with fiscal relations between the classes, and with the morality of imperial development.

In 1991 Colin was elected a Fellow of the British Academy, and in the following year he attained his personal chair. His work on the Diaries was now virtually complete, and he was an obvious choice to lead the New Dictionary of National Biography, a project of the Oxford University Press with support from the British Academy.[22] 'Still under fifty' and with 'stamina for the long haul', the Managing Director of the Press is supposed to have said. He asked friends for advice as to whether he should take the position, and some demurred, mainly because they hoped that he would devote himself full-time to the big book he wanted to write on nineteenth-century political culture. Fortunately Colin rarely listened to bad advice, and probably he had known all along that he would accept. He may even have seen this enormous new project as a way of filling the void left by Gladstone. To many people's astonishment he undertook to complete the work within twelve years, a staggeringly *short* haul, but there was one condition: no expense was to be spared in making it as wide-ranging and as comprehensive as possible. As a result the *New DNB* contains more than 50,000 articles by about 10,000 contributors, and is the product of a munificence that is all the more remarkable for the fact that it was achieved against a background of academic parsimony.[23] Colin tackled the project with Gladstonian energy, Cromwellian sternness, and—it must be said—just a touch of Sedbergh, the latter characteristic being manifested in one of his early instructions to the troops. 'Contributors should remember that their views must stand the test of time—a test which may last for much of the next century. The preparation of the *New DNB* puts a generation on its mettle. Let that generation show itself liberal, firm, and just!'

His new role brought him into contact with scholars and others from all over the globe, but the centre of the web was 37A St Giles, and the epicentre was Colin's desk. He read everything which came into the building, and was so in control of operations that he always had time to relax with anyone who dropped in. No visitor could fail to be impressed by the high morale of the more than forty staff, or by the extraordinary speed and efficiency of their operations, yet the atmosphere was always utterly calm, not to say jolly.

By this time his career and reputation had really begun to roll. And, as he became seriously distinguished, so he attained in his professional life that serenity which he had long since known in private. I think he was now very happy indeed. As a good-natured but brisk and efficient chair of committees his managerial

[22] It is now officially called *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

[23] That it should have been delivered on time and on budget in 2004 was a credit to Colin, to its second editor Brian Harrison, and to the dedicated team at 37A St Giles.

services were in constant demand.[24] In addition to performing numerous college and faculty duties, he was a Curator of the Bodleian Library, served on the editorial board of the Oxford Historical Monographs, and was for many years a member (later chairman) of the North Oxford Branch of the Labour Party. In London he acted as a vice-president of the British Academy, vice-president and literary director of the Royal Historical Society, a member of the Royal Historical Manuscripts Commission, and—most 'chuffed-making' of all—a trustee of the National Portrait Gallery. There were also numerous international commitments, of which the Bertrand Russell Project at McMaster University was especially dear to his heart. He took his responsibilities very seriously but wore his esteem lightly, without any pomposity or condescension, not that his family would have allowed him to do otherwise. One letter from the Director of the National Portrait Gallery began, 'Dear Professor Matthew, In the absence of the Prime Minister we would like you to open our new twentieth-century gallery'. It at once became a household joke: 'In the absence of the Prime Minister, we would like *you* to do the washing up'.

Clearly Colin was not just one of the premier historians of his generation but also one of the most public spirited. And, now that his generation is passing over the brow of the hill, it becomes possible to put the nature of that public spirit into some perspective. Many of his Oxford teachers and mentors had distinguished war records. Some had risked their lives and had medals to show for it; others, like Charles Stuart, had experienced the intellectual challenge of sifting intelligence at Bletchley Park and elsewhere. Several (again including Stuart) were highly conscientious tutors, and some excelled in research, but many found it hard not to give off a detumescent impression that the most exciting stage of their lives was past. To compensate, many adopted the role of public intellectuals, contributing to broadcast discussions on the BBC's Home Service and Third Programme, or writing on current affairs in national journals and newspapers. A few on the left were committed ideologically, while many more affected a witty and nihilistic Toryism. The 'Thatcherite' generation that followed Colin's has been similarly concerned to reach out to audiences beyond the academy, though its fascination with conditions in American universities, its involvement in publishing and TV blockbusters, and its general media savvy has little in common with the world of the older public intellectuals. Colin meanwhile belonged to a brief intervening generation which took the welfare state and full-cost student grants for granted, assumed that full academic employment was the norm,[25] and regarded teaching and research almost as service industries. To prepare and examine undergraduates was the prime professional duty, but there were many other obligations such as conducting meticulous scholarship with footnotes full and watertight; adjudicating in

[24] On the subject of briskness, a government minister once gave him an afternoon in which to find an appropriate academic history use for some monies that by the morrow would have to be returned to the Treasury. He found one.

[25] An assumption which was, of course, challenged by reality from the 1970s onwards.

research councils between applicants for funds; preparing scholarly editions like the Gladstone diaries for the benefit of other historians; publishing extensive bibliographies on-line and in print;[26] and, *ne plus ultra*, the *New DNB*. This highly professional approach to history did not necessarily exclude a deep interest in national politics, and it certainly did not do so in Colin's case, yet like most left-leaning academics of his generation he did not choose to address a national audience directly.[27] His preferred platform was the long series of articles entitled 'In Vacuo' that he wrote for the *Oxford Magazine*. Most would pick up on some issue of parochial concern, before ranging out onto themes of general political or ideological significance. Likewise most of his historical writing was informed by—and intended to contribute to—present-day debates. He felt it his civic duty to provide accurate and luminous scholarship, which would in turn have tangible political consequences. This Whiggish (and Scottish Enlightenment) sense of the continuity between past and present was in many ways unfashionable, and was one of the characteristics that gave his work its originality. An instinctive Keynesian, who despised 'the dotty nostrums of the monetarists',[28] he was both puzzled and shocked by the populist success of Thatcherism, not simply because it undermined assumptions about the British people's sense of social fairness, but also because it seemed to contradict decades of organic political development. However, it was not enough simply to deprive the Prime Minister of an honorary degree, or to treat her with snobbish disdain and vituperation as so many academics did. Rather, the challenge she presented had to be faced and worked through. While he was pleased by the success of New Labour, he had little confidence that its 'Third Way' had the legs to meet that challenge.

He was greatly exercised in his later years by the financial obstacles which discouraged domestic students from undertaking research in the humanities, with the result that 'what had once been a largely British representation in each new cohort of research students was increasingly being replaced by a pattern in which overseas research students predominated'.[29] This had nothing to do with prejudice against overseas students—no one could have been more eager to embrace new and different traditions—but unless a nucleus of home-grown students could be maintained, all hope of organic *national* development was lost. A similar dilemma had faced Gladstone, who early on was forced to abandon his ideal of a mono-denominational state in favour of one dedicated to religious pluralism. Viewed superficially it was just the first of his many flip-flops, but then, as Colin reminded us, 'Always with Gladstone, it is in the detail that the clarity and

[26] e.g. the Royal Historical Society Bibliographies, on the managing committee of which Colin served.

[27] A collective abstinence which must have contributed to the Labour Party's surrender of the intellectual high ground. A notable exception was Colin's friend Ross McKibbin, noted for a series of hard-hitting but reflective pieces in the *London Review of Books*.

[28] Colin Matthew, 'In Vacuo', *Oxford Magazine*, 169 (1999), 3–4.

[29] Colin's views as reported by Sir Tony Wrigley in his President's Notes to the British Academy Review, Dec. 1999, www.britac.ac.uk/news/reviews/02–99b/04-president.html.

consistency become apparent'. This comment, from a Gladstone centenary address, was one of his final pronouncements on the statesman, and so has a doubly elegiac quality, especially as, in it, Colin came as close as he ever did to revealing part of his own personal code.

> No one in our public life has been so radical and so conservative [as Gladstone], radical when he was a conservative, and conservative when he was a radical, and both running together . . . Gladstone's life tells us much about the best that a public figure can achieve in representative government, and in our own Oxford context it shows that people and places can change for the better, however irksome those changes may seem at the time.[30]

Never one to shirk things that irked others, Colin was active in helping the University to meet some of the challenges of recent years. In all such discussions he stood for pragmatism and common sense, and yet he remained at heart an idealist. Fully alive to what he once called 'the charm and the danger of Oxford', he was preoccupied in a wholly Gladstonian way with how such institutions might evolve organically to perform newly required duties, without sacrifice of their fundamental purposes. It was characteristic that, in taking over the *New DNB*, he insisted that it should build on Leslie Stephen's nineteenth-century version. There were to be very many more women, more nationals who spent their lives abroad, more foreigners who contributed to life in Britain, and many more people whose obscurity in life belied their subsequent significance,[31] but equally important was his rule that no one who had appeared in the original should be discarded, not even the humblest Victorian cleric. It was a case of evolution by accretion.

Despite all his public activities he never seemed rushed.[32] Still more impressively he did not allow them to stem the flow of original research.[33] The scope of that research may have been limited thematically to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain, but he moved effortlessly between scholarly monographs, seminal articles, and broad synoptic surveys intended for a wide readership,[34] and he was equally at home with political, social, cultural, and intellectual history. One of his

[30] Colin Matthew, 'Gladstone and the University of Oxford', a lecture delivered in Christ Church Hall at the Gladstone Centenary Commemoration, 18 May 1998, and reprinted in the *Christ Church Annual Report* (1998), 61–70.

[31] Often when an unfamiliar name of some dead national cropped up in conversation, Colin would scribble it down for checking to see whether the person merited inclusion in the *New DNB*.

[32] As Peter Ghosh has commented, 'Although, for many, the abiding image of Colin Matthew will be of the scholar and the public man, pondering what might become of Britain in the future, for the parents of south Oxford it will be that of the devotedly loyal husband who would always turn out on weekday evenings for events at St Ebbe's School [where Sue was head teacher], and who, as a special treat, would play the bagpipes at the summer fête'. *Guardian* (2 Nov. 1999).

[33] Except perhaps towards the end. After delivering a characteristically stimulating and original seminar paper on 'Gladstone and O'Connell' in Oct. 1998, he admitted to me that he felt that he was 'running on empty'.

[34] Notable among the latter were his contributions to *The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain*, ed. Kenneth O. Morgan (Oxford, 1984) and *The Nineteenth Century: The British Isles 1815–1901*, ed. Colin Matthew (Oxford, 2000).

secrets was to adopt William Hone's dictum that 'an hour before breakfast is worth two in the rest of the day'. For five or six mornings each week, he would make a point of writing sustained historical prose between 7 and 8, often to music and usually to opera, one consequence of which was that, whenever he attended live performances, he would involuntarily pull out a cheque book or some other scrap of paper and scribble away furiously in the dark. Another secret was not to worry about what other people thought. In this sense he was utterly his own man. He was once asked to address a conference on the following theme: 'Between the Mother and the Other: Sub-Texts of Nationhood'. Quite unabashed, he spoke on 'The Criteria for Inclusion in the *New DNB*'. That last talk understandably became a party piece, but otherwise he rarely repeated himself, either on paper, at the lectern, or in conversation. When talking privately on nineteenth-century matters he liked to ruminate and was not afraid of long pauses. I always felt that we were exploring the margins of our knowledge, or, to cite lines from one of his favourite poems, that we were seeking to uncover an old lost road through the woods. It was an exhilarating journey.

The last time I saw Colin was about three weeks before he died, when he and Sue called on us in Cambridge. He was in his usual high spirits. He had just uncovered some long dead plot in the Oxford University archives—a donnish conspiracy to prevent Professor *X* from being invited to deliver the Ford Lectures—and he regaled us with it over lunch, accompanying the saga with characteristic snorts and chuckles. Afterwards he insisted on visiting Newnham to check out an oak tree which Gladstone had presented to that college in 1887. It was eventually tracked down and duly photographed from various angles.[35] One could infer from these events that Colin loved trivial gossip and that he had an obsessional interest in anything and everything Gladstonian, but this was only part of the truth. With regard to the Ford Lectures, as always he was keen to trace the story's underlying significance, such as what it said about shifting historical fashions and the structures of power within the faculty. As for tracking down the oak tree, in some ways it illustrated Colin's approach to history very forcibly. He admired R. G. Collingwood, and was aware of the philosopher's belief that Hercule Poirot was a better detective than Sherlock Holmes. Rather than chasing scraps of surviving evidence like footprints and cigarette ends, and vainly 'hoping that something will come of it', the 'scientific historian' should seek to understand the big picture in all its details, however apparently irrelevant to the investigation in hand. Only by seeking to know everything will we know which are the important questions to ask. It is a challenging and to some extent unfashionable prescription, but it gives Colin's work its authorial omniscience, its semblance of control over

[35] Photography being a late enthusiasm of Colin's. This was the second tree presented to Newnham by Gladstone, the first having been torn down by a maurauding group of Conservative (male) undergraduates.

narrative and insight into character and motive, qualities he may well have imbibed from the novels of Balzac. Although there was nothing remotely bombastic about his historical writing, it had an almost Victorian self-confidence, and it also projected certain values which can also be called Victorian. Those values can be summed up in his own admonition to contributors to the *New DNB*, when he told them to be 'liberal, firm, and just'. At the risk of making him sound much too solemn, let those three words be his epitaph.[36]

[36] I have been advised by many people in writing this memoir. They include Jamie Bruce-Lockhart, Martin Ceadel, George Garnett, Peter Ghosh, Lawrence Goldman, Elspeth Griffiths, Christopher Heber Percy, Sue Matthew, Ross McKibbin, Andrew Morgan, John Morrill, Jon Parry, Margaret Pelling (to whom especial thanks are due), John Robertson, Michael Thornely, and William St Clair.