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Owen Chadwick and his work

GEOFFREY BEST

Owen Chadwick took up the first of his two Cambridge chairs in 1958. He gave his inaugural lecture on 3 November of that year. In its opening passages about 'the continuity of Christian history' he remarked that he would depart from 'the pleasant custom' on such occasions of referring to the work of his predecessor and even perhaps some assessment of it; for, he said, 'Norman Sykes is at the height of his powers, and it would be unfitting to pay tribute to him as if his work were over.'

A young Cambridge don myself when I heard that lecture, I am somewhat in the same position now as he was then. Along with all other friends and admirers I see with joy, gratitude and pride a historian still at the height of his powers, retired from high office and so freer than ever before for scholarship. It would be as unfitting as it is, fortunately, impossible to pay tribute to him as if his work were over. But some tribute must be paid, something however inadequate and provisional must be said by way of introduction to a volume of essays written in honour of him, or else there will be disappointment among the non-Cambridge thousands who will open the book with desire and expectation of learning something about the man behind the 'Chadwick' they meet so often on book-shelf and reading-list. He has himself affirmed, after all, that 'a partial understanding of the man [may well be] necessary to a right judgement of his historical work'; and that presumably may still be the case even when the 'partial' has to be understood in more senses than one.

Owen Chadwick (strictly speaking, William Owen) has lived in Cambridge for virtually the whole of his working life. Much travelled, indeed, in pursuit of archives and as coveted visiting lecturer, but homing always to the city, university and colleges so unmistakably dear to him. His Cambridge beginning was when he went up to St John's to read classics in 1935. By universal account (including his own) he went up no less to play rugby football, at which he was extremely good. He had been captain of rugger,

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as well as school captain, at Tonbridge; he played for Cambridge against Oxford three years running, and in 1938 captained the team. It was, I am told, not easy in those boisterous early years to foresee a future as priest and scholar. But in the course of 1938 two things happened. What became for most of us the year of Munich was already for Owen Chadwick the year of Niemöller; the distinguished Pastor Martin Niemöller, 'picked up (on his release from prison) and taken to...Sachsenhausen. In that moment', he has recently told us, in some reconstruction of the thoughts of himself when young, 'Niemöller looked from England like the European conscience standing on moral principle against tyranny; the freest man in Germany despite his confinement.' Some fire was lit in his mind, his heart, his soul – how can or dare one measure which? – which has burned ever since.

The year of Niemöller was also, and in its impact upon him in fact somewhat earlier, the year of Charlesworth: Martin Charlesworth, fellow of St John's; historian, Christian, friend and, without setting out to be so, guide and inspiration to very many younger members of the college. Owen Chadwick was among these. Other serious occupations now joined that of rugby football, and other high skills began to prove themselves. In the summer of 1938 he was placed in the First Class of the Historical Tripos (part 2). He stayed on for a fourth year to take theology (part 2): a First again. Then he went to Cuddesdon theological college, and was ordained.

How deep has been his love for Cuddesdon and of what texture his debt to it, those who read his history of the college and his 1966 sermon may judge for themselves. The historian notes that even if it did not wholly make, it must certainly have cemented, the bond between him and, so far as England alone is concerned, his one great source of inspiration most clearly external to Cambridge: that church-shaking group of scholars, mystics and divines emphatically called the Oxford Movement, alias the Tractarians. Cuddesdon was founded by them and, no doubt developing what they began as any continuing organism must develop through time and changes of circumstance, it has remained the most 'Tractarian' of the Church of England colleges. Much of Owen Chadwick's finest work, deep and concentrated, has been about those men of Oxford and their place not just in English but in world Christendom; see especially that unusually readable piece of European intellectual history, *From Bossuet to Newman*, that thrilling tale of religious adventure in Africa, *Mackenzie's Grave* and, what some good judges have considered the best single thing ever written about it, his long introduction to *The Mind of the Oxford Movement*.

The Cuddesdon year was the first of those few he has spent *not* in Cambridge. The year of the Battle of Britain and 'the blitz' was not well-suited for the launching of academic talent. From Cuddesdon he went as curate

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for two years to Huddersfield (St John's); until the war was over he served as chaplain at Wellington College, in Berkshire; then he returned to Cambridge in 1947 as fellow and dean of Trinity Hall, to begin in real earnest, and, as it turned out, for good, the life which has included the highest distinctions, the most responsible offices, that Cambridge can propose.

For convenience's sake I will do what Owen Chadwick has not often been able to do – separate his so to speak official and administrative existence from his life as scholar, teacher and writer. The astonishing thing is that his great activity in the latter modes has coexisted through most of his life with great activity in the former, to an extent which is simply beyond the understanding of the less gifted, less industrious and less self-disciplined of us. To name only those offices (by no means only university ones) which must have occupied much of his mind and time, he was from 1965 to 1977 chairman of the trustees of Wolfson College; from 1973 president of the university's rugby football club; from 1966 to 1970 chairman of the Archbishops' Commission on Church and State; since 1978 he has been a Trustee of the National Portrait Gallery, and, since 1981, president of the British Academy. Through the two academic years 1969–71 he was Cambridge's Vice-Chancellor; years when the tide of radical, even by British standards mildly revolutionary, student and faculty activism was at its height. The 'Garden House riot' was only the most notorious of many troubles that had to be dealt with on top of all the University's ordinary business, which at the same time he was observed to conduct with unusual grace and dignity.

The honour of knighthood was conferred upon him in 1982; the extraordinary distinction of membership of the Order of Merit in 1983. These and other posts and honours on which it would be otiose here to linger constitute a roll weighty by far beyond whatever came the way of most famous scholars; and yet the weightiest of all and the most persistent is still to be mentioned. In 1956 he was appointed Master of Selwyn College, and Master he remained until his retirement from Mastership and Regius Professorship alike in 1983.

Being Master of a college can be made much or little of, according to taste; and in some cases a college may be the better off for its Master's inattention. This Master has given hugely of himself to Selwyn, to the college's great advantage. So long and signal a service to a college and its university demands particular notice.

Selwyn was not quite a college in the fullest Cambridge sense when he went there, although for all practical purposes people accepted it as one. Strictly speaking it was only an 'approved foundation', prevented from becoming a college proper (as defined by act of parliament) by its requirements that its fellows and scholars must be members, and its Master a clergyman,

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of the established church. The movement to 'normalize' its statutes and charter, begun before Owen Chadwick's arrival, came to fruition in 1958. The way was cleared for rapid developments. More people wanted to go there and consequently more dons were needed to teach them, more rooms and services to look after them. Selwyn has undergone something of a transformation under his Mastership. The handsome Cripps building is only the most conspicuous of many material developments. In 1956 there were 282 undergraduates, 29 post-graduates and only 18 fellows; all of course were male. In 1982 the numbers were respectively 337, 71 and 47; with women among them since 1976. At the same time, both scholarly and sporting performances improved, to the extent that the college rose from the bottom to better positions in the university's unofficial 'league table' of tripos results and – a distinction that must have peculiarly gratified him – won the rugger cup twice in the seventies.

The Master's Lodge has been memorable to its visitors through these 27 years because beside the Master there has always been his wife Ruth, welcoming and generous, gentle and serene; of an importance to him whose vast extent one could estimate if one's respect for the most private and personal things of life were to permit one to do so. An academic commemoration like this, after all, makes no call for extended family particulars. Yet one other family matter does merit notice, being entirely public and of unusual interest to the community of scholars. Owen Chadwick's younger brother Henry was also, until his (early) retirement in 1982, a Regius Professor at Cambridge (of divinity) after a career of similar distinction and accomplishments (part of it in Oxford). Both brothers, for example, have given the Hulsean, the Birkbeck and the Gifford Lectures. Both have been 'heads of houses' (Henry of Christ Church). Both are fellows of the British Academy and members of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. And each, by the 1983 *Who's Who*'s account anyway, has been awarded six honorary doctorates, in Britain and abroad. Has Oxbridge, one wonders, ever before been graced by such a pair of brothers?

Almost all of Owen Chadwick's major scholarly works have been accomplished alongside such public and official activity, and I must conclude with a glance at them, for many readers of this book will be familiar with only one side of his *oeuvre*, and some will not even know that. I attempt this, however, with much diffidence. His modesty will make him dislike it, my own modesty makes me shy about doing it, and in any case readers who are seriously interested in assessing his stature and quality as a historian can best and easily do so with the aid of Dr Duffy's bibliography (below, pp. 301 ff).

It will very quickly strike the inquirer that the works are so readable because they are quite conversational, and that they are attractive because

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they are confiding. Those who have heard him preach or lecture know all about this. He addresses his reader as directly as he addresses an interlocutor, an audience. He is an exceedingly elegant and accomplished lecturer – in the best sense of the word a stylish performer – and the best qualities of writer and lecturer are more closely allied in him than is common. He likes to tell a story, to explore a situation, to try to unravel a mystery. For those Gallophiles and *Annalistes* who consider the writing of what they call *histoire événementielle* a sin, he is one of the greatest sinners going. For those, however, who do not understand how to do justice to the movement of history and the force of circumstance without some story-telling, he appears as a master of the craft, and never better than in the tautest, tightest-woven tales – of which his *Victorian Miniature* (considered by some to be his masterpiece) is an outstanding example.

His first book, dedicated to M. P. Charlesworth, was on St John Cassian, 'our earliest western monastic theorist'. That early interest in the early church has not been sustained. The Cambridge lecture list's sporadic trickle of offerings on it peters out in 1966–7; the bibliography reveals but few returns to it, and those mostly apropos of St Benedict. Nor did he linger long around the Reformation, on which he has written a well-known, workmanlike Pelican book and which prompted him to undertake what he is delightfully good at: character assessments, notably of Martin Luther and John Knox. The continuing spread of his general knowledge of church history is clear enough in the bibliography of it which he compiled, and more than once revised, for the Historical Association. But the greater part of his *oeuvre* lies in post-Reformation history. In history, though not, one gathers, in theology, he is a modernist.

Much of his writing and lecturing has been about English church, State and society since the industrial and French revolutions. The two-volume study of *The Victorian Church* is his biggest single publication. Well-qualified reviewers tended to remark that with all its gusto, learning, charm and penetration it fell a bit short on balance and proportion. To the extent that their complaint was not just that he had not written the book *they* would have written, and setting aside the obvious but important fact that no one else could have written the book he actually wrote, their complaint had some justification. It *is* rather a personal interpretation, written by a scholar who writes as he pleases. He shows less interest in Dissent than in the Establishment, less liking for the Evangelicals than for the Oxford Movement, and less love for town than country. What he writes about most warmly is the country clergy and their, generally speaking, quiet continuance in well-doing in those parts of England not yet sophisticated by machinery and macadam; what, in another place, he calls their 'reasonable, quiet,

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unpretentious, sober faith in God and way of worship'. On the politics of established churchmanship and its manifold complications, above all the legal and constitutional ones, he is unmatched; as might be expected of an Anglican well-known for his conviction as to the continuing value of establishment.

His other largest work, *The Popes and European Revolution*, is part-product of that growing interest in the modern histories of Italy and Germany which has been visibly unfolding in his university lectures since the later sixties: 'Church and State under Hitler' in 1964–5, 'The Papacy and the European Powers in the 19th Century' in 1972–3, and so on up to 'Italy and the Papacy 1814–1945' in 1980–1 and (what indeed was only in part about Germany) 'The Ethics of War 1914–45' in 1981–2. For the sources of the German interest, it is perhaps needless to go further than the year, already mentioned, when he was pondering upon the persecution of Niemöller, profoundly impressed by Waldemar Gurian's book on *Hitler and the Christians*, and beginning to place this contemporary assault on Christianity in its longest-term historical context with the inspiring aid of James Bryce's *Holy Roman Empire*. The history of the Papacy, which has exercised an independent fascination over him (springing no doubt partly from his beloved Victorians' preoccupations with it, and his Victorian professorial predecessor Lord Acton's love–hate attitude towards it), here appears as a bridge between his German and Italian concerns. To no historico-ethical problem does he seem to have devoted more anxious labour than that of the Papacy's conduct of its relations with the Italian Fascist and German National Socialist regimes. His 1980–1 Ford Lectures at Oxford were precisely on the German aspect, and at the time of writing are being extensively revised for publication.

In tackling these particular episodes Owen Chadwick is confronting the most difficult of all tests to which a historian can put himself: the most difficult and, as he has expressly acknowledged, the most intractable. In his address at the service in Great St Mary's in memorial of his immediate predecessor in the Regius chair, he spoke of Sir Herbert Butterfield's awareness of 'the war within himself over the nature of the historian's task', the problem of bringing 'historical understanding and moral conviction...into harmony, when moral judgement corrupts the *historian* and yet moral judgement is the essence of the *man*'. In acknowledging this difficulty and in not admitting, to the best of my knowledge, that there is any mortal means of resolving it, he places himself philosophically very close to Butterfield, whom he loved and admired, and with him at some distance from Lord Acton, by whom both men have been fascinated. Their dislike of judging appears to have both theological and psychological bases. Only God is in a position to understanding everything that goes on in the human soul and everything that in

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the process presses upon it. We are not to judge lest we be judged. Personality in any case is unique. His writings often insist on 'the mystery that is in every human being': 'all men are unique, but some men are more unique than others', 'human beings are often rather odd'. Of the Quietist Molinos he remarked that he was 'as mysterious a personality as most personalities, and no historian will presume to probe too far within'.

Some of us who have ventured to probe presumably too far, feeling justly rebuked, can find no line of defence but that of wondering whether ultimate mysteriousness really is so universal a characteristic as he affirms and whether some people in some times and places are not actually rather simple and straightforward – but that is no argument to pursue here... Certainly no eminent British historian alive today more consistently displays the lovely virtue of charity in his writings; and those privileged to know (so far as the mysterious in him allows one to know!) the writer, believe they know that it comes from the heart. His works are strikingly innocent of hostile judgments. Preferring simply to ignore the merely ignorant and incompetent, about the worst quality he will attribute to another scholar is that of being 'doctrinaire'. An ultra-protestant clerical pamphleteer who sought to kill his beloved Cuddesdon, and who did, in fact, cause it damage, he merely calls 'quaint', and hints at senility. In my reading of him I have come across no severer put-down of another historian than his slow-fused comment on the prolific medievalist Coulton's *Art and the Reformation*: 'Despite its title this is about medieval art and architecture, and is probably Coulton's best book.'

Unmistakable throughout all is his affectionate respect for history and historians, his conviction that the historian's work is worthwhile and within its limits valuable. Many of his smaller writings, many passages in his larger ones, are about historians and archivists and the libraries and archives in which they work. His conviction as to the value of what they consequently do is the old, straightforward, unanswerable one that nothing with any historical existence – from nation and church down to village and person – can be understood without reference to its history. But the claim is made in modest terms and nothing much is said of the use that man and men might make of such understanding. At the last, this noble Christian scholar's religious convictions merge with his scholarly commitment to confide our destiny into the hands of God – where it has been all the time anyway. The confidence, even optimism, that is (by modern positivist standards) missing from the surface of his works is to be found in their religious substructure. Commenting in his 1966 Cuddesdon sermon on the alien quality which reflective and experienced Christians must detect in the society and world around them, he yet affirms

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> that this world is God's world, that his purpose for the world is to be trusted, that change, even a change that looks menacing, may be brought within the scope of providence... This land, though strange, is not the land of Baal, nor of Moloch, nor of Dagon, nor of Thor, nor of Stalin. It is still the land of the Lord...

Owen Chadwick gave his second Cambridge inaugural lecture, when he succeeded Butterfield, on 27 November 1968. Its closing paragraphs will suitably bring our introduction to a close, for they nicely epitomize the idea of history by which he is guided and by which posterity will in due course place him.

> There is (or was) a view that though the historian is a man he ought not to be. Of course he ought to seek impartiality in the sense of understanding and fairly representing both sides. But he can only become totally detached by ceasing to be a man and therefore by ceasing to be a historian. The man who knows that his personality enters historical study and yet seeks to keep it in control and to broaden his vision will make more contribution to our understanding than the man who believes total detachment possible; though the totally detached may still contribute to the materials of history...
>
> St Augustine had a saying, Nemo nisi per amicitiam cognoscitur, you need to be a friend of a man before you understand him. So by analogy is our relation to men of the past, societies of the past, even documents in the archives. You may suspect, you ought to suspect them all as sure to mislead you vilely unless your critical sense is ever alert; but they do it (for the most part) by their inadvertence or their partial vision. You need no white paint, you need to try to see things as they were. But you need to be inside their minds and to forget the future which they could not know, and to come towards them with the openness of mind, the readiness to listen, which a man gives to a friend. Trevelyan had this among his strengths. He was the kind of man, as well as the kind of historian, who understood what St Augustine meant, that the human race is known in friendship.

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Augustine on pagans and Christians: reflections on religious and social change

HENRY CHADWICK

Although the modern world has tried hard to persuade itself that religion and morality are an individual's entirely private affair, the evidence of its social character is writ rather too large in history for this thesis to look very plausible to historians. Among the greatest and most momentous features of the later Roman empire, the factor that obviously marks the transition from what we think of as 'ancient' to what we think of as 'medieval' is the change from paganism to Christianity. How that change came about is something we are better able to describe than to explain. The ultimate springs of human behaviour and motivation in so sensitive a matter are not often readily accessible to us, even when the people we wish to understand are alive before our eyes. *A fortiori* we shall know a lot less about people who have been dead over 1500 years. Few of them could read or write, and of those who could only a small minority tell us about their feelings. When they do tell us about the process of their conversion from paganism to Christianity (as in the case of Justin in the mid-second century, or most fully Augustine in his *Confessions* and philosophical dialogues), the instinct of the learned is to suggest that such accounts are primarily literary. That is not to say that the underlying fact of conversion is to be doubted, but only that the way in which Justin and Augustine relate the story of their conversion is so pervaded with literary reminiscences (in Justin from Plato, in Augustine's case with a rich mosaic of allusions to Persius, Plotinus, the book of Genesis) that one can hardly treat their narrative as unvarnished reporting.

The pagans did not know they were pagans until the Christians told them they were. The very concept of 'paganism' is a Jewish–Christian construct. 'Paganism' is a term used by Latin-speaking Christians from about 300 onwards to describe the cults of the gods whether of Roman or Greek or Punic ancestral tradition. It is a lump word, a Christian category imposed on all non-monotheists to describe the unbaptised 'civilian' or 'non-combatant' whom they hoped to enlist in Christ's army, but who remained held by

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social tradition or prejudice or the blinding influence of diabolical counterfeit. Augustine is aware that the term is Christian argot. His normal noun is *paganitas*, but once at least (*DQ 83*, 83) we have the half Greek form *paganismus*, which suggests that this form of the word was used by the considerable Greek-speaking element in the Christian population of the seaport of Hippo Regius.

The Christians who grouped all non-monotheists together as 'pagans' created an invisible social wall between themselves and their non-Christian neighbours. Convinced that idolatry was a pollution to the conscience, they withdrew from participation in social activities where the veneration of the gods played a part, and the extent of that withdrawal was necessarily considerable. There was a strong Christian self-consciousness of standing over against the *saeculum*, the world alienated from God, oblivious of him, and essentially concerned with the four secular loves – power, honour, wealth, and sex. Towards the cult of the old gods the Christian attitude was one of deep moral disapproval, and this helped to generate powerful social tension. One has only to browse in the pages of Tertullian or Clement of Alexandria or the *contra Celsum* of Origen to be aware of a prickly defensiveness.

In North Africa, as Christians became more numerous, they became more self-confident – enough for some of the more zealous to emerge into the public squares and to make themselves prominent by demonstrations or even by insulting pagan shrines with a hiss or physical attack. A pagan complaint recorded early in the third century by the African writer Minucius Felix (*Octavius* 8, 4) declared that the Christians 'spit at the gods'. A generation earlier the pagan Platonist Celsus says that he knew of defiant Christians showing their contempt for statues of Apollo and Zeus by reviling and striking them, and calmly waiting for the god to take revenge (Origen, *contra Celsum* VIII, 38). In Africa zeal could go a long way. Well before the tensions and polarities introduced by the great persecution of Diocletian in 303, there were occasions when raiding parties of Christian militants would assault a pagan shrine and carry off any easily movable cultic objects. In the *Gesta apud Zenophilum* of 320 (an inquiry before the consularis into the records of the church at Cirta) we learn that Purpurius, the bishop of Liniata, had once removed from the temple of Serapis some casks of vinegar, presumably intended for ceremonial ablutions of the statue at an annual festival, to remove the carbon deposit left by pious candles. Purpurius was a man known for his strong-arm methods. At a council held at Cirta, perhaps in 305, the old primate of Numidia, Secundus of Tigisi, directly taxed Purpurius with the report that in the prison at Mileu he had killed his sister's two sons (perhaps to prevent them from compromising their faith by apostasy, on the principle that it would be better to lose one's life than one's eternal bliss).