

## Mentors: A Personal Note

Having recently attended a memorial service for a good man and a distinguished historian whom I admired (that for John Roberts held on 11 October 2003), I am particularly interested at this moment in the question of how ideas, influences, and practices are transmitted and what makes a good mentor. During my career so far I have been surprised by the variety that I have encountered. It is a particular pleasure to take up my pen and follow the words of the memorial service in praising great men, not least because, alongside respect I feel great affection for the two I wish to write about. In case it is thought I am uncritical, it is necessary to refer, without naming, to no fewer than five members of what William Cobbett so ably termed the 'thing', all of whom in their different ways were not only inadequate mentors but also unimpressive individuals.

Going up to university was the challenge of the unexpected, as neither my parents nor their friends had been. I was also a fairly unhappy individual, with the gaucheries of adolescence exacerbated by acute anxiety. I was therefore very fortunate to find myself under the care, as Director of Studies at Queens' College, Cambridge, of Jonathan Riley-Smith, now Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Cambridge. To me, there was much that was unusual about Jonathan, from his fascinated engagement with medieval history, about which I knew nothing, to his pipe-smoking. Jonathan's committed, enlivening and illuminating teaching has been discussed by medievalists in two volumes of *festschriften*, *The Experience of Crusading. Vol I. Western Approaches*, ed. Marcus Bull and Norman Housley; *Vol II. Defining the Crusader Kingdom*, ed. Peter Edbury and Jonathan Phillips. What I remember from the two terms teaching I had with Jonathan was the close personal interest in my work, the vivid depiction of a different culture, the precise analysis of documents (such as Magna Carta, the Provisions of Oxford), which served me so well subsequently as a diplomatic historian, and the sheer excitement of it all. This combination of excitement and precision is one that I have striven to re-capture in my own work, and Jonathan's great skill is that, like a master potter, he shaped it so well to the individual. Indeed, in a recent letter he noted, 'I remember supervising you and Oliver Letwin [now Shadow Home Secretary] one after the other for a term ... for one hour I was trying to persuade one student – you – to calm down and be less wildly speculative and for the next hour I was trying to encourage the other – Oliver – to be more bold and less cautious!'

I owe Jonathan much else, both educationally, for example persuading Marjorie Chibnall, who had retired, to supervise me for the Norman Conquest paper, and personally, not least helping to survive my second year when peritonitis and five weeks in hospital threw

my mental equilibrium; but, as a scholar, his legacy to me is that potent mix of enthusiasm and precision; and I can't help feeling that part of my edge as a modernist was that much of my training was by medievalists; indeed as an undergraduate the latest I ever went was 1793.

The second mentor I want to praise is Reg (W.R.) Ward, my first boss at Durham, where he was Professor of Modern History from 1965 to 1985, and I, from 1980, the youngest lecture. In terms of social and educational background, Reg was very different to Jonathan and, if they shared strong Christian convictions these were dissimilar: Reg is a Primitive Methodist and lay preacher, Jonathan a High Catholic and a Knight of the Order of St. John. Reg was encouraging and admonitory in an avuncular fashion, the model of industry, and a treasury of blunt comments about the profession. Prior to coming to Durham, he had taught at Manchester, and told me that he had been very impressed by the Professor, Sir Lewis Namier, who, as he saw it, was the reverse of the usual academic: in place of being harsh to the students, indifferent to junior colleagues, and creepy toward those at his rank, Namier was properly harsh to the latter and good to students and junior colleagues; a lesson I have always sought to remember. Reg was also keen on the idea that education was about developing potential and felt that famous institutions, which he had no hesitation in naming, frequently failed to do so, and that less distinguished counterparts often did a better job. His strong meritocratic attitude and blunt unwillingness to accept the second-rate, from staff and students alike, appealed greatly to me. Furthermore, Reg had the work ethic like a sick man has pain, and he published not only a lot (a full bibliography down to 1989 is published in his *festschrift Protestant Evangelicalism: Britain, Ireland, Germany and America c. 1750-c. 1950* edited by Keith Robbins), but also on a wonderful range, not only British and German religiosity from the seventeenth century to the present, but also the history of Oxford University, and British taxation in the eighteenth century: Wesley to the Window Tax. An industrious writer with high standards and deep scholarship, Reg's remark that he reckoned to write 3,000 words a day invigorated me, as did his conviction that one should not be held back by the conventional standards propagated by others. The contrast between this lively man, a keen walker, who kept a stove in his office and cooked adventurous lunches for colleagues, and the advice I was given by contrary members of the thing – one FBA telling me that 'history was like shaving: one shouldn't do too little, but one shouldn't do too much' (no reference, typically, to scholarly quality, intellectual adventure, range, or responsibility to others) – was, for me, all to the favour of Reg, and by the time he retired (from his post not from scholarship) I was set.

I have been very fortunate. To be supported and encouraged by incredibly busy scholars facing their own problems and able to treat one as an individual, 'warts and all', is to be exposed to the very best of education and friendship. That is mentoring.