

## **Penry the historian, by Sir Keith Thomas**

Penry was never a mere scholar. As a small boy, his main interests were cricket, riding and, thanks to his father (who had been Handicapper to the Calcutta Turf Club) horse-racing. When still at school he also developed a strong aesthetic sense and came 'to believe that art, literature and classical music were the most important things in life'.

As a man, he was cultivated and well-rounded, charming, witty, forthright and kind, with a huge range of interests and commitments. He loved walking in the Welsh hills. He greatly enjoyed travelling and relished landscapes, pictures and old buildings. He was an inveterate concert-goer and had a passion for opera. In his youth, he canvassed for the Labour party and in retirement he was a passionate opponent of injustice and an active helper of asylum-seekers threatened with deportation.

He combined administrative ability with unselfishness and a strong sense of duty. New College and the History Faculty saddled him with a host of responsibilities, all of which he discharged with tact, efficiency and human understanding. He was invariably sympathetic, encouraging and helpful to newcomers and to people in distress. Many think of him as the best Warden the College never had.

Above all, he was loving and attentive as a husband to June, a father to Sarah and Jonathan, and, later, a partner to Sylvia.

It is against this hinterland of a life lived to the full that his career as a student, teacher and writer of history must be set.

Behind successful academics you will usually find a school-teacher who first inspired them with a love of their subject. In Penry's case, this was the senior history master at Marlborough, Hubert Wylie, whom he describes in his unpublished (and regrettably incomplete) memoirs as 'perhaps the greatest intellectual influence of my life'. It was to him that he would dedicate his first book. Wylie, it seems, was a no-nonsense teacher, keeping rigorously to the point and tolerating no irrelevance or intellectual sloppiness.' The same was true of Penry.

When he came up to New College in 1947, his tutors were the learned but taciturn Scot, David Ogg, the medievalist Harry Bell, on whose patient tutorial methods Penry would later model his own, and the dynamic Alan Bullock, who would help him to get his assistant lectureship at Manchester University by introducing him to its celebrated professor, the formidable Lewis Namier.

Rashly choosing to take Schools after only seven terms in Oxford, Penry was understandably disappointed to get a Second. But, as so often happens, he was spurred on by this setback and rapidly overtook others, who, having gained higher honours, sank, exhausted by their efforts. Although, his undergraduate Special Subject had been on Manorial Economy, he chose to do his D.Phil on the sixteenth century. The study of that period was at a low ebb in the Oxford of 1950. The

obvious supervisor, R. B. Wernham, was ill that year and the only alternative was A.L. Rowse, whose attentions Penry was anxious to avoid. So he was assigned to the medievalist, Ernest Jacob, who proved a benevolent adviser, but knew little about the period. He did, however, put Penry in touch with the reigning authority, J.E. Neale in London, and it was Neale who suggested Penry's subject, the Council of the Marches in Wales under Elizabeth I. This was a debt which Penry repaid years later in his very fine Neale Lecture on the Elizabethan court.

In 1951 Penry took up his post at Manchester; the unsuccessful applicants included Piers Mackesy, David Fieldhouse and J.P. Kenyon. He stayed in Manchester for twelve and a half years. It was a time of great personal happiness, with his marriage to June in 1952 and the subsequent birth of their two children. His colleagues included Alastair Parker and Gerald Aylmer, who became lifelong friends. But he found the atmosphere of the University 'stultifying'. It was a nine-to-five institution, and rigidly hierarchical. The professors excluded the junior staff from any decision-making and resisted Penry's suggestion that they would do more to encourage independent thought on the part of the students if they provided tutorials as well as giving the same old lectures. Penry recalled one of the professors, giving a young woman permission to miss one of his classes, on condition that she got the notes from one of the other students. 'I don't need to do that,' she replied, 'I've got my mother's notes.' During Penry's first ten years at Manchester no First in History was awarded. All very different, of course, from New College where, he recalls, a small number of his first students were 'idle and brainless', but a few were 'brilliant'. It was partly in reaction to his Manchester experience that Penry made tutorial teaching his first priority in an Oxford which was increasingly putting all the emphasis on research.

The Manchester system did at least mean that his teaching took only two and a half days a week, leaving the rest of the time free for research and writing. He completed his thesis and published it as a book in 1958. It is an excellent study, based on extremely thorough research into the institutional history of the Council of the Marches. Penry explains the internal working of the Council, relates it to the factional conflicts of the time, and assesses its contribution to making Wales a more peaceful country, and a better-behaved one, for the North Welsh were thought to be addicted to sexual immorality, owing to the effects of the mountain air. The book remains the standard authority on the subject and is unlikely ever to be superseded. Penry followed it up with a series of important articles and chapters on the later history of the Council, on the gentry of Glamorgan, and on the politics of Elizabethan Ludlow, where popular distrust of the reigning oligarchy seemed to him to prefigure the Leveller movement of the 1640s.

While still at Manchester, Penry also wrote a famous article in *Past & Present* criticising Geoffrey Elton's notion of a Tudor Revolution in Government. Elton was a scholar of remarkable power and intensity, but his claim that in the 1530s Thomas Cromwell established a bureaucratic system of government was exaggerated. Penry brought common sense and a broader perspective to the problem. The ensuing controversy was fierce, but Elton subsequently wrote to thank Penry for the courtesy with which he had conducted it.

It was probably this article which got him his tutorial fellowship at New College, where he returned happily in 1964 to spend the rest of his life. The other History tutors were Eric Christiansen, whom Penry helped to elect shortly after his arrival and whom he regarded as an ideal colleague, and Gary Bennett, about whom his feelings were more mixed. Together they made New College a nursery of historians. As Allen Warren has recalled for us, Penry was an admirable tutor, genial and patient yet questioning. He encouraged his pupils to develop their powers of reasoning, to become intellectually independent and, above all, to write clearly. He was equally good as a graduate supervisor, combining gentle scepticism with patient encouragement.

One of his early graduate students was Jennifer Loach, who became a Fellow of Somerville. Along with Cliff Davies, who had returned to Wadham just before Penry's arrival, they planned the introduction of a new Special Subject on the reigns of Edward VI and Mary, thus setting in motion the process whereby Oxford would become much stronger in 16<sup>th</sup>-century British history than in 17<sup>th</sup>, a remarkable reversal of the state of affairs when Penry began research. In a characteristic piece of unselfishness, Penry, with George Bernard, would later devote much energy and creative imagination to reconstructing and completing Jennifer Loach's biography of *Edward VI* after her premature death.

His own work progressed steadily. Since 1960 he had become a regular reviewer for the *English Historical Review*, initially of books on Welsh history, but soon on sixteenth-century British history more generally. He was excellent at summarising a book's contribution to knowledge (if any) and his assessment of its strengths and weaknesses, though always fairminded, was crisp and incisive, particularly on matters of style and expression. He typically characterised the Introduction to one, otherwise valuable collection of essays, as 'written in a prose derived from the post-structuralist handbook in a style that can only be described as reader-repellent'. To work through his 70-odd reviews in the *EHR* is to be presented with a concise guide to the progress of historical writing about sixteenth-century Britain over the last 50 years. His judgment was excellent and has stood the test of time

That can't quite be said of his book of 1964 on *Life in Tudor England*, for social history has moved on since then. But it was an agreeable Batsford production, containing some acute observations based on wide reading and notable for its fine illustrations, many drawn from recondite sources. More enduring is Penry's masterpiece of 1979, *The Tudor Regime*. To appreciate its influence one need only look at the six copies in the History Faculty Library: battered, rebound, and heavily underlined in ink or yellow pencil. The numerous marginal graffiti include some delicate little drawings illustrating Penry's account of the peasant rebel who derisively exposed his buttocks to the defenders of Norwich in 1549, only to make them the target of a particularly skilful archer.

Penry's majestic book combines complete mastery of contemporary scholarship with his own research in public and local records. With a firm analytic framework and in

unfailingly lucid prose, he describes the working of Tudor government, the people who ran it and its impact on the society they ruled. He explains how Protestantism was successfully established, how the social order held together and how Britain was unified. The secret, he says, was 'a skilful combination of the formal and the informal, the official and the personal'. Rather than an Eltonian, bureaucratic imposition from above, royal authority depended on personal influence and negotiation with local worthies. This was a profoundly original insight which set the agenda for all future work. Penry would follow it in 1995 with his large volume on *The Later Tudors* in the New Oxford History of England. This displayed his usual virtues of clarity and good judgment, but by then the story was familiar and the book, though greatly respected, had less impact.

Always obliging, Penry edited the *English Historical Review* for eight years and became involved in a number of collaborative works. With John Buxton he edited the history of New College, contributing a chapter on the College before the age of reform, which he described as 'a comfortable institution', offering good rewards to its members and requiring no great effort from them in return. In his chapter on the Elizabethan period in volume III of the *History of Oxford University* he relates how, during Elizabeth's visit to Oxford in 1566, the professor of Greek met the royal party at Carfax and addressed her for fifteen minutes in Greek, but (says Penry) when the Queen began to reply, 'her mules became understandably restive'.

Penry's last collaboration was with Mark Nicholls on a biography of Sir Walter Raleigh, a challenging subject, which no less a figure than Edward Gibbon once contemplated, but, he tells us, abandoned because its difficulty made him 'shrink with terror'. Undaunted by this warning, Penry and Mark produced a carefully written and meticulously documented work, which is enthralling to read and unquestionably the best book on this fascinating and mercurial figure. It appeared in 2011, when Penry was 86.

For Penry, public affairs remained the central subject-matter of history and he did not set out to be an intellectual innovator. But he embodied the traditional virtues of the Oxford History School supremely well. His writing was firmly grounded on a critical assessment of the evidence. It was invariably well organised, balanced, fair-minded, judicious, cogent and humane. He insisted on absolute clarity of expression and was intolerant of pretentiousness and obscurity.

These are, perhaps, not glamorous virtues. But they are essential ones and they are much less common than they should be. In Penry Williams we have lost an admirable historian, as well as a good and delightful man who enhanced the lives of so many people.