

Penry Williams 1925-2013

I first met Penry Williams in October 1964 as one of his initial group of freshman undergraduates at New College, following his return from Manchester. Not that I've been selected by him. There must have been something in the air in December 1963 when I had been interviewed by Harry Bell, Raymond Carr, Gary Bennett and the Warden, William Hayter. In the intervening months, Raymond had become Professor of Latin American history and, sadly, Harry had died. So the history team was reduced to two, Gary and Penry, who had recently been elected to succeed Gordon Davies on his moving to Bristol. So it was all change with Eric Christiansen joining a year later. From then on until 1987 these three men were New College history for some hundreds of undergraduates, more than sixty of whom are present this afternoon, joining all his other family and friends.

Not that any of the three men was a clone of any other, far from it. Gary always made it clear that he was the senior by election. But for us, however, Penry was the don who had oversight and responsibility for our progress, and so it was to remain until his retirement in 1992. Each had a very distinctive tutorial style and in receiving memories of Penry, correspondents have written comparatively. Penry, open, conversational, interrogative and with animation, Gary, controlling, insidiously clever, and declaratory, Eric, mercurial, unexpected and imaginative.

But in reflecting on Penry this afternoon, the first thing to say is that he was a very good tutor; clear, well organised with relevant, up to date reading lists and titles which asked questions which were both precise and discursive. He made written comments on our essays, by no means general at that time, praising, encouraging, constructive and critical as required. Idleness was not acceptable and advice could be appropriately clear. Charles Rice remembers his own ambitions as a sportsman and Penry's comment, 'some undergraduates can have academic and sporting success, Charles, but you have to choose.' End of discussion. Penry was also a very good lecturer and Tony Jenkins movingly evokes the memory of him lecturing in Hall on Tudor government without notes, under the watchful eye of that other great servant of the College, Warden Smith.

These were not qualities that diminished over the decades as I can testify from hearing Penry lecture on Sir Walter Raleigh at a research conference in York on Political Prisoners, just a few

years ago.

Outstanding scholars and teachers are not just 'professional' to use that threadbare word. They engage their pupils as individuals of interest and emulation, inspiring affectionate anecdote. Penry was much mimicked in speech and gesture. Humfrey Butters remembers his own interview vividly with Gary lying back on his sofa and Penry gesticulating wildly. Peter Hinton recalls the mint tea accompanying late afternoon tutorials, while Jeff Rudman reminds us of that upholstered fender in his rooms on which Penry precariously balanced himself to discuss our essay. He was never known to fall off.

But the other quality of the outstanding undergraduate tutor is that certain of the tutor's insights stay with you, long after the problems associated with the Elizabethan Church Settlement or the Tudor economy have passed from the memory. Each pupil will have their own and these are mine.

The first is that of the problems associated with historical periodization and prompted by the debate with Geoffrey Elton, which led one naive undergraduate to understand for the first time how fundamentally ambiguous are those vital tools of the historian's trade, such as the Middle Ages, the Renaissance or the Enlightenment. The second also comes from the Elton disputation, which led me first to grasp how intricate are the relationships between the Crown, state and politics, and not only in the Tudor period. The third, again no part of school history of the time, was an understanding of how deeply nuanced is the relationship between the metropolitan and the local at all times and in almost all societies. The final lesson was in a very different sphere. Penry had taken over the teaching of the Political Thought Paper, probably from Raymond Carr, and may have been reading it up as he went along in Hilary Term 1965. From my perspective today, it was one of the most important parts of my Oxford education in terms of understanding the political world, but I did find the texts difficult - Thomas Hobbes particularly. Penry was immensely patient with my essay, explaining that it was really only a precis of Howard Warrender and that I needed to be more constructively analytical, but that I would be helped by going to Keith Thomas' lectures on Hobbes - a piece of very sound advice!

But we are not here this afternoon simply to celebrate Penry as an outstanding tutor. For all of us, pupil or not, we are here as friends of Penry and June, and Penry and Sylvia; and each of us

will have our own affectionate memories. But for his pupils, it was his ability to move between position of tutor to that of tutor and friend that was so special. For almost all of us, this is represented by 53 Park Town. If there is one consistent thread to the tributes that I have received about Penry, it is that of hospitality. Sunday lunches for pupils often with Sarah and Jonathan present, usually a roast with Penry carving as conversation flowed. It was an environment in which, as Humfrey's Butters puts it, one felt 'utterly at home', regardless of earlier schooling or family background. It went alongside a pattern of undergraduate sociability among dons that is much less common today and included both William and Iris Hayter and Gary Bennett – very different styles and each educative in its own way. Who can fail to remember the terrors of afternoon tea at the Lodgings and the dilemma of how did you actually eat honeycomb? Using wit, charm and humanity Penry and June made Park Town very important part of our moral education.

Nor did this end with June's tragically early death and it became a great joy that Penry and Sylvia came together, a relationship fashioned out of mutual loss. Those of us who were friends of all three must pay tribute to Sylvia for joining Penry, and so enable him to be the man who we all admired and loved for so long. Penry created in college and at home for his students an environment of learning, living and friendship that remains the model for me.

But this should not imply that Penry saw humanity through rose-tinted spectacles and it was his sharply-observed comments on human foibles [often vigorously endorsed by June] that made him such amusing and enjoyable company. But such comment was nearly always delivered with an acuteness suffused by a benign, slightly detached articulation. Thus a very distinguished and saintly medieval historian could be described as 'perhaps not quite as nice as he would wish to appear to be.' Or in commenting on a fellow history tutor in another college, 'one would have to be a very able man to be as idle as' One of my own favourite images is of Penry and Herbert Nicholas together in torrents of fast conversation, each representative of a distinctive tradition of Welshness – the one amused, sardonic, suggestive and open, the other sharp, almost rasping, subtle witty and ironic. It was characteristically generous of Penry to contribute a warm and appreciative essay on Herbert for the British Academy.

In conclusion, Penry provided the model of what a university teacher and scholar should be in

terms of vigorous critical assessment of the historical evidence and existing historiography, a belief in the satisfactions of teaching able and committed students, and a dedication to humane learning out of which a life-long pattern of friendships was fashioned and survives.

But on behalf of all his pupils this has been best put by David Kynaston

‘Penry always seemed to me an absolute rock of sanity. It is easy for an Oxford undergraduate to go slightly off the rails under the intense pressures of those eight week terms, but Penry’s mixture of kindness and firmness, allied to a well-developed sense of humour, did much I’m sure to prevent successive generations of New College historians from doing so. I know at times I was frustrated in tutorials by his unwillingness to provide easy, readily digestible certainties – if historians are indeed “lumpers” or “splitters”, then Penry was surely a splitter supreme – but over the years I’ve come to realise I owe him an intellectual debt for the example of his deep commitment to empirical historical truth.....I last saw him in 2008 at the Oxford Literary Festival. Afterwards I intended to send him a photograph of the old-fashioned department store in the London suburb where I live, but [as I now regret] never got round to it. The name of the store: Tudor Williams.’

Allen Warren – 27 November 2013 [a slightly edited version of the Memorial Address given in New College Chapel, Oxford 12 October 2013]