



JOHN KENYON

John Philipps Kenyon 1927–1996

JOHN KENYON was successively Lecturer in History at Cambridge (1956–62), and Professor of Modern History at the Universities of Hull (1962–81), St Andrews (1981–7), and Kansas (1987–94). He wrote nine books; he edited two more; and he published a number of distinguished essays. He was the only historian of his generation to be equally at home in the early and in the late seventeenth century (and indeed in the first half of the eighteenth century). He had what many believe to be the finest historical intelligence of anyone working in those fields, and he was one of the most stylish of historical writers, and his elegant, at times mordantly witty, prose was also seen to advantage in the many essays and reviews he contributed to weekly newspapers—especially *The Observer*—and to journals such as *The Spectator*. His extraordinary ability earned him one of the leading Chairs in the country—the G. F. Grant Chair at Hull—at the age of thirty-five and a Fellowship of the British Academy in 1981. He achieved a great deal more than he ever realised; for when gifts were showered upon him at his birth, the gift of recognising his own worth was withheld. He had a basically pessimistic attitude to the state of the world and to his own role within it. Sir John Plumb believes that he was a man who knew how to experience excitement but not joy; yet the doom and gloom that dominated his conversation did not damage his capacity to engender affection throughout the profession. There was a larger-than-life aspect to him and a very evident vulnerability that made him much cherished. For if he was without self-regard, he was also without self-pity. His honesty about his own frailties was straightforward and unembarrassing. His career did tail off, but not as much as he believed it to have done.

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John Kenyon was born in Sheffield on 18 June 1927, an only child. His father was a skilled craftsman (an inspector of boilers) and although his mother (whose maiden name gave him his middle name—Philipps) was of staunch Welsh Methodist stock, he was brought up in a home that respected the Church of England and revered Stanley Baldwin. He was later to write to a close friend that 'I always was and always will be an Episcopalian Tory'.

He was a Yorkshireman and proud of it, never disguising his northern consonants even if he overlaid his northern vowels. He preferred a pint of beer to a glass of wine and there was in his socialising the earthy banter of the Yorkshire pub and the air-raid shelter. Not the least of the pull factors that took him to Hull in 1962 was the belief that he was returning to his Yorkshire roots (and although he quickly came to see that the East Riding was not the West Riding, he was infuriated when 'North Humberside' was invented, and signed many a petition against it in the streets of Hull and Beverley). He was devoted to his parents. He spoke to close friends of his debt to them for their sacrifices to see him through school and university, their slightly claustrophobic pride and protectiveness. His grandmother lived with them in Sheffield and her harrowing death in his teens had a detrimental effect on him throughout his life. He benefited from a traditional Grammar School education in the Classics and Liberal Arts at King Edward VII School in Sheffield. From there he moved on to Sheffield University, gaining a very rare First Class degree in 1949.

He was an Episcopalian Tory. He was habitual in attending Anglican worship—regularly reading the lessons (he especially relished this in Kansas) and he had a strong faith and a deep love of the culture of Anglicanism. He was a committed member of the Prayer Book Society and did not hesitate to harangue clergymen who turned to the ASB. He once gleefully and successfully defended the religious clauses of the 1701 Act of Settlement in a Radio 4 programme called *You the Jury*. A colleague at Hull can still recall the loud and firm declamation of the promises made by godparents at the Christening of one of Lloyd's children, even though it was John's wife Angela who was the godparent! He loved *Hymns Ancient and Modern* and would growl them as he sat in his office, on one occasion sending his secretary out to find a copy because 'I cannot remember the words of that bloody 'ymn'. His favourite, which secretaries got tired of hearing on winter afternoons, was 'The Church's one foundation'; and he asked that 'For all the saints' be sung at his funeral—'but not at a marching pace'!)

His Toryism took the form of a temperamental, reflexive conservatism in academic as well as political matters, a deep suspicion and scepticism of any claim that structural change could be effected or would have any desirable consequences. His dislike of enthusiasm and his pessimism about the state of the world and acceptance of its unreformability made him a devoted admirer of David Hume's history. But other aspects of his Toryism reflected his roots in the working-class Conservatism of the 1920s and 1930s. He was a fairly robust, even curmudgeonly, little-Englander. He had no time for greater British integration with Europe, and he was as pig-headed as Alan Taylor in refusing to accept that one needed to be careful to distinguish Englishness from Britishness. None of this disfigured his scholarship or was especially apparent from it, except for his fundamental disapproval of model-builders and systematisers. He had no time for social determinism as a tool of the historian for explaining the past or of social engineering as a tool of the politician in effecting the future. As a historian he was very much on the side of Geoffrey Elton, and the historians and genres of historical writing he most cordially disliked and minced no words over, were those also disliked by Geoffrey Elton.

After graduation, he began research on seventeenth-century history at Sheffield under Professor George Potter. He chose—very much by himself, he claimed in the preface to the book that arose from the thesis—to study the political career of the Second Earl of Sunderland, who successively served and betrayed Charles II, James II, and William III. This was an astonishingly bold project. Potter was a meticulous student of estate records (especially those of the Cavendish family); and he had a significant second string interest in the Swiss Reformation, but he was not competent to direct research into later Stuart high politics, and the University Library at Sheffield was not really up to supporting this work. It was therefore Kenyon's good fortune, which he always afterwards acknowledged, that Dante Campailla, (whom he had known since they were seven year olds together at King Edward VII's Primary School), talked about this talented but rather adrift graduate student to another of his friends, Jack Plumb, and asked whether there was any money available to bring Kenyon to Cambridge. There was; and he arrived in Cambridge in October 1950 to take up a Lloyd studentship at Christ's College.

Plumb was struck by his precocious gifts—he needed less teaching than any other of his graduate students—and with his unnerving grasp of the mind of Sunderland and others in the exceptionally devious and deceitful generation of politicians who straddled the Glorious Revolution.

On the other hand, Plumb found him from the outset 'sad by birth and temperament', lacking *joie de vivre*, but so exceptional that he quickly recommended him for a Research Fellowship at Christ's. Within a short space a university assistant lectureship became vacant and Kenyon secured it (his principal rival being Bob Robson, a Research Fellow of Trinity who had written a good book on attorneys in the eighteenth century and who was turning his attention to Macaulay). Within five years of arriving in Cambridge, he had a secure future there, two books and three articles published. It was an astonishing rise.

Kenyon joined an early-modern teaching team dominated by Geoffrey Elton and Jack Plumb, but also including Charles Wilson and Brian Wormald. Throughout his seven years as an assistant lecturer and lecturer he gave the same series of thirty-two lectures on 'English Constitutional History 1603–1760' (when he became a full lecturer in 1960, he delivered an additional eight lectures on 'English Constitutional Documents 1603–1714', and the year before he left Cambridge he introduced a new final-year special subject on 'James II and the Revolution of 1688–9'). Within the Faculty and the College, he could be said to be a good Country Party man. He opposed almost every change (in the Faculty this meant arguing against the strengthening of Extra-European History), but he accommodated to change. Like any good eighteenth-century country member, he regretted little except the next change. At the Monday evening meetings of Plumb and his allies in a public house in Petty Cury, he could again be counted upon to lead lamentations at the advance of those who wished to see the Tripos develop as a programme of professional training rather than remain a liberal general education. He was to play little part in the affairs of the Faculty, but he did serve—as Christ's nominee—as Junior Proctor in 1961–2.

In those early Cambridge years he wrote two magnificent books. It is generally accepted that they were the best scholarly and popular books he ever wrote. That was certainly his view, clearly expressed in his letters in the 1980s to Bill Speck and Geoffrey Parker. Others differed from his own judgement on himself only in believing the gap between those early books and his later ones to be less than he would allow. Out of his Ph.D. thesis, he published a book and three pendant articles.¹ *Robert Spencer,*

¹ The articles were (a) 'The Earl of Sunderland and the Revolution of 1688', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, 11: 3 (1955), 272–96; (b) 'The Earl of Sunderland and the King's Administration 1693–95', *English Historical Review*, 71 (1956), 576–602; (c) 'Charles II and William of Orange in 1680', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 30: 81 (1957), 95–101 (an edition of three letters by Sunderland regarding a proposed visit by the Stadtholder to England).

Earl of Sunderland, 1641–1702 (1958) is still widely regarded as one of the finest biographies of a seventeenth-century statesman ever written, and few deny that it is the most dazzling debut by any scholar in the field over the past fifty years. It is first and foremost a penetrating human portrait. I hesitate to say a *psychological* portrait, because that would be to imply that it was based on ideas about nature and nurture of which Kenyon would have claimed to be ignorant or in which he was uninterested. It is a powerful work of empathy. Kenyon's Sunderland is a credible man whose career, for all its extraordinary twists, is the logical interplay of a particular man and of treacherous and changing historical circumstance. This was someone who needed office to keep the bailiffs at bay; who dominated the courts and administrations of Charles II, James II, and William III by 'force of personality, overweening self-confidence and black bad temper' (p. 331). His self-belief was so great and so unwavering, that others came to take him at his own evaluation. He lacked fixed principles, but was 'a man of extremes [who] once he had espoused a policy could not help push it relentlessly to its logical conclusion—pleasant or unpleasant, possible or impossible' (p. 332). No principle underlay his commitment to Exclusion in 1681, to James's absolutist designs in 1686–7 or to Junto Court Whiggery in the later 1690s, only the needs of the moment. Often his extremism represented an over-reaction to a previous failure. Early reviews of the book acknowledged the brilliant unravelling of each episode of Sunderland's career, but wondered if he had captured the life as a whole. This seems to me harsh. This is an essentially unprincipled man who would act and behave in any way so long as it would keep him trendily distinct from the pious nostrums of Cavalier Tory Anglicanism. As a result, he served and let down three utterly different kings with a stunning ability both to be captain of the mizzen and the first to abandon ships that he had guided onto the rocks. The book is also a brilliant evocation of a fetid political culture, and still the best and most readable political narrative of twenty-five turbulent years. Sir George Clark, reviewing it in the *Historical Journal* called it 'a complete biography, based on practically the whole of the available materials' (*HJ*, 2 (1959), 87), and Caroline Robbins, in the *American Historical Review* concluded that 'Kenyon has relied less on new facts for modification of old prejudices than on the careful scrutiny of contemporary political practice' (*AHR*, 65 (1959), 238). And, like others, they drew attention to the giftedness of the writing. Kenyon was a master of the one-liner, of the crisp summary, of the baroque period; and he knew how not to overuse any of them. Let me

offer a personal favourite of each. First, on Sunderland's loss of office for furthering the cause of William and Mary in 1681:

William's high regard for Sunderland was to have unexpected results in after years; but for the moment it was not a marketable product. (p. 78)

Second, on Sunderland's *Apologia* written after he had anticipated James's flight to Paris by his own flight to Amsterdam:

This confusing syllogism—the papists hated Lord Sunderland: papists hated Protestants and patriots: therefore Lord Sunderland was a Protestant and a patriot—was its central theme. (p. 233)

And on James's attempt (in 1686–7) to 'closet' MPs and browbeat them individually into agreeing to the parliamentary repeal of the Penal Laws and the Test Acts:

Early in March 1687 Admiral George Herbert declined to pledge his support for the repeal of the Test Acts and resigned all his offices. Herbert owed everything to James, his personal friend, who had raised him from nothing, and he had no private means on which to fall back. The obstinate ingratitude of this blasphemous debauchee, founded on a religious scruple which nobody had dreamed he possessed, finally convinced James that Rochester's dismissal had achieved nothing and that he could not think of meeting Parliament in April because he could not even rely on his most intimate confidants. (p. 152)

The essence of James II's tragedy is captured in this passage.

Sunderland was delivered to the Press in 1957 and appeared in 1958. In the interval, he sat down and wrote—in six weeks—*The Stuarts*. This is how—thirty years later—he was to write about its provenance:

Jack Plumb rang me one morning in Christ's in 1958 and said that Batsford were offering £500 down on the first 5000 and 12½% on the rest for a series of books on the English monarchy . . . did I want to do the Stuarts. I said 'yes' at once, because I badly needed a car to pursue my social/sexual life, and in 1957–8 you could get a very good car for £500. Jack said 'don't worry about it; it'll never be reprinted; it's just like a book review.' Well, I ripped off the thing in six weeks flat [and bought a Ford Prefect]. Then Christopher Hill gave me a great big boost with one of his sentimental reviews in the *NS & N*, denouncing me as 'the Lucky Jim of English Historiography',² a title I still treasure. This pushed the thing above the 5000. I'm therefore intrigued by what you say of the nubile girl on the New Haven train reading *The Stuarts*, though I am not surprised. Your letter coincided with my royalty statements, and the revenue from *The Stuarts* was still about 70% of that from the *Pelican Stuart England*. This has been the picture for the past ten years.

² There is an especial irony in this in that Amis's 'Lucky Jim' is widely held to be a portrait of Kenyon's later close friend Philip Larkin.

The glory of the book lies in its vivid and pithy character sketches, most obviously of the six monarchs from James I to Anne, but also of their advisers and critics. There is a clarity, a sureness of judgement, a rapid accumulation of quick-fire points that are far more than the sum of their parts:

[Charles II] was intellectual without being intelligent, and he lacked the common touch so obvious in his father and eldest son Charles II. His was never a masculine character, and his feminine delicacy of feature, his *tristesse*, that Pre-Raphaelite droop so attractive to the old ladies of Anglo-Catholicism, had a limited appeal to contemporaries. His perfect good manners, his gentle sweetness of disposition, suffused with a calvaric melancholy, imposed on those who came into daily contact with him, but they were not attractions communicable to the nation at large. . . . For not only was he ill-equipped for kingship, he never enjoyed the act of ruling as his father and sons so clearly did. The duties imposed on him by God he fulfilled with a kind of petulant distaste that struck a chill into those around him. He expected nothing from life but a crown of thorns; he anticipated betrayal and neglected to reward loyalty, taking it as his due. (p. 72)

One does not have to agree with everything in this to admire it. Throughout the book, there are even briefer, decisive assessments of controverted aspects of the rulers and their times. Here he is on William III's relationship with the Hans Willem Bentinck:

Clearly there was a deep homosexual strain in this relationship. However, it is unlikely that either man saw anything unnatural in it until near the end; still less likely that it had a physical basis. William regarded Portland with the possessive emotion of a man who had few friends, never dared have many, and used him as a substitute for the father he had never known, the mother he could scarcely remember, the son he never had, the wife he had lost. That he was a man of strong, though firmly suppressed emotions is well enough known, (pp. 179–80)

The book is not entirely composed of aphoristic writing of this quality, of course. There are stretches of narrative which are fairly routine and follow the line of least resistance, accepting the prevailing accounts which were around in the 1950s. But whenever Kenyon stepped back, took stock, assessed, summed up, evaluated, there was a challenge to established orthodoxy. He was naturally restless, unwilling to take things on trust. Much more eerie was his ability to be ahead of his time. It is difficult now to see how precocious and startling many of his judgements were. This is especially true of the chapter that preceded the six chapters devoted in turn to each Stuart reign. Rather mawkishly entitled 'The Tudor Sunset', it is a very hard and crisp review

of the political, legal, and religious culture of the period 1580–1640 and of the origins of the English Civil War. Kenyon found no evidence of a disintegration of an outdated system; no progressive movement made up of an alliance of common lawyers, puritan gentry and clergy, thrusting merchants and trendy intellectuals; rather he found a gentry confused and unsure of itself, at once timidly in awe of firebrand clergy and determined to subject the church and its wealth more and more to lay control:

The seventeenth-century gentry were intensely religious, most of them . . . but like their fathers and grandfathers before them, they remained resolutely anti-clerical. They willingly supported and encouraged individual left-wing clergymen, loquacious, learned and stimulating, within the framework of the established church, but they were unwilling to embark on any wholesale programme of reform unless it would redound to their own interests. . . . (p. 23)

A great deal of the religious history of the 1630s and 1640s can be written around those few lines. The book got few reviews, and most of them puzzled ones; and some expressed their puzzlement more generously than others. Thus, Andrew Browning recognised that *The Stuarts* ‘is obviously based on Dr Kenyon’s very extensive researches’ and that ‘the conclusions, although unorthodox, are worthy of serious consideration’ (*English Historical Review*, 76 (1960), 163), while Harold Hulme dismissed it as a book that ‘fills its pages with many blacks and a few grays, and destroys every shred of glory in the ageing “Gloriana”’. It is a bit too much’ (*Journal of Modern History*, 31 (1959), 162).

Having written *The Stuarts* in six weeks, he responded to another Cambridge invitation with a book that took him six years—*The Stuart Constitution*. He owed the invitation for that book to Geoffrey Elton, then a Syndic of the Press and the author of *The Tudor Constitution* (completed 1958, published 1960). Elton and Plumb were rivals of course, the chalk and cheese of the Faculty, hugely gifted in very different ways, and most of the younger Faculty members found themselves on one side or the other. Kenyon was one of the few who remained close to both of them. He owed a great debt of gratitude to Plumb, and fully recognised it:³ he admired Plumb’s *style* in every sense, and he was temperamentally drawn to Plumb’s belief in History as a

³ His letters to Bill Speck, for example, are explicit on his affection and gratitude; and Howell Lloyd told me that Kenyon was genuinely and deeply honoured to be seated next to Plumb at his retirement dinner.

training of the mind rather than induction into a discipline; but (as his letters to close friends make clear), he thought Elton was the better scholar, he was much more drawn—and influenced by—Elton's pre-revisionism, and (not least, in fact) he was like Elton ultimately a grain man and not a grape man, whereas Plumb was emerging as a pre-eminent connoisseur of fine wines, even by Cambridge standards. The agreement to write *The Stuart Constitution* was a sign of Kenyon's eirenicism within the Faculty of History (reinforced by the fact that this is the book he chose to dedicate to Plumb).⁴ He was commissioned in 1959 or 1960 and the book appeared in 1966.

In the meantime, Kenyon had made the most fateful decision of his professional life. In 1962 he accepted the G. F. Grant Chair of Modern History at the University of Hull in succession to A. G. Dickens (who was leaving to become Professor of History at King's College London). There were push and pull factors. He was never comfortable in Cambridge common rooms, and colleagues at Christ's at the time report that he always stationed himself at Governing Bodies at the edge of the room away from the main table, and his contributions were more quizzical asides than substantive and constructive contributions. There was an inner restlessness and a belief that the remedy to that restlessness lay in changing external circumstance rather than recognising and coming to terms with the inner demons. There were aspects of his domestic life and recent marriage that made a change seem appropriate. The chair at Hull was attractive because it was a chair with a distinguished lineage, in a northern civic university for which he had both affection and fond memory, and because it was in Yorkshire. He was told that to go to such a senior Chair at thirty-five would be a stepping stone to even greater rewards. Several senior professors believed he would be back in Cambridge in due course. Plumb has recently written that when Kenyon went to Hull 'he began a journey to nowhere'.⁵ That is surely unfair both to him and to the distinguished universities in which he was to serve; but it was a journey that failed to bring him the sense of belonging he was craving.

Kenyon found the Hull department to be what he later frankly referred to as a group of 'elderly, cranky second-raters'. Many of them were devoted to their students ('they spoon-fed them and then

⁴ *Sunderland* was dedicated to his parents; and *The Stuarts* to Dante and Selina Campailla, the friends who had facilitated the move from Sheffield to Cambridge.

⁵ *Christ's College Magazine*, 71 (1996), 71.

they smothered them', Kenyon later wrote) and they were temperamentally committed to what we would now call continuing education and to supplementing their undergraduate teaching with evening classes and summer schools. None prioritised research. From Master Elton and the Cambridge apprenticeship system, Kenyon found that he had fallen amongst journeymen—or, as he put it later: 'they were craftists, I was an Arts Man'. He set out to use his position as head of department to bring in other men (and they were all men) of the Arts from Oxbridge, London, and Dublin. But the key appointment, the Chair of Medieval History, went to another Cambridge man, Richard Vaughan (whom Kenyon described as 'an abstemious radical'), and it was not a complementary appointment that worked from his viewpoint.

He was conscientious as head of department. His secretaries at Hull remember him as a 'ferocious hard worker'. He taught far more than his predecessors and far more than most heads of department and he insisted on playing a major role in the first-year course, something he could clearly have escaped. He did not seek out student problems, and his gruff exterior may have deterred some from approaching him; but those who made the effort of will or nerve found him caring and sympathetic. He was already especially self-deprecating about his own teaching: 'I've just given the wrong lecture and not one of them noticed', he told his secretary on one occasion. He could be boorish to his older colleagues, and he was certainly not popular with them. He felt a deep loyalty to those whom he appointed and made time freely available to anyone who sought him out.

When he arrived in the morning, he would expect his post to be opened and sorted into piles. He would settle down with coffee to dictating answers, often as much as 40 pages a day. His dictation was fluent and normally word perfect. He rarely needed to go back over it and correct it. These were the days when all power and all duty lay with professors, just eight in the Faculty of Arts when he arrived. There were no administrative assistants and so when the department moved into its new building, Kenyon had to take charge of every detail, down to the last piece of furniture, fitting and equipment—as one of his colleagues put it, 'the host of trivia which generated memoranda in daily cascades upon his desk'. He played a full and active part in the life of the university over and above his departmental duties: he had two spells as Dean of Arts; he was a strong ally of Philip Larkin in the development of the Brynmor Jones Library; and for ten years he was senior warden of one of the halls of residence, where his willingness to stay up

half the night talking about football or about life and his willingness to donate barrels of beer to celebrate the victory of his hall in five-a-side soccer competitions made him especially popular.

Nonetheless, all the formal side of his life at Hull was a disappointment to him. He was much more appreciated than he realised. All the abler and more sensitive people recognised that he had an immediate presence, an intellectual authority, a self-defeating clear-sightedness that discouraged him for, as Howell Lloyd put it to me, 'he was not willing to martyr himself to the cause of effecting a sea-change' in the intellectual priorities of the department. And martyrdom is what it would have taken.

Susan Appleton, his senior secretary, nonetheless is convinced that he found happiness at Hull. He had 'dark phases' and periods of heavy drinking, but he also found comradeship and intellectual companionship in the Senior Combination Room (his kindred spirits there included Jack Watt from medieval history and Philip Larkin from the library). He was an active member of the University Jazz Club (on at least one occasion addressing it—on the subject of 'Boogie Woogie').⁶ It is full of characteristic aphorisms (of one lesser proponent of Boogie Woogie he said: 'perhaps the War was merciful. [He] retired into the costume jewellery business'). It was not, Susan Appleton insists, desperation that led him to leave Hull: 'he was fearful of becoming the caricature that people thought he was'.

He remained creative and productive: in the Hull years he published five new books (*The Nobility in the Revolution of 1688* (1963)—based on his inaugural lecture, *The Stuart Constitution* (1966), an edition of the works of the Marquis of Halifax (1969), *The Popish Plot* (1972), and *Revolution Principles* (1977)), and a clutch of important articles. And he became one of the best-known and attractive of history reviewers for the general reader, above all as a favoured reviewer for *The Observer*, but also for the *Times* supplements and for *The Spectator*. Here his intrinsic cleverness, ready wit and quickness of judgement were great assets, and there was a fizz and a fearlessness that made him (for the most part) a delight to read. He more than once wrote an 'Emperor's New Clothes' type of review about books uncritically acclaimed in more

⁶ A copy of the notes that formed the basis of his talk are now in The Brynmor Jones Library as MS DX/120/1. I am grateful to Dr Mandy Capern for drawing my attention to these racy notes, and to Mr Brian Dyson, Archivist to the Library and University, for permission to consult them.

scholarly periodicals. He was at his most daring and startling, for example, in his refusal to be carried along with the euphoria that greeted the appearance of Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down*. One does not have to concur with his judgement to be astonished by the courage and independence of his review, published in *The Spectator* on 8 July 1972.

I think we are entitled to ask where all this discussion of obscure left-wing fanatics is getting us. That some of them were mad we have always impatiently known, but Dr Hill positively glories in it. Though the mention of it occasions understandable asperity in the practitioners of this particular sub-genre of history, the ideas and efforts of these left-wing radicals had no discernible effect on the subsequent course of English developments except that it perhaps made the ruling classes and the established church a mite more reactionary than they otherwise would have been . . .

Or again:

This was not really a proletarian movement at all. It was an unexpected opportunity for failed shopkeepers, lazy artisans and eccentric academics to find their voice.

These were brave words indeed in 1972. It took a strong independent mind to think them, and a courageous scholar to utter them.

He enjoyed the challenge of writing with wit and precision against a tight deadline. And many of his conceits are treasured by those on whom they were bestowed: Mark Kishlansky remembers fondly the judgement (again in *The Spectator*) on his revisionist account of *The Rise of the New Model Army* that 'as in works of this kind, there is much solemn shooting of paper tigers and flushing of clockwork hares'. He enjoyed even more appearing on the same page of *The Observer* reviewing History books under his own name and works of Science Fiction under the pseudonym 'Kelvin Johnson'. (When he moved to Kansas in 1987 he told Geoffrey Parker with characteristic irony that no-one had complained to the paper about the passing of Kenyon reviews but there had been several complaints about the apparent disappearance of Kelvin Johnson!)

These were, then, rich years. And the books kept on flowing. *The Stuart Constitution* (1966) was an astonishing book for 1966, anticipating much of the revisionist rewriting of the seventeenth century by more than a decade.⁷ His upgrading of James I—'he regarded his coronation

⁷ I suspect that he gained the courage to advance these views not only from proximity to Elton in the later 1950s as he began his pre-revisionist probing with 'A High Road to Civil War?', his

oath with great seriousness and by that oath he had promised to respect the rights and customs of his subjects . . . he was certainly more moderate and “constitutional” than Elizabeth’ (p. 9), and his sense that—summing up the period 1603–40 as a whole—‘wild claims were made on both sides, by Eliot as well as Manwaring, but these were ignored, just as the theories of political philosophers like Hobbes were rejected. In the sphere of practical politics the disagreement essentially lay in how to operate a constitution of whose nature few had any doubts’ (p. 11) are cases in point. He had an exceptional section on Sir Edward Coke (pp. 90–3) which has never been bettered:

Coke’s greatest service to the common law was the publicity he secured for it which was heightened by James I’s incorrigible loquaciousness and essential fairmindedness. . . . In his contest with rival courts which threatened their professional dignity and their personal income, his colleagues were willing enough to follow his lead; but when he launched himself into a personal battle with King James they naturally fell back. . . . The dismissal of an obstructive chief justice who had flouted the king’s commands did not surprise or particularly displease contemporaries; it is posterity that has magnified the incident into an event of great constitutional significance . . .

This freshness of perception, this quality of assessment, this precision of language persists throughout the book. And there is a genius to the structure of the book, a wholly original arrangement that is part chronological, part thematic that allows for a range of types of material that puts this into a different league not only from all other collections of texts on the seventeenth century, but in comparison with the other volumes in the authoritative sequence of which *The Stuart Constitution* formed a part (and especially the contiguous volumes by Elton and E. N. Williams).

After this triumph, Kenyon next set out to write a monograph on the Popish Plot as a national event. Hull appointed a young scholar as a research assistant to the two History professors. For Kenyon, she systematically trawled the manuscript holdings of county record offices in order to monitor the rise and fall of anti-Catholic and pro-exclusion

study of the Apology of 1604 (see *Stuart Constitution*, p. 27 n.), but of the ‘Peterhouse School’ and especially the work of Brian Wormald, and of R. W. K. Hinton, whose articles of the very period when Kenyon was writing his Cambridge lectures which formed the basis of *The Stuart Constitution* (e.g. Hinton’s essays on ‘The Decline of Parliamentary Government under Elizabeth I and the Early Stuarts’ and on ‘Was Charles I a Tyrant?’) have never received the recognition they deserve as heralds of the revisionist dawn.

fever up and down the land. When it came to writing the book up, however, Kenyon got cold feet. He found himself unable to take on trust research notes made by someone else. He distrusted *himself* to make proper use of de-contextualised material. He abandoned his plans for a monograph and wrote instead a magnificently readable and convincing narrative of the Plot as an episode in High Politics. Reading it is like listening in to a sapper without a nerve in his body describing his journey through a minefield. With firm and deliberate gait he makes his way forward, constantly stopping to de-activate mines, many hidden from all but the most observant of trained eyes. Fact and fantasy are disentangled, the false reasoning of older historians noted, the limits of the evidence recognised (as in the appendix in which he offers his own downbeat but inexorably argued solution to the murder of Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey). The writing is less sparkling than in his previous books; but there is an iron discipline in the structure, a startling clarity to the narrative line, and—as in previous work—some magnificent character analysis, not least of the those who plotted the Plot, Israel Tonge and Titus Oates.

While work on *The Popish Plot* progressed, he took time out to put together for Penguin Books an edition of the Complete Works of George Savile, Marquis of Halifax, whose career had been so interwoven with Sunderland's. It involved little in the way of textual difficulties—these (as Kenyon makes clear at the outset) had been resolved by H. C. Foxcroft in her edition of 1898 which was the basis of Kenyon's own—but it provided him with a golden opportunity for another sustained character sketch, except that this one required much more of a study of the intellect of his subject than had been necessary in his previous work. Inspired by Halifax's own rhetorical flamboyance, Kenyon never wrote better than in his forty page introduction:

Intellectually, [Halifax] was head and shoulders above most contemporary statesmen. His nearest rival was Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury; but Shaftesbury never perceived the danger from France, never appreciated that there could be a non-violent solution to the problem of the Catholic succession. An owl amongst crows, Halifax found politics a painful and laborious business, and though his career was on the whole successful and distinguished, the tone of his *Political Thoughts and Reflections*, which were probably not intended for publication, does not suggest that he derived any satisfaction from it. (p. 8)

With *The Popish Plot* out of the way in 1972, he planned to return to a general study of the reign of James II and the Glorious Revolution,

perhaps connected to a broad consideration of its on-going constitutional significance. He procured financial help from Hull for the purchase of microfilms of archives from the period 1685–90 in Paris, Rome and London. He learnt Italian to read the letters of d'Adda (the Papal Nuncio). But again this turned into a very different book, one which explored the intellectualising about politics that went on in the generation after the Glorious Revolution. It seems likely that the invitation to give the Ford Lectures in Oxford in 1976 came too soon for him to be able to make use of the manuscript materials he was gathering and a series of meditations on the polemical literature of the decades after 1689 seemed a more manageable project in the time available. The kernel of the lectures can be found in the dazzling essay on 'The Revolution of 1688: Resistance and Contract' which graced the *estschrift* presented to Jack Plumb in 1974, and it may be that the book was an eking out of the wider reading he had undertaken for that brilliant essay. *Revolution Principles: the Politics of Party 1689–1720* delivers both more and less than its title promises. It is a powerful review of a vast number of pamphlets and squibs, but it is much less than an account of the nature and development of parties. This is no criticism, for what the book offers is a radical re-evaluation of the structure of debate about what had happened in the winter of 1688–9 and what had come to pass. The demoting of Locke as hero and champion of the Revolution and the delaying of his centrality for a generation is but the first jolt that the book delivered; it is followed by a de-emphasis on arguments from resistance and conquest, and a thorough review of how so many Tories managed a principled acceptance of the new regime. Kenyon had the ability to take *nothing* for granted; to read the literature as though unaware of received argument and generations of received interpretation. It is not just the relative importance of numerous strands of thought that are re-examined; so is the *persona* of many of the leading actors. Here he is, for example, on one of the more prominent figures: '[William] Sherlock was a tactless and thick-skinned man, who contrived to give the maximum offence even to those who found no fault at all with his conclusions.' And he offers a powerful view of the development of Defoe and his thought, locating him much more precisely than had hitherto been the case. There are some extraordinary lacunae in the book—perhaps most startlingly of all the lack of any discussion of the frantic debates over Anglo-Scottish Union (emblematic of a rigorous exclusion of non-English dimensions of the politics and political thinking of the period), but it is as clever a book as

anything he wrote; and (like all his research-based work) it has stood the test of time better than almost anything published with it. But it is not so clearly structured or pellucid in its prose. Not quite at his very best, Kenyon in 1977 was producing work as good as anyone else in the field.

In 1958 he had written *The Stuarts* in six weeks and it was a brilliant success. In 1977 he tried the same again when Sir John Plumb asked him to replace Maurice Ashley's outdated volume in the Pelican History of England. *Stuart England* was published in 1978 and was a considerable flop. Ten years later he admitted to Bill Speck that except in its earliest year, *Stuart England* had only just outsold *The Stuarts* which remained a book much loved by students and the general reader. *Stuart England* was a tired book, with less aphorisms, and far fewer effective ones, a rather breathless narrative with less sense of the clash of ideas or even of strong personalities; and it was riddled with factual errors. A single paragraph on the Instrument of Government, for example, contained five material errors of fact. Reviewers were not kind. A revised edition, in which several hundred changes were made, was issued in 1985, but his self-assurance took a serious knock.

At the end of the 1970s, Kenyon decided that twenty years in Hull was long enough. He was disappointed not to be recalled to Cambridge when the Chair of Modern History was filled, and he felt he needed a change. He felt he was no longer good for Hull or Hull for him. He began to look for sideways moves. His career was outwardly a great success: he had written more books than all but a cluster of his contemporaries, and, one miscalculation aside, all were excellent. This was reflected in his election to a Fellowship of the Academy in 1981. He had been invited over for semesters to several major US universities (Columbia, Boston, and Chicago); he was probably in more demand as an external assessor for History Chairs at other UK universities than anyone else of his age; he was a high-profile reviewer in a high-profile newspaper; his academic and non-academic interests were balanced. But that is not how he experienced it. He felt his career had failed to blossom as it should. He was—by his own report and the observation of his friends—drinking too heavily by the late 1970s, and some of his reviewing was becoming very careless and slapdash. He needed a new challenge.

In 1981 he was invited to the Chair of Modern History at St Andrews, in succession to Norman Gash. He remained for six years. He was never happy there, and opinions about him there were mixed.

His family—he and Angela had two teenage children when he arrived in St Andrews—did not settle well in a town they found very claustrophobic. Kenyon himself could not shake off his restlessness with himself. He did not enjoy his teaching there, finding that others were already teaching what he would have most enjoyed doing. He had a polarising effect on the department, however, some enjoying the hospitality he regularly extended to them at ‘open house’ parties at his home, others saying that he never had a private conversation with them in six years. He shut down the weekly departmental meeting that had been a feature of Gash’s later years. On the other hand, he fought and won battle after battle on behalf of the department within the University, securing rapid promotions for many colleagues who had been, in his judgement, unfairly held back. He relished taking on the ‘Administration’ in large matters and small. Geoffrey Parker tells a story of Kenyon’s determination to keep out of the department a mature student—a retired American Professor who wanted to study Scottish legal history: ‘it is an experience I and my staff are willing to forego’, he told the Dean of Graduate Students who had been too quick to encourage a man Kenyon had assessed to be a pedant. Three cogent reasons for not proceeding with the negotiation followed, culminating in the assertion that ‘I am advised that the Department of Scots Law at Edinburgh is running an SSRC project on the social history of law in seventeenth-century Scotland into which [the American Professor] would fit like a weevil into a biscuit.’

Two books were written during his St Andrews years. He seems to have abandoned his plans for a book on 1688 itself. Instead he turned to a history of historiography which was eventually published as *The History Men: The Historical Profession in England since the Renaissance* (1983). Fifteen years on, this is quite a chauvinistic book: *The History Men* (women get as short a shrift as the title implies); the historical profession in *England* (and yet the Scottish Burnet, Hume, and Carlyle are amongst its most prominent subjects). But it is also a wonderfully entertaining one. It is a discursive account of those who wrote History, what they chose to write about, how and why they wrote what they wrote, and how they related both to what had gone before them and to the broader intellectual and higher cultural fads and fancies of their times. It is about professionalisation, its benefits and its hazards; and it ends in a heartfelt appraisal of the sell-outs of the 1960s and 1970s. For the only time in his career, Kenyon demonstrated that he was intellectually a follower not of Plumb (‘faced with this attack on their subject

matter, their techniques and their very ethos, some of the older generation crumbled, making propitiatory gestures to the new deity of youth . . . in 1964 J. H. Plumb edited a doom-laden compendium entitled *Crisis in the Humanities*, in which leading spokesmen for the various arts disciplines paraded in sackcloth and ashes') but of Elton ('such ideas were rejected *in toto* by Geoffrey Elton, who at times in the late 1960s seemed to be fighting the battle for conventional history alone, and to be in danger of losing it, not by a straight defeat but by the sheer weight of numbers . . .'). Laced with sardonic wit and the accustomed suppleness of structure and precision of language, this is the *cri de coeur* of a scholar who sees both his own vision of the past and his own ability to evangelise that vision in decline.

In the wake of *The History Men*, he took much time and trouble to update and reshape *The Stuart Constitution*, consulting widely, listening carefully, and then amending coherently. The new edition was as distinguished as the first edition and remains the best example of locating the formal documents of government, administration and law in their intellectual context that has been produced for any period of English History. He then turned back to the mid seventeenth century and to a subject wholly new to him: a detailed account of the military, administrative, and political history of *The Civil Wars in England* (1988). He was especially hard on himself over this book, seeing it as 'a potboiler'. He was wrong. He had learnt from the mistake of writing the Pelican History too quickly. He spent a sabbatical in the Huntington Library in California reading voraciously and talking to other scholars in residence. He contacted colleagues and asked them penetrating questions. He had the drafts critically read. The result is a balanced and attractive book, full of vivid detail and shrewd assessments of men and events. It is a cross-over text, appealing with equal success to the student and the general reader. It is not a *demanding* book, offering a new interpretation or new ways of looking at the period. But it is a book of enviable intelligence and lucidity.

Alas, it was his last major work. In 1987 he moved to the Joyce and Elizabeth Hall Distinguished Professorship in British History at the University of Kansas and almost immediately was found to have a malignant tumour on his bladder. It was caught early and, following unpleasant surgery and other treatments, was dealt with. But it visibly aged and shook him. Then in 1989 an aneurysm was detected in his aorta about which nothing could be done. The restlessness remained, and a conviction grew that he could not continue to write good history.

He willed himself to believe that the well had run dry; and he spoke about himself as 'perpetually in life's departure lounge'. He made little effort to understand the particularities of the intellectual culture of American universities, although he liked American students who—he said—'took more of an interest [than British students] and actually asked me questions'. He had a scattering of research students—he had always sent the best from Hull to the Golden Triangle, recalling his own move from Sheffield to Cambridge in 1950—and he gave them exactly the kind of unimposed generosity of time and attention he had always given to his students. He never sought them out, but he always gave them time and care. An exceptionally gauche student back in England wrote to him offering clumsy and ignorant criticisms of his books and demanding complicated answers to easy questions. Kenyon began his reply by writing: 'your letter is one of the strangest letters, not to say the rudest, on professional matters I have ever received. Even from Scotsmen.' He then went on for several pages, patiently and carefully to answer every point in a constructive vein.

Kenyon's move to America consummated a love of all things American which had been growing for decades. In the early 1960s he *rushed* his new bride around New York on a sweltering August afternoon as soon as they disembarked to show her all the places he had discovered on a previous visit. He had accepted all invitations to return to run summer schools or to lecture. Despite his chronic health problems he now set out to acculturate himself, regularly joining the bus to support the Redskins against the Chiefs, trawling around Kansas City Jazz Clubs and enthusing about Jazz weekends in St Louis, gossiping with old men in the downtown Donut House, developing a keen interest in Country and Western, deepening his knowledge of American politics and renewing his acquaintance with Senator Daniel Moynihan with whom he had once shared a London flat, and collecting a vast stock of emblazoned baseball caps.

He divided his time between Lawrence, Kansas, and a vacation home in rural Norfolk which was an awkward distance from Cambridge, close enough for social visits but not to allow steady use of the libraries; and it was to Norfolk that he retired in 1994 at the age of 67. His letters show him as sharp as ever as a judge of the work of others, and an ever sharper judge of himself. He thought of undertaking a biography of Lord Chesterfield, but then thought better of it. Instead he agreed to edit for Oxford University Press a military history of the civil wars, consulting widely and bringing together a talented team of

experienced and younger scholars. He was in the process of collating the essays for this book when he died, quite suddenly, on 6 January 1996.

He had a gift for friendship. He was loyal, committed to those who (he believed) took the subject more seriously than they took themselves, he was undemonstratively kind. When Geoffrey Parker came to Cambridge to give the Lees Knowles Lectures in Military History in 1984, he found that Kenyon had unannounced made the journey from St Andrews to give him moral support. The fondness of his friends for him stemmed in large part from his vulnerability. He mocked himself more than he mocked others. He laughed at the foibles of others without malice or any sense of his own superiority. He had a wonderful sense of *la comédie humaine*. He was not a team player. He could be very politically incorrect (he was delighted when a leading girl's public school banned *The Stuarts* for its sexual innuendos; and was even more delighted to be castigated in *Private Eye*'s 'Pseud's Corner' for a misogynist remark). He was not everyone's cup of tea. But his dry wit, his sharpness of mind, his curiosity, his deep assured voice with its residual Yorkshire consonants, his loud infectious laugh, his utterly distinctive dismissive sniff haunt and delight the memory.

John Kenyon had the best historical intelligence of his generation. He understood men and women in the past and he wrote about them with a rare precision, clarity, and conviction. He was a productive scholar and all his works except one wore their learning with a deceptive lightness. He fitted into no school, reacted against fashion, came to look old-fashioned in his interests. He was a magnificent historian who could not quite build on the brilliance of his early promise, but who greatly underestimated the magnitude of his own achievement and the continuing appeal of his writing.

JOHN MORRILL

Fellow of the Academy

Note. A full bibliography of John Kenyon's academic publications can be found in John Kenyon and Jane Ohlmeyer (eds.), *Civil Wars in the Stuart Kingdoms* (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. xx–xxiii. In preparing this memoir I must acknowledge the following who allowed me to discuss John Kenyon with them: for his Cambridge years, Sir John Plumb, Revd Professor Owen Chadwick, KBE, Professor Quentin Skinner and Mr Patrick Higgins; for his Hull years, Professor Howell Lloyd, Miss Susan Appleton, Ms Kay Austin, Dr Nigel Smith; for his St Andrews years, Professor Geoffrey Parker, Professor Tony Upton, Professor Bruce Lenman,

Dr Keith Wrightson, and Ms Betty Anderson; for the Kansas years, Ms Lisa Steffen. In addition, Professor W. A. Speck and Professor Geoffrey Parker kindly showed me letters they had received from John Kenyon over the years; and I have also drawn on my own correspondence with him. I am especially grateful to Mrs Angela Kenyon for commenting on a first draft of this essay and for her enhancements of it.