



GEOFFREY HOLMES

## Geoffrey Shorter Holmes 1928–1993

THE VIVIDEST IMPRESSION THAT GEOFFREY HOLMES HAS LEFT among those fellow historians who knew him is of his sheer delight in the practice of his craft. To hear him tell of a new discovery, or expound a point of interpretation, was to expose one's self to an infection, for his enthusiasm flowed over. His writings convey it more reticently, but beyond their clarity and precision is an obvious desire to communicate his own relish in his subject and to make every paragraph a pleasure to read. These are important qualities when the subject-matter is England in the Augustan Age, which cared so much for grace and elegance, and of which he was the master historian.

Geoffrey Shorter Holmes was born in Sheffield on 17 July 1928 and died after years of distressing illness on 25 November 1993. His father, Horace Holmes, was a civil engineer who gained his qualifications through night school. His mother, Daisy Lavinia, was a talented pianist who played in cinemas in the days of silent films, and from her he derived an enduring love of music. In the course of a happy childhood he passed the equivalent of the later eleven-plus examination at the age of nine, and he greatly enjoyed his years at Woodhouse Grammar School near Sheffield, where he made lasting friendships. He also cultivated two interests that were to endure for many years to come, in cricket and in acting. He played cricket for the school at an unusually early age, and his early taste for the stage was to bequeath an endearingly histrionic touch to his lecturing style. He was barely seventeen when he went up to Pembroke College, Oxford, where he was for at

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least a year the youngest undergraduate (and the present writer, incidentally, the oldest). Pembroke was not a high-flying place academically in those years; it had had one First in History in the past thirty years, and Geoff was disappointed not to be the next. But his intellectual quality was recognised there, and he recalled the encouragement that he received from the senior history tutor and later Master, R. B. McCallum, with affection.

Upon graduating in 1948 he entered upon two years of national service, which he performed in the Royal Army Service Corps. In April 1949 he was posted as clerk to the Military Adviser's Staff of the UK High Commissioner in New Delhi. He knew nobody in India, but by his cricketing and acting talents he made a mark quite unusual for a RASC corporal. He played in the High Commissioner's eleven, and his success as a junior lead won him an introduction to the High Commissioner's wife.

Upon his release a renewal of his State Scholarship enabled him to return to Oxford, where he embarked on a B.Litt. thesis and laid the foundations of his researches into the politics of Queen Anne's reign. Sir Keith Feiling advised him on his choice of subject, and David Ogg supervised him. No academic opening offered itself when his grant expired, so for a while in 1951–2 he worked in the personnel department of a steel firm, Hadfield's Ltd, in his native Sheffield. In 1952, however, he joined the staff of the Department of History in the University of Glasgow. In those days, fledgeling academics in Scottish universities were not so much Assistant Lecturers after the English model as Assistants to the Professor, whose authority was enormous. But in Professor Andrew Browning's case it was a benevolent authority, and Geoff Holmes always spoke of him with affectionate (and amused) admiration. Another Assistant, Ella Jean Waddell Scott, joined the department at the same time, with qualifications — First Class Honours degrees from both Glasgow and Oxford — that could have launched her on a distinguished academic career of her own if she had not chosen to subordinate it to her husband's. She and Geoff married in 1955, and in the course of time acquired a son and a daughter. Younger colleagues at Glasgow remember their happiness together, and their generous hospitality.

Even more widely remembered is Geoff's quality as a teacher. At Glasgow, as later at Lancaster, his lectures were not only meticulously prepared, superbly organised and expressed with perfect clarity; they were put across with an obvious determination to convey his own sense

of what made the subject in hand important. They set a number of future scholars on the paths of study that would occupy much of their lives. When illness forced him to cancel or deputise — his health was already uncertain — his lectures were sadly missed. His tutorials are even more fondly remembered, for the communication of his own enthusiasms, for the fullness of his written comments on essays, and for his wise counsel and warm friendship.

Geoff Holmes rose through Lecturer to Senior Lecturer during his seventeen years at Glasgow, and the chief landmark of his career there, after his marriage, was the publication of *British Politics in the Age of Anne* in 1967. No work of history in our time has won its author a more instant reputation, or more decisively influenced the interpretation of the subject that it treats. It grew out of the thesis for which he received his B.Litt. fifteen years earlier, but it grew a long way. He always worked hard, but he worked slowly; and before publishing he wanted not only to explore the whole range of his subject, read every source and ponder its implications, but to perfect the shape and style of his book until it fairly earned its acclamation as a work of art. In all this he had his wife's constant and expert help; 'it is her book as much as mine', its preface concluded. When he embarked on it, the influence of Sir Lewis Namier was at its height, and the historical methods that he had used fruitfully to illumine the early part of George III's reign were being applied to periods for which they were inappropriate. In particular Robert Walcott, in *English Politics in the Early Eighteenth Century* (1956), saw very little reality behind the party labels of Whig and Tory, and found the key to understanding the politics of the age not in rival ideologies but in the power-struggles of a varying number of organised 'connexions' (he identified seven in 1701), led by political chieftains eager for office, and bound by ties of patronage, kinship and interest. Holmes was not the first historian to criticise Walcott's thesis, but he propounded a comprehensive and convincing interpretation to put in its place. He did not revert to the over-simplifications of the old Whig version of Queen Anne's reign, but he demonstrated the centrality and the passion of party politics, and he restored ideology to its proper place in Augustan politics. If this sounds like an austere exercise in political analysis, the book is nothing of the kind, for it is alive with deft character-sketches, sharp detail and apt quotations. Even if it had not effected a major historical revision, as it did, it would deserve to be read as literature. Not the least of its pleasures is the perfect courtesy with

which Holmes treated a fellow-historian with whom he disagreed fundamentally.

It has stood the test of time well. Twenty years after its first publication Holmes brought out a revised edition, with a lengthy new introduction which surveyed the work done on the period in the interim and the new manuscript material that had been unearthed. He was generous to those who had enlarged and filled out the picture, but he found few errors to correct and nothing fundamental to modify in his interpretation.

Meanwhile other publications had appeared. In company with his friend Professor W. A. Speck, he edited *The Divided Society: Party Conflict in England 1694–1716* (1967), a collection of well-chosen documents with typically lucid and perceptive introductions. Two years later he provided another boon to students with *Britain after the Glorious Revolution 1689–1714*, a collection of essays on a comprehensive range of topics by a distinguished team, whose efforts he directed, and to which he contributed a lengthy introduction and a masterly piece on ‘Harley, St John and the Death of the Tory Party’.

In the same year (1969) that saw this volume’s appearance, Geoff Holmes was persuaded to come to the five-year-old University of Lancaster as Reader in History. It was the beginning of a happy period, at least until the breakdown in his health began, for he and Ella loved the old house that they found in Burton-in-Lonsdale—chosen not least because it lay just within the confines of Yorkshire. When (to Geoff’s disgust) Bramall Lane ceased to be a venue for Yorkshire’s county cricket matches, he acquired some of the sacred turf and laid it as part of his lawn at Tatham House.

To the mainly young historians at Lancaster he set a splendid example by his equal dedication to teaching and research. The department was already large enough to enable him to concentrate his teaching in those areas where he was most at home, and as time went on he made a special contribution to the development of postgraduate studies. Several pupils whose Lancaster Ph.D. dissertations he supervised now hold senior academic posts. He was the originator and architect of the MA degree in Historical Research, which sought to bridge the gap between the study of taught courses at BA level and the plunge into full-time research for the Ph.D., though its appeal was not confined to would-be doctoral candidates. It addressed a problem which has since exercised the Academy, and it continues to flourish. He also made a substantial contribution, through many years on the Graduate

Studies Committee, to the organisation and regulation of postgraduate work in the university as a whole. And well into middle age he continued to turn out from time to time for the staff cricket eleven, whose members particularly recall his elegant cover drive.

Recognition came to him steadily, both inside and outside the university. He was promoted in 1973 to a personal Chair; his distinguished Inaugural Lecture on 'The Electorate and the National Will in the First Age of Party' was one of his memorable set-piece performances, beautifully shaped and delivered with panache. He was a Visiting Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, in 1977–8, and in the latter year received his Oxford D.Litt. In 1979 he delivered the Raleigh Lecture on History to the British Academy, on 'The Professions and Social Change in England, 1680–1730', and in 1981 he was the James Ford Special Lecturer in the University of Oxford. He was elected to the Fellowship of the Academy in 1983. He served on the Council of the Royal Historical Society from 1980 to 1984, and was made a Vice-President in 1985.

Two more major books and many shorter pieces appeared during his teaching years at Lancaster. In *The Trial of Doctor Sacheverell* (1973) his love of a good story, which kept bursting out of *British Politics in the Age of Anne*, was given full rein. To take just one example, the skill with which the physical scene of the trial itself is set in Chapter VI, and the sheer narrative power with which the proceedings are recounted, might well earn the envy of a professional novelist. Yet the book is not only a splendid read but a very serious piece of historical research, based on hitherto unused manuscript sources and revealing as never before the full historical significance of this *cause célèbre*.

On a smaller scale, Geoff Holmes's Historical Association Pamphlet on *Religion and Party in Late Stuart England* (1975) reveals, in its clarity and concision and its focus on the significant, something of his qualities as a teacher. The full fruit of his researches during the Lancaster years appeared in 1982 in *Augustan England: Professions, State and Society, 1680–1730*. This is a major contribution to the social history of pre-industrial England. It first deals in general with the development of the concept and the reality of 'professions', as we understand the term today. Then follow chapters on schools and schoolmasters, the church and the clergy, the legal and medical professions, and the new professions that served the state, namely the increasingly professionalised government officials and the armed services. Each is

enlivened with the loving vignettes and case histories that we have come to expect.

Geoff is remembered as a skilled and sympathetic editor, as well as for his own original works. The series entitled *Foundations of Modern Britain*, which covers the six centuries from 1370 to 1975 in as many volumes, was conceived and controlled by him from the start, until failing health forced him to ease off. It is one of the most successful of all textbook series, and its quality owes much to his clear directions and his acute perception of students' needs. Contributors recall the meticulous care with which he read their drafts, his detailed and helpful comments, and the enthusiasm with which he encouraged them. They found him flexible, too, and ready to waive his own guidelines when he was persuaded that there was a case for it.

Serious ill-health was the reason why his own contributions to the series were the last. In 1982 he underwent major surgery, involving the removal of a kidney. Sensing that he would have to husband his physical resources if he was to meet even some of his extensive scholarly commitments, he took early retirement in 1983, though he continued to teach part-time for several years. He still had another large book in the pipeline, *The London Diaries of William Nicolson, Bishop of Carlisle, 1702–1718*, which he edited in partnership with his former pupil at Lancaster, Clyve Jones. This appeared in 1985, and in the following year he brought out a collection of twelve of his major articles and lectures under the title *Politics, Religion and Society in England, 1679–1742*. It is a rich harvest, covering twenty years of his output, and it exemplifies all three of the fields of research to which he had devoted himself.

Those three fields provide the subject-matter of a fine Festschrift which his friends, colleagues and former pupils presented to him on the twentieth anniversary of the publication of his first and most influential book. Edited by Clyve Jones and entitled *Britain in the First Age of Party 1680–1750*, it has considerably more unity and coherence than most such celebratory volumes, and it testifies as much to his continuing intellectual influence as to the affection of the contributors.

Geoff had to undergo a second very serious operation in 1985, and though it left his intellectual powers unimpaired he had to further curtail his activities, which in his prime had covered a wide range. In Glasgow he had engaged enthusiastically in Liberal Party politics, and in Burton he and Ella were still active members of the Liberal Democrats. That had to be wound down, as did his various involvements in the affairs of

his church and parish. For many years he had been a churchwarden and a member of the parochial Church Council, and he sat on two deanery committees and one diocesan. It went hard with him that he gradually had to give up gardening, in which he had taken much pleasure, as the delightful garden at Tatham House clearly showed. For several more years, however, he could still enjoy his first-floor study in a building separate from the house, which commanded a view of the garden and a broad sweep of Yorkshire fells. But he was forced finally to give up several historical projects that he had had on the stocks, including a study of tourism in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to be called *The Discovery of England*, a biography of Thomas, Lord Wharton of the Junto, and a book on *The Gentlemen of England*.

From now on his chief commitment, and the hardest fought battle in his long struggle against failing health, centred upon the completion of his own volume in *Foundations of Modern Britain*. He had planned it to cover the period 1660–1783, which was a tall order for a single volume in any circumstances. He began work on it in 1981, but he found himself unable to control its length. Fortunately, he completed the reading of primary sources that he felt necessary while he was still able to travel, but the amount of material that he accumulated proved intractable. When he had written up most of it, he was forced to admit to himself that he was no longer up to the daunting task of rewriting it all and cutting it down to the specified size. He put his problem to his publisher, Longman, who agreed to accept two volumes instead of one, with 1722 as the nominal dividing-line. It was a wise as well as a generous decision, for out of it have come two books which no student or teacher of the periods concerned would be without. The first, *The Making of a Great Power*, has Geoff Holmes as sole author, though how much its completion owed to Ella's constant professional help and personal care only she can now know, generously though he acknowledged his debt to her. During these years she herself had to battle against serious illness. The second volume, *The Age of Oligarchy: Pre-Industrial Britain, 1722–1783*, was written in collaboration with Daniel Szechi. Both are large books. *The Making of a Great Power* supplements four hundred pages of text with over a hundred more of apparatus, most of it consisting of a splendidly planned 'Compendium of information' in fifteen sections, which like the 'Framework of events' which precedes each major section of the text shows how carefully Geoff had considered what would most help his readers—tutors as well as students.



One might have expected work completed in such adverse circumstances to betray signs of tiredness, but *The Making of a Great Power* is written with a freshness and grace that are rare in a textbook, and enlivened with a wealth of telling detail and quotation that make one grateful that Holmes was allowed to operate on a scale larger than he had planned. Nice touches abound, like the vision of ‘an army of pedlars and a whole irregular cavalry of petty chapmen’ who helped to bring about the great reclothing of rural England, and the comment that for the Scots, in the twenty years after the Act of Union, ‘the honeymoon proved the roughest part of the marriage’.

In the early months of 1990, very shortly after the manuscripts of these two volumes had gone to the publisher, his health took further crippling blows. He suffered two coronary thromboses, which were not diagnosed at the time; then later in the year he developed a brain tumour, which required immediate and drastic surgery. This was partially successful, but though his mind remained as keen as ever his powers of concentration were permanently impaired. He could now walk only with difficulty, and he also found himself totally unable to sing. He felt this loss keenly, for he had had a fine bass voice and loved choral singing. He had been a regular member of his church choir and organised festival concerts in Burton.

He and Ella adjusted to these sadly changed circumstances by building a charming smaller house (Tatham Lodge) in the grounds of Tatham House. He himself drew the plans for it, and it had a lift to take him to his first floor bedroom. They moved in in March 1991, and for a year or so it suited their needs well. But then he suffered a serious collapse, requiring him to be rushed to hospital, and though he made a partial recovery he could no longer move from bed to wheelchair and back without the help of two strong nurses. There was nothing for it therefore but a nursing home, and Ella found the pleasantest possible one within visiting range at Anley Hall, Settle. His memory was still good and he could work in short bursts; on his better days he could enjoy talking to visitors, but he was all too conscious of mental decline, and he knew he could never live in his much loved home again. His days were long, for he no longer had the concentration to read much, and television hurt his eyes. He lived long enough to see the publication of his two volumes in *Foundations of Modern Britain*, and to take some pleasure in their handsome appearance. They gave him a well-earned sense of achievement against heavy odds, and he was still able to inscribe copies for his friends.

But it is not by those sad last years that his friends, colleagues and pupils will wish to remember him — or let us just say his friends, for all his colleagues and pupils would surely wish to be numbered among them. They will bring to mind gratefully his warmth of nature, his gift for friendship, his delight in his craft and his enthusiasm in communicating it. He enjoyed controversy and he could be a searching critic, but he always showed an exemplary courtesy towards fellow scholars whose views he challenged, and a sensitive consideration for the feelings of those with whose work he felt bound to find fault. He was a master of both the written and the spoken word, and instinctive though his command of language was he took immense pains to make everything he published a pleasure to read. If one has any regret about his output, apart from its tragic curtailment through ill-health, it is that he never addressed a book expressly to the general reader who turns to history simply for pleasure. For all the contribution that he has made to the teaching of history, both personally and through his writings, he remains something of a connoisseur's historian. The pity is that a potentially wider readership may be unaware of what it is missing.

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*Note.* I wish to thank Alan Smith, John Thomson, Eric Evans, John MacKenzie and above all Ella Holmes for communicating their recollections of Geoffrey Holmes.

### Addenda to Bibliography

A full bibliography of the publications of Geoffrey Holmes up to 1986 was published in *Britain in the First Age of Party 1680–1750* (Hambleton Press, London), compiled by Clyve Jones. Publications since that date appear below.

*British Politics in the Age of Anne*, revised edn (Hambleton Press, London, 1987), with new introduction, pp. ix–lxii.

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*The Making of a Great Power: Late Stuart and early Georgian Britain 1660–1722*  
(Longman, London, 1993), 507 pp.  
with Daniel Szechi, *The Age of Oligarchy: Pre-Industrial Britain 1722–1783*  
(Longman, London, 1993), 439 pp.