

## Keith Jeffery (1952–2016): an appreciation

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Keith John Jeffery: born 1952; educated Methodist College, Belfast, and St John's College, Cambridge; lecturer in history, Ulster Polytechnic (later University of Ulster at Jordanstown), then reader and professor of modern history, 1978–2005; professor of British history, Queen's University Belfast, 2005–16; Member of the Royal Irish Academy, 2009; joint-editor of *Irish Historical Studies*, 1988–1997; married Sally Visick, 1976, two sons (Ben and Alex); died 12 Feb. 2016.

'You think that you are composing a new kind of history', he said to Keith with that kind of unguarded enthusiasm that commonly accompanies the apprehension of some strikingly original insight, 'but in fact there is nothing new here at all! It's just really the old stuff, dressed up with stories of ambitions, intrigues, colourful characters and *Boys' Own* adventures. But underneath it all, it's the oldest kind of secular history: institutional history, administrative history, state history. A hundred years ago you'd have been working with Tout, adding further chapters to the interminable *Chapters in administrative history*. It's no accident that your first book was published by Manchester University Press!' To this playful but pointed challenge Keith responded, eyes sparkling through those tinted glasses, and summoning that stage Belfast accent which came so effortlessly to him when he was seeking to rib others, while simultaneously ribbing himself, 'Och I know, I know, but anyway, isn't it still great fun?'

This encounter, witnessed by me at one of those convivial gatherings surrounding the biannual meetings of the editorial board of *Irish Historical Studies*, contained, amidst a large amount of falsehood, some essential grains of truth. The first, and least important, of such grains was that Keith, historian of the British High Command in the years immediately following the First World War, biographer of the army's sometime chief of staff, Sir Henry Wilson, authoritative historian of the British Secret Intelligence Service, was indeed, and unapologetically so, an expert historian of some of the great institutions of the modern British state.<sup>1</sup>

But 'modern' is, of course, only the first of his many differences with the venerable tradition associated with the medievalist Tout. For Jeffery's approach to the history of the institutions of the modern state was far different

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Jeffery's principal individual contributions to the study of modern British institutions will be discussed and noted below, but his first major publication, his important collaborative study with Peter Hennessy, should be registered here: *States of emergency: British governments and strikebreaking since 1919* (London, 1983).

in many other ways. Having graduated in history from St John's College, Cambridge, he undertook research under the supervision of the formidable Jack Gallagher, fellow of the neighbouring Trinity College. An original and penetrating critic of conventional theories of imperialism, Gallagher, along with his co-author Ronald Robinson, had in *Africa and the Victorians* (London, 1962) developed the concept of 'the official mind' of a view of colonial policies independent of, and sometimes hostile to, corporate and commercial interests. Though no slavish follower of his doctoral supervisor – he never identified wholly with Gallagher's strongly anti-economic analysis – this sense of a bureaucracy as a quasi-independent political entity with inherited practices, interests and defences of its own, but also as an arena of political and ideological competition – was evident in Jeffery's first monograph, *The British Army and the crisis of empire, 1918–22*.<sup>2</sup> Though it was indeed published by Manchester University Press, this study was no mere administrative history nor a military history, instead it recounted in fascinating detail the manner in which the high command struggled vigorously and successfully against the attempts of the politicians to impose on them responsibilities which its leaders realised were impossible and potentially disastrous for the army to assume in the post-war world. Jeffery's study was less about bureaucratic continuity and conservatism, than it was about change. And it was this recognition that the proper history of bureaucratic structures was at least as much about the reception of change that characterised so much of his later work.

Following on almost naturally from his study of the post-war high command, his biography of Sir Henry Wilson, a work which I know was dear to his heart, further developed this theme of adaptability, critical response and change through the examination of the career of one of the most successful, complex, and hitherto most poorly assessed of the British Army's high command.<sup>3</sup> Thanks largely to his own diaries, Wilson had been portrayed by previous biographers (sometimes unintentionally) as a neurotic and ruthlessly ambitious careerist. But, while neither rebutting these assessments nor seeking to excuse Wilson personally through extenuation, Jeffery quietly but compellingly shifted the focus of historical interest from the observation of the mere defects of individuality toward an analysis of the complex, conditional, ever-shifting, and deeply uncertain processes of bureaucratic politics within which an individual such as Wilson, with hardly any initial advantages, should so effectively achieve the highest office. From Jeffery's study Wilson thus emerged not merely as a colourful, if unattractive, individual, but, as a figure who, having so successfully climbed to the top of a bureaucratic greasy pole, laid bare to historians complexities and contingencies that applied within British governing structures that were far greater than those suggested by Disraeli's familiar simile. For students of Irish history, of course, a particular interest lay in Jeffery's treatment of Wilson's engagement in Irish politics, and his killing in 1922. And it is here that Jeffery's unobtrusive but powerful skills as an interpreter were at their most effective as, having threaded through all his narrative Wilson's deep Irish heritage and convictions, he offered a highly persuasive account as to why the field marshal

<sup>2</sup> *The British Army and the crisis of empire, 1918–1922* (Manchester, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: a political soldier* (Oxford, 2006).

should have abandoned a lifetime's career and taken the plunge into politics, but also as to why, despite Wilson's actual distance from the Irish conflict, his opponents in Ireland should have been determined on his elimination.

It was this sense of the internal tensions and conflicting forces operating within a state institution under the stress of tumultuous historical events that, among other reasons, made Keith a natural choice as the official historian of MI6.<sup>4</sup> Universally praised both for its assured grasp of the structure and practices of the service, and the richness and variety of its anecdotes, what was less obvious to his reviewers (some of whom preferred one aspect over another) was that Jeffery's technique was more than an attempt to keep the attention of different categories of readers. It was instead an essential element of his understanding of the way in which modern bureaucratic agencies, especially those formed under the pressure of imminent or existent crises, actually functioned (or failed to function) and more importantly, evolved, as their largely unquestioned underlying assumptions were challenged by events, contingencies, unexpected accidents, and unforeseen contradictions. Conducted once again with the quiet deftness deployed in his *Wilson*, one of the most delicious features of this intricate study was the manner in which Jeffery revealed how the various compartments of the 'official mind' so suggestively but incompletely adduced by Gallagher and Robinson came, sometimes overtly, but frequently quite unintentionally and bewilderingly, into conflict with one another, as conventional reflexes originating from within quite different areas of the Foreign Office, Treasury, and Defence (war) were together plunged into the all too brittle melting pot of the intelligence agency. Here is a contrapuntal analysis of administrative structures, bureaucratic politics, and historical processes richly attractive in its intellectual sophistication, silently regretful in its revelation of human limitations, and far different from the optimistic and solemn days of Tout.

But of course, and it should hardly need saying, Keith Jeffery ranged far beyond the frames of military and administrative history. His Lees Knowles lectures of 1998–9, published as *Ireland and the Great War*, offer sufficient witness to this.<sup>5</sup> They dealt lucidly and with admirable compression with topics which might conventionally have been considered most immediately relevant – initial attitudes toward the war, enlistment, the impact of the Easter Rebellion, the Somme, the threat of conscription. But ranging far beyond this, Jeffery found space to address artistic responses to the war in literature, the visual and plastic arts, and in music. In each of these areas Keith had something of interest to say, but perhaps because we shared a strong practical interest in music, especially choral music – Keith was a stalwart voice in the bass line of the Belfast Philharmonic Choir – the most fascinating sections for me were those dealing with the effect of the war on musical composition and performance. Keith's research in regard to the latter, mostly tucked away modestly in a set of footnotes citing his own original research, will be a source of admiration and example for all who should follow his lead.

*Ireland and the Great War* was a sprint, superbly executed. But even more impressive, not only because of its range, but also because of the extremely difficult circumstances under which it was researched and produced, was

<sup>4</sup> *MI6: The history of the Secret Intelligence Service, 1909–1949* (London, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> *Ireland and the Great War* (Cambridge, 2000).

Jeffery's final extended monograph, *1916: a global history*.<sup>6</sup> Notoriously, from the perspective of most historians of the Great War, 1916 was the year when history appeared to have been paralysed, buried in the sands of Gallipoli and the mud of the Somme. But Keith took on this formidable challenge of making history out of stasis, and in a veritable *tour de force* conducted through twelve vividly presented case-studies, revealed the vital springs of change that were emerging across the world in this germinal year which was, as his title indicates, a decidedly global one: and the book concludes with a consideration of two events in the following year which were to be of lasting global import: the Russian Revolution and America's entry into the war. But Ireland was never far from Keith's focus in most of his work, and here the book opens with a telling illustration of the impact of the Great War in a small place in rural Ireland. It contains a chapter, 'Ypres on the Liffey', which offers a fresh perspective on the Easter Rising, and one gets the sense that the underlying perspective of the book as a whole has been shaped by the historian's own appreciation of how that apparently futile gesture was laden with profound historical implication.<sup>7</sup>

All of this is more than sufficient to answer the challenge of Keith's jocular critic. But there are other aspects to that chance interchange which are, if anything, even more revealing of Keith's attitude toward history and historians. Keith's good-natured refusal to be drawn was prompted by something more than mere flippancy. Underlying his attitude was a profound respect for all modes of historical enquiry as long as they were conducted with the same sincerity, thoroughness, fidelity to the rules of method and evidence, and showed an equal measure of criticism and self-criticism. A product both of a natural instinct (anyone who knew Keith would have been fully aware of his open, liberal and tolerant disposition) and of his rigorous intellectual training, it was this characteristic which made Keith such a superb editor of other historians' work at all stages from the initial point of submission or commission to the polishing of the final draft. In addition to the ten years he devoted to editing the pages of *Irish Historical Studies* between 1988 and 1997, Keith undertook this selfless and occasionally self-damaging service to the discipline of history in several other enterprises, most notably the hugely valuable *A military history of Ireland* which he co-edited with Tom Bartlett.<sup>8</sup> But it was as editor of *Irish Historical Studies* that (first as a member of the editorial board and later as his fellow editor) I came to witness at first hand not only Keith's extraordinary combination of skills as an editor – shrewdness of judgement, tact in expression, encouragement and firmness, an eagle eye for solecisms and typos, and an acute ear for dissonant metaphor and clunking cadence – but above all his

<sup>6</sup> London, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> A full bibliography of Keith Jeffery's writings pertaining to Irish history can be extracted from Irish History Online ([www.irishhistoryonline.ie](http://www.irishhistoryonline.ie)).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery (eds), *A military history of Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996); but see also Robert K. Blyth and Keith Jeffery (eds), *The British Empire and its contested pasts: Historical Studies XXVI* (Dublin, 2009); Neil Garnham and Keith Jeffery (eds), *Culture, place and identity: Historical Studies XXIV* (Dublin, 2005); Keith Jeffery (ed.), *An Irish empire?: aspects of Ireland and the British Empire*, (Manchester, 1996); T. G. Fraser and Keith Jeffery (eds), *Men, women and war: Historical Studies XVIII* (Dublin, 1993).

wide range of historical knowledge and his modest acceptance of the multiple, contrasting and sometimes conflicting ways in which historical research and writing can be conducted.

It was this appreciation of the contested nature of historical writing that underlay all of Keith's judgements concerning work submitted to the journal, but in particular one decision made jointly with his then fellow editor, James McGuire. This was their resolve to accept for publication Brendan Bradshaw's provocative and frankly polemical essay 'Nationalism and historical scholarship in Ireland'.<sup>9</sup> *Irish Historical Studies* had in the past published several articles critical of some modes of current historical writing. But these were commonly restricted to particular 'Historical revisions' or were muted through being framed within the several 'Agendas' for further research which the journal occasionally published. Bradshaw's essay was unique both in the extent of his critique and the depth of the charges he made against the historical profession in Ireland as a whole. His assertion that, whether deliberately or unconsciously, the most influential figures within the discipline had been engaged in a systematic sanitisation of the record of Irish history through evasion, obfuscation, and through the insistence upon the employment of rhetorical tropes of pseudo-objectivity, was an immense indictment of contemporary historical writing in general, and of the standard contributions of *Irish Historical Studies* in particular. Not unnaturally, Bradshaw's submission occasioned considerable turbulence in the dovecotes of the journal's editorial board, a phenomenon which Bradshaw, by his nicely calculated decision to offer the piece to the journal in the first place, might have pleasurably and justifiably anticipated. Yet such resistance was met with quiet but firm and supremely persuasive rebuttal by Keith, and by James McGuire, who argued that the most powerful manner in which Bradshaw's indictment could be answered was through the welcome acceptance of the essay within the journal's pages. The result was the opening of a refreshing and overdue debate about Irish historical writing which, having been long simmering, would sooner or later have had its expression in other places. It is to Keith's (and to James's) courage and foresight that, instead of being sidelined as the organ of a passed generation, *Irish Historical Studies* would play a central role in this rejuvenation of Irish historical debate.

Its testimony to the depth and sincerity of Keith's respect for all kinds of history and all kinds of historians does not exhaust the significance of that humorous exchange. Hardly less important is the manner in which it reveals Keith's quiet and self-effacing conviction that the intellectual exercise of historical writing and debate should be conducted without bitterness or rancour, or with an animus thinly veiled by a patina of scholarly objectivity; and that for all of those engaged it should contain an element of rich intellectual pleasure – of 'fun'. Returning from Cambridge in 1978 to take up a post as lecturer in history at the Ulster Polytechnic (incorporated into the University of Ulster, in 1984), Keith came back to Belfast at one of the darkest and most violent phases in all of its troubled history. The University of Ulster was itself both a symbol and a symptom of the troubles, and the subjects in which he was a specialist, modern Irish and British history, the most contentious of all imaginable. But as lecturer and later as professor of modern

<sup>9</sup> *I.H.S.*, xxvi, no. 104 (Nov. 1989), pp 329–51.

history, Keith took on this exceptional pedagogical and, indeed, personal challenge and succeeded in it supremely, as both colleagues and students so frequently attested. Keith's deep intellectual respect for all kinds of sincere historical work was doubtless a major factor in his success in meeting this enormous challenge. But no less essential were his extraordinary personal gifts of sympathy, openness and most especially good-humour.

Asked of late to characterise the chief personal characteristic which I associated with Keith, 'mirth' was the word which spontaneously sprang to my mind. By such a word I intended not simply frivolity, or even conviviality (though Keith had the latter in good measure), but a sense of joy in the world around him. By times puckish, ironic, splendidly mock-indignant, Keith, as the anecdote with which I started illustrates, exuded mirth. But underlying Keith's mirth lay a deep and active humility, a recognition that all of us sentient creatures, regardless of class, creed or intellectual level, had been cast into the same existential condition and shared the same destiny. This was the fundamental force underpinning all his work as a writer, teacher, and public defender of history as a way of understanding and living in the world. It is an attitude toward life that should be common to all of us privileged to study and write history. The sorry fact that it is not always so makes the untimely manner of Keith's departure such a grievous loss to friends and colleagues, and to all who had the occasional joy of sharing life with him.