

History, Religion, and Culture

British Intellectual History 1750–1950

edited by

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General introduction

I

It may be that there is no longer any need to justify the term ‘intellectual history’ or the practice for which it stands. If this is so – experience can, alas, still occasionally cause one to wonder – then it is a very recent development indeed, at least in Britain. Only two or three decades ago, the label routinely encountered more than its share of misunderstanding, some of it rather wilful, especially perhaps on the part of some political and social historians. There was, to begin with, the allegation that intellectual history was largely the history of things that never really *mattered*. The long dominance of the historical profession by political historians tended to breed a kind of philistinism, an unspoken belief that power and its exercise was what ‘mattered’ (a term which invited but rarely received any close scrutiny). The legacy of this prejudice is still discernible in the tendency in some quarters to require ideas to have ‘influenced’ the political elite before they can be deemed worthy of historical attention, as though there were some reason why the history of art or of science, of philosophy or of literature, were somehow of less interest and significance than the histories of policies and parliaments. In the course of the 1960s and 1970s, the mirror-image of this philistinism became even more common, particularly in the form of the claim that ideas of any degree of systematic expression or formal sophistication did not merit detailed historical scrutiny because they were, by definition, only held by a small educated minority. The fact is, of course, that much which legitimately interests us in history was the work of minorities (not always of the same type, be it noted), and it remains true, to repeat an adaptation of a famous line of E. P. Thompson’s that I have used elsewhere, that it is not only the poor and inarticulate who may stand in need of being rescued from the enormous condescension of posterity.

A further, related misconception has been the charge, which still has some currency, that intellectual history is inherently ‘idealist’, where that term is used pejoratively to signify the belief (or, more often, assumption)

that ideas develop by a logic of their own, without reference to other human activities or to what is loosely called their 'social context'. There was possibly some truth to this as a criticism of some of the work written a couple of generations ago, particularly that originating in the history of philosophy, but it is simply false as a description of what intellectual history must be like. The intellectual historian is someone who happens to find the reflective and expressive life of the past to be of interest: it is the vulgarest kind of reductivism or ideology-spotting to presume that this betrays an unspoken belief in the superiority of one form of human activity, still less an underlying commitment to a monocausal view of history.

In some quarters, the very term 'intellectual history' itself generated unease, with the result that 'the history of ideas' has sometimes been preferred as an alternative label. However, the danger here is that the emphasis on the 'history of *ideas*' may precisely suggest that we are dealing with autonomous abstractions which, in their self-propelled journeyings through time, happened only contingently and temporarily to find anchorage in particular human minds, a suggestion encouraged by the long German tradition of *Geistesgeschichte* or *Ideengeschichte* which, revealing its Hegelian ancestry, looked to the history of philosophy to provide the pattern of human history as a whole. By contrast, the term 'intellectual history' signals more clearly that the focus is on an aspect of human activity and is in this respect no different from 'economic history', 'political history', and so forth.

One final, more local, form of resistance took the form of the suggestion – only partly facetious, one fears – that there is no need for intellectual history in the case of Britain since it, at least in the modern period, has been a society with no worthwhile or significant ideas, or, in another version, one where ideas are of no consequence, or, marginally less crass, one where the preferred idiom is that of the practical or the implicit (as though these, too, were not susceptible of historical analysis). In each of these claims, not only is the premise deeply disputable but the logic is, anyway, plainly faulty, as though one were to conclude that there could be no economic history of sub-Saharan Africa or no constitutional history of post-war Italy.

Given this still-recent history of prejudice and misunderstanding, one of the striking features of the essays in these volumes is their lack of defensiveness: they are written as contributions to an area of scholarship which is already rich and complex, and their tone does not suggest any felt need to justify the larger enterprise. And it is indeed the case that the last couple of decades have seen an impressive efflorescence of work in intellectual history understood in the broad terms sketched here. Where previously the 'history of ideas' was often, especially in the modern period, a

pursuit cultivated by philosophers, political theorists, literary critics, social scientists, and others pursuing the 'pre-history' of their own disciplines, recent work in 'intellectual history' is much more likely to be done by those with a trained and cultivated interest in a particular period of the past, seeking to apply the same standards of historical evidence and judgement to the intellectual life of that period as their colleagues have traditionally displayed towards its political, social, and economic life. Instead of works which cut a 'vertical' (and often teleological) slice through the past with titles like 'The History of Sociology from Montesquieu to Weber', 'The Growth of Economic Theory from Smith to Friedman', 'The Making of Modern Historiography from Gibbon to Braudel', and so on, the tendency of recent work has been towards excavating a more 'horizontal' site, exploring the idioms and preoccupations of a past period as they manifest themselves in thought and discussion about various issues that cannot readily be assigned to current academic pigeon-holes. In other words, rather than constructing a 'history of ideas', where the emphasis is on the logical structure of certain arguments that are seen as only contingently and almost irrelevantly located in the past, the informing aspiration has been to write an 'intellectual history', which tries to recover the thought of the past in its complexity and, in a sense which is neither self-contradictory nor trivial, as far as possible in its own terms.

However, although I have been suggesting that intellectual history is now becoming an established and, on the whole, accepted sub-discipline even in Britain, it would be a disagreeable consequence of the hyper-professionalism of modern academic life were this to result in the formation of a new disciplinary trade-union, with all the characteristics of parochialism and exclusiveness, together with the attendant demarcation disputes, that threaten to characterise such bodies in their militant phase. It is surely a sign of cultural health rather than of corporate weakness that several of the contributors to these volumes would not wish to be constantly or exclusively classified as 'intellectual historians', and indeed that their institutional affiliations span several academic departments, including English, History, Politics, Law, and Religious Studies.

It will, I trust, be obvious that the brief characterisation of intellectual history offered in the preceding paragraphs is open to dispute and has in fact been vigorously disputed in recent years. The work of Michel Foucault and his followers has encouraged a rather different form of engagement with the 'discourses' dominant in past societies – one which often displaces purposive historical agents from the scene altogether – and more recently still, styles of work deriving from literary theory and cultural studies have attempted to shift attention yet further away from

the meaning-laden utterances of those who can be identified as members of some kind of 'elite'. Meanwhile, detailed historical work on a broad range of aspects of the intellectual life of the past continues to be carried on in a variety of less noisy or self-advertising modes. The result of these developments has been an inevitable and largely healthy pluralism of approaches: now that the legitimacy of the activity itself no longer needs to be argued for, intellectual historians can be allowed the same luxuries of disagreement and rivalry as have long been enjoyed by the more established branches of the historian's trade. And precisely because this plurality of approaches *is* now coming into being, it may be appropriate to switch the focus of attention from these general considerations to examine at slightly greater length the specific contributions to this field made by John Burrow and Donald Winch.

II

Insofar as the activity of intellectual history *has* received institutional embodiment and cultural recognition as an academic discipline or sub-discipline in Britain in the last generation or so, it has been particularly identified with the University of Sussex. Sussex was the first British university to offer a degree programme in the subject and to establish posts explicitly defined as being in the field of 'Intellectual History'. In the course of the 1970s and 1980s, some observers, claiming to find certain shared characteristics in the work published by some of those responsible for this programme, began to refer to 'the Sussex School'. This label can, at best, only ever have served as a piece of academic shorthand or argot, while at worst it was a culpable form of exaggeration or reification. No such 'school' exists or ever existed if that term be taken to imply common adherence to an explicit and exclusive methodological programme. It would be more accurate to say that the comparatively flexible and interdisciplinary structure of Sussex in those decades provided a congenial berth for a group of like-minded scholars whose interests typically tended to fall across or between the domains of the better-established academic disciplines. (I shall return to a consideration of the nature of this 'like-mindedness' in section III below.) In any event, what most certainly *is* beyond dispute is the fact that Donald Winch and John Burrow were for many years the leading figures in this group at Sussex.

Since this is not the place to attempt to recap the entire career of either Burrow or Winch, I shall merely touch on some of the more significant stages in their respective formations as intellectual historians. It is, of course, sobering for the historian above all to be brought to realise just

how hard it is to reconstitute, let alone account for, the intellectual trajectories even of one's close friends, a difficulty compounded as much as eased by the risks of relying overmuch on one's own rather randomly accumulated personal archive. And anyway, perhaps writings that are in the public domain are merely the by-product or end-result of some primal process of self-fashioning – indirect records of some now undetectable early shifts in the tectonic plates of temperament and disposition. Perhaps the ministrations of any number of careers advisers were otiose from the moment in which the young John Burrow stumbled on Figgis's *Gerson to Grotius* in his school library and was enthralled rather than baffled; perhaps all that has followed was already prefigured in the scene in which the teenage Burrow, crouched on the floor next to the family wireless, took notes, no doubt of a daunting illegibility even then, from a series of talks on 'Freedom and its Betrayal' by a speaker he had up till that point never heard of called Isaiah Berlin. And why it was that, at almost exactly the same time, the young Donald Winch was to be found rather self-consciously reading Plato's *Republic* while on holiday by the shores of the Baltic, or why it was that, though a student of economics, he chose to attend, for two years running, Michael Oakshott's lectures on the history of political thought – these may be matters which defy further explanation, though in each case the temptations of teleology are strong (and have here not been altogether resisted).

Academically, both men were shaped in the 1950s. For John Burrow, an undergraduate at Christ's College from 1954 to 1957, the initial scholarly context was provided by the Cambridge History Tripos, and more especially its options in the history of political thought where he was particularly stimulated by the teaching of Duncan Forbes. At an early stage, Burrow had found the dominant genres of political and economic history less than wholly congenial, and after graduating he embarked, under the benign but necessarily somewhat distant supervision of Kitson Clark, on an ambitious Ph.D. on Victorian theories of social evolution, which was submitted in 1961. More broadly, his mentor at this time in the ways of the world, no less than in the duties and opportunities of being a historian, was J. H. Plumb, an academic talent-spotter and trainer with an unmatched successful record. A research fellowship at Christ's was followed by a college lectureship at Downing, but by the time the revised version of his thesis appeared as a book in 1966, Burrow had moved to a lectureship at the recently founded University of East Anglia.

Evolution and Society: A Study in Victorian Social Theory was an extraordinarily assured debut. The book decisively challenged the assumption that the source of mid-Victorian ideas of social evolution was to be found in the application of Darwin's biological theories, and instead traced the

attempts of figures such as Spencer, Maine, and Tylor to address questions of cultural variety within the framework of a (sometimes profoundly troubled) belief in progress. As a result, the book immediately established itself as a pioneering contribution to the history of anthropology as well as a provocative exploration of a central aspect of Victorian culture. That the argument of *Evolution and Society* certainly did not reflect any lack of appreciation on Burrow's part of the intellectual change that Darwin had wrought was demonstrated by his introduction to the Penguin *Origin of Species* in 1968, while his familiarity with European, and especially German, sources in the Romantic period was evident in his substantial introduction to his new translation of Wilhelm von Humboldt's *The Limits of State Action*, published in 1969.

In Donald Winch's intellectual formation, the LSE and the discipline of Economics occupied something of the same place that Cambridge and History did for John Burrow. An undergraduate between 1953 and 1956, Winch opted to specialise in international economics under the tutelage of James Meade, but he was already revealing himself as being at least as interested in Popper's teaching on scientific method or, as mentioned earlier, Oakeshott's on the history of political thought. Moving to Princeton for graduate study, he fell under the influence of Jacob Viner, of whom he later wrote a perceptive and affectionate memoir, and began to specialise in the history of economic thought. On returning to Britain after a year's teaching at Berkeley, a post at Edinburgh was followed in 1963 by a lectureship at Sussex, which soon led to rapid promotion, and he became Reader and then, in 1969, Professor of the History of Economics.

His first book, *Classical Political Economy and Colonies*, published in 1965, already displayed what were to become trademark qualities: the substance combined a quiet mastery of the technicalities of the history of economic theory with a sure grasp of the historical embeddedness of such ideas, while the manner exhibited a seemingly unforced alliance between clarity and argumentative vigour. The book compelled the historians of government policy in the period to learn their economic letters, while at the same time infiltrating some awkward complexities into the standard chronicles of 'the rise of political economy'. A certain distance from his initial disciplinary formation was already manifest in his declared intention to 'steer clear of the history of economic analysis for its own sake in order to remain close to the issues as seen by the participants' (*Classical Political Economy and Colonies*, p. 3). In other ways, too, Winch was already contesting that canonical account of early political economy which confined itself to the Holy Trinity of Smith the Father, Ricardo the Son, and Mill the Holy Ghost, one fruit of his historical attentiveness to less

fashionable figures being the substantial editorial labour of his edition of James Mill's *Selected Economic Writings* which was published in 1966.

Both men, therefore, began by initially pursuing a somewhat under-favoured branch of a powerful discipline (respectively History and Economics) and then progressively reacting against the coerciveness and complacency of representatives of mainstream traditions of those disciplines. Both had encountered the constraints of orthodox 'discipline' history as written by present practitioners of a given discipline, especially the 'pre-history of anthropology' in Burrow's case and the 'pre-history of economics' in Winch's. By the late 1960s, partly as a result of this experience, their respective scholarly interests were, quite independently of each other, moving closer together under the broad rubric of the history of social thought or of the social sciences. From his arrival at Sussex, Donald Winch had been closely involved in teaching a 'contextual' course, compulsory for all final-year students in the School of Social Sciences, called 'Concepts, methods, and values in the social sciences' (always known, not always affectionately, as CMV). In the mid-1960s he was instrumental in adding an option in 'The historical development of the social sciences' to the existing course which had previously been confined to philosophical and methodological issues. In those expansionary days, it was possible to think of making appointments to match such academic initiatives, and it was Winch, in his role as (a notably young) Dean of the School of Social Sciences, who first invited John Burrow, by then Reader in History at East Anglia, to Sussex, initially to lecture for the new course, and eventually to take up a post teaching it. (The first exchange of letters – 'Dear Mr Burrow'/'Dear Mr Winch' – has, in retrospect, something of an 84 *Charing Cross Road* feel about it.) As a result, in 1969 Burrow was appointed to a post principally responsible for teaching the historical part of CMV; a few years later he transferred to the School of English and American Studies.

The University of Sussex had been founded in 1961 with the deliberate aim of 're-drawing the map of learning', and institutional expression had been given to this ideal by not establishing conventional academic departments, but instead grouping scholars with related interests into schools of study, usually with an area basis such as the School of European Studies or the School of English and American Studies. Within and across these schools, 'majors' were taught in particular subjects, while students had also to spend approximately half their time on school 'contextual' courses (such as CMV). 'Subject groups' were responsible for these majors and these were the nearest Sussex came in those days to having orthodox departments. Both the ethos and the structure of Sussex in the late 1960s and early 1970s were favourable to innovation, and it was this supportive

setting that permitted the establishment initially of an MA and then, in 1969, of a undergraduate 'major' in Intellectual History, the first such degree programme to be set up at a British university. These early initiatives were undertaken by members of staff who had initially been appointed to more traditionally defined posts, such as Peter Burke in History and Michael Moran in Philosophy; crucial support was provided by James Shiel from Classical Studies and the then recently retired Helmut Pappé. A new lectureship in Intellectual History, the first to be formally designated as such, was established in 1972 and initially held by Larry Siedentop, and then, from 1974, by Stefan Collini (to whom I shall, for the sake of narrative propriety, sometimes have to refer, as here, in the third person).

The years during which these institutional arrangements were being established and consolidated – roughly the late 1960s to the mid-1970s – also saw shifts, or perhaps just modulations, in the intellectual interests of both Donald Winch and John Burrow. Winch's interest in the interaction between economic expertise and political exigency was for some time principally focused on the twentieth century, and his *Economics and Policy: A Historical Study* (1969) broke what was then new ground in its exploration of the ways in which Keynesian arguments came to penetrate the policy-making establishments of both Britain and the United States. In terms of both chronology and of sources, the book's range was impressive, moving from Alfred Marshall's attempts to accommodate the challenge of 'the social problem' within the absorbent framework of his *Principles of Economics* in the 1890s to the measures undertaken by the Kennedy–Johnson administrations of the 1960s. The interest in the role of economic advisers was sustained, and supported by a daunting display of expertise in the official and archival sources, in a study of the Economic Advisory Council of the 1930s, which was jointly written with Susan Howson and published in 1976. But, as already indicated, his earliest work had been on the foundations of political economy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, an area of research which he never entirely deserted, as evidenced by his substantial introduction to the Penguin edition of books IV and V of Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* in 1970 and his Everyman edition of Ricardo's *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* in 1973. Moreover, by the mid-1970s, Winch had begun to read widely in recent work by early-modern intellectual historians on the roles played by the languages of 'civic humanism' and 'natural jurisprudence' in the development of political thought during that period, and he brought the fruits of this reading to bear on the interpretation of the most canonical of all figures in the history of economic thought in his *Adam Smith's Politics: An Essay in Historiographic Revision*,

which was published in 1978. This characteristically combative book sought to rescue Smith from the retrospective teleologies of the historians of economics, and to restore him to his eighteenth-century context, principally but by no means exclusively his Scottish context. This relatively short, tightly argued book was to have considerable impact both within and beyond the confines of the history of political economy, not least through its firm insistence on the distinction between the goal of recovering the historicity of a past writer and that of using the name of that writer to legitimate a variety of political or academic enterprises in the present.

During these same years, the focus of John Burrow's scholarly work also underwent some change, essentially away from its initial concentration on the history of social and political thought towards a broader engagement with Victorian culture and historiography. His essay for J. H. Plumb's *Festschrift*, published in 1974, "'The Village Community' and the Uses of History in Late-Nineteenth-Century England", signalled an early step in this direction by focusing on the historical writings of figures such as Maine, Freeman, and Maitland. At the same time, partly through the structure of teaching at Sussex (especially after his move into the School of English and American Studies), Burrow was drawn more deeply into the relations between history and literature in nineteenth-century Britain; some incidental fruits of this experience may be found in his contributions to *The Victorians*, edited by Laurence Lerner, a volume in the 'Context of English Literature' series which appeared in 1978. This phase of Burrow's work culminated triumphantly in *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past*, which was published in 1981 and was joint winner of the Wolfson Prize for History for that year. The book's principal sections discuss the vast, sprawling narrative histories of Macaulay, Stubbs, Freeman, and Froude and the intellectual and historiographical traditions within which they worked, but this flat inventory signally fails to do justice to the book's widely ramifying explorations of Victorian cultural sensibility. There is now abundant evidence of how its account of the nineteenth-century Whig tradition of historical writing has left its mark on scholarship across a wide range of topics, some far removed from the confines of the history of historiography. Yet for many readers, the book's distinctiveness and charm lie in the ways in which the writing allows a cultivated sensibility to direct, inform, and give appropriately modulated expression to its historical analysis, simultaneously catching and doing justice to the idiosyncrasy of his chosen historians while placing them within intellectual and literary traditions which are characterised with great richness and subtlety.

In the early 1980s, Collini, Winch, and Burrow collaborated in writing *That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual*

History, whose publication in 1983 marked, both practically and symbolically, the high point of their collaborative endeavour. Perhaps the least awkward way to provide some characterisation of the book here is to quote from the preface which was specially written (in 1996) for the Japanese translation.

In the nature of things, a book that sets out to challenge or repudiate accepted disciplinary boundaries is likely to run the risk of baffling some of its readers. As one reviewer sympathetically put it: 'This is going to be a perplexing book for many. Librarians will wonder how to classify it. Specialists in politics and economics will be embarrassed at its demonstration of how what they thought sewn up can be unstitched. Tutors will wonder what passages their pupils can be trusted not to misunderstand.' As the Prologue to the book was intended to make clear, some of the intellectual energy that fuelled its writing came from our shared negative reaction to certain prevailing disciplinary dispensations. Most obviously, we repudiated those forms of 'the history of the social sciences' which consisted in finding 'precursors' and 'founding fathers' for contemporary social scientific specialisms from among past writers the specificity and integrity of whose concerns thereby came in for some very rough treatment indeed . . . We also repudiated the coerciveness of the priorities encouraged by 'the history of political theory', an enterprise which has enjoyed such a strong institutional position in the Anglo-American scholarly world that political, economic, and social historians all too easily take it to *be* intellectual history. And, more obviously, we took our distance from those kinds of approaches which are united in little else than in assuming that intellectual activity is best understood as a reflection or by-product of some allegedly more fundamental social or economic process . . . Without wishing to set up a new meta-discipline or to propose a panacea for wider cultural ailments, we continue to regard intellectual history of the kind exhibited in this book as a flexible and responsible approach to the intellectual life of the past. In certain respects, intellectual history pursued in this manner may itself be regarded as having a kind of 'anti-specialist' identity, both because it cannot be equated with the history of one subject-matter or discipline and because it cannot be reduced to one methodology or vocabulary.

Although there has been no further attempt at direct collaboration, it is clear from the prefaces and acknowledgements in their subsequent works (to cite only evidence that is in the public domain) that the ties of friendship and intellectual exchange between the three authors remain close. However, the partly parallel and partly divergent trajectories followed by Winch and Burrow since that period must also be noted here.

John Burrow's stylish 'Past Masters' volume on Gibbon was published in 1985, and in the same year he gave the Carlyle Lectures at Oxford, which were then published in 1988 under the title *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought*. This slim volume testified, as its preface acknowledged, to Burrow's 'long-standing interest in the impact of historicist ways of thinking on European, and above all

British, culture in the post-Romantic period' (*Whigs and Liberals*, p. viii). It set some of the familiar ideas of nineteenth-century liberalism in a new perspective by tracing continuities and discontinuities with that broadly Whig tradition of political thinking whose richness and longevity have only become fully apparent with the scholarship of the last generation, and the book gracefully sketched some of the ways in which conceptions of variety or diversity were seen as essential to social and individual energy and vitality. The attempt to establish some perspectival balance in understanding the ceaseless gavotte of continuity and change is, of course, the stock-in-trade of all historians, but it is in a deeper sense at the heart of Burrow's scholarly sensibility and informs his recurring preoccupation with the mutations of intellectual traditions. As he put it in his speech accepting an honorary degree at the University of Bologna in 1988: 'Our relations to the past, or to what we conceive it to be, are, it seems to me, full of ambiguity and fascination; at once indispensable and civilising and also, as perhaps all worthwhile relations are, perilous. We may derive from them both confidence and complacency, nourishment of identity and the bigotry of exclusiveness.'

Winch's contributions to *That Noble Science* signalled what were to be his principal preoccupations during the ensuing decade: on the one hand, the question of the fate of Smith's ambitious programme in the hands of various putative successors, and, on the other, what was to prove a long engagement with the work and reputation of Robert Malthus. The former issued in a stream of essays in the 1980s and early 1990s – essays often couched in revisionist terms in an attempt to counter the later appropriation of some eighteenth- or nineteenth-century figure. His carefully crafted 'Past Masters' volume on Malthus in 1987 was the chief expression of the latter concern, but Winch was also closely involved in enabling the Royal Economic Society edition of *An Essay on the Principle of Population* finally to see the light of day, and this was later followed by his own edition in the Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought series in 1992. The invitation to deliver the Carlyle Lectures at Oxford for 1995 provided the opportunity to present the outlines of the synthesis of many years of work in these related areas, the full version of which was to be published in 1996 as *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834*.

Even in what has thus far been an exceptionally productive writing life, *Riches and Poverty* stands out as a remarkable achievement. The book provides a learned, thickly textured account of the ways in which arguments over economic matters (in the broadest sense of the term) in this crucial period were bound up with and expressive of wider political and social identities. Its command of the purely *theoretical* complexities of classical

political economy is evident yet never foregrounded: instead, the main strands of the period's attempts to grapple analytically with a new range of issues about wealth and poverty are threaded into a thickly peopled narrative tapestry, and the book is studded with intellectual vignettes that are as impressive for their concision as for their scholarship, whether it be in discussing the differences between Smith and Ferguson on the appropriateness of taking a 'philosophic' view of the rebellion of the American colonies, or in discriminating shades of unfairness in the treatment of Malthus by the leading 'Lake poets'. The book may only now be starting to make its presence felt, but it will in time surely do what all outstanding works of historical scholarship do, namely, to make it harder, or at the very least less excusable, to write the kind of shoddy, simplistic accounts of 'classical political economy' or 'the 1790s' that are regularly to be found in treatments of this period written by economists and literary scholars as well as by some historians.

As their new essays in these two volumes suggest, the stream of outstanding publications by these two authors shows no signs of drying up: at the time of writing, John Burrow is just on the point of completing a large study of European intellectual history between 1848 and 1914, while Donald Winch is organising a major British Academy project on the peculiarities of British economic experience since the Industrial Revolution. However, the last decade or so has seen some significant changes in the institutional bases from which the activities chronicled here have been carried on, changes which may make 'the Sussex School' less appropriate than ever as a collective label. In 1986 Stefan Collini left Sussex to take up a post in the Faculty of English in Cambridge, a move reflecting and encouraging a shift in his interests away from the early focus on the history of social and political thought to a concern with literary and cultural criticism, as well as a move from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. In 1995 John Burrow became the first holder of the newly established Chair of European Thought at Oxford, resuming an engagement with nineteenth-century European thinkers and writers that had been largely in the background of his intellectual activities since the late 1960s, though it had never been wholly absent. The personnel of the group at Sussex changed in other ways, too. Following Collini's departure, Anna Bryson held a lectureship there from 1986 to 1992 and Richard Whatmore and Brian Young have been lecturers in Intellectual History since 1993. Martin van Gelderen succeeded John Burrow as Professor of Intellectual History in 1995, and the appointment of Blair Worden to a Chair of History in the following year further strengthened Sussex's standing in the early-modern period. Structural reorganisation within the university led in 1997 to proposals for the establishment of the

Centre for Literary and Intellectual History, an arrangement which would give institutional expression to the close collaborative links already existing with colleagues such as Norman Vance in English, and Donald Winch formally moved into this Centre in 1998. In institutional terms, there have, therefore, been both dispersals and continuities, and at this point it is proper to leave others to take up the story, or stories, in other ways in the future.

III

The term ‘the Sussex School’ has, as I have already emphasised, never been more than a piece of academic shorthand, but insofar as any reality lay behind the label, it would have to be found in a series of works published from the late 1970s onwards. These in no sense constituted a coordinated programme, but they perhaps evinced certain common qualities of approach and manner, and they all focused on a series of interconnecting themes and figures in British intellectual history from roughly the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. The principal titles, in chronological order, were probably the following:

Adam Smith’s Politics: An Essay in Historiographic Revision (1978);

Liberalism and Sociology: L. T. Hobhouse and Political Argument in Britain 1880–1914 (1979);

A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past (1981);

That Noble Science of Politics: An Essay in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History (1983);

Whigs and Liberals: Change and Continuity in English Political Thought (1988);

Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850–1930 (1991);

Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain 1750–1834 (1996).

All three authors also published volumes in the Oxford ‘Past Masters’ series at much the same time: John Burrow’s *Gibbon* (1985), Donald Winch’s *Malthus* (1987), and Stefan Collini’s *Arnold* (1988). It was no doubt characteristic that these three books should have dealt with figures normally seen as the intellectual property of three very different modern disciplines – respectively, History, Economics, and English. Over these two decades, these books were, of course, accompanied by numerous articles, essays, and reviews, some of which occasionally took a more polemical or critical stance towards works by other scholars in the field. The perception of a characteristic ‘Sussex’ style may also have been encouraged by the fact that a number of younger scholars who had been

graduate students there began to publish work in a not dissimilar vein, including two of the contributors to these volumes, Julia Stapleton and Dario Castiglione (as well as Philip Ironside who would have been a contributor but for ill health). Notable publications from this generation include Stapleton's *Englishness and the Study of Politics: The Social and Political Thought of Ernest Barker* (1994) and Ironside's *The Social and Political Thought of Bertrand Russell: The Development of an Aristocratic Liberalism* (1996).

The work of the scholars who have been regarded as at the heart of this group has thus taken the form of substantive books and essays rather than programmatic manifestos, and its characteristics can therefore not easily be encapsulated in a few sentences. But it would be reasonable to say that the informing spirit of much of this work has been the attempt to recover past ideas and re-situate them in their intellectual contexts in ways which resist the anachronistic or otherwise tendentious and selective pressures exerted by contemporary academic and political polemic. Work in this vein has also attempted to be alert to questions of style and register, to the nuances of individual voice as well as the animating presence of intellectual traditions, and to recognise the different levels of abstraction and practical engagement involved in work in different genres. The aim has been to offer a more thickly textured sense of the interplay between, say, literary, historiographical, and economic ideas in the cultural life of Britain since the Enlightenment, as well as much subtler characterisations of the relations between such ideas and the broader social and political developments of this period.

Intellectual history in this vein has, as already observed, eschewed adherence to any of the methodological programmes or tight conceptual schemes which have from time to time been elaborated and defended in general terms – the sociology of knowledge, the history of unit ideas, the mapping of *mentalités*, the study of political languages, the critique of ideologies, the recovery of authors' intentions, the archaeology of epistemes, the deconstruction of texts, and so on. The intellectual practice of both Winch and Burrow has, of course, displayed closer affinities to some of these approaches than to others, notably to those expounded in the methodological essays of John Pocock and Quentin Skinner (leaders of what, with equal imprecision and a fine disregard for geography, has sometimes been dubbed 'the Cambridge School'). But a characteristic of the work of Burrow, Winch, and their associates has been a certain deliberate eclecticism and a preference for letting substantive scholarship speak for itself (a preference which is not to be confused with the theoretical stance of 'empiricism', properly so called), and such collective distinctiveness as this work has displayed has been more a matter of tone and

level of treatment, of common preoccupations and similar dispositions, than of adherence to the precepts of any one interpretive scheme. Moreover, this work has not for the most part been directly addressed to those working in the highly contentious (and only partly historical) sub-field of 'the history of political thought', and insofar as it *has* dealt with past political debate it has, especially in recent years, certainly not concentrated on relations between past political theorising and contemporary moral and political philosophy, as so much of the work in that field continues to do. As their titles indicate, the essays in these two volumes range fairly widely over aspects of cultural and intellectual life in Britain during this period, as a result of which the history of political theory as such receives only glancing or incidental treatment.

In their occasional public ruminations on their practice, both Burrow and Winch have explored the value and limitations of the metaphor of 'eavesdropping on the conversations of the past' as a way of gesturing towards the intellectual historian's characteristic role, both immediately adding the rider that what is overheard has also to be (to use another metaphor) 'translated' for the benefit of the contemporary reader. Other, similar metaphors could no doubt capture other aspects of the constant journeying between strangeness and familiarity which is the historian's task, but at the heart of this practice has been an underlying respect for the brute fact that the thoughts and feelings of the historical agents being studied are *theirs* not ours, and that a certain empathy and interpretive charity are essential if the activity of historical understanding is to involve anything more than merely confirming one's appearance in a mirror. (This, incidentally, is one reason why the historian who is seeking understanding rather than simply collecting information need never be afraid of the glib charge of antiquarianism; the past can have no capacity to surprise us if we merely visit it to provide material for *our* debates and preoccupations.) In practical terms, this rules out an excessive high-handedness in our dealings with the dead; as Winch has put it in discussing ways of 'achieving historical understanding': 'I would confess . . . to following a fairly simple rule of thumb in such matters: past authors should be treated as one would wish one's own writings and beliefs to be treated, should the positions, by some amazing twist of fate, be reversed' (*Riches and Poverty*, p. 30). The contrast with what is suggested by the revealing metaphor of 'interrogating texts' is striking: interrogators know in advance the kinds of thing they are expecting to learn, often subjecting their victims to some pretty ungentle kinds of pressure until the process yields the desired information.

Ultimately, the most appropriate as well as most effective way to indicate some of the distinctive characteristics of the work of Winch and

Burrow would be through an extended analysis of their *practice*, and this, of its nature, cannot be undertaken in the brief compass available here. Instead, a couple of more or less arbitrarily chosen passages from their work must do duty for a fuller critical account. In the case of *A Liberal Descent*, almost any sentence taken at random could be used to illustrate how a layered richness of understanding seeks and finds expression in a prose that is sinuous and complex, yet entirely free from inert, clogging abstractions. Thus, from the discussion of Macaulay:

The *History* is much more than the vindication of a party; it is an attempt to insinuate a view of politics, pragmatic, reverent, essentially Burkean, informed by a high, even tumid, sense of the worth of public life, yet fully conscious of its interrelations with the wider progress of society; it embodies what Hallam had merely asserted, a sense of the privileged possession by Englishmen of their history, as well as of the epic dignity of government by discussion (*A Liberal Descent*, p. 93).

No-one, not even the most inveterate Jamesian, could be tempted to describe this prose style as 'sparse'. And yet there is a curious form of economy of expression here, a compacting into one sentence of elements which, taken alone, could too easily become blandly propositional and, hence, exaggerated. Even the wilful disregard for the usual proprieties in the use of the semi-colon plays, I am sorry to have to acknowledge, its part. As in the treatment of each of the major historians he discusses, the sense of intimacy with Macaulay here is intense, but it is the opposite of mimetic: it 'places' Macaulay's characteristic themes, and such placing always depends upon the kind of distance engendered by reflection and comparison. The voice in this passage, as in the book as a whole, is knowledgeable, but not insinuatingly knowing; it embodies both sympathy and understanding, without in the least threatening to patronise or to recruit.

Or, for a different range of effects, one may turn to the book's discussion of Freeman's deliberate use of an archaising, 'native' style in his *Norman Conquest*:

Like Pre-Raphaelite painting and the earnestness of Victorian Gothic, Freeman's restricted diction and syntactical austerity represent an attempt, conducted with revivalist zeal, to use archaism as a means of cleansing and renewal; as usual, the achieved effect is an almost fetidly intense, gamey Victorianism. Freeman's diction was of course not only restricted but necessarily in some measure deliberately archaic; there are times, though their preferred periods were different, when one is reminded of Rossetti's searching of old Romances for 'stunning words', though Rossetti's eclectic sensationalism was actually the reverse of Freeman's austerity: Strawberry Hill Gothick to Gilbert Scott's pedantry (*A Liberal Descent*, pp. 211–12).

Comparison and allusion rank high among Burrow's preferred literary instruments: his broad range of cultural reference yields unlooked-for

similarities which simultaneously help isolate distinctiveness. His own vocabulary can be high, in more than one sense, but the manner is conversational rather than pedagogic, and in this passage the calculated off-handedness of the final clause has an aphoristic crispness, the effectiveness of which would be dissipated and perhaps even rendered doubtful in any more laboured exposition of the point. More than many historical figures, Freeman may now seem to invite mockery and even derision, and it is not the least of the achievements of the section of the book from which this passage comes that it resists this invitation, restoring intelligibility to his cultural enthusiasms and endowing his quirkiness with energy and purpose without ever merely sending him up or putting him down.

Turning to *Riches and Poverty*, one faces a different kind of difficulty in excerpting, since Winch's austerer style tends to produce its effects by means of a kind of sustained command. The following passage is simply one of dozens which display the book's incisive grasp of the choreography of intellectual alliance and antagonism as it introduces a discussion of the relations between the ideas of Smith, Burke, Paine, and Price at the end of the eighteenth century. Having remarked that Burke 'suggested the possibility of an inversion of the more familiar sequence expounded by Hume, Smith, and other Scottish historians of civil society, whereby commerce brings an improvement in manners and the arts and sciences in its train', Winch proceeds in characteristic fashion to allow historical complexity to erode the simplicities of later stereotypes:

Paine's extrapolation of the more widely accepted sequence into the future, however, and the welcome given to Smith's system of natural liberty by other contemporary opponents of Burke, has proved as useful to students of turn-of-the-century radicalism as it has to students of what later was seen as Burke's conservatism. In Paine's case, it has allowed him to be characterised as a spokesman for an upwardly mobile society of self-interested economic individualists, as the radical embodiment of all those 'bourgeois' qualities that Smith, alongside and in harmony with Locke, is supposed to represent [a footnote hauls a selection of eminent miscreants into the dock at this point]. As in the case of Burke, some of the resulting characterisations have had an homogenising effect on the diverse qualities of radicalism in this period. Including Price alongside Paine in this comparative exercise acts as a reminder that supporters of revolution did not always speak with the same voice when diagnosing the economic conditions most likely to consort with republican institutions. Price did not fully share Paine's 'Smithian' confidence in the progressive potential contained in the spread of commerce and manufacturing. Nor, as we shall see, did Smith share Paine's belief in the capacity or necessity for commerce to civilise by revolutionising government (*Riches and Poverty*, p. 131).

The passage is in some ways a promissory note, one made good by the rest of the chapter from the opening paragraphs of which it is taken. It is,

typically, argumentative, and it is revisionist in the way complex, freshly seen history is always revisionist, in refusing the mind any easy resting-place in familiar modern categories. The chapter is entitled 'Contested Affinities', a phrase which is almost emblematic of the way Donald Winch writes intellectual history, with its constant attempt to do justice both to family resemblances and to family quarrels. The very structure of the prose vetoes any slack assimilation of what were subtly different positions, yet a clarity of outline survives through all attention to idiosyncrasy.

Or, for an example of how a seasoning of irony can contribute to, rather than detract from, fair-mindedness, consider his account of Arnold Toynbee's 'extraordinary lament' about the development of political economy earlier in the nineteenth century:

he regarded the failure to emancipate political economy from the influence of Ricardo's ruthless abstractions as a significant tragedy . . . As in the case of Keynes's equivalent regrets that the rigidities of Ricardian orthodoxy had vanquished Malthusian insights, the underlying belief in the importance of economic theory, whether as source of hope or betrayal, now seems almost as remarkable as the criticism. How could the mild-mannered Ricardo's theorems and parliamentary speeches be seen as so malevolent, let alone as so influential? . . . Yet Toynbee's horrified fascination with Ricardo and his own interest in political economy were not of the kind epitomised by George Eliot's character, Tom Tulliver, who was said to be fond of birds – that is, of throwing stones at them. Toynbee was earnestly seeking an accommodation between history and political economy, though his early death prevented the union from coming to fruition (*Riches and Poverty*, pp. 416–17).

By this point in the book, the reader will know how authoritative and deeply grounded are Winch's judgements about the extent of the exaggeration present in one generation's view of another; only someone so profoundly familiar with the intricacies of classical political economy *and* so well versed in the extensive literature about its alleged impact on policy could have earned the right to raise this question about Toynbee's reaction without seeming merely glib. The prose secretes a strong sense of proportion, as much by the balance of the sentences as by the quiet contrasts between 'tragedy' and 'regrets', between 'mild-mannered' and 'malevolent', and so on. Yet Toynbee's position is neither mocked nor dismissed; indeed, being placed alongside Keynes's 'equivalent regrets' almost confers an additional dignity on it. And as the passage from which this extract is taken continues, the conventional caricature of Toynbee, like the still more conventional caricature of Ricardo with which it is too easily contrasted, comes to seem exactly that.

Other passages from both authors could, of course, be cited to illustrate

other traits, but there is just one general feature of the work of both Winch and Burrow which may merit separate mention here, particularly since it can lead to a misperception or undervaluing of that work in certain quarters. Neither of them has felt obliged to introduce every observation and to preface every claim with extensive lists of works by other scholars upon which they are building or against which they are reacting. Such slightly ritualised roll-calls of (not always entirely relevant) recent books and articles sometimes seem to be taken, particularly in the United States, as an indication, perhaps even a guarantee, of a work's scholarly seriousness. By contrast, although there is no lack of familiarity with the work of other scholars in the writings of Burrow and Winch – indeed, there is considerable evidence of their implicit engagement with it – both have opted for lightly carried learning in place of academic name-dropping. As Winch characteristically puts it at the end of the 'Prologue' to *Riches and Poverty*:

Like any safety-conscious traveller to places that are new to me, I have read the work of the many *ciceroni* who have explored the territory before me. My footnotes record my debts to these sources and occasionally my opinions of those I have found less reliable as guides. As the term 'secondary sources' implies, however, none of them can ever be a satisfactory substitute for the real thing. For this reason, they will not be mentioned in the text from this point onwards (*Riches and Poverty*, p. 31).

IV

As indicated in the Preface earlier, these two volumes bring together the work of many of the leading scholars currently engaged in the field of modern British intellectual history. Needless to say, they write in their own distinctive styles, and their inclusion here should not be taken as an endorsement, and still less as any kind of imitation, of those features of the work of Burrow and Winch discussed in this introduction. Moreover, in assembling these essays, our aim has not been to try to produce a comprehensive 'intellectual history of modern Britain'; rather, each volume is devoted to a cluster of closely related themes. The contributions in *Economy, Polity, and Society* are primarily focused on the various ways in which 'economic thought' is inextricably embedded in a wider range of social and political debates, while those in *History, Religion, and Culture* particularly address the relations between historiography, religion, and conceptions of natural and social change. (The contents of each volume are summarised more fully in their respective 'Presentations'.)

In both volumes, the arrangement of essays is primarily thematic, while at the same time a rough chronological sequence from the mid-

eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century is maintained. It has to be acknowledged that the second half of our stated period is dealt with somewhat less intensively than the first, and that, in particular, the years between 1900 and 1950 receive rather short shrift, apart from the essays by Winch and Stapleton (the unfortunate withdrawal of one contributor and the disabling illness of another reduced the planned coverage here). Something should also be said about the geographical or cultural limits of the terrain. Cultures are not discrete, sealed entities; ideas have scant respect for merely political boundaries, individuals belong to more than one 'culture', and the life of the mind is inherently cosmopolitan. Nonetheless, there is a certain pragmatic logic in confining attention to the intellectual life carried on within a given national culture, a unit often defined in primarily linguistic terms. Of course, a generation or two ago, these volumes might have been unselfconsciously sub-titled essays in *English* intellectual history, but both scholarly, and political developments have drawn attention to the problematic nature of that traditional label. In addition, passing references to links with the American colonies in the eighteenth century or with the problems of empire in the nineteenth are more easily accommodated under the wider term, and what one might call 'the Scotticisation of English culture' is an important theme of the first half of the nineteenth century in particular. For all these reasons, the use of the term 'British' in our sub-title can serve as no more than an approximate marker, a signal that these essays do not make the intellectual life of other societies such as France or Germany their primary focus, but equally that they do not confine themselves, rigidly and artificially, to the intellectual life of England in the strict, territorial sense.

It should also be clear that there are large areas of the intellectual history of the period in question which are, designedly, not covered in these volumes. There is, for example, little directly on the history of philosophy; similarly, although both Boyd Hilton's and John Burrow's essays touch on scientific topics, there is no sustained engagement with the history of scientific thought in this period; Brian Young's essay apart, there is little direct discussion of imperial themes, and so on for many other topics one might mention. These exclusions are intended to have no polemical significance; they are an incidental result of inviting contributions from scholars with a particular range of overlapping interests. Still less is popular culture made the focus of attention here; the essays overwhelmingly focus on ideas which attained a certain level of elaborated expression as part of the educated culture of their day. Again, this is not the outcome of some principled hierarchisation of subject-matters; the only 'principle' it could be said to instantiate is that one must study, and

be allowed to study, what one finds interesting. But perhaps that is not, after all, an entirely unimportant principle. Jacob Burckhardt spoke of historiography as the record of what one age finds of interest in another. Not the least of the achievements of Donald Winch and John Burrow has been that they have helped us to find the intellectual life of Britain in this period so interesting.