

A Man of Contradictions: a Life of A.L. Rowse

Review Number:

100

Publish date:

Tuesday, 29 February, 2000

Author:

Richard Ollard

Date of Publication:

1999

Publisher:

Allen Lane

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Julia Stapleton

I confess that he gets on my nerves. I have admired some of his work. But the *ipse* behind the work - what a lot of that *ipse* there is!

The occasion for this remark was Herbert Butterfield's extensive review of A.L. Rowse's *The Uses of History* (1946), an offprint of which the author had sent to his emeritus colleague at Peterhouse, Sir Ernest Barker. Butterfield and Barker alike would not have been unsympathetic to Rowse's concern to cultivate a wide readership, far beyond the confines of the university common room which he inhabited on a strictly love-hate basis. Nor would they have despised for a moment the patriotism which he vigorously espoused, particularly in the 1940s. However, the large injection of Rowse's personality into the book clearly grated on them both.

The figure who attracted such a combination of respect and hostility has been well depicted by Richard Ollard in this first biography of Rowse - prolific historian, political commentator, man of letters, and poet - who died in 1997. Rowse's keen self-centredness ensured that he would amass an enormous personal archive, now held at the Library of the University of Exeter. He not only preserved all manner of material which recorded his life - journals and letters, unpublished books, diaries and accounts; he also returned to annotate much of it at a later date. Rowse granted Ollard exclusive access to these sources. Quite rightly, the dust-jacket emphasises the appeal of the book not only to Rowse's readership itself, but also to students of extraordinary personalities. Ollard enjoyed a long acquaintance with Rowse, based on professional and family bonds, and Rowse has been fortunate in acquiring such a sympathetic biographer, alert to the merits as well as the defects of both his work and his character.

Ollard explores sensitively the powerful influences in Rowse's childhood which stood at the root of the insecurities that in turn underlay his egoism. Not least important in this respect was an anxiety that never ceased to trouble him concerning his paternity. It severely limited Rowse's attachment to his home, as did the lack of concern he perceived in his parents' attitude towards him as a child, and also the coldness, egotism, and selfishness of his mother - the key source, he believed, of his own failings in these respects. Moreover, the youngest of three siblings born to a china-clay worker turned shopkeeper in a village where illiteracy was

rife, Rowse was deprived of any home stimuli. In the small, two-up, two-down house in which he grew up, toys were sparse and books non-existent.

In the light of the unhappiness that characterised his childhood, Rowse tended to project his home loyalties on to the county of Cornwall more generally, although never to the exclusion of the wider nation and never unambiguously. It was to be an extremely fruitful source of his imaginative output in the realm of poetry, biography, and history. In addition to Cornwall, the precocious and able young Rowse substituted school for home in his earliest affections (p. 22). He was fortunate in attending a village school where his talents and industry were noticed and encouraged. At the age of eleven he won a scholarship to a secondary school in St. Austell, where a similarly dedicated set of teachers helped to nurture his interests and aspirations. As a young adolescent at his local church, he attracted the attention of a kindly member of the choir who showed him the breathtaking beauty of the Luxulyan valley only a few miles beyond his home. This experience awakened in him a life-long feeling for landscape and place. From secondary school, and with the assistance of no less a champion than Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (p. 26-7), he achieved the extraordinary success of winning one of only two (£60 p.a.) scholarships to Oxford which the County offered following the Economy Ramp of 1921. There, despite severe ill-health which was not diagnosed (as a case of duodenal ulcers) until it almost killed him in his mid-30s (p. 39), his efforts were rewarded with a double First in History, followed shortly afterwards by his election to All Souls in 1925. He thereby became the first Fellow of that bastion of the political, diplomatic, legal, and scholarly elite to be recruited from working-class ranks.

Both the achievements themselves, and the impediments to them, make Rowses life worthy of a biography. Indeed, the impediments became integral to the achievements. I owe what I am to the struggle, he wrote, in his autobiography, *A Cornish Childhood*. It isolated me from others, it concentrated me within the unapproachable tower of my own resolve; I was determined to do what I wanted to do; I was left sufficiently to myself, for nobody was interested, to carry on what I wanted in my own way and nourish the inner life of my own imagination. Rowse managed to show the tenderest feelings for his parents - particularly his father - in this account of his childhood, and he provided a home for his desperately trying mother until her death in 1953. Nevertheless, Ollard makes amply clear that the price paid for such perceptions of being slighted at a critical stage in his development was a lifelong solipsism, resentment at being born into a poor uncultivated home, an unedifying defensiveness and incapacity to forgive, or admit to his own mistakes.

In many of his published writings the resulting abrasiveness was kept well below the surface, and Rowses consummate professionalism is much in evidence. Like his friend John Betjeman he excelled especially in drawing out the intimate connections between people, places, and events. In some of his more occasional pieces, however, and in private correspondence, what Ollard aptly terms deuterio Rowse was all too evident. Here he was prone to overstatement, brisk dismissal of his opponents, and lack of generosity to others. He became trapped in a vicious circle of overappraising himself, leading to rebuffs from others, which fed - in turn - his sense of superiority and worth. Disappointments there certainly were, although no more than is usual in the course of a professional lifetime. But Rowse used them to sharpen the tremendous chip on his shoulder without which, indeed, he could not have accomplished all that he did. The long letter which Rowse wrote to Sir Arthur Salter in 1957 - some five years after Rowse had been unsuccessful in his bid to become Warden of All Souls, and in response to Salters move towards burying the hatchet after the latters support of Rowses rival - illustrates well Rowses astonishing capacity for nurturing a grudge and moulding an entire *weltanschauung* around it. Ollard rightly judged it worthy of reproduction in full in an appendix. It concluded with an acceptance of Salters olive-branch, although delivered with such ill-grace that it was scarcely worth having:

I find that the best attitude with which to confront an ill world is one of a solitary and rather grim stoicism. It is best to be independent in all senses, independent of people, free of all ties - an atom in an atomic age. If you think that friendly acquaintance mitigates in any way the grimness of the world around us, I am prepared on a purely individual basis for the acquaintance to be a friendly one. (327)

Injury was undoubtedly added to insult by a request that Salter return the letter - for the archive, it now transpires.

Rowse's defeat by John Sparrow in the election to the Wardenship following the death of Benedict Sumner brought to a temporary halt his ambitions to become a public figure, helping to set the highest political and moral standards for his fellow countrymen. In the letter to the hapless Salter, he expressed his gratitude for having *no* responsibility for anything in contemporary society - though when I was younger I was public-spirited enough, and fool enough, for anything. The process of disillusion and disengagement had been set in train some ten years earlier, and was exacerbated by the austerity and high taxation of post-war Britain, as Ollard's Appendix on Rowse's Finances makes clear. But in the wake of the massive snub he perceived himself to have been dealt by All Souls it rapidly accelerated. (In truth, many of the older generation of Fellows who voted against him - like Salter - did so out of a high regard for Rowse's scholarship, which they knew would suffer if he won.) With a seemingly unrivalled ability for losing all sense of perspective, he seems to have taken the result as a withdrawal of the license to leadership he had acquired on his election in 1925. Ollard recounts how, for the next decade, Rowse made his primary intellectual home in America, taking advantage of the wealth of historical material in some of its most prestigious libraries. In that country, unlike his own, he enjoyed generous hospitality, remuneration, and acclaim. His resentment at his treatment by All Souls and Britain generally softened when, in 1966, he discontinued his half-yearly sojourns in the United States (again, after an episode in which the bonhomie necessary to sustain academic acquaintanceship signally failed him - p. 208). He returned to the All Souls fold, and once again appeared to acquire his old sense of public purpose in Britain, the Rowse of the 1960s and 70s becoming, in particular, the scourge of political correctness.

Had it not been for All Souls, he recalled in *A Cornishman Abroad*, he would never have become a politician - a term he used to cover both his overtly political activities as the Labour candidate for Penryn from 1929 to 1941, and his role as a political and cultural critic - and would have pursued instead the purer literary and artistic vocation that his nature dictated. But the powerful political atmosphere of All Souls impelled him to combine both, using his ample literary talents to illuminate the major public issues of the day. He was denied the OM which for many a year he believed his literary services to the public warranted, although just before his death he was honoured with the award of a CH. Ollard's biography brings home clearly the historic role of All Souls in rallying the public soul of the nation before the Second World War, and also the decline of the institution in the immediate post-war years. A keen sense of the latter drove Rowse to his ill-fated candidature for the Wardenship, despite a horror of what success - principally in the form of commitment - would entail. As Ollard writes, All Souls stood for everything he most valued, the recognition of the supremacy of the life of the mind, the acceptance of public duty and of pride in one's country, the cultivation of good manners and of domestic elegance. Was this not all under threat from the *Sans Culottes* [Isaiah Berlin's term], to whom Warden Sumner had through high-minded ineffectiveness given so much ground? (p. 194).

Ollard analyses sensitively and appreciatively the work which a Fellowship of All Souls made possible. Rowse found his *métier* as an historian of Elizabethan England, a society whose fullness of life was more than a match for his wide interests and sensibilities, and against which the social and cultural drabness of post-war Britain compared so unfavourably. Entirely in character, he could assume too much authority, as his dogmatic claim of truth for mere conjecture, in the unfortunate episode of his identity of the dark lady in Shakespeare, reveals only too well. But most of his writings in this area reveal a command of the subject and sources which not even his bitterest enemies could deny, and for which he was justly praised by such celebrated scholars as J.E. Neale and Dom David Knowles.

All the contradictions in his character and outlook which Ollard identifies found full expression in many of his histories, and far from undermining them, added to their zest. A case in point is his *The Expansion of Elizabethan England*, the second volume of his Elizabethan trilogy published in 1955. With typical verve, he discounts the Victorian idea that the empire came into being through a fit of absence of mind. To the contrary, argued Rowse, it was the result rather of a conscious, deliberate and tenacious campaign - in face

of constant disappointments, and confronting undreamed-of hazards - on the part of the elect spirits of the nation. Yet Rowses notorious (Swiftian) elitism, underpinned by an inveterate despair of the idiot people, was accompanied by a sustained profession of Marxist faith. At its most elementary level, this took the form of an insistence on the shallowness of any history which does not see with understanding and sympathy how throughout the ages the burden has always rested on the people. Thus, he quoted from graphic contemporary accounts of the horrors of life aboard Elizabethan ships in such ill-starred ventures as Daviss attempt to find the North-West passage, commenting Such was the price the Elizabethans paid. More ambitiously, as a young Turk in Oxford and London in the 1930s, he had attempted to modernise political thought, stressing the primacy of conflicting (economic) interests rather than ideals in politics. Even the radicalism of Arnold Toynbee, William Temple, and R.H. Tawney was suspect in the light of this analysis. Yet Rowse stopped well short of affirming the dialectic, the imposition of which on history he described as an obvious relic of the old transcendent claims of idealist metaphysics. It had led Communists down the dangerous road of pragmatism in the wake of Nazism - as witnessed by the Nazi-Soviet pact - although in this they were no worse than the appeasers in Britain whom Rowse equally despised. Here was Rowse, the arch-sceptic and rationalist coming down heavily on the side of conviction. Similarly, at another level, however much he denounced the evils of doctrine and however much he praised the easy-going English sense of what is possible and what is not, he was quite capable of extolling the virtues of persistence in quiet faith, and the common culture it had generated in counties such as his beloved Cornwall. The passage from *Expansion* quoted by Ollard in which Rowse almost romanticises the lost cause of recusancy is used to underline one of the many unresolved conflicts in Rowses nature (p. 227-8).

Ultimately, though, Rowse always favoured the decent and humane, and action taken in good conscience, qualities which underlay his fervent admiration for Elizabeth and her senior advisors. They were qualities, too, which Rowse associated with England more generally, not least her military commanders. This became evident in his writings of the 1940s, which often bore scarcely a trace of the Marxism which had captured his intellectual interest in the early 1930s. The very title of one volume, *The English Spirit* (1945), would be anathema to a Marxist, despite his somewhat unconvincing attempt at the same time to include the character of the people in his broad definition of the underlying (economic) conditions of British history. *The English Spirit* was launched with an impressive print-run of 10,000 copies (Ollard, p. 179). In this collection of essays Rowse is the epitome of the national intellectual, depicting and celebrating a unifying national tradition rooted in literature and life in which the thorny issue of class is completely passed over. Its inspiration is much more George Santayana - whom Rowse quotes admiringly - than Marx. Santayanas *Soliloquies in England* (1922) exercised a profound effect on a generation of non-Marxist intellectuals and public figures who wrote in the interwar period: Barker, W.R. Inge, G.M. Trevelyan, and Stanley Baldwin. Rowses dedicated *The English Spirit* to Trevelyan, admirable exemplar of the English spirit. He was at pains to emphasise in the introduction that the contents of the book bore no witness to a hasty patriotic conversion engendered by the heroism of Britain in the Second World War: many of the essays derived from the closing years of the previous decade. Nor, despite the peoples war, was he about to flatter the masses by projecting the nation in their image: This may be the century of the Common Man - it certainly is of the common *cliché* - but I prefer to look for the uncommon man, the man of genius or ability (p. vi). The elite corps of Englishmen and women whom he assembled for the book - Churchill, Drake, Sarah Churchill, Horace Walpole, Macaulay, and so on - exemplified all that was best in the nation. This was a direct fly in the face to the carping [Left] intellectuals for their niggardly rejection of the outstanding achievements which he believed to be to the English nations eternal credit. Ollard rightly emphasises Rowses support of ordinary Labour leaders like Ernest Bevin but his loathing of the leading intellectuals of the left like Cripps, Shaw and Laski, the latter-day descendants of Carlyle. Indeed, he later asserted that had it not been for the Conservative Partys ruinous foreign policy in the 30s, he would not have been a Labour man.

If Rowse was a man of contradictions he exemplified the wider tensions in British intellectual life in the middle decades of the twentieth century: a residual English nationalism and liberalism bequeathed by a declining but still seductive Whig ideal and a Marxism which posed a serious challenge to, but never entirely succeeded in displacing the latter This was certainly true of Rowses formative years in the 1930s. Such tensions were bound to become accentuated in a writer whose own personality was perpetually under the

strain of oppositional forces. But there is surely further scope for exploring these and other intellectual currents which informed Rowses work. For example, another historian who felt the charms of both Marxism and Whiggism in the 1930s and 40s was Butterfield himself. Rowses anti-intellectualism married to a vehement patriotism was also not exclusive to him, but was shared by other contemporary writers such as Arthur Bryant and Francis Brett Young, as well as Betjeman.

Perhaps there is further scope for work on Rowse in another respect too. Ollards primary resource base was Rowses extensive personal archive. Yet for all Rowses efforts in retrieving his own correspondence there must be a considerable amount of material which escaped his grasp, to be preserved in other manuscript collections instead. There is, for example, an abundance of Rowse letters in the Bryant papers at Kings College London, which give conclusive evidence of the primacy of his patriotism over his Marxism in the late 1930s and 40s.

In Ollards book there is much of that eager assertion of his own personality that he also identifies in Rowses writings (although his reticence in analysing Rowses homosexuality on grounds of his incompetence to do so is refreshing). This is nowhere more evident than in the numerous comparisons between Pepys, whose biography Ollard has also written, and Rowse. There is much self-indulgence in language and imagery, and the footnoting is slipshod, even allowing for an understandable contempt for the dry-as-dust nature of modern scholarship. At one point, for example, the reader is referred to the already sizeable literature on the subject without any further details (p. 68). Nevertheless, this is an extremely rewarding book, and it has undoubtedly set the framework for any future studies of Rowse.

The author declined to respond on this occasion.

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/100>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/663>