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Troublemaker: The Life and History of A.J.P. Taylor

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'We historians are dull creatures', A.J.P. Taylor once wrote, 'and women sometimes notice this.' One woman who obviously thought Taylor far from dull was Kathy Burk, the last of his postgraduate students. In a departure from her more familiar role as an economic historian, she has written an excellent study of his life and work that restores him to his rightful place in the history of History.

This is the third life of Taylor. The first was his autobiography, published in 1984. Rich in anecdotes, but composed from memory, it left his readers wondering how far the tale had improved in the telling. It was the story of a Lancashire radical, born into the dissenting tradition of the industrial north, but fated to spend much of his life at loggerheads with the gentrified Establishment of Oxford, the BBC, and the civil service. Taylor's account of the many spectacular quarrels in which he became involved demonstrated, to his own satisfaction at any rate, that he was always in the right, and his opponents always in the wrong. The turning-points in his career were attributed mainly to the workings of chance. Hence it was largely by accident that he became a historian, or moved to Oxford, and a complete surprise to him when he was elected to the British Academy. Taylor did confess, however, that until he met his third wife, Eva, his private life had been wretchedly unhappy. Like his father, he explained, he had been too soft on his first wife. But the autobiography left a huge gap in the story. His second wife, Eve, had threatened to sue for libel if she were mentioned anywhere in the book. All references to her were deleted and the children of the marriage appeared as if from nowhere.

In 1994, four years after Taylor's death, Adam Sisman published a highly accomplished biography based on

archival research and interviews with scores of witnesses. Broadly speaking Sisman was a sympathetic biographer who admired Taylor as a historian and appreciated the more amiable of his personal qualities. But as Sisman observed, he could also be a very difficult person: self-centred, vain, prickly, quarrelsome, and fiercely competitive. Controversies were seldom forced upon him: he sought them out. His radicalism was deep-seated and frequently took the form of extreme but witty polemics against 'the Establishment' - a phrase he appears to have coined. But this did not prevent him from striking up deferential relationships with right-wing mavericks like Beaverbrook in the 1960s or Oswald Mosley (with whom he frequently dined at the Ritz) in the 1970s. Besides, he was hungry for recognition from the Establishment and incensed when it was refused. Though he tried to make light of the matter, he badly wanted the Regius Chair of History at Oxford and never forgave those denied it him. As for Taylor's relations with the opposite sex, Sisman concluded that he was inclined to be selfish, manipulating the women in his life in the same fashion as his hero, David Lloyd George.

Kathy Burk occasionally cites Sisman's biography in her footnotes but otherwise makes no reference to it. Since her book has been independently conceived and even more thoroughly researched she is quite within her rights, but it would have been interesting to know how far she sees it as an exercise in revision or an alternative approach. So accustomed are historians to the analysis of themes and problems that they often find it hard to surrender to the requirements of biography, with its voracious appetite for anecdotes and minutiae. Burk's interest in Taylor is profound, but she is too good a historian to be the perfect biographer. Although she discusses all aspects of Taylor's life, and tells the story in broadly chronological terms, the core of the book is devoted to a theme and a problem: his career as a scholar and the critical assessment of his work.

This emphasis is reflected in the structure. Chapters two and five aim to disentangle his development as a historian, the origins, writing, and publishing history of his major works, from the aspects of his life dealt with in other chapters. The principle is clear but the consequences can be confusing when events are divorced from their context. So, for example, the arrangements for the publication by Manchester University Press of Taylor's first book are described in chapter two, 'The Making of the Historian 1927-1934'. But Taylor only arrives as a lecturer in Manchester in chapter three, 'The Manchester Years 1930 to 1938.' Chapter four, 'The Oxford Years 1938-1963: The Good College Man' describes how Taylor was commissioned by the Political Warfare Executive to write a manual on the history and politics of Hungary. As Kathy Burk explains, this was probably due to the publication two years previously of *The Habsburg Monarchy*. But the genesis of that particular book is discussed in chapter five, 'The Oxford Years 1938-1965: The Books and their Publishers.'

That said, the analysis of Taylor's academic career is compelling. From the time he arrived at Oxford as an undergraduate in 1924 there were always, in a sense, two Taylors. With his trade-mark bow tie, two-seater sports car, grand dinner parties, and enthusiastic support for the General Strike, the publicist and champagne radical was already in the making. Less visible was the scholar and intellectual, slipping into libraries where no one would recognise him, tactfully concealing his ambition to achieve a first. 'He knew as well as anyone', writes Kathy Burk, 'that it would be fatal to be seen to be working.' In the end Taylor got his first and after a couple of false starts as a trainee solicitor and inspector of ancient monuments, returned to his first love - the study of history.

As Kathy Burk demonstrates, Taylor had a remarkable knack of anticipating later developments in the historical profession. At Oxford the emphasis was on teaching almost to the exclusion of research. Few dons possessed a doctorate and a first was generally regarded as the only qualification required. But Taylor served a rigorous apprenticeship in research in the Austrian, French and British archives. At Manchester he submitted a thesis and was awarded a PhD - refusing it on the grounds that he did not want to be known as Dr Taylor. In our own day Taylor's chosen field of nineteenth century diplomatic history looks very old-fashioned, but as Kathy Burk reminds us, the historical profession at the time was dominated by medievalists who regarded the Victorian era as far too recent for serious study. Taylor's first book, *The Italian Problem in European Diplomacy 1847-1849* (1934) was therefore a groundbreaking exercise in contemporary history. In the late 1950s he was ahead of the field once more when he turned from the nineteenth to the twentieth

century. His *Origins of the Second World War* (1961) was written before most of the archives were open. His classic *English History 1914 to 1945* (1965), was published at a time when history as taught in the Oxford History Faculty stopped at 1914, and the release of public records was still governed by a 50-year rule. Both were therefore pioneering enterprises and seminal works.

Taylor was also one of the first academic historians to exploit the possibilities of journalism and broadcasting as a source of freelance income. Kathy Burk has itemised and estimated the sums involved in a remarkable chapter, 'The Business History of the History Business'. Taylor began in the 1930s with reviews and features for the *Manchester Guardian* which brought in relatively modest sums. In 1938 he earned £141 or £3,751 at 1995 prices. There was nothing accidental about his subsequent breakthrough into radio, television and the popular press. He worked hard at it, building up a reputation as an expert on foreign affairs, and later as a controversialist ready to express a provocative opinion on almost anything. Commercially shrewd, he drove hard bargains with newspapers and broadcasters and invested the proceeds on the stock market. 'By 1950', Kathy Burk writes, 'his freelance income overtook his academic salary; by 1958 it was probably three times as much.' She estimates that over the whole of his lifetime he earned (at 1995 prices) about £1,900,000 in freelance income.

In 1957 Taylor was invited for the first time to lecture in television. He seems to have delivered at least one lecture series a year over the following decade. Taylor loved the fame, and with two families to support, he also needed the money, but his lectures had great integrity. He simply transferred to the television studio, with a minimum of change, the techniques he had learnt in the lecture hall. No one has ever been able to repeat the astonishing feat of delivering unscripted to camera a coherent and entertaining lecture with a perfectly timed ending. But in retrospect we can see that Taylor was the pioneer of a new and important medium of public history. Where Taylor led, David Starkey and Simon Schama have followed, not to mention all the historians who appear on 'Timewatch' or act as consultants for documentaries.

How is Taylor to be summed up? On the subject of his personality Burk tends to confirm Sisman's portrait. 'He was', she writes, 'basically indifferent to most people. He was conceited and self-righteous, self-absorbed and self-contained, insensitive and thoughtless. He did not like his mother and, indeed, had little respect for her, and this appears to have coloured his attitudes towards women. Where they were concerned he was frequently indecisive, and sometimes weak and resentful.' I wonder. Mothers in general may deserve well of their sons, but who is to say that Taylor's mother was not one of the exceptions? And if Taylor was selfish, what of his first wife, Margaret, who neglected the children and ran after other men? Bullied and exploited by Dylan Thomas, she was a glutton for punishment. For his part Taylor seems to have displayed the patience and generosity of a saint, albeit at the expense of his relations with other women.

Kathy Burk's title is of course apt. Her detailed and balanced account leaves no doubt that in academic and political life Taylor was indeed a 'troublemaker'. Matters came to a head in the storms that raged around him in Oxford in the 1950s. Conceited by his fame in the media, goaded by the misery of his private life, and determined to speak out against the Cold War and the hydrogen bomb, Taylor was too old to be classified as one of the 'angry young men' of the period. But he was angrier than most and ever more of a misfit among the dreaming spires. For the rupture which followed it would be easy to blame Taylor, and easy to blame Oxford, but the reality was complex, with rights and wrongs on both sides. With patience Taylor could no doubt have redeemed the situation, but in public life he was always quick on the trigger. In his autobiography he claimed that his break with Oxford was a liberation after which life was much more fun - but it was a sad day for the University and in all probability an even sadder day for Taylor himself.

How is Taylor's achievement to be summed up? He wrote twenty-three books, six hundred essays and articles, and nearly sixteen hundred book reviews. Though many historians have borrowed from him, he founded no school and has no successor. Such was his flair as a stylist that many of his books are likely to be read for pleasure long after they have lost their academic value. So far, so familiar, but Kathy Burk's analysis goes deeper. The historiographical chapters of her book include what are, in effect, a series of critical essays on his major works. Here she analyses Taylor's methodology, his literary techniques, the types of question that preoccupied him, and the concepts and arguments he employed. She freely acknowledges Taylor's

weaknesses, most notably a love of paradox for its own sake, but she also explains his strengths, exposing the bones and sinews of his more powerful works. Two of his books, she argues, will endure as works of scholarship for a generation: *The Habsburg Monarchy* and *Bismarck*. But the three greatest will last even longer: *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe*, *The Origins of the Second World War*, and *English History 1914-1945*. My only complaint on this score is that she could profitably have explored the books in greater detail, and also discussed some of the major essays such as 'Politics in the First World War'. But Taylor's admirers have cause to be grateful to her. She has rescued a great scholar from the shadow of his alter ego, the wizard of the television studios.

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