

PATRICK COLLINSON

1929-2011

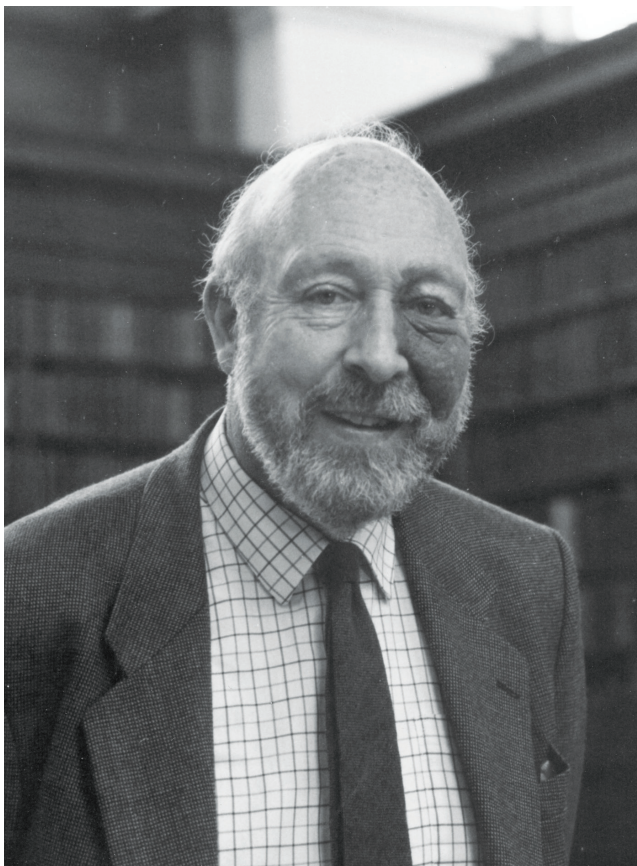


Photo: Courtesy of Trinity College Cambridge

PATRICK Collinson, who died on 28 September 2011, was Regius Professor of modern history at Cambridge (1988-96), a Fellow of the British Academy, and an historian who, in a series of magisterial books and articles, significantly changed understandings of Elizabethan England and in particular of the role of Puritanism in shaping church, society and nation. From mid 1969 until the end of 1975, he was professor of history at the University of Sydney. He was elected a fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1975, ‘an honour’, he wrote in his later memoirs, *History of a History Man; or The Twentieth Century Viewed from a Safe Distance* (2011), ‘in which I take great pride’.*

* All quotations are from Patrick Collinson’s memoirs.

Patrick Collinson was born in Ipswich, United Kingdom, in 1929, to evangelical missionary parents who had met in Algeria. His mother had earlier been one of the first women admitted to legal practice in Scotland. After a peripatetic childhood in southeast England, Collinson completed his education at the King’s School, Ely. The periods that he had spent in rural England left him with a lifelong passion ‘for the natural world of living things’ and for marine zoology as his profession, an ambition thwarted by poor mathematics. Good teachers led him to history, which he went on to read at Pembroke College, Cambridge. Apart from history, it was, true to his background, evangelical religion that dominated Patrick Collinson’s life at Cambridge, but he also joined the Labour Club and was an enthusiastic member of the Boat Club and the University Mountaineering Club. He left Cambridge with a first and went to the University of London to write, under the supervision of Sir John Neale, his half-a-million-word doctoral thesis on Elizabethan Puritanism, a thesis which reputedly led to the introduction of a word limit for doctoral theses at London. It was Neale who suggested the subject of the thesis but Collinson raised no objections: ‘I had always been interested in religious history which I suppose ran in my genes and my bloodstream’.

The patronage of Neale was a mixed blessing, and Collinson had trouble finding an academic position in Britain, finally taking a position at the University of Khartoum. The lectureship in the Sudan may not have helped his investigation of Elizabethan Puritanism but it did open up a vast world for exploration, and Collinson travelled as an enthusiastic, observant and intrepid adventurer through North Africa and the Mediterranean. It was in the Sudan that he met and married Elizabeth—Liz—Selwyn, an independent-minded and vivacious nursing sister whose family tree counted many eminent Victorians and Edwardians. Her father was a great-grandson of Thomas Arnold of Rugby, a nephew of Mrs Humphrey Ward and of Janet Trevelyan, wife of G. M. Trevelyan, and a cousin of Aldous and Julian Huxley.

During his time in the Sudan, Collinson moved from his non-denominational evangelical background into the Church of England and seriously considered the priesthood

as his vocation but, after acceptance into Ridley Hall in Cambridge, he opted for continuing an academic career. If not his career, his religion was to be a central thread in the rest of his life, underpinning his strong and active commitment to social justice, internationalism and reform, activism and commitment embraced perhaps even more strongly by Liz and his four children.

In 1961, Pat and Liz Collinson left the Sudan for London where he took up an Assistant Lectureship in Ecclesiastical History at King's College, University of London, and worked on the conversion of his PhD thesis into the first of his books, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (1967), a highly influential revisionist history that emphasised the popular and cultural aspects of English religious radicalism and represented Puritanism as a central and dynamic force in the Elizabethan Church. Averse to theory and sceptical about its usefulness—to either writer or reader—Collinson portrayed himself as 'the hunter and gatherer' kind of historian, passionate about finding new material. But he was no antiquarian. His discoveries were elegantly crafted and placed in the economic, social, political and human conditions of their time and place to tell new stories.

In the middle of 1969, Collinson again went abroad to take up the third chair in history at Sydney. His burgeoning reputation was known to few of his new colleagues, who were more preoccupied with issues relating to authority both at the university and national level than those that impinged directly to the discipline and its advancement. With the emergence of an oppositional culture, the University of Sydney, like many other universities in Australia, Asia, Europe and North America, was going through a period of social, cultural and political upheaval. Students were protesting against the University's collaboration in enforcing conscription legislation as well as demanding a meaningful voice in the determination of policies relating to assessment and curricula. The sub-professorial staff in the Department, who now numbered around thirty, were also campaigning for the creation of mechanisms that gave them a more effective voice in decision-making—especially in relation to teaching and the curriculum.

As Head of the Department between 1972 and his departure in 1975, Collinson conducted himself with dignity and always seemed to possess a sense of calm. As chair of the staff-student consultative committee he listened patiently to the sometimes emotional and irrational diatribes delivered both by staff and students. Although he was far more willing than the senior professor, John M. Ward, to consider the creation of consultative mechanisms, he shared the view of his professorial colleagues that professors possessed certain rights and obligations both in terms of their contracts and the University by-laws. In this context, he was rightly unwilling to consider the demands of the more radical sub-professorial staff that the Head of Department should become an elected position.

Collinson's time in Sydney was thus one of considerable frustration. To the political struggles were added the obduracy of some of his colleagues before his attempts to refashion first-year teaching and to teach his own subject and his inability to get on with his own research and writing.

Pat Collinson's memories of Sydney were by no means only negative. He was a stimulating teacher much appreciated by students, particularly those who took his History IV seminar, and he remembered them as among the ablest students that he ever taught. Pat was a convivial man of strong personality, wide interests, generous with his time to both students and colleagues, including the most junior members of the department. He brought to the department a new sense of collegiality and worked hard to create an academic community. With his regular presence, the common room became a centre of departmental life. He and Liz were generous hosts to his colleagues and students at their home in Beecroft, and their holiday cottage at Patonga, a fishing village on the Central Coast, a haven for a marine biologist *manqué* and recalled in his memoirs as 'one of the most beautiful places on earth.'

While in Sydney, Pat Collinson found a rewarding community among those working across the country in religious history. He became an Associate Editor of the *Journal of Religious History*, which had been established in 1971, and chairman of the Journal Association. He was also instrumental in the organisation of what was in effect the first conference of early modern Europeanists in Australia in Sydney in 1972.

Collinson left Sydney to take up a professor's chair in history at the University of Kent, moving to the University of Sheffield in 1984 and then to the Regius Professorship of modern history at Cambridge and a fellowship at Trinity College. His return to England was followed by the steady publication of ground-breaking books and articles beginning with *Archbishop Grindal 1519-1583: The Struggle for a Reformed Church* (1979) and including *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society 1559-1625* (1982), *English Puritanism* (1983) and *Elizabeth I* (2007), a reworking of his massive *Dictionary of National Biography* article on the Tudor queen. Four volumes of his collected articles and essays also appeared.

In his later years Patrick Collinson was much honoured; made a Commander of the British Empire (1993), he was the recipient of many honorary doctorates, and subject of three festschrifts including one from his early modern European history colleagues in Australasia. His was a rich and rewarding life, centred on his family, underpinned by religion, a deep rapport with the natural world and a love of music, 'far more important than religion, perhaps a religion itself', and a vocation which he loved and in which he excelled.

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