



John McManners
(1916–2006)

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Rev. Professor John (Jack) McManners died in Oxford on 4 November 2006. He had been Professor of History at the Universities of Tasmania (1956–59) and Sydney (1960–66); before returning to England and becoming (in 1972) Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Oxford. He was a Foundation Fellow of the Academy.

He was born in County Durham on Christmas Day 1916. His mother Ann was a warmhearted schoolteacher, his father Joseph an activist miner. Converted to his wife's Anglican faith, Joseph eventually sought ordination and returned as curate to his own village Ferryhill when Jack was twelve. Jack's schooling was local and in 1936 he went up as exhibitioner to St Edmund Hall, Oxford. 'Teddy Hall' was a loved community lifelong. He distinguished himself in studies (first in history, 1939) and in sports.

War cut across his graduate plans. He has left in his book *Fusilier* (2002) a remarkable record of his experiences in North Africa, serving as platoon commander, wounded at Tobruk, rising to be adjutant of the first battalion, Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, by 1943. Appointed to a liaison unit, he navigated the tortuous politics of the Greek army, seeking to shore up the liberal, constitutional forces against extremists. For this service, he was made at war's end Officer of the Order of King George I of the Hellenes.

The war's impact on him was profound. He wrote in *Fusilier*, 'Since that day in Tobruk I had thought through and rationalised the impact of the sudden sight of those slaughtered Germans; what had happened was that Christian belief had become intensely personal.' That meant, he said, confronting evil and the God who takes the evil on himself. He decided to follow his father and seek ordination, which he did by studying theology at Durham. After a curacy at Leeds, he returned to St Edmund Hall as chaplain and lecturer in history, commenting wryly, 'So I was ordained just like the port-filled dons of old, to go to a Fellowship.'

In fact, he worked hard at the Hall, pastorally and tutorially. In 1951 he became dean; in the same year, he married Sarah Errington, a geographer. In 1956 they broke the pattern of an Oxford career by electing to come to Australia. He admired the Australian soldiers he had fought beside in the Western Desert. Places he had never seen, places like Tasmania, exercised a pull on his imagination. There was also the attraction, as he put it in his letter on the Orr affair (the affair which destroyed his hopes) 'of new creation in a new country'. With the powers then accorded a professor/head of department, he could look forward to rejuvenating a relatively immobile department.

His letter to the staff associations was characteristically independent. Directed primarily against an academic boycott of his university ('an extreme weapon which is totally unsuited for use among universities'), it condemned those on both sides claiming an infallibility which mortals 'should not take upon themselves lightly'.

In 1960 he moved to the University of Sydney, to a department then alive with energies. Jack's coming reinforced 'from the top down' the position of European history, strong since Stephen Roberts's time and graced by figures like Ernest Bramsted and Barrie Rose. He saw that the growth of the library, made possible by funds flowing from the Menzies government following the Murray Report, opened honours research to fields other than Australia and the Pacific. He relished collegial teaching, of which he was a pioneer. In one year nine staff members, some teaching honours for the first time, were involved in his collaborative seminar 'Church, State and Society'. This was his form of staff development. 'Church, State and Society', together with other Sydney experiences fed into the sequel he wrote to J M Thompson's famous *Lectures on Foreign History, 1494-1789*, called *Lectures on European History 1789-1914: Men, Machines and Freedom* (1966).

As an administrator he was humane, with a bias towards *laissez-aller*. He had from his father the expression 'holy carelessness', which was intended, presumably, both to honour the solemn responsibility of the administrator and warn against fussiness or bossiness. From Hobart he had encouraged another collegial venture, the *Journal of Religious History*, identified himself with it in Sydney and in 1963-64 was chairman of the journal association. His essay for the Humanities Research Council 'The Future of the Humanities in the Australian Universities' (1965) gives a clue to his reflections on the eve of his departure from Australia. It was a plea for interdisciplinarity, for 'interdisciplinary syntheses' in research and cooperative courses, even for pass students.

In the year of his transfer from Hobart to Sydney, there was published in Manchester the book that made his name, *French Ecclesiastical Society under the Ancien Régime: A Study of Angers in the Eighteenth Century*. It was a sensitive evocation of a lost world. A distinguished French reviewer called it 'a masterpiece of method and historical understanding', an 'astounding success', giving proof, 'non seulement d'une culture historique peu commune, mais, ce qui est plus rare encore, d'un sens du concret humain et d'un talent littéraire hors de pair.'

Jack McManners did not plan his Australian venture as but a stage in his academic progress, though he well knew that the sources for his work were back across the water. The ageing of his parents obliged a return to England. He went first to a chair in Leicester, soon becoming Head of Department and, as in Sydney, working to extend and diversify courses. Then in 1972 he was appointed both Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Oxford and Canon of Christ Church.

For him the combination was ideal. For Oxford it gave fresh promise to a Chair hitherto restricted to historians of the ancient church. He spoke of the responsibility this imposed. He was a member of two Faculties, Modern History and Theology and was active in their administration (Chairman, Modern History Board, 1978-81), exercising the diplomatic skills he had honed, if not acquired, in Australia. He was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1978.

The main work of the Christ Church years was *Death and the Enlightenment* (1981), which won the Wolfson Prize for history. The book displays the distinctive qualities of his history: the sense always of a very individual voice within the formidable analysis, a stunning use of anecdote and quotation, which only a mastery of myriad sources could furnish. It required, said a reviewer, the competences and sympathies of both an historian and a theologian, a tribute to his twin loyalties at Oxford.

On retirement in 1984 he became chaplain at All Souls, exercising an unobtrusive pastorate and preaching regularly, 'yoking', as Nigel Aston put it, 'edification and entertainment harmoniously together'. He edited, with a luminous introduction, the *Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* (1990), the best known of his books to a wider public. He was appointed CBE (2000) and awarded French honours. In 1998 he crowned over forty years of scholarly endeavour with the massive *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France*, set, Aston remarks, 'to last as long as the subject is studied.'

He was tall, slightly stooped, walking with a long, rangy stride. He was an avid tennis player, continuing well into his eighties. His tennis was at once powerful and subtle, not a bad metaphor for his style as historian and preacher, the two vocations of his life.

He and Sarah were completely at home in Oxford. He was at the top of his profession there, as was recognised in both Britain and France. Yet, he looked upon his time in Sydney as 'golden years'. He was not in Australia long enough to influence a whole generation of history students, but there were some whose enthusiasm he confirmed and whom he set on the way to academic careers. He thought well of Australian students and enjoyed the vigour and independence of his honours classes.

He is survived by Sarah and their two sons and two daughters.

Bruce Mansfield