

History Reunion talk

I am pleased to see so many people here for this reunion and would like to thank all those involved for the support and encouragement in bringing it about, especially Bea Nagy of the Alumni Office, Professors Peter Hennessy, Colin Jones and Miri Rubin. Also to Patrick Higgins, Jim Robertson and Frank Curry for their support and help.

According to my family archives, the History Department was founded in 1912 by my grandfather, Balliol double first and All Souls scholar Professor Francis Clarke, so this is a slightly late centenary. Francis Clarke died in 1950 to be succeeded by Professor Bindoff. Needless to say, I have few recollections of him as he died when I was seven. I have had extreme difficulty in finding anything that he wrote or published, maybe the result of a failed marriage or erudition skewed towards articles in more unreadable journals. I do have an essay on Oscar Spengler, however, and I have been told he was particularly keen on chess and the “dialectics of the dialectic”!

I recently discovered that the College principal in 1950 was another Baron Professor, Ifor Evansⁱ, who wrote an obituaryⁱⁱ for the Financial Times and who I have to thank, for putting Francis Clarke’s affairs into the hands of the Public Trustee from whom in due course I received the legacy which not only allowed me to go to University and Queen Mary College but also to acquire a notorious Morris 1000 convertible (of which David McLaren keeps reminding me of lots of interestingly embellished stories).

I have come across and then lost examples of Francis Clarke’s wit. A family story is of my father trying to engage his father-in-law in deep conversation in about 1942 and asking him “What do you think Bismarck would have made of things today?” There was a long silence whilst the professor spooned sugar into his teacup to overflowing. Just when my father thought he was not going to get an answer, the professor said “I think if Bismarck was alive today, he would be too old to have taken any interest”.

He was also a classically forgetful academic. My grandmother told the story of his walking into college, picking up his mail and returning home, leaving her to phone the college saying, “my husband has just arrived home. Where on earth should he be?”

There are a lot reasons for reunions like renewing old interrupted friendships, lifelong learning etc but most important is building the value and reputation of your alma mater. This sounds cheeky when reviewing the exalted ranks of today’s History Department but then we should compare ourselves with those provincial establishments on the Cam and Cherwell where centuries of bequests have meant not only that you could walk all the way from Oxford to Cambridge on land owned by one of their colleges. American universities understand very well that to maintain the value of your degree and your alma mater means helping build the resources necessary so it can offer inducements to the best students and staff!

Thank you all for the reunion and the chance to relook at the past and maybe provide help for the future.

Jeremy Coke-Smyth

ⁱ Baron Benjamin Ifor Evans, of the Borough of Royal Tunbridge Wells was a British literary historian, literary critic and university professor, Provost of University College London (UCL) between 1951-1966. He was Professor of English at Queen Mary University of London between 1933-1944.

ⁱⁱ PROFESSOR .FRANCIS CLARKE 1887-1950

Professor Ifor Evans wrote;-

The sudden death¹ on Sunday of Francis Clarke (on 24th September 1950 at Sevenoaks Kent) will come as a great shock to his many friends, colleagues, and former students. After a brilliant undergraduate career at Oxford and an All Souls Fellowship, Clarke came to Queen Mary College (then East London College) in the University of London as Professor of History in 1912. Here, with characteristic devotion, he nursed his young department to its present strength and promise. . He chose quite early the field of German history for his special study, but what was manifest even from his early days was the extreme breadth and variety of his knowledge.

In his reading, he moved over a wide range of medieval and modern history yet made time to extend and deepen his many cultural interests as well as indulge his passion for music. It was the very width of his learning as well as a gentle scepticism which perhaps made of Clarke not the research historian that in other circumstance he might have¹ become but the tolerant and friendly tutor of generations of undergraduates. Though his lectures were always marked by an impressive wealth of detail and suggestion, it was in the private tutorial with a single undergraduate that Clarke excelled. It was in these more intimate relationships that the hesitancy and reserve fell away and the fortunate undergraduate had the full advantage of his stimulus and enthusiasm. Those of his friends who had the privilege of enjoying the intimacy, kindness, and humour of Francis Clarke will long treasure his memory.