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Norman Stone, 1941–2019

by Jeremy Black

On the life and works of the European historian.

“Thank God I’m not in that system any more.” My last email from Norman, sent on June 7, eleven days before he died, included criticisms of Oxford and Cambridge. That the most talented British historian of European history of his generation had felt it necessary to part company with them was proof that his criticisms were no empty gripes. As so often with the skein of life, his path was shaped by a temporary aberration: briefly carried away by the meritocratic ethos of that age, Oxford, in filling its Chair of Modern History in 1984, decided to make an appointment on talent and looked to an outsider, one, moreover, who was not only highly qualified but also, coming from Glasgow Academy, provincial middle-class and right-wing. When Oxford realized what it had done, it reversed direction and sought to make him, in effect, redundant. The spinning started immediately. Norman had an alcohol problem, as if that were at all unusual in Oxford, not least among the historians. Patrick Wormald drank himself to death in 2004, but then he was acceptable because he had been at Eton and Balliol. Norman was interested in sex, but that again was scarcely unusual among the Oxford historians.

It was said that Norman’s work no longer approached the quality of his first two books, which was hilarious given the number of Oxbridge dons who had not written two of any distinction in the first place, instead taking early retirement but forgetting to notify the authorities. They said he was a bit hit-and-miss in terms of regular teaching habits. Well, that also was scarcely unusual in the

Oxbridge of his era. For example, my D.Phil supervisor at Oxford made no effort to conceal his lack of interest in the role, and totally lacked Norman's charisma and capacity to inspire. Norman, in contrast, was particularly helpful to younger historians who showed a mind as open as his was.

No, Norman's crimes clearly were to be right-wing and provincial middle-class. The latter readily could have been forgiven if the don had displayed or acquired the necessary values to fit in, but the particular combination of Norman's characteristics proved toxic. This was the Oxford that turned down Margaret Thatcher for an honorary doctorate and where hostility to the Right became, as it remains, a reflexive substitute for rational thought and argument. So Norman, who demonstrated a deep integrity in never disguising his views, was anathema. Indeed, in 1991, he became a trustee of the Margaret Thatcher Foundation.

Norman's talents were raw. He was particularly strong in languages: on top of French, German, and Spanish, he added Hungarian, pressing a pin into his thigh to keep himself awake while learning the vocabulary, before acquiring others including Polish, Italian, and Serbo-Croat. He had spent time in a Bratislava prison for trying to help a Hungarian dissident to escape. This provided an opportunity to broaden his language skills. Alongside bridge, music, and Turkey, languages were his choice for recreations in his *Who's Who* entry.

Norman's first book, *The Eastern Front 1914–1917* (1975), drew on these languages and was even more impressive because of the difficulties of research in Eastern Europe during that period. The book showed that Russia collapsed because of a crisis of distribution and war administration, not one of production.

Norman's engagement with Eastern Europe was also seen in later works, notably *Europe Transformed, 1878–1919* (1983), *The Atlantic and Its Enemies: A Personal History of the Cold War* (2010), and histories of Czechoslovakia (1989) and Hungary (2019). *Europe Transformed* was particularly effective. It appeared in the Fontana History of Europe, the best such series then available in English, but a distinctly patchy one. Good on culture, Norman's volume was far better than the other modern ones, and offered much to bright students. He had an instinctive

flair for paradox, for the pithy observation, the all-encompassing example, the barb that undercut the established view. Norman's sentences were well-crafted, and his erudition, blended with an impressive literary style and wicked humor, made his work immensely readable.

In *Europe Transformed*, Norman very much presented a Russia that was developing prior to the First World War, with rising living standards for the peasantry. Thus, the Communist Revolution appeared a rank disaster.

Norman was indeed clear in his views on the malign character of the subsequent Russian developments and in his criticism of historians, such as Richard Evans and Richard Overy, who he felt were overly favorable to Communism. Norman understood the moral and material bankruptcy of Communism long before others.

His keen interest in Eastern Europe, one that eventually landed him in Budapest, was important to his politics. These politics were reflected in his committed journalism, notably (but not only) his column in *The Sunday Times* from 1987 to 1992; in his support for Margaret Thatcher, including his offering advice on foreign policy and speech-writing; and in his academic life. Thus, in 1983, he wrote an obituary of E. H. Carr (1892–1982), a Cambridge don who had written extensively in favor of the Soviet Union. Norman's piece, "Grim Eminence," in the January 10, 1983 edition of the *London Review of Books*, is still well worth reading. This was historiography in the raw, a work that captured the extent to which writing on history overlapped with politics and involved real people and not the interchange of impersonal ideas. Norman's piece enhanced his unpopularity, and it is scarcely surprising that he did not join the serried ranks of acceptable flag-bearers for received wisdom in the British Academy.

His knowledge of Eastern Europe and understanding of Germany made Norman's journalism of particular significance in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as first Communist control of Eastern Europe, and then the Soviet Union, disintegrated. Like television work, journalism attracted Norman because he understood the need to reach out to a wider public, instead of despising them as

so many liberal intellectuals did; because he wanted and needed the money; and because he felt frustrated at Oxford. The money was important because he was not the beneficiary of inherited wealth: his father, a fighter pilot, had died in a war-time training accident when Norman was one year old. Moreover, he wanted to enjoy himself: he was never an ascetic. Instead, he was an engaged drinker and a committed smoker with a face that moved from cherubic to lived-in.

Oxford, of course, provided plenty of opportunities for drinking. As it was with Richard Cobb, his predecessor in the Oxford chair, this was not a matter so much of overcoming the dullness of academic gatherings, but rather of a rich pub culture. Cobb was very open about which of those two options he preferred, and Norman, another maverick who did not fit in, had a similar response. At times, his alcoholism was a serious problem, and it left a trail that included blighted hopes. Indeed, Norman had a talent for self-destruction. Cobb himself regarded *The Eastern Front* as “splendid,” and Norman as “having done a marvellous job on that old horror Carr,” but also maintained that Norman was “accident prone.”

His frustration was much in evidence in 1997, when Norman moved to Ankara’s Bilkent University, where he spent most of his remaining career. He preferred the salary, smoking opportunities, and curriculum of his new home, and was delighted to be shot of what he saw as the parochialism, political correctness, and narrow-mindedness of Oxford. Petronella Wyatt, later writing in *The Daily Telegraph* in December 2012 on why she rapidly left Oxford as a student, complained of the same, and noted being told by Norman, “You won’t be happy here. . . . I get out as much as possible to escape these - - - - -.” As Wyatt correctly reported, Norman in part “loathed the place . . . for its adherence to the Marxist-determinist view of history.”

A former Turkish student, Murat Siviloglu, observed to me of Norman’s eye for talent: “If he saw any light, he would lavish with praise, patronage and protection. . . . He was like a character from a nineteenth-century Russian novel, a genius of eccentric habits.” Another friend, a fellow British writer, Donald Sturrock, noted: “What other historian could enthrall you with tales of how he

had escaped from Haiti at dead of night? . . . a man who liked to drink the cup of life to the full . . . a connoisseur of opera, pianists, and conductors. . . . Though he saw the big picture . . . he also loved human detail. . . . [He was] immensely warm and sociable.”

His impish sense of fun characterized meetings and correspondence. Indeed, the coruscating wit was yet another reason why the left-liberal establishment hated him—he was capable of generating deep belly laughs in an audience. That is deeply subversive, as his political and other observations could transfer to the reader/listener all the more effectively for that. As he was not interested in climbing the greasy pole, that was doubly reprehensible.

Although distance ensured we did not meet as much as I would have liked, we communicated regularly. His emails were funny, wry, and possessed a “fuck it” quality of defying political correctness. At the same time, he had a continued commitment to accuracy. Thus, in May, he emailed correcting a joke about Lenin in Poland that I had re-sent: “Lenin actually was in Austrian Poland in 1914. They let him go to Switzerland and didn’t intern him.”

Often amiably hammered, but still functional, interesting, productive, and hugely funny, Norman continued to be phenomenally bright to the end. There were flaws about his later books, but they remained masterpieces of concision, like his history of the First World War. So also with the consistency of his politics and his robust expression of them. Frequently he praised Mrs. Thatcher, expressed disapproval of Scottish nationalism, criticized the self-hatred of the West, attacked the educational changes of the 1960s, and made known his views on the problems with “this bunch of marshmallows” (politicians) or “all these superficial people yapping into mobiles.”

Ironically, it is the failure of Thatcherism that resonates most strongly when looking at Norman’s career as a whole. Her commitment to freedom meant that the Left was able to consolidate its control of the universities, while, in the Blairite aftermath, political correctness came greatly to the fore. These days, a Norman would be removed at once for some thought, expression, or action

deemed inappropriate, and/or banished to an Orwellian, indeed Maoist, course on sensitivity that would turn any sane individual desperate with dismay and anger. That, of course, is a comment not only on a true closing of the Western mind but also, more particularly, on the failure of the humanities and social sciences both in society and in the universities.

I was lucky to know Norman. I enjoyed his sardonic wit, the clarity of his mind, his integrity. I can recall his aptly caustic comments about the platitudes of others at a conference jamboree in Sweden that we both found somewhat troubling. He was a definite case of the hero, not some cardboard cutout collection of virtues, but a troubled man who saw clearly and stood for his values with vigor. That was his true honor.

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