Jeremy Catto

A tribute from Dan Hannan

When Jeremy Catto died in August, Oxford’s History Faculty put out a regretful statement noting, among other things, that “he opened up fresh vistas on apparently sleepy and hitherto-unrecognised topics, from the ‘triumph of the hall’ in fifteenth-century Oxford, to the writing of memoranda by Lancastrian civil servants.” Well, yes, I suppose he did. His academic output, as that summary rather implies, was limited – though he did write a fine history of mediaeval Oxford.

In its own death notice, Oriel College, his home for four decades, listed the many posts he had held there (“Vice Provost, Senior Dean, Steward of the Common Room and Editor of the Oriel College Record”) and, like the History Fac, noted that he’d be missed.

Quite so, he is missed very keenly. But how misleading are the bare facts of a man’s life. Such bulletins can’t hope to do justice to a don who shaped two successive generations of undergraduates, whose connections in politics and government were matchless, and who, more than anyone else, ensured the survival of that temperate High Toryism that is peculiar to England.

Dr Catto enjoyed, as Peter Frankopan, the author of Silk Roads, puts it, “as big and varied a web of contacts as anyone in the country”. His friendships stretched from Hugh Trevor-Roper to Bryan Ferry, whom he met as a teenager in Newcastle. He sometimes liked to purr that his protégés were “running the world”. And so they were: chatting to him at some Oxford event in the early 2000s, I realised as we spoke that he had been an intellectual mentor to the then Conservative leader (William Hague), the Ambassador to Washington (David Manning) and the British EU Commissioner (Chris Patten – not a former student, but a near-contemporary and chum).

Almost everyone who came into contact with him bears his spoor – though it’s fair to say that conservatives are generally more aware of it. “When I got a decent degree, he wrote to me that he suspected this was ‘more by native wit than by hard work’,” says Andrew Robathan, the former defence minister. “I took it as a compliment and have the letter still. We were planning lunch in the Lords just before he died.”

What made his students so loyal to him? “He was a gentleman and a gentle man,” says Alan Duncan, yet another former tutee who became a lifelong friend. “The only word for it is inoffensive. Even when he said outré things, they were somehow both thoughtful and playful, so no one ever took offence.”

Not giving offence is a useful skill for a Right-leaning academic, especially one who backed Margaret Thatcher in the early 1980s. William Hague, who knew Dr Catto through the Oxford Union, recalls that “at the high point of student hostility to Thatcher, he was a reassuring and quietly strengthening influence on those of us who stuck with supporting her through everything. There weren’t that many dons who were like that, and it was satisfying to know that someone with such knowledge of history could believe it would all turn out well.”
Possibly even more upsetting to modern sensibilities than his support for Thatcherism is the fact that Dr Catto opposed admitting women to Oriel – which consequently remained the last all-male college for years, finally joining the others only in 1985. It is fair to say that he was more sexist in theory than in practice: many female undergraduates adored him. Still, given how easily academics can be felled by the caprices of identity politics, it was quite an achievement to have remained not only uncensured but popular.

How did he do it? A large spirit and an engaging manner. “He was immensely generous to his students and also to the colleagues he admired – to whom his loyalty was legendary,” says Peter Frankopan. “He could be waspish, but was never unkind or unfair to those with whom he didn’t see eye to eye.”

It helped, I suspect, that mediaeval history is a relatively uncontroversial field. Other than some gentle pressure to backdate, as far as possible, the presence of ethnic minority communities in England, it is a discipline little touched by the vicissitudes of modern politics. In his rare academic articles, Dr Catto none the less managed to take a line that was shockingly unorthodox in its orthodoxy: he was, for example, no fan of John Wycliffe, the heresiarch whose doctrines anticipated not only Protestantism but a great deal of modern liberal Christianity in all its denominations.

Like John Henry Newman, one of Oriel’s few great intellectuals, he ended up converting to Roman Catholicism – impelled, I think, as much by aesthetic as theological considerations. Again, the bare facts may present a misleading picture. Jeremy Catto was no ultramontane Tory. He had little time for systems or doctrines, seeing conservatism as an instinct rather than an ideology. Political opinions, in his mind, ought properly to be infused with scepticism, pragmatism, irony, self-awareness and a certain wry humour.

So soft was his demeanour that you kept forgetting how clever he was. He could come across almost as a sort of Winnie-the-Pooh: cheerful, tubby, imperturbable. His *bon mots* – “historians make the best bankers” – seemed to be thrown out almost casually; but challenge one and you soon found how much insight and knowledge had gone into it.

What he was really doing, of course, was teaching you how to think – how to approach an intellectual problem in more than one way, how to develop an argument and, not least, how to do so in a social setting. A great many of his tutorials involved sherry or pink gin, and the most important of his lessons were imparted elsewhere – at the Union, at receptions in his rooms, or at the Canning Club, which brought together dons and bright undergraduates of Tory inclination. He had a strong sense, almost vanished these days, of university life as a symposium – a time when intellectual stimulation ought to be constant and convivial, not confined to tutorials.

It helped that he was one of the few remaining unmarried dons who made college their home. He lived in a suite overlooking Oriel’s gorgeous Second Quad – a suite that, incredibly, he had enlarged by instructing builders to annex two rooms from the Provost’s apartments during an interregnum. For all his worldliness, something in his manner recalled the eccentric and celibate dons of the Victorian era, a breed generally supposed to have died out when Maurice Bowra retired in 1970. (He did finally tie the knot with his long-standing partner, a clever and good-natured American, shortly before he died – waiting, I suspect, until civil partnerships were a respectable conservative option rather than something *avant-garde.*
He had a fine sense of the absurdities of university life, and enjoyed one or two good-natured feuds with other academics. He once saw potential in a teenage historian who had been refused an undergraduate place at University College, snapping him up for Oriel. When the man came top of his year in Finals, and won a prize fellowship at All Souls, Dr Catto sent a three-word telegram, to the University don who had turned him down: “Ha. Ha. Ha.”

Marcus Walker, a former President of the Oxford Union and now a High Church clergyman in London, recalls an occasion when the Polly, the Oriel cat, was attacked by two ducks in Second Quad. “Jeremy leapt from his normal recumbent position on the sofa, jumped onto the table in front of the window, leaned out of the window, and started shouting, ‘The puss! The puss! Somebody save the puss!’ That the duck was served the following Sunday only added to Jeremy’s mystique.”

His politics were not unique. He was a conservative in the mould of Leo Strauss, Michael Oakeshott or Roger Scruton – an heir, like them, to Edmund Burke, as almost every conservative intellectual is on some level. Unlike them, though, he never committed his philosophy to paper. His conservatism was lived, implicit and exemplary.

They say in Spain that, when a wise man dies, it is as if a library had burned down. Yet a library, of sorts, survives Oriel’s great mediaevalist. Not a literal one: Dr Catto’s academic tracts were, as we have established, sparse. Its volumes are made up, rather, by the hundreds of men and women whose minds were touched by his. They may not all be conscious of his influence, and they are certainly not all conservatives, but his trace can be found somewhere in their bibliographies and footnotes. Over four decades, he sent people into Whitehall, Westminster, the City and the universities who carried with them a touch of his amused, quizzical, detached approach to the great questions of life. I’d call that a magnificent legacy.