Jeremy Catto

A Tribute from Niall Fergusson

Very recently I heard from Niall Ferguson, Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, Professor of History at Harvard University, and close friend of Jeremy who sent me this tribute. Let me share it with you before I recite the Prayer of Thanksgiving:

Though he never officially taught me, Jeremy Catto will always be for me the perfect Oxford don—the tutor and scholar I tried and failed to be. I wish I were with you in St Mary’s, rather than on a plane bound for Sydney, to bid him a proper farewell.

My most vivid memory of Jeremy dates back to the early 1980s. He was the senior member and presiding genius of the Canning Club, the conservative essay-writing and claret-drinking society to which I was fortunate to belong, along with lifelong friends such as Andrew Sullivan and Radek Sikorski. Jeremy didn’t say much. He just sat in a corner and beamed indulgently as we read our papers and talked our nonsense.

Jeremy encouraged us. Sometimes he even egged us on. Occasionally, I am sure, he must have reigned us in. But he never treated us as infants, as so many American professors and administrators these days treat their students. On the contrary, he acted as if we were fully fledged adults—just a smidgen less well read than him.

In those days, as today, to be a conservative—with a small or large “c”—was a minority pursuit at Oxford. Back then, the History Faculty was a broad church. There were Communists, socialists, social democrats, left-leaning liberals, right-leaning liberals, and a few Tories, amongst whom Jeremy was much the most affable. Part of the fun of being an undergraduate in those days was that you could have a Marxist tutorial in the morning, read Isaiah Berlin in the afternoon, and drink sherry with Jeremy in the evening—gin came later.

You can guess, I think, which of these was the most fun.

It was only later that I realized that Jeremy was not only a wonderful educator but also a scholar of the first rank. I think it was his article “Written English: The Making of the Language 1370–1400”—published in Past & Present in 2003—that opened my eyes. He sent me an offprint and I remember reading it with awe. It changed completely the way I thought about our language.

I came back to Oxford shortly after that, following a period of enjoyable exile in Cambridge, where I had got to know his Eastern equivalents, notably Maurice Cowling, David Watkin, and John Casey. It had been great fun, but I had missed Jeremy’s bonhomie—yes, that is the right word—amid the irony, geniality and malice of Peterhouse and the sheer wickedness of Caius.

Back in Oxford, we immediately became allies. For the next nine or so years, we contrived to be on the losing side of nearly every vote the Faculty took. Perhaps more importantly, we worked
together on admissions, to make sure that no genuinely talented applicant slipped through the many holes in our system. And we would lunch together—at least once a term at the Quad Bar—to compare notes. We always began with champagne.

When I decided to move to the United States, Jeremy did not protest. Instead, he offered me the use of a room in the Oriel whenever I returned to Oxford. It was—is, I hope—a little room next to the library called “The Boudoir.” That was such a Brideshead touch that I could not resist. I suspect I still possess a key to it.

Jeremy, you inspired us. With a subtle mixture of mischievous banter and scholarly rigour, you showed us the true way. Mark Whittow having been so cruelly snatched away, I am not sure you have a successor. But I hope and pray that such a person is out there.

We who were so lucky as to know you should make a concerted effort to track down the spiritual heir of Jeremy Catto.