



RICHARD PARES, C.B.E.

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1902-1958

THERE seems to be something like agreement that with the comparatively early death of Richard Pares the study of English history suffered its greatest loss since that of Maitland at the same age. But it is astonishing what Pares accomplished, when one considers his half-dozen finished books, the number of learned and important articles, the scholarly reviews, the vast mass of research—of which many evidences, transcripts of documents in the West Indies and elsewhere, now repose at Rhodes House. And not only that: there were his ten years as a don at Oxford, 1929-39, taking a full share of teaching, lecturing, and examining; his nine years as a full-time professor at Edinburgh, 1945-54; in between, the years as a civil servant at the Board of Trade during the war; and all the while from 1939 till his death there was his ardent, conscientious work as joint-editor of the *English Historical Review*. What a pile of work to have got through!—enough to shame most of us into humility before it.

In addition to his intellectual gifts and his achievement, his was a most rare character, in its moral distinction approaching something like perfection—well worthy of his friend Isaiah Berlin's tribute at his death: 'he was the best and most admirable man I have ever known'.

He was born at Colchester, 25 August 1902, the eldest child of a celebrated man, Sir Bernard Pares, and his enchanting wife, Margaret Dixon of that town. The Pares family were a Leicestershire stock, who took to banking in the eighteenth century and rose to county status. Nothing could be more English than Richard's appearance: very fair, pink and white complexion, flax-gold hair, bright blue eyes, lively and amused. He was of a slight, boyish figure, upright and active, very quick in pace and movements; his face full of sensibility and humour, his lips mobile and amusing, but with a strong set of jaw and chin.

As a child he was extremely delicate, and Lady Pares was told that she would never rear him. It was not until he was eight that he went to school; but, very precocious, he largely taught himself to read at three or four, and from then onward he was the most voracious of readers. At six he was already a Spenserian, writing long poems which his father would circulate,

for he was inordinately proud of him. Only a year or two later his natural bent for what would become his life's work declared itself—as often happens with talented children—in a child's game which he went on with for years. His collections of animals, teddy-bears, celluloid ducks—his devotion to ducks was life-long, as against an absolute horror of other birds—were employed as puppets in a continuous game of make-believe history, in which they were kings and queens, courts and cabinets, ministers, generals, rebels: the kind of thing he was to spend his life on later.

At a prep. school at Broadstairs he was unhappy and ill; in college at Winchester, to which he won an exhibition, he was often on the sick list but happy. Here he owed a great deal to the history-master, A. T. P. Williams, an All Souls man, subsequently bishop—Richard always declared that his was the best teaching he ever had; it must have confirmed his bent. He emerged a very recognizable Wykehamist scholar, with the interests and quirks of the young intellectual, the finicking hobbies, the distinguished, meticulous, yet rather difficult handwriting, the devotion to Jane Austen.

In 1921 he went up to Balliol with a Brackenbury Scholarship, and with his gaiety and charm became one of a brilliant and amusing group of undergraduates, along with Cyril Connolly, Evelyn Waugh, John Sutro, Basil Murray, Roger Mynors. They were much patronized by the benevolent and avuncular Urquhart, 'Sligger', and often spent vacations at his celebrated Swiss chalet. For a couple of years Richard much enjoyed himself as Union politician, editing the *Cherwell*, a social success (for he was always popular wherever he went), at the Labour Club—where I first met him. Then will-power asserted itself: he gave all this up to work hard during his last year and assure himself a First in Greats, followed by a Fellowship at All Souls in the autumn of 1924.

Two All Souls men exerted a more serious and permanent influence upon his outlook and work. One was Humphrey Sumner (the 'Emperor', for Richard had names for all of us: I was always 'the Professor' to him, E. L. Woodward 'the Abbé') with his austere, somewhat inhibiting, view of history. In one of his later essays Pares wrote: 'the right age to start reading history is about twenty-five, and those who have to study it at fifteen must obviously be studying something which is not in the full sense history at all'. This excessive professionalism, which was also Sumner's, seems to me absurd when one reflects that

J. R. Green was *writing* his studies of Oxford town life at not much more than fifteen.

Kenneth Bell's was a more positive impulse when he suggested to Richard both a period and a subject—it is curious, and perhaps significant, that he should not have had a strong inclination, a choice, of his own. He was, as a Greats historian, already thinking of studying the Principate, and made a promising archaeological tour in Asia Minor with Buckler and Calder. So it was appropriate in a way that he should come to rest with the study of the first British Empire at its apogee in the eighteenth century, in particular with the West Indies, and in especial the sugar industry, of which he meant to write the history. This had been Kenneth Bell's suggestion—it seems an odd choice for someone so gay and amusing, so scintillating and brilliant.

For there was a glaring dichotomy between Richard's earlier work and his personality, a contradiction between the brilliance of the person and the inhibited (and inhibiting) attitude towards his work and towards history at large. He distrusted, almost detested, the brilliant; he preferred, he insisted on, the dim—a favourite word, not used pejoratively. This was all very well for genuinely dim professors, but it was not right for him. G. D. H. Cole, another brilliant Balliol man, of whom Richard was fond, had this same inexplicable option. It was a psychological curiosity in both cases, for both were men with strong aesthetic strains—and it damaged their work.

In Richard's case, I have no doubt, it came from a marked reaction against his father, an idiosyncratic and wilful man who was always troublesome to his family. Sir Bernard had a magnetic personality, there was all the glamour of Russia—with which he identified himself—about him; he was a celebrity, a star-lecturer, undoubtedly brilliant. Very well, Richard would *not* be brilliant—and yet this was precisely what he was by nature. There is a revealing sentence in a late essay, on the relations between Chatham and his son: 'perhaps, too, the old man developed his son's quickness of mind, for a boy shut up for hours with a daemonic father like the Earl of Chatham could only hope to defend himself if he could parry thought by thought with the speed of lightning'. At the end of his own life Richard came round to doing justice to his remarkable parent: 'he was not one of the great scholars, in the sense in which the word is commonly used; but he was a creator, which is perhaps something more, even in academic life; a great orator,

a vivid and magnetic personality, and a man of indomitable will'.

This spirit of renunciation, the refusal to be fully himself in his work, to carry all his gifts and powers into making an aesthetic whole, was always a subject of latent disagreement between us, in a lifetime of affection. It influenced not only his choice of subject, or subjects, but also his treatment of them. He had much difficulty in doing justice to Chatham, for example—he was a 'clanger', a fatal category, always artful and besides much too brilliant. Pares much preferred the Duke of Newcastle—the 'dear Duke', 'the poor old Duke'—though he knew very well what an old silly he was, but wasn't it engaging of him to be so dim? Sense of justice compelled him at the end of his first, immensely long, book to make retribution: 'in spite of its exaggerations and inconsistencies, Pitt's is the only opposition to the Peace of Paris that can be justified or pardoned, and why Pitt remains, for all his insincerity and demagoguery, the one living figure among a generation of shadows'. That is handsome enough, yet the reluctance is obvious.

And he never got round to doing any justice to Burke, whom he could not abide, throughout the whole of his work; even in the best book of his maturity, Burke still is 'the theorist and the high priest of snobbery'. This Namier-Pares *parti-pris* seems very unworthy to anyone outside the privileged enclosure of eighteenth-century studies; for Burke was the theorist of a great deal besides snobbery, and though Pares may have had some, very slight, justification in being anti-snob, Namier can hardly have had that. For, besides being an Irish adventurer, Burke was a man of a most generous heart and mind, of perception as well as imagination, indeed a man of genius. I find this prejudice a fault in both Pares and Namier—the worse in Namier in that Burke provided the philosophic defence for much of what he, Namier, thought.

After a trial run at journalism, for which Richard returned to Liverpool where he had spent much of his boyhood—and where his father had been a professor in the great days of the university there—he came back to All Souls in 1927 to a life of research and historical writing. He afterwards said that it was 'the library, traditions, and conversation' of All Souls that formed his mind as an historian. But I doubt if many of the old-fashioned Fellows of that, in those days, gentlemanly institution recognized these influences in the austere and somewhat rebarbative work of research he presented them with, some nine years later: *War and Trade in the West Indies, 1739-1763*, in 1936.

This is a very remarkable book, especially for a young man of thirty-three. Perhaps it is a young man's book; it certainly is a formidable one. I may as well confess that, when it came out, I could not read it, though I tried hard. Plunged uncompromisingly up to the neck from the very start in West Indian detail, the moment I came upon something to engage my interest, the personality of Edward Trelawny, the first Trelawny governor of Jamaica, who after all was important in its history, it was switched off as soon as possible. When I asked in all good faith, as a junior, why we were not given a full-length portrait of this interesting character to help to make the whole thing more real to us, Richard replied, quite finally, that he did not think that was history. He did not think very highly of biography, hardly considered historical biography as history at all. He was curiously uninfluenceable, inflexible, rigid in what he thought about history and politics; he had a streak of the doctrinaire in him—it was his father, the fanatic, coming out. In my unformed, uncertain view, this was Richard's loss as an historian. But what was so curious was that it went with a general disposition of such sweetness and lovability, of such sensitiveness, sympathy, and humour. On his subject he was unyielding.

What happened was that he worked like a beaver for seven or eight years, in fact with great speed, through all the archives bearing on his subject in Great Britain, in France (at Bordeaux as well as in Paris), in New England, New York, Philadelphia, and all through the West Indies. It was an incredible performance. When he turned to writing it up, also at immense speed—often three thousand words after dinner!—he came up with a mass of half a million words. Both G. N. Clark and Namier got to work on it, and, with the author, there was excavated the present book, *War and Trade in the West Indies*; two immensely long chapters formed the nucleus of a subsequent book, *Colonial Blockade and Neutral Rights, 1739-1763*, and there were two very substantial articles left over to be published separately. Such was the story.

With proper deference to Richard's seniority and expertise, in my humble opinion that was not the way to write a book. A book was an organic whole, with one's life-blood in it.

Now that I have reread these works today, I recognize all the same what an impressive achievement they are. There is no immaturity in the actual content, in the treatment, or in the style. In these works Pares's attitude of mind was already completely mature, his mode of expression fully developed, his actual

way of writing clear, precise, elegant, as always. The difficulty one has in reading the books is not only that there is too much in them, an *embarras de recherches*: it lies at a deeper level, it is that the author is uncompromising and refuses any concession to human interest, or to that ultimate touchstone of all history, a sense of life. There is renunciation, rejection of so much.

This does not mean that the author is afraid to express his opinion about events or persons. Not for him the feeble impersonality of the third-rate historian, often afraid of saying anything to the point. I am indeed taken aback by this young man's summary judgements: the 'very silly mistake' the dear Duke of Newcastle was led into—in a complicated diplomatic situation to my simple mind—in the autumn of 1737. We are told that the duke 'never really understood a legal or a commercial question in his life'; that he was 'above all a political coward . . . terrified of public opinion—whatever that may have been in the eighteenth century'; but, 'he was not, like Pitt, deliberately and artificially dishonest. His was the spontaneous dishonesty of weakness.' Nor are these judgements censures merely upon individuals: on the war of 1739 'there was plenty of material for a conflict, provided each party adhered to its principles with only a little of that righteous obstinacy which inexperience of war inspires in statesmen and journalists'. These are the judgements of a fully fledged young man who knows his own mind.

The words 'cant' and 'nonsense' were those most frequent upon his lips in those years in describing eighteenth-century politics, and I got the definite impression that he did not much like his chosen period then. He had a very disillusioned view of politics and (at that time) of life; indeed, he never entertained many illusions—a good qualification for an historian, while he had no opinion of philosophy and no liking for it. Perhaps it came in part from his mind being so centred upon politics in history, with its accessory interests, commercial, maritime, and diplomatic affairs—all of them a happy hunting ground for humbug, and it was too much for this honest and upright man at times.

In later years, and with domestic happiness achieved, his sympathies broadened out—not so far as to include either metaphysics or humbug—but he became more tolerant, less exacting in his judgements, more sympathetic (with his own burden to carry) towards other men with theirs. Nevertheless, the abnegation in his view of history remained—so strange in a devotee of Jane Austen and Mozart, one so well read in various

literatures, of such refinement of taste. A friend tells me that not long before his death he said that he regretted, as things had turned out, that he had given so much of his working life to the West Indies, which he had originally meant to be only the way-in to more varied studies. His feeling for the eighteenth century deepened with time. He one day said to me in his last years that the reign of George III, after all, was the apogee of English history: the age of the Pitts (he did not add Burke), of Nelson and Wellington, of Gainsborough, Reynolds, and Constable, of Dr. Johnson, Scott, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Jane Austen; of Adam in architecture and the decorative arts; of the great inventors of the Industrial Revolution, of Warren Hastings and the builders of empire. This, with a shy pride—but even an Elizabethan is bound to own it is a just claim.

If history is not about all this—and the pity of it was that no one was so well equipped by nature to deal with it—if one does not hold much of an opinion of the biographical nor hold narrative history in any high esteem, what, then, is history about?

Well, it is about questions—at least, the technical, professional history that he held in exaggerated esteem is. He never varied from this position, though he became more human, riper, and wiser, in his last years. Even then the syllabus he dictated for one of his last books, *Yankees and Creoles: The Trade between North America and the West Indies before the American Revolution* (1956), asks: 'Who conducted this trade and supplied the capital for it? What kinds of ships were used? What were the sailors paid and how? What places in North America were particularly active in the trade? What were the outward cargoes, and how and by whom were they sold in the West Indies? What were the return cargoes, how were they collected, and what became of them when they were brought home to North American ports? What profits were made in the trade, and what part did the trade play in the general economy of North America?'

What a programme for a book! But the extraordinary thing is that he managed, by industry, by pertinacity, by sheer cleverness, to answer all these questions that he set himself. One feels a bit like Dr. Johnson at the lady's playing—not so much surprise at the performance as at anybody wanting to do it! Of course someone must; but why this scintillating, brilliant man? There was the paradox: he condemned himself to the dull, but happily he could never achieve it: brilliance would come breaking in.

He told the Edinburgh business-men (in *The Historian's*

Business) that professional historians nowadays 'do not usually tell a story. They discuss questions.' (It sounds like a civil servant's view of history—and in the war he made a brilliant civil servant.) He thought that the history-books of the nineteenth century were 'so unlikelike for us'. I see what he means: that they do not render humdrum life, the life of the dull and the dim, in all its fascinating detail, nor go into how things worked and why, administratively, constitutionally, commercially. Richard once said to me that the prime interest of history for him was to find out how things worked—a legitimate enough desire; only I would add that in the house of history are many mansions. And I do not agree that Macaulay and Froude and Green were 'unlikelike': they merely found the interesting in history more interesting than the uninteresting. One can hardly quarrel with that, though one may supplement it. Actually Pares positively disliked Froude and disapproved of him, carrying on that old feud, in which the academics did not appear to the best advantage. Even Stubbs admitted in the end, 'Froude is a man of genius, and he has been treated abominably'. But they were the losers—after all they had more to learn from Froude (including how to write, if they could have learned) than he had from them.

Pares, with his emphasis on the discussion of questions as the content of history, was sympathetic to the academic controversies, the boring *querelles de doctrine*, that arise from time to time. 'Still more important than corrections of fact is the constant refinement and supersession of interpretation. There is a perennial dialectic between each generation of historians and its predecessor, not only because new information is brought into use, but still more because new emphases and new patterns take the place of the old.' There is something in this, even if one's capacity for its enjoyment is limited and one prefers to search for what is true for oneself, without the disadvantage of rival combatants digging in their feet, sticking to positions taken up out of *amour propre*, &c. Pares was even sympathetic to thesis-history, which I should have thought went clean contrary to the nature of history, though when he tackled the most massive form it has taken in our time, Toynbee's *A Study of History*, the result was the most formidable indictment the book has received—a heavy-weight performance beside which Trevor-Roper's was a series of amusing toots on a tin-whistle.

Pares began as a disciple of Namier and never ceased to admire him; but he pointed out that Namier had transformed

our view of eighteenth-century politics 'by virtue of a new outlook even more than by exploiting new manuscripts and exhibiting new detail'. That provides a useful corrective for those who make a fetish of Namier's methods without his power and originality of mind. If the two schools of modern historians may be represented by Trevelyan and Namier, Pares belonged uncompromisingly with the latter, and did not appreciate Trevelyan at his proper value. This was a defect; for, when all is said, Trevelyan's view of history incorporates and includes the technicians; they do not incorporate or circumscribe him.

In his last period Pares was opening out in his sympathies, allowing his own rich nature to flower, giving proper play to his gifts and aptitudes. In *George III and the Politicians* (1953), his mature masterpiece, a new note is heard: 'it is a pity that historians should so seldom have recognised the fact that men were in politics not only for party and for profit, but most of all for the due exercise of the talents God gave them, and for fun'. This book spoke the last word on the constitutional issues of the reign of George III, on which we have all now heard more than enough: it stands four-square still with Namier, though Pares's statement of the position has the advantage of a subtler, if less original, mind with its instinctive feeling for the English environment. Indeed, the penetration of his political perception was one of his most striking characteristics all through. It comes out not only in exposition of and judgements on complex situations but in illuminating sideshafts. 'Those who have any share of political power (which comparatively few people have) usually obtain it because they are exceptionally able to emancipate their purposes from the control of their unformulated wishes and impressions.' 'Very few people are quick to see a point before they have to see it, especially if it is something not easily reconciled with their own interests and the interests of those near to them.' 'The enormous growth of the organized professions—perhaps the greatest change in the whole of modern history—explains, better than anything else, the difference between our attitude to patronage and that of the eighteenth century.'

Some of the best things appear in his volume of essays, *The Historian's Business*, which I can only describe as dazzling: in reading them one shares the feeling of Bacon's audience, only afraid lest he make an end. One of the most moving is his brief portrait-sketch of the younger Pitt, with whom he had an innate sympathy: it shows us what we might expect if he had

lived to write a full-length biography of him, as he might have done—he was not unwilling. Contrary to popular misconceptions, ‘as much, perhaps, as any other leader we have had, he was the creature of impulse and inspiration. He was to the last degree mercurial.’ There was his father in him. But his talent was all for administration and reform—there was his mother’s family in him. ‘The tastes of a Grenville at war with the temperament of a Pitt must have produced a curious mixture which not everybody could understand. . . . Moreover, Pitt was not only industrious—his mind worked fast. Even his enemies admired him for his miraculous quickness of perception.’ Then there was the combination of deep reserve with genuine charm, whenever he had a moment free to display it. Dead, worn out, at forty-six. There was a good deal that must have drawn Pares to the younger Pitt; and if he never was fair to Burke, at least he did not fall for the facile charm of Charles Fox.

How one wishes he might have lived to fill the staring gap in his field—a great book on the American Revolutionary War, a book worthy of that titanic struggle for Britain, that did justice to both sides, while yet free of Whig partisanship! He alone had all the gifts for it, and the equipment—including a notable understanding of, and sympathy for, America, dating from his early time there, 1928–9, as a Rockefeller student.

Illness prevented him from carrying out his intention to write the George III volume, 1760–1820, in the new *Oxford History of England*. But he gave us three more books, largely based on original material gathered before the war. *A West India Fortune*, 1950, based on the papers of the Pinney family, was the most satisfactory of his West Indies books. When it came out he said to me, modestly, ‘I think this is a book of which you will approve. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end.’ And so it is, an aesthetic whole, beautifully done. He gives us the Pinney family in their environment, under the slopes of Pilsdon in Dorset, and he is able to quote Jane Austen’s description of the place of their origin. Their story in the West Indies is told with all his mastery of technical business detail. Then he brings them back again to their home. ‘An excursion of a century or two is not very long in the history of a family. Once more there are Pinneys in Dorset, in the old houses, the old fields and the old churchyards. It is as if they had never been out of the county.’ There, too, is a new note, like that which is to be heard in Jane Austen’s last novel, *Persuasion*.

Two more books were to come: *Yankees and Creoles*, an im-

portant study of the trade between North America and the West Indies, in 1956, and *Merchants and Planters*, published posthumously in 1960. These last used up some of the material left over from the good years before progressive paralysis made it impossible for him to visit, or revisit, archives. Even so they have new and pertinent things to add to his chosen subject, the eighteenth-century empire and its trade, imperialism, and colonialism. And there is a new simplicity. He had written 'the historical process is very complicated', and brought it home in his books. Perhaps, if he had been granted a full new phase—'if only one could go on with one's work, nothing else would matter' were his last words—he would have achieved that simplicity his father so much admired and his father's friend, G. M. Trevelyan, exemplified: hallmark of greatness.¹

I have confined myself largely to his historical writing, for it is as a remarkable historian that he will be remembered. But he was a notable, if slightly daunting, teacher—like his mentor, Sumner, with perhaps too exacting standards for *l'homme moyen sensuel*. Academically he was at his best as a professor, and it is consoling to think that he enjoyed every minute of his nine years at Edinburgh. He could not help being a brilliant lecturer, like his father, though without Sir Bernard's uncanny magnetism. During the war he achieved equal eminence as a civil servant—a realm beyond my ken. A colleague of his writes:

He began in the Commercial Relations and Treaty Department of the Board of Trade—the aristocracy of ability of the Board as it then was—and rose to the status of Principal Assistant Secretary, as Principal Priority Officer.² Not all Principal Priority Officers were key men as he was, but it was a job which, as filled by him, put him at the centre of the policy-making of the Department, and it brought him into touch with most other Ministries. He also ran a small group responsible for the Board's concerns in the combined Anglo-American planning of civilian production and, in the latter years of the war, in the plans for the relief of liberated Europe and he was much concerned in the plans for conversion of industry back to peace-time conditions.

He gained a remarkable personal ascendancy over successive Ministers and colleagues alike. His memoranda were first-class—constructive, comprehensive and expressed with all his force and distinction of style. He was both quick and effective in discussion, never bothering to score debating points and open-minded as well as decisive, and

¹ It is interesting to note that it was Bernard Pares who suggested Garibaldi as a subject for Trevelyan and so set him on his way.

² Pares wrote about this too in 'The Work of a Departmental Priority Officer', in *Lessons of the British War Economy*, ed. D. N. Chester.

a first-class chairman. He worked prodigiously hard, had no fear of responsibility, never took anything at its face value, or endorsed an opinion without knowing why. His reputation for sheer ability was fabulous, and his complete integrity, absence of self-seeking and his consideration for others made him universally liked.

He held himself amiably aloof from his colleagues outside his work, though he was the best of company in it. When they were lunching at their clubs, he would sit in the canteen with a book—mostly 19th-century African travel, or things he was reviewing for *E.H.R.*—propped up before him. He was often critical, but in a good-tempered, detached way, and he never displayed the slightest sign of personal ambition, of self-consequence or pique. He shirked nothing, and was a dutiful member of the Home Guard, looking very young and straight, but most unmilitary, in his rough battle-dress. Some academics merged themselves increasingly into their environment, as the war went on. He never did. When the war was over, he said he preferred 'writing about political events to taking part in them'.

That brings him vividly before us, as he was before illness crippled him.

What was so wonderful was that this incisive ability, with its intellectual austerity and even astringency, went with a temperament of singular sweetness and charm, of selflessness and consideration for others, of good temper and kindness. The fearful ordeal of his disease, a creeping paralysis which left him before the end nothing but a living head, could never have been confronted, let alone endured, if it had not been for the marvellous courage and lovingkindness of his wife, Janet Powicke, and the happiness of home with which she and their daughters surrounded him. After his long battle he died on 3 May 1958: an example of fortitude and nobility rarely equalled, though one hopes never again to have to contemplate so cruel a fate.

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