

PETER DICKSON

Peter George Muir Dickson

26 April 1929 – 16 October 2021

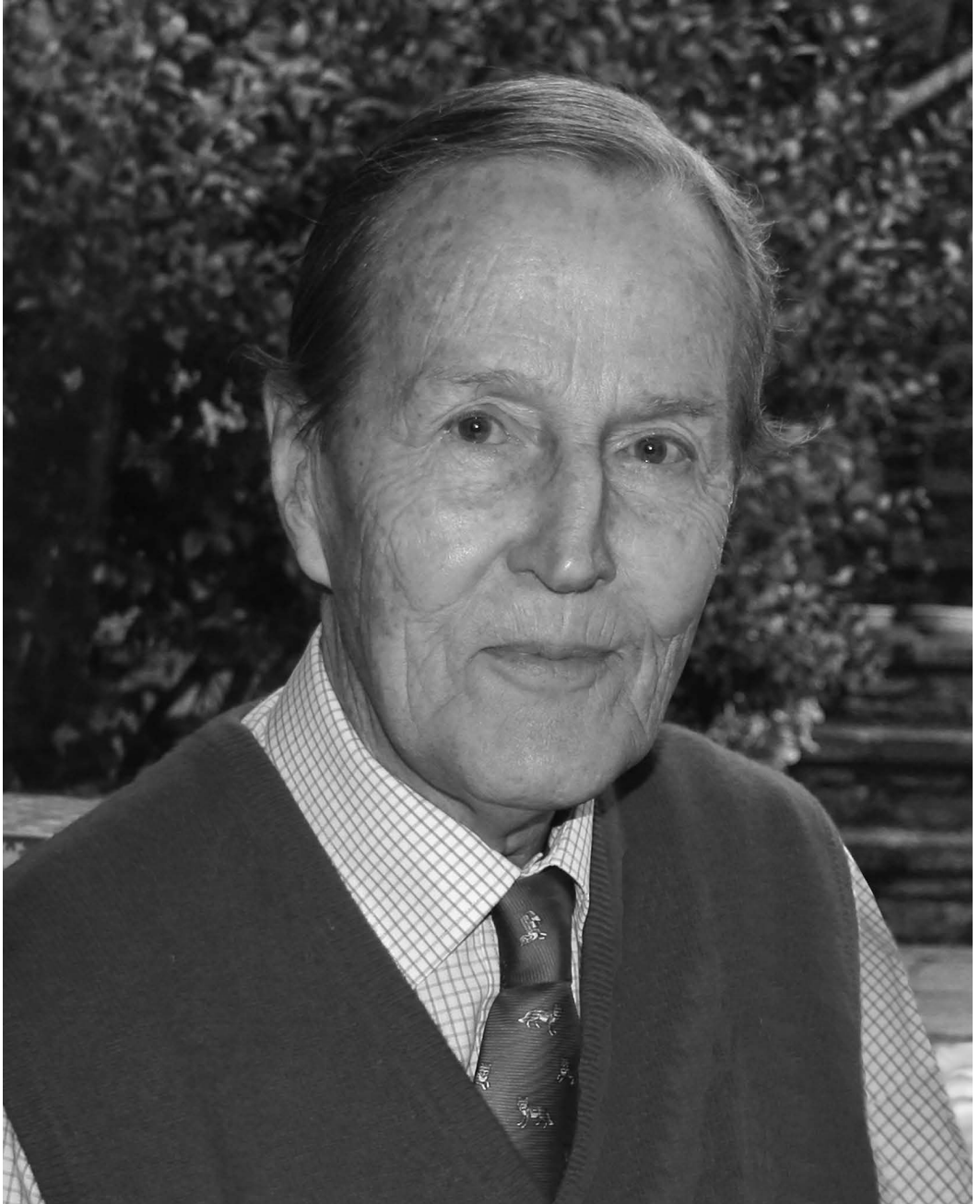
elected Fellow of the British Academy 1988

by

R.J.W. EVANS

Fellow of the Academy

Peter Dickson was a pioneer in fiscal history, who made transformative contributions to our understanding of two quite separate major European countries in the 18th century. He initiated the ongoing discussion of the rise of the fiscal state in international affairs and its role in funding resources for defence, imperial aggression and foreign trade. His work on Great Britain is central to study of the establishment and evolution of the national debt and the development of a banking system. His analysis of Austrian state finances was combined with a fundamental reassessment of government and society under Empress Maria Theresia. In Oxford he made his mark especially as a founding fellow of St Catherine's College.



Alvin Dickson

Peter Dickson combined formidable intellect with unassuming dignity. That was already apparent on casual acquaintance. Most of those who were his colleagues, sometimes over many decades (like the present writer), also found him an extremely reserved person. We never learned much about his private life, and nothing at all about his background and early years. The late Jose Harris, who worked closely with Peter at St Catherine's, says she found him at first formidable and distant, a 'man of mystery'; she suspected at the time that he had endured a difficult childhood. That intuition may well be correct.¹

Peter was born in London on 26 April 1929. His father, William Muir Dickson (1891–1956), was a Harley Street surgeon of Scottish ancestry. His mother, Regina Dowdall-Nicolls (1887–1968), was of Irish heritage. Her previous marriage, to Walter Tobin, a much older man from a well-to-do Liverpool shipping family, had yielded a son, Patrick, 16 years older than Peter, who served in the Second World War, then went into the nascent shipping container business. After this marriage ended in divorce, Regina met and married Peter's father in 1924 in London. It was she who suggested that they set themselves up in a house in Kensington, on Hasker Street, as more suitable for his career than the address in the north of the city that he (being unfamiliar with the capital) had chosen. Peter also had a full sister, Jean (later Ellwood), four years older. In their early years Jean and Peter were looked after by a kind and affectionate nanny. This tiny lady then bravely emigrated to serve in a leper colony in Fiji, but continued to be remembered warmly by Peter and his family, who long remained in touch with her.

William Dickson was a didactic man and that compounded many disagreements with Regina. When this marriage also fell apart, leaving her quite poor, she and Peter went to live with a friend, Flora Hastings, who had offered them a flat in her spacious house in Barnes. Jean stayed with her father. For the rest of his mother's life, Peter remained devoted to her. In later years he would visit her on a weekly basis and take her for outings when she lived at Glove House, a home for elderly ladies overlooking the grounds of Blenheim Palace, and then in a hospice in Northampton.

In his own later years Peter dabbled in family history, in communication with cousins on both spear and distaff sides. Whereas he showed interest in the fate of a Dickson family bible, which he pursued with American relations of his father, it's perhaps revealing that he was more fired by the story of the Dowdalls and Nicolls in county Meath and of their earlier kinsfolk. These included the Old English clan of Nangle, whose horrific end, in the so-called Streamstown Murders of 1757, captured Peter's imagination.²

¹Ariane Dickson generously shared family papers with me, and provided a careful reconstruction of Peter's early life. See also <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/genealogy/records/regina-magdalene-dowdall-nicolls-24-pv8ybv>. For Harris, see the Memoir by Pat Thane in *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, 21 (2023–4), 493–504.

²Peter kept a copy of James Robinson, 'The Streamstown Murders, 20 March 1757', *Irish Family History Journal*, 17 (2001), 76–83.

I

Peter was sent off to a preparatory school called Swanbourne House in Buckinghamshire, recently founded as a filial of Bradfield College. The dress code was ‘Norfolk Jackets and knee-breeches during the week and Eton suits on Sundays’.³ Then he transferred – at his father’s insistence – to St Paul’s School, under its High Master Walter Oakeshott (a noted medievalist who later became Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford). For the period of the war St Paul’s was a boarding establishment located at a safe distance from London: boys lodged in Crowthorne and were taught at nearby Easthampstead Park.⁴ Peter doesn’t seem to have related his experiences at either school. However, there is an unexpectedly vivid passage in his memoir for Alan Bullock (of which more below) which seems to convey his own recollection of time spent in London during the desperate days of the blitz.⁵

In 1947 Peter won a scholarship in history to Worcester College, Oxford, where he flourished, with the support not least of the new provost, John Masterman (best remembered as a wartime spymaster). The modern historian was Harry Pitt, at the start of an illustrious career as a superb tutor with a voracious appetite for higher learning and a sharp-edged commentator on his pupils’ work – but no researcher, quite unlike Peter.⁶ No less formative were lasting friendships with fellow-students such as the slightly older Alastair Burnet, who would become godfather to Peter’s daughter, and John (later Baron) Sainsbury, and the slightly younger Rupert Murdoch. Peter duly emerged with a first in 1950. After two years of national service, he returned to Oxford to study for a doctorate and quickly played an integral part in some innovative post-war activities there.

Whereas at Worcester he could have been housed in some of the oldest domestic buildings of the university, his career became associated with a pair of its newest institutions. First Peter joined Nuffield College: between 1954 and 1956 he held a research fellowship there. Nuffield had been founded in 1937 to promote the social sciences, including relevant kinds of history; but it only began to admit students in 1945 and acquired its famously Cotswold-vernacular campus during the fifties. It was the first college to specialise in this way, to recruit from both sexes, and to admit graduates only.

³ <https://www.swanbourne.org/discover/history>

⁴ Peter would surely have been aware that during his time the school’s buildings in Hammersmith became the home headquarters of Old Pauline General Bernard Montgomery, where the Allied invasion of Europe was planned.

⁵ ‘The thunder of anti-aircraft guns, the accelerating banshee shriek of descending bombs, and the crash of their explosions, only lacked the percussive rattle of small-arms fire to duplicate a battlefield. Even those who only experienced this in childhood will not forget it’: Peter Dickson and Jose Harris, ‘Alan Louis Charles Bullock, 1914–2004’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 153 (2008), 125–46, at 128. This must be from Dickson: Harris was born in 1941 and lived her first years in Bedford. Cf. also below, n. 63.

⁶ Lesley Le Claire (ed.), *For Harry: A Testament of Friendship for H. G. P.* (Abingdon, 2002).

Its stimulus to fresh thinking was obvious. Peter warmed to the warden of the college, Norman Chester, whose experience of the workings of administrative systems may have left its mark on the young protégé.

Simultaneously Peter came under the influence of one of his two chief academic mentors. Lucy Sutherland, from South Africa (but born in Australia), was a transformative figure on the Oxford historical scene.⁷ By this time – after secondment to the Board of Trade during the war – she was head of Lady Margaret Hall and a leading expert on the British 18th century, especially its economic and financial aspects, with acclaimed work on the City and the East India Company. How far did she frame his research agenda? At least she would have confirmed him in a commitment to minute and exhaustive investigation of surviving papers, personal and institutional, and a certain then-fashionable Namierite nonchalance about individual agency and loftier political ideas.

The outcome was a dissertation on ‘The English National Debt, 1693–1754’, one of the earliest in a series called ‘Nuffield College theses’, but – like many of its kind – unwieldy (at more than 600 pages) and fated to remain unpublished. The dissertation took its time (they usually did in those days): Peter submitted it in 1958. By then he was deep into his next project, located in the same general area of his growing expertise, but requiring a markedly different approach and extracting one thread: that of risk management. He had already shown skill in relating the essentials of a financial story in what appears to be his first published article, on the South Sea Bubble, for *History Today* (another new venture, a magazine founded in 1951 to make the subject accessible to a wider audience).⁸ Now Dickson was commissioned to produce a piece of commercial and institutional history.

Sun Alliance Insurance was approaching its sestercentennial. Perhaps through Sutherland’s network of acquaintances in the City they secured Peter to write the story of the company. They provided him with an old leather briefcase, from which he became inseparable, and gave him the run of their archive. It proved a golden opportunity, of which he took full advantage. A congenial task for a native Londoner, this allowed him to draw on themes from his doctoral work in order to tell a corporate tale. A sensitivity to the collective human agency of business and government finance henceforth became his trademark.

⁷Anne Wightman, ‘Lucy Stuart Sutherland, 1903–80’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 63 (1983), 610–30; on her qualities as supervisor at 627. J.S. Bromley in *Statesmen, Scholars and Merchants: Essays in Eighteenth-Century History presented to Dame Lucy Sutherland*, ed. Anne Whiteman, J.S. Bromley and P.G.M. Dickson (Oxford, 1973), vii–xviii (his sole authorship of this preface is established by Wightman, loc. cit., at 630).

⁸Peter Dickson, ‘The South Sea Bubble, 1720’, *History Today*, 4 (1954), 326–33.

II

By this time Peter had joined his second new or rejuvenated institution and become enthralled by his second intellectual role model. St Catherine's Society was a non-collegiate body whose earlier purpose had been to allow non-residential access to a university education for impecunious men (there was a female equivalent in the Society of Oxford Home-Students, later St Anne's). Now, as state grants became available to all, it needed a fresh purpose. In 1952 it acquired a dynamic leader in Alan Bullock, a historian who made his professional name in that same year with his acclaimed life of Hitler, and who also (like Sutherland) brought recent metropolitan and international experience as a wartime broadcaster and administrator.

Bullock's first step was to afforce the Society's as yet skeletal teaching provision, based in its existing premises, an austere purpose-built block at the bottom of St Aldate's (later to house the Faculty of Music). Among others he recruited two novice historians: Peter and the medievalist George Holmes.⁹ Thus began Peter's teaching career in October 1954, actually in a rented house across the road on Brewer Street since Bullock's operation was already bursting at the seams. Soon both he and Holmes advanced to the status of tutors.¹⁰

Alan Bullock already nourished a grand aspiration for his fledgling organisation, still a ward of the university, managed by an ad hoc committee. He envisaged a large, fully residential college for undergraduates, to match the provision now (belatedly) being made for graduates at Nuffield and elsewhere. It would have a wide catchment, transcending the often all-too-cosy conventional admission arrangements, with their inbuilt private-school bias, and at last giving equal weight to scientific subjects. It was a heady vision, requiring massive funds from within the university and beyond, which Bullock himself progressively secured almost single-handedly with energy, eloquence and aplomb. It also needed loyal support from colleagues. Prominent among these was Peter, who felt boundless admiration for Bullock, indeed reckoned him a 'genius'¹¹ on the academic scene – and this from one who always weighed his words carefully. In 1958 Peter was appointed secretary to the impromptu tutorial group that would come to constitute the college's governing body.¹² In 1960 he became one of its founding fellows.

⁹George Arthur Holmes (1927–2009): see Keith Thomas in *Memorial Addresses of All Souls College Oxford, 1990–2020*, ed. Peregrine Horden (Oxford, 2022), 313–23. Brief appreciation by Gervase Rosser in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v; there is as yet no British Academy memoir.

¹⁰Margaret and Derek Davies, *Creating St. Catherine's College* (Oxford, 1997), 19 and passim; also ex info Margaret Davies.

¹¹Jose Harris recalled his use of that epithet.

¹²Davies and Davies, *Creating St. Catherine's*, 129.

An early occasion to display that new distinction was on the title-page of Dickson's first book, which appeared with Oxford University Press in that same year.¹³ The fruit of his parallel life as a researcher in London which we've already encountered, it's no *pièce de circonstance*, but a crisp and assured narrative which conveys a strong sense of place. Despite the title, it concerns itself predominantly with fire insurance, the Sun's original and core activity, from its 'formative period', c. 1680–1750, 'coincide[nt] and connected with the contemporary increase in national wealth and foreign trade'¹⁴ – and thus squarely part of that wider topic Peter had already begun to treat in the DPhil – through its two phases of heavy concentration around London in the 18th century and expansion across Britain and into the rest of the world in the 19th.

The text already reveals Peter's gift for succinct anecdote and revealing quotation. It tells a lively tale of this pioneering venture, from the chequered career of the brilliant but wayward and cantankerous projector Charles Povey, who founded the firm, through the development of a network of agents, firemen, and fire-engines across the country, to an erratic advance across the globe by the 1860s, from Turkey and Russia to the USA and even New Zealand, 'with its sober population stiffened with Anglican respectability and Scottish zeal'.¹⁵ Moreover, it incorporates some powerful analysis, as when the company comes to terms with modern risk management, initially in its dealings with Lancashire cotton mills. There is briefer coverage of the Sun's espousal from around 1810 of life assurance, previously regarded as a branch of gambling; and of the concomitant rise of its investment business, first in stocks, later in mortgages and annuities, railway debentures and finally shares by 1900.

Through all this Peter displays that enviably clear head for financial exposition that would characterise his whole oeuvre; and also anticipates his penchant for what we have come to call 'prosopography' (though I fancy he never did). Here it takes the form of a notable investigation of the Sun's 'managers', that self-perpetuating but capable oligarchy of twenty-four men who ran the firm throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. He concludes, with a suitably resounding vindication of his subject: 'Taken as a group they [the Managers] are an interesting cross-section of the aristocracy of finance which, joining the manners and assumptions of the governing classes with the interests and attitudes of the commercial bourgeoisie, has played a crucial role in the development of modern Britain.'¹⁶ In one superficial respect, the *Sun Insurance Office* looks strikingly different from Dickson's later work: the almost total absence of annotation. That, however, is because his text was so steeped in uncatalogued business records there was evidently no

¹³ *The Sun Insurance Office, 1710–1960: The History of Two and a Half Centuries of British Insurance* (London, 1960).

¹⁴ *Sun Insurance Office*, Preface.

¹⁵ *Sun Insurance Office*, 206.

¹⁶ *Sun Insurance Office*, 298.

scope for conventional references: his acknowledgements are correspondingly to company secretaries and the like, not to fellow historians.

Dickson's book belonged to a new genre of business histories, which was just then coming into vogue. It had been initiated by Charles Wilson's massive history of Unilever, published in two stout volumes in 1954 (a continuation would appear in 1968). Other distinguished contributions during the 1960s and 70s were those by D.C. Coleman on Courtaulds, Barry Supple on Royal Exchange Assurance, and W.J. Reader on ICI. All, like Peter, laid stress on the role of individual entrepreneurs and the social and cultural milieu in which they operated. This style of economic history, personalised and contextual – and directly sponsored by commerce and industry – did not flourish for long. Peter was not the only practitioner of it to move on.

III

Catz (as the College is now usually known) opened its doors to students in October 1962. The place was still a building site, and Peter in on the ground floor (of which there was already a great deal: it's a very spacious design). At Bullock's insistence, the contract had gone to a Danish architect, Arne Jacobsen. By general agreement, the eventual outcome was a triumph: 'here is a perfect piece of architecture', was Nikolaus Pevsner's concise verdict.¹⁷ But that took a long time, and required persistent negotiation with the perfectionist Jacobsen over the smallest details.

A building subcommittee had been established in 1959; from May 1961 Peter joined it and kept its minutes.¹⁸ He became heavily involved with furniture and fittings, and chose much of the glassware and crockery. There were many tussles with Jacobsen: Peter sometimes prevailed over such matters as the height of ceilings. He helped draft statutes and by-laws for the new college – his forensic precision must have been of service. However, Peter's most conspicuous contribution was the crest, or coat of arms, which he and Margaret Davies sketched out during a wet August bank holiday on Boars Hill in 1962 (I'm not aware that he otherwise took any significant interest in heraldry).¹⁹

¹⁷ Jennifer Sherwood and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire* (Harmondsworth, 1974), 240. When Master of the College, Brian Smith showed Richard Rogers around. The eminent architect said that 'this is the finest building built in Britain in the twentieth century': Smith, 'Early Days at St Catherine's', in the college archive; also pers. info. But in the construction a lot of RAAC had been used, as was (re)discovered in 2023.

¹⁸ Ex info Margaret Davies; Smith, 'Early Days'.

¹⁹ Davies and Davies, *Creating St. Catherine's*, 67, 110ff, 132, 135; and ex info Margaret Davies.

In the midst of all this exciting makeshift Peter ploughed his furrow as an undergraduate tutor, in a partnership of over twenty years with George Holmes. They were, some said, like chalk and cheese; their relationship was amiable but not close. Students tended to align with one or the other. While George was outgoing and hospitable, Peter rarely held or even attended parties. More formal students may have been attracted to his correctness of attire – with the *de-rigueur* tweed jacket and trousers – and to his dapper, almost military bearing. Others penetrated to an inner warmth. All would have been struck by his integrity: he had, as Jose Harris nicely observed, ‘a highly-strung sense of fairness’. And his demands on them, although highly serious, were always measured and reasonable, with emphasis on a broader training of the mind: ‘The Oxford tutor’s task is rather to guide, encourage, and assess than to provide expert instruction’, as Dickson himself put it, in his memoir to Bullock.²⁰

Many tributes to Peter from his old pupils substantiate this picture. His ‘immaculate appearance and manner’ were complemented by the pink copy of the *Financial Times* on his coffee table. He could be stern, even austere; but was always courteous and could appear ‘deceptively easy-going’. One found him ‘a character with lots of wonderful idiosyncrasies’; another ‘a beacon signalling all things bright and intellectual’. For a third he ‘explained the fallacy of “post hoc ergo propter hoc”, a useful lesson for life’. His relentless pursuit of total clarity in thought and expression went with deep concern for the travails of his more vulnerable charges. ‘Despite his exemplary reserve he had an enormous capacity for warmth and humanity.’²¹

George Bernard has more distinctive recollections than most, as befitting one soon to become a distinguished historian himself. He remembers the lavish provision of annotated bibliographies, with a stress on monographs (‘the good general book ends by telling you nothing’), the quiet encouragement, the brisk efficiency; but also the range of intellectual engagement. Once he was gently upbraided for arriving three minutes late for a tutorial. Yet on another occasion Peter took up time to discuss why traditional clock faces show four [o’clock] as ‘IIII’ rather than ‘IV’.

The balance of public and private in Peter’s life must have been affected by his marriage to Ariane Faye in 1964. They had met in 1957 at a friend’s in Belgravia, and he courted her on his frequent visits to London to work in the archives of the Bank of England and the Sun (Ariane remembers fondly the omnipresent ‘Sun’ briefcase). Peter became friendly with the Fayes, regaling them with tales of the construction of St Catherine’s. Having briefly and half-heartedly returned to Australia with the rest of her family, Ariane soon decided to rejoin Peter in England. The wedding took place at

²⁰ Dickson and Harris, ‘Bullock’, 128.

²¹ I’m especially grateful to Gaye Myatt and Jane Woodward for their memories here.

Chelsea Old Church, a noted society venue badly damaged in the war, but then recently reconstructed as a faithful copy of the medieval original.

In 1966 Ariane and Peter moved to live in Iffley, Oxford's leafiest and most venerable suburban village. They remained at Field House, on Church Way, for the next fifty years. Increasingly Peter detached himself from the social life of the College, though he made an exception for the maturing gardens: he enjoyed discussing horticulture there and in the neighbouring University Parks, where the long-serving superintendent, Walter Sawyer, was a particular friend. During the 1960s and early 70s, in the still all-male colleges, wives began to be invited to occasional lunches and dinners. This was a trend which Peter disapproved of. However, his broadly progressive opinions reasserted themselves when it came to women as students: in 1974–5 Catz was one of the earliest to admit them.

Remarkably, Alan Bullock at first resisted this change. He also disapproved of the radical student demands around 1970, which led to widespread protests and even the threat of violence, and to which he, as Vice-Chancellor at the time, had to respond across the university as a whole. Peter agreed – in the memoir for Bullock his handling of the crisis is described as ‘an exemplary mixture of firmness, reason, and occasional anger’ – but the issue split the previously easy-going college into factions which for years barely talked to each other.²²

IV

Earlier generations of Peter's pupils were probably only dimly aware that he was simultaneously busy with a project which demanded all those powers of scholarly resource and judgement. It was the fruit of years of intensive research in the Bank of England and other archives, and fed also on the evidence and ideas generated by his work on the DPhil and the Sun. *The Financial Revolution in England* appeared in 1967.²³ Peter had offered it to OUP; but procedures there were tardy. Lucy Sutherland could do him a final favour when at a dinner she sat next to Harold Macmillan, ex-premier and at that time Chancellor of Oxford University, and told him of the brilliant text by her old pupil. The book was promptly espoused by his family firm.

The Financial Revolution begins, already in the Preface, indeed on the title-page, with two resounding assertions which throw down a challenge to orthodoxy, in respect of both method and concept. On the one hand, ‘the amount of detail in the text reflects, unapologetically, my belief that insufficient is as yet known about the eighteenth century,

²² Dickson and Harris, ‘Bullock’, 133. Ex info Graeme Segal.

²³ *The Financial Revolution in England: A Study in the Development of Public Credit, 1688–1756* (London, 1967).

in England or Europe, to bear the weight of generalization with which historians have normally loaded it.’ On the other hand, ‘the title reflects a further belief: that the smooth, even flow of history, interrupted at long intervals by sharp, short political upheavals, is a myth invented by historians; that the life of nations, as of individuals, proceeds in jerks ... and that there are periods of accelerated development in both which can without distortion of language be called revolutionary, even though they have nothing to do with tumbrils or barricades.’²⁴ Over 500 and more pages Dickson now deploys his methodology to demonstrate his conceptual assertion. It’s a masterful performance, which deserves a reasonably full exposition here.

The British economy from the 1690s was transformed by success in war. The contest with France was essentially about trade and colonies, and it was won because of the growth of state borrowing, which obviated too high taxation, whereas ‘the fiscal incompetence of the French monarchy was the main reason for its ultimate collapse’. This ‘rise of a system [of public borrowing] in the six decades before the Seven Years War was rapid enough, and important enough ... to deserve the name of the Financial Revolution’. But it depended on ‘stable and efficient government’: steady prices; gentle growth and rise in population; sensible and moderate politics, centred on Parliament, without religious strife; less difficulty with Scotland and Ireland; a freer press; and scope for talents within overall aristocratic control. All that in contrast to France.²⁵

Most contemporary discussion of this ‘financial revolution’ was censorious. It was seen as serving the government’s political interest, threatening propertied society and depressing the price of land (by raising the rate of interest), favouring ‘stock-jobbers’, many of them Jewish. Long-term borrowing began with the Bank of England, and the lottery, in the mid-1690s, imitating Dutch practices; importantly it was guaranteed by Parliament. When the Tories came to power in 1710, they had to accept this new ‘bourgeois’ financial structure. After 1714 Walpole *et al.* sought to pay off the ‘debts of the nation’, partly by selling them on to the South Sea Company.

There is a fascinating prosopography of the South Sea directors, presented as typical of a new business elite. Dickson documents the ‘blind enthusiasm reminiscent of Gadarene swine’ with which the government’s creditors subscribed to the company, both long-term annuitants and holders of redeemable stock, in a ‘confidence trick entirely dependent on the rise in market price of South Sea stock’. Speculation was compounded by the effects of Law’s Scheme in France, much foreign investment and new company flotations. All was reversed after a few weeks as the market collapsed and the company was bailed out in part by a new government under Walpole, a most able financier, ‘who

²⁴ *The Financial Revolution*, xvii.

²⁵ *The Financial Revolution*, 11–14.

applied the harsh cautery of common sense to the soaring dreams and megalomaniac expectations of the South Sea year'.²⁶

There are elaborate calculations to show how various kinds of investors fared: annuitants lost *c.* 50 per cent of their funds, on a rough average; others did less badly. The South Sea Company survived, although its directors were expropriated in part and it became merely an arm of the Exchequer. And confidence in government and the Bank of England bounced back: 'despite all defects in the handling of English public finance, for the rest of the century it remained more honest, as well as more efficient, than that of any other country in Europe.' During the 1720s and 30s Walpole's 'pacific mercantilism' fused a conservative landed elite with a progressive commercial one, under the aegis of Parliament, to promote growth, significantly reducing the national debt and the rate of interest payable on it. The renewed wars of the 1740s were as expensive as that of the Spanish Succession had been. However, the national debt could now be more than doubled with the help of 'monied men in the city', who through the Bank of England arranged subscriptions to an array of government issues, including the lottery, while Henry Pelham (another of Peter's heroes) negotiated the rate of interest downwards in the teeth of establishment opposition.

All this was possible because of 'the development of an efficient market in securities' in London, which allowed the state to float long-term loans without promising to redeem them. Who were the creditors? Another massive prosopography, accompanied by intricate calculations and multiple tables, shows there were *c.* 4,000 of them by 1720, a mercantile rather than a landed interest, with many small investors, but the bulk of stock owned by middling commercial groups, mainly from the London area, some Huguenots at the start, some Jews, quite a few women, mostly individual holdings. There follows a similar superb analysis of foreign investors, rising from *c.* 10 per cent to 15 per cent of the whole: mainly Dutch, some Swiss, German, etc., and again including a striking number of women.

Short-term loans followed their own course of development, and are examined separately. The bewildering and complex tally system that had traditionally secured them almost failed in the 1690s. Then astute management by Godolphin, another candidate for Dickson's fiscal pantheon, enabled government credit in anticipation of taxes to survive further wartime crises, as well as his own fall in 1710. An increasingly sophisticated structure of Exchequer bills now arose, operating through the Bank of England. Similar measures regulated army and navy debts: 'Britannia ruled the waves – on credit'; likewise the market in bonds of the East India and South Sea companies, where the rate of interest could gradually be reduced. Another amazing prosopography follows: short-term creditors were mainly drawn from the new merchant class in

²⁶ *The Financial Revolution*, 112–76.

London, with some aristocrats and MPs; by far the largest individual lender was the Marlborough family.

Finally, Dickson gives us an elaborate discussion of the actual workings of the market for securities and the rate of interest. Government stocks tended to yield less over time, reflecting in part the stability of the state and hence confidence in it. That was roughly true for private loan dealings too, though he finds no close causal connection between the two. Markets were imperfect, especially as provincial centres emerged alongside London. The steady advance of jobbing/broking led to the establishment of the Stock Exchange in 1773, and Dickson dissects its personnel in one last stunning prosopographical study. Though a self-regulating body at arm's length from the state, it still dealt mostly in government stock; savers wanted above all security (those who didn't could choose the lottery), and typically at fixed interest. Company shares were less prominent; thus while the 'financial revolution' supplied important preconditions – the availability of capital, low levels of interest, an absence of regulation, the rise of a merchant class – it did not itself fund an incipient industrial revolution. 'The age of reason was also an age of war, and the English government's voracious demands for capital to finance it easily outpaced the requirements of private companies during the whole of the eighteenth century.'²⁷

The analysis in this concluding section is outstandingly pellucid, and perforce draws attention to the muddle-headedness of many contemporary commentators – and some modern ones too. Dickson makes no attempt at a general summary: he was never a man for peroration; but the wide-ranging implications of the book were rapidly registered by reviewers.²⁸ Some of them began drawing up a further agenda.²⁹ This would give rise to a whole new debate about what others soon christened the 18th-century 'fiscal-military state', to which I shall return. Peter hardly contributed to that debate. If he had surprised the world with his *Financial Revolution*, he surprised it no less by promptly turning to a quite different scholarly venture.

²⁷ *The Financial Revolution*, 488.

²⁸ E.g. Charles Wilson in *Economic History Review*, ns 20 (1967), 396–8: 'His solid architecture spans the subject with unrivalled authority. Its foundations are laid deep in the original sources and the whole is a monument to industry and craftsmanship of a high order.' Stephen B Baxter in *Journal of Modern History*, 41 (1969), 237f, notes the 'brilliant prose ... [with] complex and technical argument presented in an admirably lucid way'.

²⁹ Thus Michel Morineau, in *Annales ESC*, 26 (1971), 1028–9, regrets 'qu'il n'ait pas saisi plus souvent l'opportunité de prendre de la hauteur pour des vues d'ensemble, et qu'il n'a fait qu'effleurer les comparaisons internationales'; and cf. C.D. Chandaman below.

V

This new project was well under way by the time *The Financial Revolution* appeared. In 1965 Peter and Ariane took a year's sabbatical leave to live in Vienna, so he could explore the archives of the 18th-century Habsburg Monarchy. I have no full understanding of this remarkable career shift. But there are some pointers in earlier years.

Peter enigmatically attributed the first impulse for his work on Austrian finances to John Bromley, the historian of Anglo-Dutch relations.³⁰ Bromley taught at Oxford in the 1950s; moreover, for many years he struggled as editor to put together a volume of the *New Cambridge Modern History* on the decades around 1700, to which Dickson contributed a chapter about war finance in western Europe.³¹ Peter also recalled that Lucy Sutherland 'encouraged the earlier stages of research, and expressed characteristic interest in it'. He acknowledged a 'greatest single debt' to Alan Bullock, whose widely acclaimed life of Hitler had set an example – and especially for Peter we might suppose – of how to tackle even the most troubled history of the area with the benefit of an external perspective. But the initiative was surely Peter's alone.

He had a passion for languages, and learned good French, Spanish, and Greek (he took holidays in Greece, one in the company of Patrick Leigh Fermor). He would have liked to study German too at school, but had to settle for science instead, apparently under pressure from Oakeshott and his father. A love of music might have inclined Peter to know more of what, alongside all material developments, was also the age of Joseph Haydn. Not least of what Ariane brought into the marriage was a copy of Archdeacon William Coxe's substantial history of the 'house of Austria', long the standard authority on the subject in English: a rather primitive compilation, but Coxe had experienced Vienna at first hand in the 1770s.³²

There are hints of a central-European awareness in Peter's previous work. The Austrian ambassador was perhaps the first person from the area to insure with the Sun, already in 1763.³³ A flash in the pan, it seems; but then came the episode of the company's initial expansion on the Continent, to Germany in the 1830s, albeit that too was

³⁰ P.G.M. Dickson, *Finance and Government under Maria Theresia, 1740–1780* (2 vols, Oxford, 1987), p. v.

³¹ P.G.M. Dickson and John Sperling, 'War finance, 1689–1714', in *The New Cambridge Modern History*, vol.6: *The Rise of Great Britain and Russia, 1688–1715/25*, ed. J.S. Bromley (Cambridge, 1970), 284–315. The chapter on 'The Austrian Habsburgs' was written by John Stoye, an Oxford colleague who had also moved to the study of central Europe at much the same time. It is probably coincidence that George Holmes too turned his attention from British to continental history during the 1960s.

³² *History of the House of Austria: from the Foundation of the Monarchy by Rhodolph of Hapsburgh to the Death of Leopold the Second, 1218 to 1792* (3 vols, London, 1807).

³³ *Sun Insurance Office*, 76: 'His Excellency Count [Christian August] de Seilern the Imperial Ambassador', for £4,000.

soon cut short by a great fire in Hamburg.³⁴ More portentous must have been the prominent role of Austria in the mid-18th-century financial world, impinging on Great Britain especially in the form of war loans which had begun during the years after 1700, and latterly of commercial arrangements as well. These form the subject of Dickson's contribution to a *Festschrift* for Sutherland of which he was also one of the editors, and which, when it appeared in 1973, became the first published indication of his direct engagement with the government of Maria Theresia.³⁵

In *The Financial Revolution* linkages are more evident: the ramifications of Netherlandish trading and finance stretched into central Europe. Moreover, by the time he completed it, Peter was already exploring Austrian archives anyway, so some allusion to them could have been inserted at an advanced stage; for example, an obscure reference to emulation of Walpolean trade policies in Silesia in 1740, presumably discovered and smuggled in late.³⁶ Dickson notes how Habsburg funding was crippled by the absence in Vienna of that 'efficient market in securities' that London possessed.³⁷ He points up the remarkable fact that far the largest of all holdings in the South Sea Company was owned in Switzerland, by canton Berne, and identifies further substantial holdings across central Europe, as far as Hungary and Transylvania.³⁸

A key factor in his decision must have been the rising awareness, even revelation, that 18th-century Austria possessed a hitherto insufficiently recognised significance for historians. Peter once affirmed to me that – in as many words – 'if you can understand the Habsburg Monarchy, you will understand modern Europe'. I took him to mean that the survival of this uniquely adventitious dynastic state and its adaptations to gain and uphold status among the great powers of the continent were a key to grasping the norms of European modernisation: somehow the exception that proves the rule.

Equally important: he quickly persuaded himself that much about Austria which *was* recognised, had in fact been taken for granted, the conclusions outrunning proper exploitation of the evidence, i.e. that the *état de la recherche* on the public finances and related aspects of the 18th-century Monarchy did not satisfy the first maxim he had enunciated in the Preface to *The Financial Revolution*. Dickson was often disparaging about sins of omission and commission in Austrian historiography: thus the celebrated biographer of Maria Theresia, Alfred von Arneth, illustrated for him – in his fallibility

³⁴ *Sun Insurance Office*, 164ff.

³⁵ 'English commercial negotiations with Austria, 1737–1752', in *Statesmen, Scholars and Merchants*, 81–113. Cf. *Financial Revolution*, 333. I write Maria 'Theresia' here, in deference to Peter's own preferred spelling.

³⁶ *The Financial Revolution*, 201n, from the Hofkammerarchiv, which is not listed among the archives consulted.

³⁷ *The Financial Revolution*, 245.

³⁸ *The Financial Revolution*, 280, 292 (Berne); 317.

– that the higher scholars stood, the further they could fall; the French expert Jean Bérenger was another *bête noire*. However, there were some beacons of light, such as the worthy Freiherr von Mensi (1854–1935), a senior treasury official who had laboured prodigiously to clarify the Monarchy’s financial affairs in the decades after 1700.³⁹

For all his strictures, Peter was evidently beguiled by a Vienna that was gradually recovering its cultural vibrancy after the war and still parading the grandeur of its historical legacy. And he was hooked for the rest of his life on the past intricacies of the vast empire of which it had been the capital. I met him and Ariane there as a complete neophyte, just graduated, with a vague notion of working on early modern Austria. From their flat on Prinz-Eugen-Straße they were enjoying the city’s attractions – I received shrewd advice about where to eat (Schmidt im Schwarzenbergpalais and the lugubrious-sounding Smutny in the Elisabethstraße near the Opera). But Peter was already deeply and assiduously occupied with his new enterprise.

He took me to his main workplace, the Hofkammerarchiv, then still at its venerable Biedermeier location on the Johannesgasse, which housed state financial records. I saw the room, conserved in its pristine state, where the great tragedian and sardonic commentator Franz Grillparzer had held sway as director of the archive in the 1830s and 40s.⁴⁰ I heard stories about the then director, Hanns Leo Mikoletzky, whose own paperwork was in complete disarray and whose wife served *Tee mit Rhum*; but the official I met at this time was a courteous and kindly Herr Schmidt.

The main purpose of that visit was to acquaint me with samples of older German handwriting, *Kurrentschrift*. A kindness, but also a warning, for Peter, like all students in the field, had taken on an extra linguistic challenge. Over the years I recall joint counsels of despair at the impenetrability of so many of the texts on which Peter was drawing – even the fair copies, not to speak of the many rough office drafts. One longed for passages, even just individual words, written in another language, like Latin or Italian, which would at least be more legible. We even opined how much more efficient and stronger the Austrian state might have been if its public servants could actually understand at first sight what they were writing to each other.⁴¹

That was not the only headache in handling this material. The world of Habsburg officialdom had generated its own abstruse technical terms, its own *Beamtensprache*. How to tell a *Konzipist* (Grillparzer had been one of those once; likewise Franz Kafka) from a fully-fledged *Konzeptsbeamter*, or a mere *Kanzlist*? Or how to distinguish the various designations for the flood of decrees and pronouncements issued under Maria Theresia (and even more under her son, Joseph II): *Hofdekret*, *Patent*, *Verordnung*,

³⁹ Franz Mensi von Klarbach, *Die Finanzen Oesterreichs von 1701 bis 1740* (Vienna, 1890). On him see *Österreichisches Biographisches Lexikon*, s.v.

⁴⁰ Gerson Wolf, *Grillparzer als Archivdirektor* (Vienna, 1874).

⁴¹ Cf. *Finance and Government*, i.12f.

Hand-Billet, Entschließung, Befehl, Rescript, Novelle ... Nor was this the last linguistic challenge. Having gained access to German sources, Peter became ever more aware that a chief weakness of most of the standard literature was precisely its proprietorially German character. *Slavica et Hungarica non leguntur*. He made heroic and successful efforts to acquire a reading knowledge of both Czech and Hungarian, mainly in order to come abreast of secondary writing. Thus he could incorporate essential contributions by such as Josef Pekař, Jaroslav Prokeš and Bohuslav Rieger, or Ferenc Eckhart, Győző Ember and Dezső Szabó.

Over the years Peter built up an international network of colleagues with whom he could share queries and exchange materials. Most important among them was Derek Beales, an almost exact contemporary at Cambridge, whose career showed a remarkable convergence with his own: from notable earlier work on Britain and western Europe to a close concern with 18th-century Austrian government, which yielded his great biography of Joseph II. The pair furnish a fascinating and fruitful juxtaposition of diverse but eminently compatible approaches to the same subject area.⁴²

VI

Finance and Government under Maria Theresia finally appeared in two volumes in 1987. Peter reverted to the OUP imprint, though he was not fully happy with the result.⁴³ The shaping of the book raised major structural problems anyway. He explains that he wished to start with finances, but found this to be ‘unsatisfactory’ without coverage of government and society too, and has ended up dealing with the latter first, thus reversing his original conception. All that is compounded by difficulties with the evidence. Crucial material has been lost; while a good deal that survives is opaque, maybe ill-directed paperwork which needs to be read (and what a job that has been!) against the grain. Most important of all – here we have a refrain which accompanies the whole analysis – existing historiography has neglected a proper comprehensive review of the primary sources.⁴⁴

Thus Dickson begins with an overall survey, across the whole Monarchy, of population and social groups, followed by chapters on the church and the nobles, investigating especially their assets in land and other property. ‘Peasants and others’ come next, the ‘others’ turning out to be townspeople, whose modest role in the general story is eked out

⁴²Derek Edward Dawson Beales, born 12 June 1931, died 10 July 2023 (at almost exactly same age as Peter): a British Academy memoir by Eugenio Biagini and Tim Blanning is in preparation.

⁴³There were many misprints. The publishers said they would enclose paper slips with each copy, but many of these were lost.

⁴⁴*Finance and Government*, i.1–15.

with a fascinating excursus which reveals details from the inventories of 150 burghers of Vienna. The chapter on the city's merchant and banking community is wonderfully incisive, with a notable exploration of the Jewish element within it: dominant at the outset, when the traditions of *Hofjudentum* were still strong; reduced later in favour of other immigrants, particularly Calvinists. This treatment is supported by a separate one on an equivalent group of financiers in the Southern Netherlands, joined to Austria since 1714, but also a bridge to Dutch networks with which Dickson was already acquainted from his earlier work. In addition there is, floating free in its own bewilderingly dense 38-page appendix, an astounding prosopography of the capital's warehousemen (*Niederleger*) and wholesalers (*Großhändler*), compiled straight from the archives.

The rest of volume one addresses governance: the attempt by the Habsburg dynasty under Maria Theresia to transform a congeries of territories into a coherent centralised polity through the agency of what's often conventionally described as Austria's enlightened absolutism. For all the regime's claims to that epithet, Peter finds that its ameliorative 'principles' were honoured more in the breach; its operations were often divided and inconsistent. He luxuriates in the complexities of the shifting institutional structures by which Vienna sought to control the disparate populations, and gives extended treatment to shifting patterns of regional administration, where local elites could hold back reform more than has been generally acknowledged. A chapter on 'patterns of government' turns out to be about the changing role of the corporative estates as they were challenged by the new bureaucracy, its language and its managerial style, and its waves of new *Dekrete* (or *Patente* etc., etc.), especially on economic and fiscal matters.

Emerging from this forest of detail, Peter pauses briefly in a sunlit glade of interpretation, and ventures a general observation (a technique he adopts throughout the book, as an explicit guide for the reader to his wider thinking).⁴⁵ He determines that Maria Theresia was an 'active feudal monarch', rather than a 'paladin of enlightenment'; and that despite the very public persona of the Empress, her rule achieved results through collegiate authority and the power of the written rather than the spoken word (contrast the role of oratory in England or America). It's striking that both volumes are illustrated – but the persons depicted are all high officials of the crown (plus one eminent banker), whereas Maria Theresia herself is not shown.

From this clearing we plunge back into the woods to end volume one with a huge prosopography of Austrian officialdom. It shows that initial aristocratic domination became attenuated. In the provinces it tended to recover; but at the centre many fresh trained bourgeois *Beamte* came to the fore. Again some thoughtful wider inferences are tentatively drawn from the evidence, as that in England Parliament may have been

⁴⁵ *Finance and Government*, i.325; cf. i.2: 'reviews of findings'.

instrumental in limiting the rise of the civil service, and the Anglican establishment had a far larger stake in administration than did the Catholic church in the Habsburg lands.

This first volume affords a consummate epitome of Maria Theresia's state, a pioneering achievement which yet harks back, appropriately enough, to the genres of *Statistik* and *Staatenkunde* devised in 18th-century Germany by the likes of Achenwall and Schlözer. In that spirit, volume two begins with a memorable statement of the Dicksonian *modus operandi*: 'It is now time to put some numbers into this hitherto largely qualitative exposition.' He does so with a vengeance, beginning with the great programme of tax reform introduced by Count Friedrich Wilhelm Haugwitz in the late 1740s, and commenting on the historiography as well as the documents in his effort to achieve some statistical clarity. Then he moves to the next phase, the debates of the 1760s about how to raise revenue and reduce debt in the aftermath of the crippling Seven Years War, with elaborate detail on how that was partially achieved.

All this has prepared the ground for an attempt to calculate Austria's peacetime state budget: again Peter uncovers much contemporary and historiographical muddle, showing confusions between gross and net income, between estimates and actualities, between real revenue and loans. He quantifies the main revenue streams: the principal direct tax (Contribution), the forms of excise, the state monopolies ('the Monarchy partly rested on a pillar of salt'). Setting all of this against the main expenditure items, led by the army and debt-servicing, Dickson constructs balance sheets, for various years and for different regions – since much income was expended locally, and may never have shown up in central accounting.

There is more, much more, to follow on the prime budgetary items. Roughly half the costs of an army that had risen to a quarter of a million men were met out of direct taxes; the rest derived from British and then French subsidies, and from sources of credit which increasingly involved imposition of more-or-less forced loans and a still limited resort to printing money. The Contribution is subjected to minute examination in its myriad modes: Dickson surveys its complicated history, nature and means of collection. He notes with irony some of the droller expedients: an excise imposed on beer in the 1770s was called 'Catastrierte Bier-Fleischkreuzer-Viehaufschlags- und Classenssteuerrelutionsauflage und extraordinari Tranksteuer'.⁴⁶ He shows that the strenuous efforts to augment tax revenue enjoyed considerable success, not least since the clergy put up little resistance. A French-style 1789 never threatened.

Finally, Dickson turns to the loan market. He identifies external credit providers from the 1690s onwards, mainly in Amsterdam and London, terrain with which he had long been familiar. These owned about half Austria's state debts by 1740; later more of it was held in the detached Habsburg territories of the Southern Netherlands and Milan. There

⁴⁶ *Finance and Government*, ii.198.

is (of course) a prosopography of the main bankers and lenders, which allows Peter to point to the key role of noble estates as a whole, alongside that of some individual aristocrats, in funding the crown. That would accord with his broader depiction of a rough *modus vivendi* between ruler and local elites, with a different balance struck in each of the many territories of the Monarchy.

Yet there are no resounding conclusions. The work ends suddenly, *in mediis rebus*, and in a welter of appendices and tables. Dickson had delivered an astonishingly authoritative verdict; but he felt all too keenly how much work would still be needed before any firm assertions could be made. Reviewers were less tentative: plaudits like ‘extraordinary book’, *Standardwerk*, ‘seminal study’, ‘magisterial work’, ‘inspired labours’ flowed freely; though there were some expressions of puzzlement about the organisation of the material and the absence of confident judgments.⁴⁷ Grete Klingenstein, doyenne of Austrian *dix-huitièmistes*, views it in retrospect as ‘one of the most significant contributions to eighteenth-century Habsburg history in the past decades. His strictly empirical approach has brought forward a great wealth of archival material hitherto neglected, and the clear-cut conclusions and concomitant sober style have given his work a quality of classical dimensions.’

VII

During the 1970s and 80s Peter continued his sterling service to St Catherine’s: he acted as vice-master for two years from 1975. A university readership (in ‘Modern History’) from 1978 had allowed him to complete *Finance and Government*. Then the award of an ad hominem professorship (for which he now assigned himself to the ‘Early Modern’ period)⁴⁸ saw him through from 1989 till retirement in 1996. He now took on less undergraduate work, though he continued to teach 19th-century British politics with Angus Macintyre – a great friend, whose tragic premature death deeply affected him – and Cecilia Dick. There were more graduate pupils instead, and Peter became anchorman in a research seminar on the 18th century, convened together with Paul Langford and Joanna Innes.

⁴⁷ Ernst Wangermann in *English Historical Review*, 104 (1989), 427–9; Jeremy Black in *European History Quarterly*, 20 (1990), 304–6; Larry Neal in *Economic History Review*, 42 (1989), 426–7; Karl A Roeder in *American Historical Review*, 94 (1989), 805–6: ‘The amount of research that must have been expended ... boggles the mind’. Belated but most extensive: Lothar Schilling in *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung*, 21 (1994), 274–7: ‘der wissenschaftliche Ertrag [kann] ... kaum hoch genug veranschlagt werden’. One dissentient voice was Hermann Rebel, in *Journal of Modern History*, 64 (1992), 304–6.

⁴⁸ Such designations were made in consultation with the appointee.

A young Robert Bucholz, fresh from Cornell, encountered him at that seminar in the early 80s, and neatly conveys his first impression of ‘a quietly commanding figure, the Oxford don out of central casting, dignified, a little formal, a historian’s historian’. Alienated from his initial supervisor, who thought his quantitative study of the British royal household at the time of Queen Anne’s ‘Augustan’ court had lost its way, he turned to Peter, who instead encouraged him, characteristically commenting that ‘this sort of work takes time’, and took on the supervisory role himself. That mentorship gave Bucholz his academic compass: ‘Dickson’s authority, his calm and calming wisdom, his wry bemusement at the world; his voice, stentorian and commanding, still rings in my ears.’

But predominantly Peter now advised on central European topics. Regina Pörtner turned to him for guidance when frustrated by tribulation in her doctoral project about the Austrian Counter-Reformation (it turned out that the Jesuit records she had been counting on were destroyed by over-zealous reformers under Maria Theresia ...). Again a supervisory relationship resulted, and she profited from Peter’s ‘capacity for explanation, his inexhaustible patience, tact, and kindness, as well as his insistence that “mind must impose itself on matter”’. There was always a no-nonsense streak, which fits with Peter’s lifelong fascination for practical kinds of historical actor – many of them seeking direct financial gain (either personally or for someone else but with a percentage for themselves) – and with the material substance of human interactions which underpins so much of his own work.

Finance and Government proved to be Peter’s last book. But there was much more still to come, in a string of weighty but pellucid articles. One of them strikingly reverted to an earlier, pre-Austrian theme: in it he, together with J.V. Beckett, undertakes a comprehensive dissection of the finances of the dukes of Chandos.⁴⁹ James Brydges, the first duke, one of most spectacular profligates of the whole Dicksonian era, quite lacking in the asset-management skills of his cousin Marlborough, was one of the principal borrowers from the Sun Fire Office. His extravagant son and heir, Henry, did even worse; likewise the third and last duke, another Henry: all ‘lived effortlessly outside their incomes’.

⁴⁹P.G.M. Dickson and J.V. Beckett, ‘The Finances of the Dukes of Chandos: Aristocratic Inheritance, Marriage, and Debt in Eighteenth-Century England’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 64 (2001), 309–55. The authors had both lighted independently on the Chandos papers in the Huntington Library at San Marino CA. John Beckett writes modestly: ‘Somewhat to my surprise he proposed that we write a joint article. I was only too keen to agree although, in truth, I think much of the final piece of work was his rather than mine. This was partly because he was a meticulous scholar and had worked systematically through the Chandos material in a manner I really could not match because I was trying to cover many documents in as short a time as I could.’

It's a story of purchases and sales, dowries and jointures, annuities and personalities, settlements and entails, told with consummate skill and not a little mordant wit. There is diverting – but relevant – detail, such as that the second duke married (reputedly by purchase) the daughter of an ostler at the Pelican Inn, Newbury: a happy union, till the duchess lost her mind and inadvertently caused the death of her husband by withdrawing the chair he was about to sit down upon. Throughout the authors show themselves better informed, and much shrewder, than the dukes themselves can ever have been.

The episode reveals Peter's continuing proficiency in the world of English landownership and wealth management: or rather British, for when Regina Pörtner turned to postdoctoral work on Scottish legal history, especially the difficult subject of entails, she found him not only bountiful in expert advice, but happy to indulge a passing fling with his own North British ancestry, so far as it comported with his overall 'cosmopolitan tolerance'. However, Peter's involvement with the British past now remained low-level.⁵⁰ Central Europe predominated in his published output, the bulk of which appeared in his house journal, the *English Historical Review*. There, as a great succour to generations of hard-pressed editors, he regularly reviewed additions to the German-language literature: the first in 1968, the last in 2014. There too were issued half of the six articles in which his further research on Austria bore fruit. They are not for the faint-hearted; but each is finely wrought, meticulous, richly learned and sharply focused on its own *Problematik*.

One of these filled in a gap in *Finance and Government*. It distils a key source, newly available, for understanding of the most important single decision in fiscal governance under Maria Theresia: the Haugwitz tax reform, as interpreted in memoranda of the mid-1750s by the Empress' now semi-retired confidant Johann Christoph von Bartenstein.⁵¹ His assessment, broadly chiming with Dickson's own, that the measures were salutary, but too rigidly and aggressively implemented, anticipated the radical modifications made when Kaunitz replaced Haugwitz as chief architect of Habsburg policy.

The rest of the articles take the story further, into the post-Theresian period; and all reflect Dickson's mission to 'put some numbers in'. But alongside the statistics there are

⁵⁰In 1993, for a reprint of *The Financial Revolution*, he was able to insert (pp. xvii-xxiii) a brief survey of publications in the field over the intervening quarter of a century. He covers especially the rise of political stability, and the role of crown and Parliament, as a precondition for business confidence; the work of Brewer and others on taxation; and the 'commercial revolution' of the period. That is followed by a more extended new section (pp. xxiii-xlv) of 'corrections and additions', cast as a page-by-page commentary on the original.

⁵¹'Baron Bartenstein on Count Haugwitz's "New System" of Government', in *History and Biography: Essays in Honour of Derek Beales*, ed. T.C.W. Blanning and David Cannadine (Cambridge, 1996), 5–20. Dickson had known of this when writing *Finance and Government*, cf. *ibid.* 226, 239; but only through a summary. The MSS, which were supplied to him from the papers of Zinzendorf (see below), must have been made available later.

also people, characterised with his customary deftness and acuity, for although Peter eschewed the genre of biography as such – we’ve already seen his preference for group analysis – he always appreciated the role of the individual, and these later articles revolve around two key personalities of the reform movement. The first was Joseph II. His decade of personal rule in the 1780s constituted an extension and intensification of that of Maria Theresia, as the Emperor directed and oversaw the minutiae of financial policy far more thoroughly than his mother had ever done. However, Dickson held off closer engagement with Joseph himself, given Derek Beales’ full-dress biography, complementary to his own work and overlapping in its preparation from the 1970s onward.⁵² They exchanged much information and traded fraternal suggestions; the essay on Bartenstein appeared in a celebratory Beales Festschrift.

The Emperor is evidently the protagonist in ‘Joseph II’s Hungarian Land Survey’, a comprehensive study of one of the largest and most portentous of the government’s reform initiatives.⁵³ Peter’s treatment of Hungary was already distinctive in *Finance and Government*: setting it alongside the rest of the Monarchy through even-handed scrutiny, but without forcing it into any kind of Austrocentric interpretative mould. Now he examined the massive statistical intervention which agitated Hungarian rural society, including the peasants, during the 1780s. Dickson confirms that a prime purpose of it was indeed to remove noble tax-exemption, potentially a huge economic and political stroke against the most entrenched oppositional force faced by Habsburg rule; though this was never made explicit, and was lost as the project had to be abandoned at Joseph’s death. There are the usual wise general reflections and some prosopography as leaven to the mass of quantitative evidence in this virtuoso deployment of diverse and challenging source materials.

Joseph is again the prime mover in Peter’s next article, as the ruler who ventured much further and more vehemently against the privileges and powers of the Catholic establishment than had Maria Theresia. Dickson’s rich survey of the ‘reshaping of the Austrian church’ explains the regime’s broadly successful campaign and the comparatively muted resistance from the clergy by showing that ecclesiastical finances were weaker than had always been assumed.⁵⁴ In the field of religion Joseph thus had a larger and lasting impact: Dickson compares the state of church assets in 1790 with figures for the mid-19th century to show how and why the clerical estate had been brought under effective state control.

The third in this trio of ‘Josephinist’ pieces is the most ambitious yet, assaying nothing less than a quantitative survey of the bureaucracy created by Austrian absolutist

⁵² Derek Beales, *Joseph II*. Vol I: *In the Shadow of Maria Theresa, 1741–80*. Vol 2: *Against the World, 1780–90* (Cambridge, 1987–2013).

⁵³ *English Historical Review*, 106 (1991), 611–34.

⁵⁴ ‘Joseph II’s Reshaping of the Austrian Church’, *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), 89–114.

rule, measured in a series of snapshots for years between 1780 and 1796.⁵⁵ Dickson follows the bewildering institutional shifts over the period, as central bodies (*Hofstellen*) came and went, and as regional executives buckled under pressure from the restless Emperor, only to re-emerge after his death. Their competences covered administrative, political, financial, judicial and other matters, alone or in combination. Estimates of overall numbers of personnel are fraught with problems of definition, as well as the patchiness of evidence – perhaps around 5,000 *Beamte* (in some sense) in the Vienna-based offices and roughly twice as many again in the provinces. Likewise with the social background: evidently a kind of mutuality between nobles and bureaucrats was established; the former could embrace the latter, and vice versa. The volume of business exploded under Joseph: decrees multiplied at least fivefold – and typically for the Emperor, they were regularly accompanied by admonitions against excessive *Schreiberey*.

In 2007, after a gap of a decade, Dickson showed more fruits of his ongoing research, still with Josephinist governance as the theme, but now with a deuteragonist alongside the Emperor, indeed a figure whom he evidently found both fascinating and appealing, perhaps as an encapsulation of the best traits of the new officialdom. The Zinzendorfs were an old Austrian aristocratic clan, forced into exile as Lutherans during the Counter-Reformation, where the most famous member of the family, Nikolaus, became a leader of Protestant revivalism. Two of his nephews were drawn back to Vienna to pursue careers in Habsburg service, and in *Finance and Government* we had already encountered Count Ludwig, who in the 1760s proposed that in order to monitor the state budget Maria Theresia create an audit office (Hofrechnungskammer). He became its first president.

Ludwig's half-brother Karl, eighteen years younger, followed in his footsteps, indeed himself became president of the Hofrechnungskammer under Joseph. Early in the reign the Emperor gave him the job of bringing order to the state's management of its financial business, and Zinzendorf largely succeeded. Dickson uses evidence assembled by this massive accounting exercise to cast light on the workings of Josephinist fiscality.⁵⁶ Much remained imprecise and unprofessional; but there was comparatively sound budgeting through the 1780s, and not many loans or paper issues till the Ottoman war. Thus – a regular refrain with Peter – the Monarchy avoided the rocks on which its French equivalent foundered.

In the process Dickson clearly warmed to Zinzendorf as 'one of the more remarkable actors on the late eighteenth-century Austrian political stage'. He sketches his person: 'shy, awkward, fiercely ambitious, emotionally deprived by his rigorously spartan Protestant upbringing, Zinzendorf, by his own admission, was unversed in the ways of

⁵⁵ 'Monarchy and Bureaucracy in Late Eighteenth-Century Austria', *English Historical Review*, 110 (1995), 323–67.

⁵⁶ 'Count Karl von Zinzendorf's "New Accountancy": The Structure of Austrian Government Finance in Peace and War, 1781–91', *The International History Review*, 29 (2007), 22–56.

the world, better at paper than people, ever the victim of intriguers with superior guile ... a man with enlightened economic and social views and expert in statistics, a post-1867 liberal born before his time.⁵⁷ Zinzendorf possessed for Peter two sterling virtues. He was a figures man, never happier than when compiling or scrutinizing balance sheets and the like. And he was an archivist's dream: he left a huge paper trail, including a 57-volume diary, which scholars have only recently begun to exploit.

The sympathy for Zinzendorf and the desire to highlight his significance carried over into Dickson's last publication, which appeared in 2018: a finely chiselled text with never a hint that its author was in his late eighties.⁵⁸ It tells of Zinzendorf's role at the very apex of the Austrian administration. At the start of Joseph's reign he found himself promoted from a provincial governorship to become what Zinzendorf describes as 'privy finance minister in the cabinet of the ruler'. More ominously he was made chair of a key ad hoc body, the *Steuerregulirungs Hofkommission*, with responsibility for implementing a new *Grundsteuer*, or land tax, a kind of *impôt unique* intended as a more efficient and simplified way of harnessing the fiscal resources of the Monarchy. He was suited to this assignment, not least since he shared much of its physiocratic agenda; but the Emperor never gave him his head, and it all ended in tears by 1788, when Zinzendorf resigned his position and retired into disgruntled passivity.

We know the story from Zinzendorf's subsequent exhaustive account of what went wrong. The task was a colossal and extremely complex one, even when it only embraced the Austrian lands (later, Hungary was added to the portfolio, as readers of an earlier article by Dickson would be aware). Yet Joseph rushed to complete the undertaking far too quickly, employing what were necessarily inadequate and untrained resources, especially peasant surveyors alongside representatives of the squirearchy. The strong anti-noble bias in the procedures and the intended results was, Zinzendorf felt, both unfair and unwise (his arguments would later be taken up against their ruler by the Austrian estates opposition). Above all, according to Zinzendorf, the calculations weren't correct: no clear and reliable measures had been adopted in order to estimate yields, incomes, or values. He even constructed his own elaborate set of figures to indicate how the new tax should have been apportioned. He also calculates with remarkable, indeed uncannily exactness that the whole abortive operation cost a total of 6,745,695 fl.

Did Peter Dickson sometimes imagine himself behind Zinzendorf's desk? Certainly he is again unusually forthcoming about his subject's personal qualities. Zinzendorf possessed 'the aptitude for facts and figures of Edmund Burke's sophisters and calculators

⁵⁷ 'Zinzendorf's "New Accountancy"', 26. In Austria he had converted to Catholicism, and even entered a celibate religious order (cf below). 1867, the date of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, counts as the start of the age of liberalism in the Habsburg lands.

⁵⁸ 'Count Karl von Zinzendorf on Joseph II's New Taxation', *English Historical Review*, 133 (2018), 323–50.

... the ambition, strivings and self-doubt of the romantic hero'. As holder of a sinecure ecclesiastical preferment 'he was forbidden to marry, but he yearned for marriage and children ... Politically, he anticipated the vocabulary and mental climate of the French Revolution in its early stages: the virtuous citizen seeking the public good; the importance of economic and religious liberty; the power of institutions to increase public happiness.' It reads like a kind of envoi, revealing some of the motivation, not just of Zinzendorf, but perhaps also of Dickson in devoting over fifty years to study of the reform movement in 18th-century Austria.

There's one small postscript, or rather *Nachtrag*, to this survey of Dickson's oeuvre. His latest published work, from 2019, is actually – unlike all that went before – a collaborative text, and in German. It was evidently compiled some years earlier, probably as much as a decade, jointly with an Austrian colleague, for a handbook to the history of administration (in the larger central-European sense of that word) of the early modern Habsburg lands. Peter's two contributions are factual and expository. One outlines the government's financial policies through the 'reform period' of 1748–90. The other briefly follows the chequered 18th-century history of the Hofkammer, that institution where he had spent so many fruitful hours since first coming to know it in 1964–5.⁵⁹

VIII

All this time Peter could enjoy domestic fulfilment. He was devoted to Ariane, 'uxori dilectissimae' in the dedication of *The Financial Revolution* (red roses were his most visible means of expressing this affection), and to his daughter Olimpia, born in 1975. Their house was 'perfect and beautifully furnished', as a long-time friend and neighbour, Susan Seville, recalls. He valued life in Iffley and his numerous academic neighbours there, though reticence tended to keep him from closer involvements. He was long a devotee of cinema, including Western films, but also relished more active recreation. He stayed fit and vigorous into old age, helped by his preference for light lunches and perhaps by his favourite lapsang tea which he procured from Oxford's Covered Market. In *Who's Who* he listed 'swimming' as his sporting pursuit: he enjoyed sea-bathing on family holidays; but he seems to have been more competitive on the tennis court. A longtime opponent, the late Brian Smith, noted that he 'played his strokes flat, without topspin'. When he felt his play inadequate, he could be as hard

⁵⁹P.G.M. Dickson and Peter Rauscher, 'Die Hofkammer im 18. Jahrhundert', and 'Das habsburgische Finanzwesen im Reformzeitalter', in *Verwaltungsgeschichte der Habsburgermonarchie in der Frühen Neuzeit*. Vol I (in 2): *Hof und Dynastie, Kaiser und Reich, Zentralverwaltungen, Kriegswesen und landesfürstliches Finanzwesen*, ed. Michael Hochedlinger et al. (Vienna, 2019), 848–55, 960–81. At the end of the work is a listing of its 58 contributors. The other 57 all show email addresses.

on himself – in full public view – as if he had misconstrued some document about state finances.

Essential unclubbability admitted of one large exception. Elected to the British Academy in 1988, Peter took his membership seriously. He regularly travelled to London for meetings and pondered the issues which were addressed there.⁶⁰ He was troubled by what he (rightly) thought was the arbitrariness of electoral procedures, which at that time remained the chief activity of Sections. Perhaps he viewed it rather as Joseph II did (though with less vitriol) an errant *Hofstelle* or a *dicasterium* not wholly fit for purpose. Sometimes he couldn't hide his exasperation. Tim Blanning 'always enjoyed Peter's company, especially at H9 meetings, where his waspish – but always judicious – comments injected a little entertainment into what were usually dreary events. But I don't think you would be able to print any of them.' Blanning adds, as a reminder that Peter could be punctilious as well as precise: 'My clearest memory of someone for whom I had huge respect on all fronts is of being upbraided – justly – for getting the plural ending of a fourth declension Latin word wrong.'

He looked to, and helped achieve, more method and system in the choice of new Fellows, the Academy's chief responsibility. However, he balked at the further implications. By 2007 'disclosure', i.e. informing candidates that they were under consideration for the Fellowship, was deemed mandatory, in light of new data-protective legislation; and Peter hated it. 'It represents that triumph of abstract principles over common sense, and in this case common humanity, which is characteristic of so many areas of national life.' And he mused about confidentiality: 'the bizarre idea that I somehow own facts about myself, and no one else is to "process" them without my consent. ... I like the concept of confidentiality, not least because it subsumes the old-fashioned notion of honour.' He worried about the introduction of 'assessment' – opinions on candidates solicited from outside the immediate circle of electors – and wonders if it could remain in-house, given the sensitivity and scope for bias in responses. The President agreed with him that too many of the resultant evaluations were 'far more promotional than evidential'.⁶¹

Later Peter, with his acute sense of propriety, was censorious about the Academy's solecism in listing its life peers with first names as if they were 'younger sons of a duke or marquis ... which simply makes us look ignorant to those parts of the great and good who know the rules. And whom we wish to influence.'⁶² Alongside such quixotic sallies,

⁶⁰ From 1990 he served for over ten years on the British Academy's *Records of Social and Economic History* committee. In meetings he intervened so regularly on points of proper procedure that another member later revealed to Academy staff that he had mistakenly assumed that Peter was the chair of the committee.

⁶¹ Correspondence with the President (Onora O'Neill) and Secretary (Robin Jackson), 2007–8, in BA archives.

⁶² Letter to Robin Jackson, 14 August 2013, BA archives.

he made one notable contribution to the life of the Academy, with a memoir of Alan Bullock. The matter hung fire after Bullock's death in 2004: in attempts to commission it (as an official privately noted) 'some quite distinguished historians are not shown at their best'. Eventually Peter volunteered to compile the memoir, with assistance from Jose Harris, and it appeared in 2008: an outstandingly perspicuous, sensitive and accessible tribute to his old mentor.⁶³

In 2016 Peter and Ariane, feeling themselves increasingly frail, made a move from Iffley to join their daughter and son-in-law, David Lindgren, in a roomy property with annexe at Freeland, long a hamlet in the parish of Eynsham, nowadays a separate community, some ten miles outside Oxford. Taunton House, built originally in the 1890s, had been lived in by, and named after, the most prominent local landed family.⁶⁴ It occupied a pleasing open location, close to the village green, and with an Anglican nunnery and a care home as neighbours. The attraction for Peter was enhanced by the presence of three grandchildren, George, Charles and Ophelia. One drawback was the need for him to dispose of most of his books. This was the point, it seems, when he finally laid down his pen.

Never one to fuss about his health, Peter was spared all but a few falls, some leg pain, and an eye accident until almost the end. His last illness was very brief, and he died at home peacefully of heart failure on 16 October 2021, midway through his ninety-third year. A service of thanksgiving was held at North Oxfordshire Crematorium on 10 November 2021, and a memorial event at the University Church and at St Catherine's on 28 October 2023. He asked for his ashes to be scattered 'in the English countryside'.

IX

There's a kind of domesticity about Peter's scholarly legacy too. He didn't advertise himself; emphatically he was not a joiner or a networker in the contemporary sense. Amid a rising tide of academic conferences, he hardly attended any at all. He left others to come to him, both substantially and intellectually; and his working style became very old-fashioned, the charm of his dense black- (sometimes red)-ink fountain-pen communications sadly outweighed more and more by their impracticability. One conference he did attend – on his doorstep in Oxford – was a gathering in 2006 to commemorate the bicentenary of the end of the Holy Roman Empire. On the attendance list of some ninety

⁶³ Dickson and Harris, 'Bullock'. Cf. Dickson to Robin Jackson, and internal BA memos, 5 December 2007. The bulk of the memoir was by Peter. He writes: 'I have just completed a memorial text ... Jose Harris has helped me with it.'

⁶⁴ *Victoria County History, Oxfordshire* at <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol12/pp116-117>

participants his entry was the only one to lack an email address. He never advanced beyond an electric typewriter.

Dickson's impact was correspondingly gradual and often oblique. But it proceeded steadily, before accelerating when some of his findings about the British state were incorporated into what became a larger claim about finance and governance in relation to warfare across the whole of 18th-century Europe. The catalyst was John Brewer's influential book *The Sinews of War*, published in 1988, with its highly ambitious agenda: 'The creation of what I call "the fiscal-military state" was the most important transformation in English government between the domestic reforms of the Tudors and the major administrative changes of the first half of the nineteenth century.' Brewer seeks to 'expose the hidden sinews which animated the British body politic'; Britain as 'the military *Wunderkind* of the age'.⁶⁵

Brewer acknowledges not only Peter's 'brilliant and inspiring published work', but also his kindness in reading part of his draft text. Dickson, he says, 'establishes beyond doubt the central contribution of borrowing to the survival and subsequent expansion of the English state ... but he underestimates the importance of taxes to the so-called financial revolution. An effective tax system ... was a necessary condition of the new credit mechanisms.' That's a desideratum already picked up by reviewers of *The Financial Revolution* like C.D. Chandaman.⁶⁶

The model constructed by Brewer for Britain was soon deemed to be far more widely applicable. It's appropriate that the fullest encapsulation of this interpretative schema thus far was laid out in a *Festschrift* for Peter Dickson himself, nursed over the years by his pupil Christopher Storrs and eventually appearing in 2009. The original plan had been to encompass 18th-century Anglo-Austrian relations and comparisons; but although Peter's own work had already highlighted the intrinsic merits of such a collection, it fell foul of publishers' misgivings. It was then successfully reconfigured as a volume squarely about the 'fiscal-military state'.⁶⁷ There are chapters on all the powers of Europe, including Austria (by Michael Hochedlinger); and they pay at least indirect tribute to the formative scholarship of the honorand. Yet his significance remains understated, beyond a brief general tribute; the book does not even engage directly with the linkage between Dickson and Brewer. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, Peter was delighted with the accolade, and travelled all the way to Dundee for a

⁶⁵ John Brewer. *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688–1783* (London, 1988), pp. ix–xiv. Peter certainly approved of the new terminology: 'the "fiscal-military state", to use J Brewer's instantly classic formulation', *The Financial Revolution* (1993 reprint [cf. above n. 50]), p. xix.

⁶⁶ Brewer, *Sinews of Power*, ix, 73. Chandaman in *Historical Journal*, 11 (1968), 378–80.

⁶⁷ Christopher Storrs (ed.), *The Fiscal Military Sstate in Eighteenth-Century Europe. Essays in Honour of P.G.M. Dickson* (Aldershot, 2009), tribute at 18–20. Other scholars, especially pupils, would have liked to contribute, had space permitted (ex info Chris Storrs).

presentation ceremony. Very recently another collaborative work, with more detailed treatment of the Habsburg Monarchy as a ‘fiscal-military state’, has been dedicated to his memory.⁶⁸

A couple of further recent instances must suffice to indicate Dickson’s continuing wider stimulus. A virtuoso treatment by Cornel Zwielerlein of attitudes to fire and related risk-management in central Europe over several centuries acknowledges his seminal role in opening up the subject and devotes a whole chapter to the Sun Office.⁶⁹ New work on banking history by Patrick O’Brien and Nuno Palma takes from Peter the major historical point that Britain financed the vast proportion of its wars fought from 1689 to 1802 on borrowed money and that for the next century most of taxation was allocated to servicing the national debt.⁷⁰

An astute critic of the intellectual constructions of others, Peter was too pragmatic and modest to develop any of his own. In particular, having applied the term so provocatively in his first *magnum opus*, he never sought to develop a wider theory of revolution. Symptomatically perhaps, reviews back in 1967, predominantly by economic historians, did not pick up on this: evidently his title constituted no challenge for them. Whereas he employs the word from time to time – with and without inverted commas – in relation to Austria, especially for the activities of Haugwitz and Joseph II, the burden of his analysis is, as we have seen, to show how the Habsburg lands avoided revolution of the kind that befell France.

Yet Dickson definitely associated himself with ‘reform’ – free from any semantic baggage. It cannot be an accident that his work engaged so much with attempts to change societies: if not necessarily to make them radically better, at least to purge them of older abuses and order them more efficiently. And his praise, always cautious and unconstrained by fashion, was bestowed on those who promoted such outcomes with a degree of moral seriousness. One such object (we encountered it earlier) was the ‘pacific mercantilism’ of Robert Walpole, to which Peter appended a revealing comment: ‘[L]ike many of the politicians of the 1930s, he had an active hatred of war, based on personal experience of its cost in blood and money’.⁷¹ Peter had not forgotten the blitz.

⁶⁸ *The Habsburg Monarchy as a Fiscal-Military State: Contours and Perspectives, 1648–1815*, ed. William D. Godsey and Petr Mat’á (*Proceedings of the British Academy* 247, 2022).

⁶⁹ *Prometheus Tamed: Fire, Security, and Modernities, 1400 to 1900* (Leiden 2021), 243f, 265f, 315, 388, 406, 410–45; a reworking of his earlier *Der gezähmte Prometheus: Feuer und Sicherheit zwischen Früher Neuzeit und Moderne* (Göttingen, 2011).

⁷⁰ ‘Danger to the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street. The Bank Restriction Act and the Regime Shift to Paper Money, 1694–1821’, *European Review of Economic History*, 24 (2020), 390–426; ‘Not an Ordinary Bank, but a Great Engine of State. The Bank of England and the British Economy, 1694–1844’, *Economic History Review*, 76 (2023), 305–29.

⁷¹ *The Financial Revolution*, 200.

In common with his protagonist Zinzendorf, the fastidious genius of Austrian statistics, Peter's greatest achievement was to establish firm quantitative foundations for an informed understanding of his chosen societies in the past. Of all his dicta – and he was a master of the pithy phrase – the most revealing of its begetter is the one I've already cited, which comes at the start of volume two of *Finance and Government*, after he has served up hundreds of pages as a kind of prolegomenon about the Habsburg state and society: 'It is now time to put some numbers in ...' Not a bad epitaph for a man who devoted his career to establishing – as we might say, adapting Ranke – 'wieviel es eigentlich gewesen', and who thereby achieved his own 'financial revolution' in the historiography of 18th-century Europe.

Acknowledgements

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Note on the author: Robert Evans is Regius Professor of History emeritus at the University of Oxford. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1984.

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