Introduction: ‘De Omni Scribili’

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This book is a tribute to a historian of rare ability, fertility and generosity: a grammar school boy from working-class London who became Britain’s authority on the histories of the Enlightenment and of madness; a Stakhanovite scholar, teacher and editor who became a media star; a Bohemian of astonishing efficiency who freely gave encouragement and assistance to students and colleagues, and to amateurs and the public at large. It was not hard to find willing contributors to this volume, for many historians grieved at his early death as we also treasure his example and are grateful for his rich gifts. This volume’s authors, like its editors, were Roy’s colleagues, collaborators and students; the collection represents some of his interests and approaches, and it illustrates the impact of his work on the fields which he enlivened. It is, therefore, also an exploration of what it means to be a ‘Porterian’ social historian.

As many of our contributors note, Roy had no ambitions to found a historical school or system. His was an embracing and flexible intellect, always willing to support the work of others, even when its subjects or approaches were outside his own wide range. So what does characterize his work and that of his collaborators and students? In part, it is an enthusiasm for the individual, the experiential and the local – for the people, places and things of an historical moment, especially for those which had been submerged or disregarded as tangential to the sweep of history. He wrote about the mad when few had done so, and about the Enlightenment of England rather than of the Continent. When medical history was mostly about doctors, he wrote about patients and their views. But although Roy took a magpie’s delight in the stories turned up by this approach, they were not just adornments of the text. In his history, the striking stories did the heavy lifting and made the theoretical load of social history seem light. They exemplified the historical impact of individual (though never isolated) choices and lives – not just those of ‘great men’ but of ordinary men and women. In turn, the appeal of the stories made the histories accessible to all.
The chapters in this volume cover topics ranging from Spanish anarchism to Hungarian hypnotism. The casts and periods are similarly diverse: begrimed gardeners jostle with grinning dentists in settings from the seventeenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Some of our authors ask big questions in small places: can the suburbs of south London, Porter’s home ground, tell us why blood itself did not become a commodity in Britain? Or what did Spanish anarchists and British working-class utopians have in common (the answer is sex), and why? Other essays take key present-day issues – the applicability of the insanity defence; the shaping of access to science, and social and individual responses to disability – and place them in rich and revealing historical contexts. One way or another, they all combine characteristics from Roy’s work. We hope they will appeal to the varied audiences that he reached so well.

We begin with an essay by Hal Cook, who came from Wisconsin to follow Roy as Director at the Wellcome. Examining the themes and style of the Porter corpus, Cook traces a central concern with the ideas of the Enlightenment as they were embodied in the practices of individuals – great and small, high and low. He notes that Roy was not much interested in the theory of historical writing or in models of society; instead, he valued the history of medicine, and especially the history of madness, as a tool for exploring the variety of lives and the richness of their interactions, both social and commercial. Roy loved eighteenth-century England for its variety and openness: the ranks could mix and merit could rise. He was not blind to power and class, and recognized the enormous contributions of E. P. Thompson and colleagues on the histories of oppression and resistance; but Porter’s world was the haunts of London rather than the factories and farms, trading houses or government offices. Cook is right that beneath Porter’s capacious bed there was no ideological Red. But if Porter did not write politics explicitly, his sympathies were well known. He had grown up in post-war, inclusive Britain, with its model welfare state and an educational system that encouraged and supported him to the highest level. He sought to repay that good fortune; egalitarian generosity was built into him; and by his standards, the Thatcherite (and Blairite) reaction was both controlling and mean.

In the next part of the volume, we move outward from Roy himself to address his impact as a historian and his approaches to the sciences of history and the politics of science. We turn first to Michel Foucault – another historian of madness, medicine and much more – who was in curious ways Roy’s opposite number in France. Foucault was a formalist and an ideologue of the left, who became known for his rereading of ‘moral’ psychiatry as extending professional control from the body to the mind. Roy was not unsympathetic to the anti-psychiatry movement, but his realism tempered his suspicion of professional medicine and he worked hard to develop a history of psychiatry that would satisfy doctors as well as social historians. For him, Foucault’s stimulating history could do neither – partly because the