I need to state at the outset that I owe a huge debt of gratitude to David Dilks for the significant impact he had on my life at Leeds and Oxford in the 1970s and at Singapore ever since. Without David’s influence and periodic intervention, my professional career would have almost certainly turned out quite differently.

Despite the fact that he has performed a number of cameo roles at various stages of my life, I have to confess I don’t begin to know what really makes him tick. He is an elusive fellow who guards his privacy almost inordinately well. For someone who has been in the spotlight for much of his life, he was rather embarrassed at the thought that I was going to prepare an essay on him for this volume and hoped it would be a brief affair. I laughed as only a prolix fellow should and gave him no such guarantee.

I think it would be entirely appropriate to call David a ‘high Tory’ – someone who early on in his career found a congenial home in the corridors of the Conservative and Unionist Party working closely with a number of the leading luminaries of that institution – some of whom had reached the top of the greasy pole in British politics in the post-war world. It’s clear that Anthony Eden, Harold Macmillan, Lord Home and RAB Butler trusted him and with good reason since he never let them down. Secrets that he became aware of were never divulged – at least not by him. David’s moral integrity wasn’t compromised. His sphinx-like persona gave nothing away. If Robert Blake was the older generation’s official historian of the party, David was seen by many as his natural successor. His two volume study of another stalwart of the
party – Lord Curzon – and his magisterial work on the much maligned figure of Neville Chamberlain, together with the scholarly grasp he acquired of Churchill’s turbulent career, made him a natural choice for that role until university administration lured him away from the archives and began to take up an overwhelming amount of his time. Tertiary administration’s gain was, alas, historical scholarship’s loss.

A Baring Scholar at Hertford College, Oxford (1956–59), David’s interests in International History were fostered by his two spells at the hothouse of St Antony’s (1959–60, 1961–62) and by his early undergraduate teaching assignments at the LSE. These were busy and productive years as he spent the decade working as a research assistant on the memoirs of Eden (1960–62), Marshal of the RAF Lord Tedder (1963–65) and Macmillan (1964–70). There was much to do. Access to closed archival papers is usually fascinating and always a great privilege, but the staple of fact checking, draft writing, editing and endless amounts of reading that comes with it does so at a great cost to the individual’s free time and often saps his energy. Working for prominent figures with a story to tell is rarely as easy as it sounds. Some can be considerable task masters and research assistants need as much enthusiasm and self-confidence as endurance and resilience to ride out the storms that occasionally erupt when material that they may have presented doesn’t go down well with their host and paymaster! On balance, however, David gained vastly from the experience. He was seen as a safe pair of hands: bright, scholarly and agreeable, but far from being a cloying sycophant.

Working on several fronts appealed to David. As he devilled in the archives for biographical details, he was gathering a mass of material for his projected manuscript on the tenure of the rather superior Lord Curzon as the Governor-General and Viceroy of India, and editing the diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, the analytically shrewd and dependable former Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office. All of this hyperactivity was going on while he was moving through the lecturing ranks at the LSE. This fine institution proved to be an ideal launching pad for his assault in 1970 on the new position of Professor of International History and Politics (IHP) at the University of Leeds. Despite his unflagging energy and commitment to the cause, David at only 32 was hardly a cast iron certainty for a professorship at a well-established university in West Yorkshire that might have been expected to appoint a more seasoned academic with bags of administrative experience on his record. Although he had only eight years of university service to his name by this stage, David did have youth, flair and that key asset ‘potential’ on his side. When linked to an impressive maturity