The General History of Mark Whittow

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Mark Whittow's career turned on 25 minutes in March 1998.

Before that, on leaving his Junior Research Fellowship at Oriel College, he'd known the frustrations of a decade without a secure job: positions for medievalists, let alone Byzantinists, have never been profuse and he'd struggled to find one.

But afterwards he would enjoy twenty years of remarkable professional success and high regard at St. Peter's and Corpus Christi, in the History Faculty, and latterly in the University as Senior Proctor.

On the morning in question he was interviewed for the medieval history fellowship at St. Peter's. He was the first up at 9 o'clock to give a short, specimen lecture and answer our questions. I can't remember exactly what Mark told us about the Second Crusade, but I do recall the brio and bravado with which he said it and his use of technology (which was bound to awe the fellows of St. Peter's). He was compelling as he drew his small audience into another age and world.

After he had finished, the then Master, John Barron, turned to me and said simply: 'I think we've found our man'. John was a great judge of academic horse-flesh, and of course he was right. The rest of the day was a parade around the paddock rather than a race. Mark told me afterwards that St. Peter's was his final job application and if he'd been unsuccessful he would have given up and become an interior designer. It is to the credit of this college that we didn't let that happen – though I mean no offence to interior designers.

Mark followed the remarkable Henry Mayr-Harting in St. Peter's. Henry had built-up History here and especially medieval history over the three preceding decades and there was so much already in place: we were all in Henry's debt for the high regard of the subject in the college and History Faculty, and among the wider community of historians.

Mark, Henrietta and I were in harness for twelve years. Together, we admitted as undergraduates or appointed as junior research fellows many of the speakers at today's event and many of you in the audience, collaborating in mutual respect and affectionate regard, sharing a common view of our task, and fuelled always by great quantities of Mark's tea and cake. We were referred to by another of today's speakers as 'the dream team'. As everyone who knew him can attest, Mark was a huge personality in his own right, but he was also a team player which is why he collected so many friends and admirers along the way.

He was a brilliant undergraduate tutor who knew he was made for the job. In 2007 Mark rejected an offer from the History Faculty to translate to the soon-to-be vacant Lectureship in Byzantine Studies at Corpus, explaining to me as we walked down the high street in Aldeburgh, Suffolk on a History Reading Party, that he was thoroughly happy at St. Peter's and didn't want to move. Unfortunately for St. Peter's, difficulties within the college two years later led him to change his mind and to apply for the position at Corpus.

Mark spoke often of the nature and aim of an Oxford education and it's this I want to dwell on. He believed in breadth and perspective, not depth and specialisation, always conscious that the majority of Oxford undergraduates will not become academics themselves but follow careers in the professions, the media, public life and politics.

He admired Oxford's long history of supplying men, and now women, for public service, and wanted that to continue. For this reason, he was against the earlier plans of Vice-Chancellor Hood to build the most prestigious graduate school in Europe. To Mark, Oxford's role was to send young people out into the world to make a difference and their fortunes, and then to help support their university; not to replicate their teachers and merely populate the university system. As he always said and long lamented, what good would it be to Oxford if its alumni were all paid merely academic salaries?

For these public roles, he knew that a broad understanding of History is more useful than specialised knowledge of a little, and his strength as a teacher came from his ability to take that sweeping view of the past, the *longue durée*, just the view he had shown us at his interview in 1998.

Accomplished in so many ways and deeply learned in his own subject, Mark was an ideal convenor of the successful *Masters* course in Byzantine history for sure. This was the appropriate place to begin the training of future academics. But a first degree was for education and learning, rather than for scholarship and skills. His aim was to provide a framework of the past for undergraduates. The details could then be filled in, whether at Oxford or later during all the years of reading and travelling and thinking that would follow graduation.

The purpose of reading History, indeed any subject at all as an undergraduate at Oxford, was self-development and self-realization. Nothing gave Mark greater pleasure than to see shy and unconfident young people at the *Matriculation* Dinner turn into self-aware adults by their *Schools* Dinner three years later. In his view, those years of intensive academic work were as good a way of finding out about oneself as has yet been devised: it's an argument rarely heard now in defence of a traditional university education, but Mark made it continually.

He understood that if executed conscientiously and at the highest level, whatever one studies will develop the capacity for *judgement* - judgement of situations, judgement of people, of lab results, of experiments, of historical controversies, of political contests. He taught in such a way that his pupils were encouraged to weigh the evidence, assess the arguments, and become confident in their ability to judge the present as well as the past.

Mark believed in a liberal education, in short, though that is a Victorian term and concept, and I never thought of Mark as an earnest Victorian in any manner: to me he was instead an eighteenth-century squire, the kind of figure who dominates a portrait by Stubbs, surrounded by family, horses, and of course, beagles.

The best speech I heard Mark give was at a Faculty meeting, one of so many in that permanent revolution which is the Oxford History syllabus. On this occasion, I recall, General History was under threat of being downgraded. In Oxford terminology, 'General History' denotes those papers which survey broad swathes of international history, all of them covering many decades and, in Mark's period, several centuries.

Though his colleagues might dwell upon the merits of Special and Further Subjects which focus on specific themes or events, Mark explained that intellectually, a paper in General History is the hardest element in Oxford's syllabus, calling for knowledge across frontiers and continents, and great powers of synthesis. To do it well, undergraduates have to stamp a period with their own authentic structure and plan, their own view of the period, and know what they think about each regime in turn; the textbook could not save them. General History is the ultimate test in sorting out the best from the merely good. We lost that vote, I'm sorry to say, as we lost many debates on the syllabus, but Mark always defended a traditional Oxford education.

It was for this reason that Mark's election at Oriel was cheered so loudly: it was against the run of play. We welcomed it, of course, because we knew Mark was the man for this particular job in this particular college and that he would do it brilliantly. But we also hoped that he would make these arguments about an Oxford education in the highest councils of the university and protect, as much as he could, the concept of a broad, outward-facing, self-enhancing, liberal education in a public-spirited university.

Many of you sitting here today and listening to this who were taught by Mark are his legacy. We will together honour his memory in the best way if we remain committed to his vision of Oxford and the purpose of an undergraduate education here.