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## *Richard Cobb 1917-1996*

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‘**C**haque homme a deux pays: le sien et la France.’ Richard Cobb, one of the outstanding contemporary British historians of France, was one of the last survivors of the happy few who had lived in France before the war, had returned to Normandy as soldiers in 1944, and came to regard it as their second country.

His background was conventionally English: public school (which he detested), followed by a history scholarship to Oxford. Here he had the good fortune to be tutored, among others, by J.M. Thompson, who stimulated an interest in the French Revolution that never left him. After taking his degree he left British university life behind him; he was not return to it until almost twenty years later. Instead, he installed himself in Paris and eventually set to work in the Palais Soubise on the archives of the Revolution. His stay was interrupted by the war. After vain attempts to join the Free French, he was called up in the British army and towards the end of the war found himself posted to liaison with the Czech Group in Northern France and Belgium (A Czech brigade was then containing the German enclave of Dunkirk). He was touched by the misery and poverty suffered by the working class, particularly the ‘chétimis’ of the Nord, during the Occupation. Such people, not politicians, he once told me, are the stuff of history.

After the demolition in 1946 he decamped again to Paris and resumed his studies, with the vague idea of presenting himself for a French doctorate. By day he continued to work on his beloved documents. He made friends with Albert-Marius Soboul, a fellow-historian of the Revolution, and a communist, who, with other members of the party, offered him welcome hospitality when he was penniless, as he often was. He relied on money sent from home, or earned by teaching English, and other odd jobs. At night he would sometimes return to his room off the Rue Tournon on foot, either because the last Métro had gone or, more usually, because he had no money for a ticket. Once he walked through the night from Viroflay, on the outskirts of Paris, to the Odéon. He was, he asserted, a ‘walker’s historian’ (I never saw him ride anything more ambitious than a bicycle). This is reflected in his loving and minute descriptions of people and places,

(as in his book of the same title, and in *The Streets of Paris* [1980]). It was with despair that he viewed the 'renovation' of the capital that began under the Fifth Republic, as old buildings were demolished and the neighbourliness engendered by the various 'quartiers' inevitably diminished.

Work and the struggle for existence nevertheless left him time for enjoyment. The escapades he got up to once even included a morning dip — unclad — in the Paris fountains. His puckish sense of humour and an impish desire to cock an occasional snook at the Establishment continued even in later life. Serving on the committee for the Booker Prize, he declared, — probably with tongue in cheek — that he had not read a single line of Proust. He was, as *Le Monde* described him (in another context), always 'l'étonnant monsieur Cobb'.

In 1955 he somewhat reluctantly returned to Britain to rejoin the mainstream of university life. His thesis had not been presented, but volumes on the revolutionary armies published (translated into English and appearing in 1987 as *The people's Armies*) demonstrated that he had not wasted his time. Others more competent will doubtless evaluate his contribution to historiography. Suffice to say he discounted the Carlylean view of history: some 'great men' he indeed despised. Instead his work is shot through with an absorbing interest in ordinary people which included the common, even the vulgar, and those living on the fringes of society. His history was, like that of his 'maître', Georges Lefebvre, written to be appreciated by the non-specialist.

After university appointments in Aberystwyth, Manchester and Leeds followed in quick succession, until in 1962 he was elected to a history fellowship at Balliol. Back in Oxford, he had at last found his niche, although he was always drawn back to France. In France his contributions to scholarship have been substantial, but sometimes articles had appeared in obscure regional journals or local publications. More books, articles and reviews now began to pour from his pen and found a wider public. Further writings on the French Revolution with the occasional telling anecdote lighting up the page, bore the hallmark of his originality. Yet if he had not been an historian, he might well have made his mark in literature. Here the unusual and the extraordinary attracted him. *A classical Education*, an autobiographical piece, for example, is mainly concerned with the true account of a school friend who murdered his own mother. But his interests ranged widely, from historian's appraisal of modern French literature to a personal interpretation of France under the German occupations, and to impressions of his own childhood growing up in Tunbridge Wells. His last book, *Something to hold on to*, (1988) consisting of graphic-autobiographical sketches, also harks back to 'times past'.

Honours sat lightly upon him. In 1973 he was elected to professorship of modern history, which entailed a move to Worcester College, where he remained as a senior research fellow after his retirement from the chair in 1984. Already in 1967 he had become an FBA; in 1971 he was visiting professor at the Collège de France, Balliol and Merton made him an honorary fellow. The French government had bestowed on him its first honour, the *Palme Académique*, in 1956, followed in 1977 by appointment as officer de l'Ordre national du Mérite, and finally, in 1985, as Chevalier of the Légion d'honneur. The British had awarded him a CBE in 1978. He was a recipient of the honorary doctorates from Essex, Leeds and Cambridge Universities. Such was his modesty that one never once heard him mention any of these distinctions.

He was a gifted teacher, kindly, infinitely 'sympathique', and always ready to help. If he was occasionally swift to take offence, he was also quick to forgive and forget. With his death the Maison Française in Oxford has lost a faithful friend, as have also historians of France on both sides of the Channel.

W.D. HALLS.