

Obituary

Professor Robert Burchell,

1941–2020

Bob Burchell was for many years a leading figure in the UK's American studies community. Appointed to the University of Manchester in 1965, he rose to become professor of American history, before becoming the first director of the Eccles Centre for American Studies at the British Library. He also served successively as treasurer, secretary and chair of the British Association for American Studies (BAAS), and largely ran this professional body in the 1980s. He was noted for his convivial lifestyle and his resistance to the conventional wisdom.

His background was modest, his father an electrician in the Devonport shipyard until the family was bombed out in 1943, which precipitated a move to South Africa before a return to Plymouth in 1950. Plymouth College led Bob Burchell to Oxford and a history degree, a trajectory that took him to UC Berkeley (in time to revel in its free-speech movement) and into research specialization in American immigration. His academic career was spent primarily at Manchester, punctuated by research trips to American universities and over time visits to all but two of the US states.

A master of statistical methods, Bob Burchell published a number of closely researched articles challenging standard interpretations of American elections and immigration patterns, as did his most important book, *The San Francisco Irish, 1848–1880*, which found that those Irish immigrants adapted more successfully than had been assumed, and revealed an affinity for discovering uncharted sources. Skeptical of the pieties of the then fashionable “history-from-the-bottom-up” approach, at times in his research he afforded what seemed to some of his colleagues undue attention to the wealthy. His students could sometimes find his sardonic manner off-putting, but he could be reached. On one occasion two pupils whose essays had each been given a modest B?+ challenged him; he heard them out and then reached over and changed the marks to B++. But perhaps his real taste was for administration, which increasingly occupied his attention, whether at the university or in the

offices he held over several years in the BAAS. At one annual conference when Bob was treasurer the Executive Committee had been worried about proposing a large subscription hike to the AGM, but Bob airily reassured them, "I'll manage." In the event he persuaded the assembled throng to vote unanimously for the increase; as one member put it, "he laughed us into voting for higher taxation." His administrative and persuasive political skills were exerted to excellent effect with his appointment in 1991 as the first director of the Eccles Centre at the British Library.

Bob's bibliographical expertise played its part in that appointment. Known as a "great bookman," his friends long envied his vast collection of Penguin paperbacks, including the distinguished nonfiction Pelican series. No visit to a secondhand bookshop was complete without a search for the one or two titles that still eluded him (though he took time too to seize "finds" for other bibliophiles). He named his first house Burchell Towers, where he entertained royally, dressed in a fashionably antique waistcoat as he genially presided over meals he cooked himself, which might include roast eel, jugged hare or shark steaks. At least one dinner party featured about two dozen guests, who had to be seated in rows. To another Bob invited a Mormon academic couple who were visiting the university, a somewhat strained occasion since he liked to ply his guests copiously with wine but Mormons are teetotal; after dinner Bob put on a recording of Monty Python, leaving the two visitors hopelessly bemused. He was a vivid storyteller (though some tales are best repeated in a medium other than print), and enjoyed Manchester's stock of concerts and theatre. With retirement Bob reached deeper personal happiness, in 1999 meeting Stephen Torr, who became his partner for the rest of his life. The couple continued to entertain their many and varied friends in their Stockport home and enjoyed frequent holidays abroad, not least in Sicily, where they followed the culinary trail of Inspector Montalbano. Bob's final years were marred by episodes of epilepsy and a very painful back condition. But he had made sure that he would be remembered.

University of Lancaster

MICHAEL HEALE