

Richard Wall – a personal tribute

Even historians who have a predisposition towards counting, as did Richard Wall, recognize that there are aspects of the human condition that defy tabulation. In this brief tribute, this celebration of the life of our Founding Editor, we endeavour to present both the quantitative and the qualitative. We offer an impressive ‘census-like enumeration’ of his publications, the lens through which outsiders came to view and respect Richard in the course of a career that spanned more than four decades; also, we ponder and reflect upon aspects of his personal life (sadly shorter than we all had a right to expect) that seem shrouded and mysterious even to his closest colleagues and friends.

Others will, of course, have their own reveries. Mine commences as follows. I first met Richard around the ‘Library’ table at the Cambridge Group, his preferred venue for entertaining the multitude of foreign visitors who arrived in Cambridge with yet another household listing that demanded analysis. There he partook of coffee and tea because, I would in retrospect argue, it allowed him to indulge in what was his true passion, sweets. A big heart and a generous nature (for what further individual academic accomplishment could he have achieved if he had not selflessly donated his own time to the mentoring of others?) are often accompanied by a large sweet tooth; which of us can recall a meal with Richard in which he passed on dessert? Enmeshed in academic conversation fuelled by biscuits (and on birthdays and the arrival of transatlantic visitors the coveted cakes from Fitzbillies), Richard Wall held court at 27 Trumpington Street like the sultan of household studies that he surely was.

It should come as no surprise that Richard, the historian of the family *par excellence*, was devoted to his brood. In his own parlance, Richard

was himself a ‘head of household’. In his life course, he raised two separate families and leaves children, stepchildren and grandchildren. At one time or another in his life, Richard’s residence pattern encompassed nearly all the Hammel–Laslett permutations in household form including the rarely discerned *frèreche*. He co-resided not infrequently in multi-generational households extended in almost every imaginable direction, frequently with lodgers (but invariably without servants) in that beautiful, albeit disorderly, but above all endearing fashion that was the measure of this extraordinary man.

To the familial domain we can add the political. Richard was old Labour to the core: for the third-quarter of the twentieth century occasional Briton like myself that means Wilson and Callaghan, not Blair and Brown. No designer suits and pretentiously styled haircuts (affectations which he beyond doubt regarded as insidious as privatization) for him, though who could deny that when Richard reinvented his personal life with Beatrice Moring more than a decade ago, the beard he sported at her behest suited him well. Indeed Richard came to resemble the folksingers whom he listened to without fail (though inevitably drenched in the ubiquitous July downpours that plagued the event) each year at his much beloved Cambridge Folk Festival.

Perhaps my first personal encounter with Richard was of Wall the political activist. In those fateful months in 1979, the disastrous election looming, Richard presided at a strategy meeting at E-2 Bishops’ Hostel with Peter Laslett (of Laslett and Wall, but as Peter himself was quick to point out the first volume on the household was followed by a second, Wall and Laslett) in tow preparing an offensive of massive proportions to get out the vote in the Arbury Estates for Martin Smith, the Labour candidate for Cambridge City. True to his roots, Richard was also devoted to the Co-operative movement, a tireless director of the Cambridge Co-operative and, as *Continuity and Change*’s sound financials illustrate, devoted to its bank.

About two years ago, Richard was diagnosed with the illness to which he succumbed. He fought this diabolical menace courageously and fiercely with his beloved and devoted Beatrice in constant attendance and also bore it with a patient shrug. To the end, he never abandoned either his dignity or that peculiar glint in his eye and ironical smile. Much of what preoccupied Richard over the course of time that remained to him was to ensure the continuation of *Continuity and Change*. I met with him the penultimate Saturday of his life in Addenbrooke’s Hospital, and the conversation turned, as it inevitably had for nearly thirty years, to submissions past, present and future. The journal will survive him, and will prosper, but it will never be quite the same without him. If there is

consolation in this tragic event it is that three times a year, when the journal hits the streets, lands on desks and thumps on doormats (or arrives electronically), he will be remembered.

Lloyd Bonfield



Richard Wall – a bibliography

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Books

The welfare of widows in European society (with Beatrice Moring). Scheduled for completion 2011.

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