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# NOTES & TOPICS

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## A Tory Seer

By Geoffrey Wheatcroft



“THAT VILE PUB, the King and Keys”, Colin Welch called it at T. E.

Utley’s memorial service, and vile it was even by the standards of London pubs, its awfulness tempered by the extraordinary cabaret which the staff of the *Telegraph* from next door in Fleet Street put on. It was further mitigated: at the table behind the door sat T. E. Utley, talking to his court of young admirers and unfailingly beautiful secretaries, buying and being bought drinks, waiting for Brigid to pick him up, and surveying, as it were, the carnage around him. As it were, because in “Peter” Utley’s serene face one eye was covered with a patch, the other closed.

His blindness from boyhood was in one sense important, in another insignificant. He had developed perforce a formidable memory, as those of us who can take notes and can look things up again are not obliged to, and might almost regret. Utley sometimes referred to his blindness in a matter-of-fact way and without a trace of self-pity. It made remarkably little difference to his career.

After wartime Cambridge (where he read History) he worked for *The Times*, *The Observer*, *Sunday Times*, and *Spectator*. Then he joined the *Daily Telegraph* where he spent twenty mostly happy years as leader writer, assistant editor and columnist. He made his name not only as a workaday journalist but as pamphleteer and “Tory philosopher”—the seer of the title of a recent anthology, *A Tory Seer: The Selected Journalism of T. E. Utley*.<sup>1</sup>

For years he was a resistance leader. It is hard now to remember—or to understand—the intellectual hegemony which socialism and collectivism appeared to enjoy in the post-War years, when intelligent, cocksure Socialists like Tony Crosland thought that there remained merely the technical problems of how to enjoy the fruits of a planned economy which must inevitably become richer and richer—and when many Conservatives silently agreed that they had lost the day.

Utley did not. He addressed himself to the question of what the Conservative tradition had still to offer. Had Conservatism now confined itself to “the unheroic function of

holding a balance between its opponents’ positions”? Was it a positive or a negative creed? What did it mean? All of these are examined from different angles in “What is a Tory?”, the first section of *A Tory Seer*.

One answer is Johnson’s definition of one who adheres to the ancient constitution of the state and the apostolic hierarchy of the Church of England, a description Utley exactly matched. Both his constitutionalism and his churchmanship were sane and balanced, if at times a little self-conscious. The section of the book on ecclesiastical questions makes dispiriting reading. In a column not included in the anthology, Utley dealt all too charitably with one of Mrs Thatcher’s strange court of wizards and mountebanks, contrasting the man’s hot-gossiping with “my own arid Anglicanism”, an odd phrase if only as an unconscious slip. Didn’t he mean “austere”? (No one, surely, wants to think of his own faith as dry and un nourishing.) In any case, the book—Utley’s life—covers the period when the Church of England changed from a good joke to a bad one (the hierarchy may be apostolic, but just look at them).

There were tensions, not to say occasional contradictions, in Utley’s thought. A tension between the needs of freedom and authority is common to almost all political thinkers. For a Tory, there is further potential contradiction. Government cannot “will the good society”. Utley says, quoting the lines about what kings or laws can cause or cure (he says that they are wrongly attributed to Samuel Johnson rather than Oliver Goldsmith; surely they were written by Johnson for insertion into Goldsmith’s *The Traveller*?).

But pessimism cannot itself constitute an idea. Perhaps what makes Conservatism valuable in practice vitiates it as theory. Perhaps it is wrong to think of Peter Utley as a “philosopher” rather than an empirical commentator. Perhaps that is true of all of them from Professor Michael Oakeshott to every hack backbencher with his pamphlet on “My Tory Philosophy”. Perhaps, indeed, “Tory thought” is an oxymoron, and a Conservative Philosophy Group is what Oliver St John Gogarty called the Royal Hibernian Academy—a treble contradiction in terms.

AT ANY RATE, Utley is at his most convincing when he takes on concrete issues. He recalls Maurice Green, the former editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, saying that the right to smoke was, “along with Ulster”, the only subject on which “Utley writes with a small semblance of sincere feeling”; and although this is a nice joke against himself it may not be coincidence that he did in fact write very well on both of them. He rehearses the arguments about smoking (in an article which ends with the words “sack Mrs Edwina Currie”). Again, he does not fully resolve his own contradictions here. To say that “I, for example, am a libertarian about smoking. I am not a libertarian . . . about the drug traffic”, doubtless expresses most people’s view, but it does not deal with the awkward fact that every argument against “the drug traffic” is *a fortiori* an argument against the unrestricted right to smoke.

That piece appeared in *The Times* where Utley migrated in the last years of his life. There had been an honourable disagreement between him and the new editor of the *Tele-*

<sup>1</sup> *A Tory Seer: The Selected Journalism of T. E. Utley*. Edited by CHARLES MOORE and SIMON HEFFER. Hamish Hamilton, £15.95.

*graph*, Max Hastings, about Northern Ireland. Peter was a staunch Unionist, whose wife and children were Roman Catholics, who stood against Paisley in a general election, and who would have been delighted by last autumn's Conservative Conference vote to run Tory candidates in Ulster.

He saw the absurdity of forcing a million people against their will into another state (even if the people of that state really wanted them, which is an interesting "if"), and saw as well the futility of the incessant "initiatives" which British governments have been inflicting on Ulster these past twenty years.

He had the advantage in this context of knowing a great deal of Irish as of British history. Reading these pages, you see that his double First was no mere technical qualification. The pieces in the book are arranged generically but, as Enoch Powell says in his Introduction, they are almost more illuminating when read chronologically: a commentary fascinating to anyone interested in post-War British history, however much or little they sympathise with Utley's views. His political and ecclesiastical attitudes were indeed rooted in history—and he was much too good an historian not to see further contradictions.

HE HIMSELF was a Burkean Tory, deeply grounded in a tradition which was in many ways not merely inimical to Manchester economic individualism but its antithesis. He denounced at different times free trade and the free market, advocated protection, thought that vested interests were entitled to privilege "as such", and that corporatism should not be inherently condemned.

Came the 1960s and 1970s: corporatism, planning protectionism, and buttering up vested interest were tried by Conservative governments as well as Labour, and failed. One or two Tories—Enoch Powell, Keith Joseph—began to look again at the *laissez-faire* tradition, and so did Margaret Thatcher. Of course, she has never been a true Manchester liberal. One or two in her Party might be so described—Jack Bruce-Gardyne, John Biffen—and much good has it done them. Her own politics are rather those of Lord Copper and the *Daily Beast*, "self-sufficiency at home, self-assertion abroad", and this combination of *enriches vous* and populist nationalism has made her in electoral terms the most successful Party leader of the century. She succeeded with some help from Peter Utley, as she has generously acknowledged (she contributes a Foreword to this book), but was her Toryism his? Is she, in his sense, a Tory at all?

Two of the most penetrating pieces in this book are on Sir Robert Peel. Utley describes him as the man who "first defended the Irish Protestants and then betrayed them . . . first attacked the Great Reform Bill and then grovelled to it . . . first supported the Corn Laws and then abolished them". Harsh words; but then, in his own time, Utley was to witness tergiversations just as striking, and sometimes to defend them. He writes sardonically about the practice of "historical body-snatching" and the way in which, on the bicentenary of Peel's birth, his mantle had been claimed by her acolytes for Mrs Thatcher, absurdly so. As Utley rightly said, Peel was the founder and master of "what may be

called 'concessionary' Conservatism". Its characteristic is to resist change until it becomes inevitable, and then to concede it with as little fuss and as much obeisance to tradition as possible. Beyond that, Peel assumed "that his political opponents represented the future".

That is an accurate description of most Conservative politicians—it is conspicuously true of "the great Lord Salisbury" to whom Utley makes the ritual genuflection—from Peel until Mrs Thatcher. It is conspicuously not true of her, who is not so much conservative as part reactionary and part radical.

In April 1988, Utley wrote a column about the Health Service and the self-defeating pursuit of absolute equality as described in an Institute of Economic Affairs pamphlet which "I rather hope Mrs Thatcher does not read" lest she incautiously quote it too freely. He added that he was about to go into a public ward for a short operation:

" . . . having failed to get a private bed in the hospital of my choice. Whether this is intolerable inequality, acceptable inequality or, as I suspect, just an infernal unavoidable nuisance, I do not know. Anyway, it will involve my absence from or only intermittent appearance in this space for a little while."

It involved more than that. Peter Utley died some weeks later of cancer, aged 67, mourned as much as any journalist that I can remember. In his last days, or his last years, those final ironies of the conquest of Thatcherism cannot have been lost on him.

## Ah, Calcutta!

By Carolyn Wright



ALTHOUGH I CAME to India on an Indo-US Subcommission Fellowship, with a project ("The Study and Translation of Work by Bengali Woman Poets and Writers") that sounded clearly defined, I had no idea what I would actually be able to accomplish. The requisite tourist visits included the day tour to Agra and the Taj Mahal; the boat ride on the Ganges past the bathing and cremation *ghats* of Benares; the trips to the majestic ruined hulk of the Sun Temple of Konarak in Orissa, and the immense Red Fort in Delhi, with the famous verse inscription by the Persian court poet Mirza Ghalib:

*If there is a paradise on earth,  
It is this, it is this, it is this.*