
Taxation, Writs, and Populations—Roger Schofield Measures History*

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Abstract

This paper is a personal reflection on Roger Schofield's life and work, especially his work on taxation under the Tudors.

We come full circle back to our beginning, to Richard Smith's magisterial survey, to which my remarks can only be an extended footnote. He has given us a truly admirable analysis of Roger the Scholar. In order to produce what Roger did, in the articles and books and the Cambridge Group itself, he had to be the Roger that I knew and admired: patient, meticulous, generous, burning the candle at both ends after midnight in order to get the numbers and the narratives correct. I am most grateful, as we all must be, for Richard's thorough contribution.

Thinking about Roger, think also about ourselves. I am now 81, which is Roger's age when he died.

You currently enjoy mid-life expectancies and talents at mid-career, domestically stable, as seasoned scholarly researchers and departmental teachers, with reasonably good health and excellent prospects as you approach your prime. That was the robust Roger that I knew from 1963 to 1988.

Then his first stroke, aged 50.

Married to a beautiful film and West End actress, Katherine Schofield, devoted dad to their daughter Melanie, daily train commuter between Camden Town and Cambridge, committed to Clare College culture, he was carving his own niche as a cross-disciplined historical demographer, Roger was subversive within a university departmental structure that traditionally had little place for *un uomo universale*.

My God, I loved him as my life-long friend. I envied his intellectual brilliance. After that first stroke in 1988, I was always stunned by his clinging each day for 31 years to life's pleasures and productivity.

That first stroke introduced daily health crises. Eventually, life meant for Roger sitting two thirds upright during each day in his battery operated wheelchair, in his penthouse

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apartment above Cambridge's city centre. He would survive several more strokes and accompanying impairments, eye infections that partially blinded him, then heart surgery in 2000, a broken hip in 2010. He was routinely in and out of Addenbrooke's Hospital and the Hope Nursing Care Home on Brooklands Avenue. Sometimes shrunken gauntly in bed, at other times nearly upright with full appetite and ready to go, always with a mischievous memory. For the last eight and a half years of his life he had a 24-hour live-in caregiver.

Throughout his suffering decades he had the loving care, as a widower, of his daughter Melanie, helping to guide his tenacious energy for life and humanistic scholarship.

Roger begged no sympathy, offered warm hospitality to any occasional visitor, and aspired to his own self-sufficiency. He enjoyed every opportunity to motor down to a street restaurant or to dine in hall at Clare College as a Fellow, when its kitchen's back-alley freight lift was available. He kept working into his 81st year. I chided him once to challenge Stephen Hawking to a race around Senate House Yard.

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The typewriter ink on Roger's doctoral thesis was barely dry in 1963 when we first met. I was 25 years old, a farm and small town lad from central Wisconsin, recruited by Geoffrey Elton out of the University of Pittsburgh's doctoral program into Clare College for supervision, as an Andrew Mellon scholar. Roger had completed undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in history with distinction and was very much an Eltonian primary evidence-based positivist. He had put in daily time at the Public Record Office in London's Chancery Lane for years. I soon came to him as the go-to expert for deciphering the parchment's fifteenth-century Latin, its secretarial elisions and clerical abbreviations, the common law writs, the procedural formularies, the labyrinth of accounting vocabulary, and the many paleographical mysteries that confused anyone working in late-medieval Exchequer plea rolls. Roger was self-taught, nose to the parchment, just like later his nose to the numbers made him expert in statistics, regression analysis, demography and family reconstitution. Roger the Auto-Didact easily acquired all the skills for antiquarian studies.

As a teacher Roger was a quintessential tutor, as David Cressy reminds us, but not a Mill Lane lecturer like his mentor. Elton was the swashbuckling cyclist, suit, tie and gown flowing toward the podium where—without any notes or visual aids—he resumed from his previous performance, often in mid-thought, even in mid-sentence, with answers and citations for questions students had not yet asked but now felt passionately about. And over all there were the 'Tudor Revolution' and the Thomas Cromwell agendas.

Roger was a more balletic speed cyclist from Clare Memorial Court through Clare Old Court, then along Trumpington Street over to Mill Lane. He continued as a popular college history tutor and examiner, until his body failed him; but his career as a university lecturer ended before it began. In late August 1965, I had a note from Professor S.T. Bindoff, Queen Mary College (QMC), London, offering—nay, begging—that I take over Roger's assigned discussion seminars in QMC's Fall semester 1965 first year European History

course. Why such short notice? Roger had accepted the coveted QMC lectureship and spent most of the previous year trying to prepare lectures. Now, in August, facing weekly realities of lecturing to classrooms full of demanding undergraduates, he proved too anxious and gentle to continue. Jack Scarisbrick, Bindoff's assistant, could substitute for the lectures in 1965-1966 and I would cover each week's accompanying discussion sections. Roger returned to tutoring at Clare in October and to re-think how best to earn a living, practicing his skills while furthering his intellectual life. Soon, in 1966, he was dazzling Peter Laslett and Tony Wrigley with his research and analytic skills; but a Mill Lane dazzler he could not be. Roger and I never spoke about these events ever after, until today.

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All of this is personal context for Roger the Researcher in his prime after 1965, picking up the Cambridge career pieces before that stroke in 1988. On occasion we shared opera and theatre performances, most memorably Georg Solti's four nights of Wagner's *Ring*, which Roger's wife fled after the second night, saying that shrieking German could not compete with more dignified English drama. By 1966 Roger was in the fledgling Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. It was a perfect fit for his skills and the Group's plans. Roger the Auto-Didact now re-channeled himself from being a late-medieval Exchequer institutional historian into an interdisciplinary, international scholar in a wider world that had its own methodologies, vocabularies, comparative analyses, structuralism, statistics, and evidence sampling. This contrasted sharply with the narrow epistemological Eltonian bounds focused on primary manuscript sources and literal, anecdotal, narrative interpretations.

Richard Smith, as Roger's major colleague, has admirably expanded here on his memorial lecture of November 2019, adding a magnificent tracking of Roger's lifetime scholarly production and intellectual development. Richard was his closest colleague, always relied upon for second readings, who shared the secrets of the Group's craft and medieval-like mysteries for reconstructing past contexts. For my own sanity, integrity and safety I must defer to Richard and the Group, retreating back to the prior time and place that I shared with Roger, before his perspective opened to demography. Roger and I shared only the late-medieval common law court of the Exchequer for our research lives.

Roger's PhD thesis in 1963 remains under restricted access in the Cambridge University Library (CUL) and unavailable elsewhere. He clearly wanted his 2004 published book version to rule, which begs two questions: how much growth was there since 1963 in his mastery of that taxation topic and what impact did his intervening career as a historical demographer have? Currently I have the 2004 published version and a promise of a copy from the CUL, post-coronavirus.

We followed Professor Sir Geoffrey Elton into early Tudor royal administrative studies; but without a trace of *The Tudor Revolution in Government* (1954) or Thomas Cromwell's foot-

prints.² Roger pioneered English historiography with a quantitative study of parliamentary lay taxation 1485 to 1547. Hardly an exciting topic and perspective for breathing life into Henry VIII, even if you are Hilary Mantel. I always thought that my quantitative case analysis of penal law enforcement, mainly about smuggling, in Henry VII's reign was a tad more exciting than his taxation.³ Better to count swarthy dockyard lurkers, not slick tax collectors, in protecting Crown coffers!

Nevertheless, his thesis forced its own revolution in Tudor research studies, in terms of epistemology and methodology. If Elton became more teleological, more purpose driven as a Cromwell-hunter, more of a searcher in the sources, Roger became more of a *re*-searcher, with a sense of duty to learn things as applied knowledge even for present and future issues and questions. Elton searched for past policy, pre- and post-Tudor, for its own sake; Roger searched past procedures for clues about effectiveness. Both rejected any predictive powers in historical studies, especially those looking for so-called lessons of history.

What mattered most was to know the past from the knowledge or data created by that past in that past, the primary evidentiary sources, most preferably the clerical writer of the record itself. The true historian would not rely on any later intervening writer, commentator, memorialist, editor, fiction author, and certainly never a modern historian, three or ten times removed from events. Where best to find such primary evidence pure? In at least one place, from a law court. What, in its daily proceedings, year after year, did a court need to remember, for the crown, for litigants, for contemporaries? One could quantify participants, types of conflicts, sources of cited law, formulaic procedures, resolutions, enforcement effectiveness. If you are a lawyer or judge, you search one case at a time; if an academic researcher, you look for a single case or, more likely, for a straight, uninterrupted chronological line of cases. Either way, the one case exists among the many, whether or not the many are totally the same or more likely different. And what about that 'nailing jello to the wall' word: *typical*? Is any one case ever typical of another? How can you know? To determine that you must know the many, or at least the actual comparables in the many. That much any ancient Greek philosopher could tell you. And that much the Exchequer records told us about taxation and smuggling: any one case begged the question about its many. So roll up your sleeves and count.

His thesis-into-a-book in 2004, *Taxation Under the Early Tudors 1485–1547*, offered a model institutional history for any court of law, or for that matter any public or corporate institution.⁴ The researcher is always a hostage to the extant contemporary evidence in terms of time and place. In the Tudor Exchequer, and most emphatically for Roger's post-1966 application to demographic studies, especially for family reconstitution, one had to locate unbroken runs of operational records (in this example, parish registers) providing the same categorical data and then compile each 'many' as context for any 'one'. Roger the Public

2 G.R. Elton, *The Tudor Revolution in Government: a Study of Administrative Changes in the Reign of Henry VIII* (Cambridge, 1954).

3 D.J. Guth, 'Exchequer penal law enforcement 1485–1509' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1967).

4 R. Schofield, *Taxation Under the Early Tudors 1485–1547* (Oxford, 2004).

Record Office (PRO) Archivist thrived on such discoveries for the Cambridge Group from all around the country, ever since parish registers began in the 1530s. This was the simple epistemological and methodological reality that Roger and his thesis in 1966 brought to the Group. It was the base for the superb scholarship published by Roger and Tony Wrigley in *The Population History of England, 1541–1871* (1981).⁵

Roger-the-Case-Counter was so much more than merely that. Roger-the-Taxman had had to parachute into the early Tudor Exchequer, the King's revenue court mainly for debt collection, designed to create and enforce assessments of lay subsidies across the realm. Roger-the-Auto-Didact had to learn, in any one case and in the many, when the common law procedure required issuance of a writ of *venire facias* or an *exigi facias*, a distress, attachment, an assigned tallie, Privy Seal warrant, or recognisances, etc. That gave him a commanding knowledge of contemporary bureaucratic process.

Reconstructing royal taxation required, first, study of the sources of authority, in this case parliament. Then mastery of procedures, meaning the writ system, whereby brief strips of parchment were issued by the Exchequer judicial clerks to local sheriffs, whose agents waited with horses outside Westminster Hall to begin dispatch rides to their assigned counties for delivery and execution. Bags of these returned writs still exist in the PRO, familiar to both Roger and me. The local appointed assessors and collectors had statutory powers, which Roger studied carefully. He was not, however, a prosopographer; he never attempted to do composite research biographies as a collective of these 'many'. Rather, he worked with generic categories which made all named local personnel presumed to be of 'typical' sameness. In later work for the Group, particularly with parish registers, his method could be much more individuated, much more interested in the particulars when narrating explanations. Everything was local for the Group's research, when it came to family reconstitution and reconstructing the 'many'. Roger could be brilliant, as again Richard Smith has explained, at isolating and gathering the nuances of what constituted the particular and the universal when explaining social structures at village levels.

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When Roger joined the Group in 1966 he brought an unrivalled archival experience and skill, where the focus was to be not on the one but the many.

He could locate where parish registers survived annually for long runs, yielding baptismal-to-burial as well as marital data, ripe for quantitative and qualitative analyses. As Richard Smith and colleagues here have so ably explained, Roger almost instantly became the perfect fit as a ground worker, not just a leader. Beyond this my ignorances dare not embarrass me further.

Roger had returned to his scholarly roots in the Exchequer with the book in 2004, not that it was ever out of mind while immersed in immediate work for the Group's diverse projects. All of this was as his health fluctuated from bad to worse to bad. Ten years after the book, he published

5 E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541–1871: a Reconstruction* (London, 1981).

his final scholarly article. The man simply never gave up! He dug out of his Public Record Office notes an anecdotal ‘case’ that was not a case, but it was Roger’s last laugh for us all.

The article’s title is promising: ‘Still more things to forget, in the wiping of Henry Patenson’s bottom in the Exchequer’. He published it in an obscure, pious, now Florida-based periodical devoted to Thomas More hagiography.⁶ Having spent an academic lifetime in the early Tudor Exchequer, Roger knew the ‘many’ when it came to any ‘one’ case, especially one that he called ‘bogus’. His last publication displayed all of his skills. Henry Patenson, described as the ‘[s]limpering fole of London’, was in fact employed as Sir Thomas More’s personal court jester, allegedly suing John Hone, master of London’s Company of Tallowchandlers (candlemakers) for a debt related to the lay subsidy tax. The lawsuit was phony, the people were real. Its parchment record was a stitched add-on to the official plea roll. Roger fleshed out all of the actors in splendid detail, having searched London’s abundant primary evidence for 1524–1525, to put alongside the case report. Roger’s genius was to document Sir Thomas More as complicit in his ex-jester’s allegedly subverting Exchequer legal process to recover a debt (which might or might not exist) against Patenson’s former master candle-stick maker. Suffice it to say that, at age 77, after 26 years of physical crises, Roger was as admirably resilient and full of curiosity as ever.

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About the time of this final publication, my wife Katie and I enjoyed time with him in the Hope Nursing Care Home. The day before we flew back to Winnipeg we asked if he needed anything special. He asked for Ribena, a blackcurrant fruit drink, a habit since boyhood. We went at once to the corner store and cleared the shelf, forgetting that it came as a concentrate. We got at least a dozen large bottles. Months passed and when we returned he offered us a share of the last bottle that he had saved for us, thanking us for supplying him with enough for once-a-week Ribena parties with the nurses at tea-time.

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This brief paper, however so fragmented and unsystematic—two things that he never was—gives some of my glimpses of the Roger Snowden Schofield that I still know and still love. *Un uomo universale*, indeed!

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to our conference organisers for their patient planning in these troubled times and for their own devoted commitment to remembering Roger so that our next generations can build on his masterful scholarship.

6 R. Schofield, ‘Still more things to forget, in the wiping of Henry Patenson’s bottom in the Exchequer’, *Moreana*, 51 (2014), pp. 29–43, <https://doi.org/10.3366/more.2014.51.1-2.5>.