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# Richard Ollard

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A Man of Contradictions

A Life of A. L. Rowse



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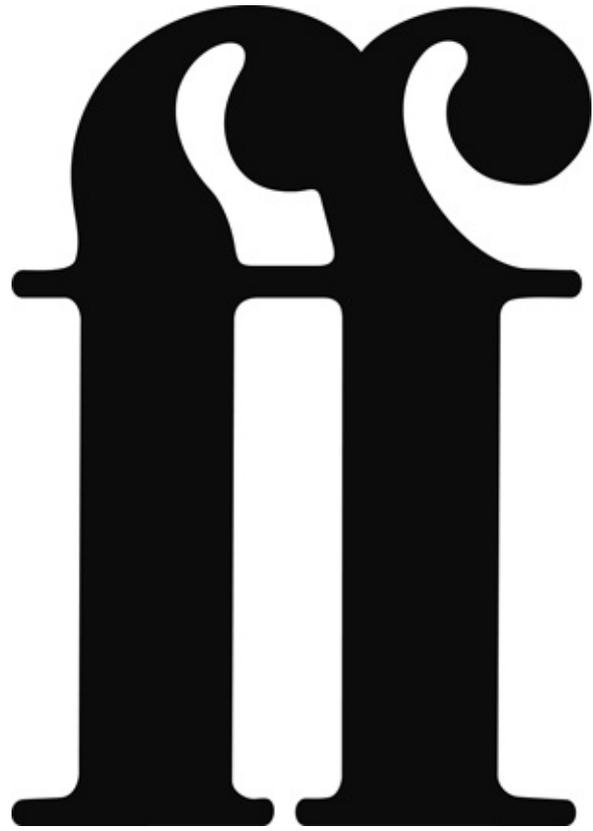
# Richard Ollard

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A Man of Contradictions

A Life of A. L. Rowse





# A Man of Contradictions

*A LIFE OF A. L. ROWSE*

RICHARD OLLARD



To Mary  
μάλιστα δέ τ' ἔκλυον αὐτοί

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## *Preface and Acknowledgments*

This biography is based largely on A. L. Rowse's personal archive which he presented, two or three years before his death, to the Library of the University of Exeter. When I was invited to write his life I made two stipulations: first, that nothing I wrote on the subject should appear during his lifetime and second, that I should be granted exclusive access to all his books and papers until after my book had been published. Rowse, who had several times expressed the wish that no biography of him should be written, nevertheless agreed at once to these conditions. He further presented me with a great deal of material (he had not yet made his gift to the University of Exeter) and welcomed my visits to discuss its contents and, indeed, to range at will over his long life.

The disorder of the papers (he kept, it sometimes seems, everything, even Christmas cards, but made only fitful efforts to sort and to arrange) meant that if I was to get on with the job I could not afford to wait for what was bound to be a long undertaking. The papers had been piled into boxes and files which were numbered, so that in taking notes and transcribing I had the rough means of citation necessary for my own reference but useless to future researchers when the papers will have been properly classified and arranged. Thus to facilitate reference I have tried to indicate by date and description the documentary authority for statements deriving from this my principal source. Other sources are cited in the usual manner in the footnotes.

It will be seen that I had the advantage, unknown to a biographer whose work has been largely in the seventeenth century, of conversing with my subject. The kindness of his contemporaries and friends has been no less valuable. The late Lord Sherfield, who was Rowse's contemporary at Christ Church and was elected to a Fellowship at All Souls on the same day, and the late Sir Isaiah Berlin, elected only a few years later, both allowed me to come and question them. So did his colleagues of a younger generation, Sir Raymond Carr and Sir Michael Howard. The chaplain of the College, Professor McManners, and the ex Codrington Librarian, J. S. G. Simmons, the closest friends of his last years at All Souls, have been unfailingly helpful.

In Cornwall the hospitality of Lord and Lady St Levan at St Michael's Mount and that of David Treffry at the great house from which his family have for centuries commanded Fowey harbour introduced me to two of the County's splendours dearest to Rowse's heart. His near contemporary and sometime solicitor Mr John Pethybridge supplied me with invaluable recollections of the circumstances of Rowse's early life.

I wish to express my thanks to Tim Farmiloe and John Handford at Messrs Macmillan and to Mrs J. C. Sen at the John Rylands University Library, Manchester for searching their archives on my behalf. In America I wish to record my obligation to the Library of the University of Georgia at Athens (to which Rowse sold part of his library) where I was shown much kindness by Mary-Ellen Brooks, and to the Huntington Library at Pasadena, especially to its distinguished senior scholars, J. M. Steadman, Andrew Rolle and Robert Wark, who allowed me to profit from their

memories of Rowse's visits.

In Shakespearean matters Miss Mary Edmond, Mr Stephen Freer and Professor Stanley Wells have generously put their scholarship at my disposal. Elizabeth Jenkins, in Rowse's opinion his most rewarding correspondent, has kindly supplied me with letters of hers which are not in the Rowse archive. My old friend Kenneth Rose has allowed me to quote from his Diary whose future publication is eagerly awaited.

Mr Sydney Cauveren has saved me much labour by permitting me to avail myself of his A. L. Rowse bibliography which is shortly to be published in America by the Scarecrow Press. Mr John Saumarez Smith of Heywood Hill Books, the purchaser of Rowse's library, has drawn my attention to much that I would have missed. For the assistance and considerate attention of the Exeter University Librarian, Dr Alasdair Paterson, and his staff over many months I am deeply grateful.

Finally to Rowse's oldest and closest friends, Jack Simmons, Norman Scarfe, David Treffry, and Raleigh Trevelyan my debt is limitless. Their friendship and encouragement have irradiated the writing of this book.

For permission to quote from T. S. Eliot's letters in the Rowse archive I am most grateful to his widow, Mrs Valerie Eliot. The letter from George Bernard Shaw is printed by permission of the Society of Authors on behalf of the Bernard Shaw estate.

Richard Ollard

## Contradictions

Cornwall, the Little Land as A. L. Rowse, one of its most distinguished sons, thought of it, is like a tender towed in the wake of Britain. It is a tongue of land, seventy miles long and rarely more than twenty miles broad, buffeted to the north by the crashing seas of the Atlantic, indented to the south by the deep bays and estuaries of the Channel coast, sharing with Brittany a Celtic and a maritime inheritance that sets them apart from the great countries to which they have long been attached. Unlike the other large historic English counties it exudes no evidence of wealth. There are no smiling, fat, landscapes. Its beauties are either big, bare, dramatic, as most of its grand coastline or its central moors, or hidden, intimate valleys. It is not at all English. A fierce poverty, a fierce independence, are its human characteristics.

Alfred Leslie Rowse, born on 4 December 1903, in the hamlet of Tregonissey, on the hillside above St Austell in which it is now absorbed, proudly recalled that it ‘like all the china-clay villages of the “Higher Quarter”, escaped the stifling embrace of the squirearchy. And that fact, I realize now, though it was never thought of then, had a profound effect on our upbringing and social outlook. We were an independent folk; we never saw anybody in the village better than ourselves. I never remember seeing any sign of servility among any of its inhabitants. We were not in the habit of saying “sir” to anybody. I cannot recall my father saying “sir” to anyone; nor did the china-clay workers as a whole, any more than, I suppose, the free and independent tanners from whom they sprang had done in their day.’<sup>1</sup>

The tin mines to which he alludes, and in which his grandfather had worked, had been for centuries, perhaps even from Phoenician times, the chief source of such natural wealth as the county could boast. The mining tradition it fostered enabled Cornishmen to seek their fortunes in the Gold Rushes in South Africa, Australia and California when the tin diminished. (It had finally given out a year or two after Rowse’s death.) But it was succeeded in the nineteenth century by the china-clay industry, in which his father was employed, that still flourishes in the part of southern Cornwall in which he was born, lived and died.

Cornwall is now, to most English people except those who go there for seaside holidays (again like Brittany), as remote as Greenland. It is on the way to nowhere. It is an end in itself (as Rowse would passionately have wished it to be and as, for him, it always was). In ‘The Seven Landscapes of Cornwall’<sup>2</sup> he describes the contrasts and particularities of its landscape, concluding with his own:

‘What about the corrugated lunar landscape of the St Austell china-clay country – in the moonlight, under snow? I once saw an *aurora borealis* up there on a snowy day, over a thousand feet up.’

What indeed? But we must turn to the man himself. And there may be something to be said for introducing the reader to him by recalling how I was.

At my very first meeting with him, more than fifty years ago, I recall a snatch of talk arising from the fact that Harold Laski,<sup>3</sup> then the self-appointed *guru* of the triumphant Labour Party, had attacked Rowse as ‘a traitor to his class’.

‘What about HIM! Old Nathan Laski, respectable, prosperous pillar of Manchester capitalism ...’ The words are not exact: I did not take them down at the time and I certainly had no inkling that I should one day be Rowse’s biographer. But the amused, high-spirited tone is as fresh in my mind as if it were yesterday.

It has often been observed that actors who have made their name in comedy will generally succeed in tragedy, whereas the converse is rarely true. Which was Rowse? He certainly saw himself, or liked to present himself, as a tragic character. But his humorous perception was acute. He was very entertaining company, his sense of comedy irrepressible if not often directed at himself. It was not that he was self-satisfied. He had a Pepysian power of turning a cold objective gaze on the nakedness of his jealousies, resentments, pettinesses, that most of us are happy to ignore in ourselves.

That he was unusually and variously gifted few of his detractors, no inconsiderable body, would deny. The positive and negative aspects of these qualities are related. Rowse was a brilliant historian, specializing in the Tudor period but by no means confining himself to it. He was a poet. He was an aesthete whose taste and knowledge in painting, architecture and music were not shallow. He was a notable biographer. He was an antiquary whose understanding of the Cornish past was profound and passionate. He campaigned as a Labour candidate in the 1930s when the tide was running strongly against his party. Forty and fifty years later he was to encourage a view of himself as the sworn enemy of the progressive intellectual. And yet he could – and did – argue that he had been consistent in his loyalties. To the end of his life he retained his admiration for Attlee and Bevin. It was the fashionable Left and its fashionable idols that he hated and despised, sentiments which were warmly reciprocated. Yet for all that he never retracted his early admiration for Karl Marx, finding in his historical analysis a powerful support for his own scepticism towards liberal principles and professions. It was from Marx that he learned, and continued to believe, that at the base of human history lay its economic facts.

Even those who did not find themselves berated as humbugs or derided as simpletons were disturbed by the diversity of his scholarly interests. Rowse never forgot that he was a poet, that he had won a scholarship to Christ Church in English, not History, that he had appeared in print with Graham Greene and others in an undergraduate volume *Oxford Poetry* for which some of his contemporaries, later to achieve fame as writers, had been rejected. Like it or not, Literature was as much his parish as History. The members of these two encrusted academic faculties, for the most part, did not like it at all. They liked it still less when he followed up a widely admired biography of Shakespeare with volumes on the sonnets and on the identity of the Dark Lady.

Whatever the merits of Rowse’s arguments there can be no question that the tone in which he advanced them gave a huge advantage to his opponents. Rowse was quite clever enough to have seen this for himself. Why then did he adopt it? The answer that he gave was that a lifetime of rebuffs, of exclusion, of non-recognition, had exacerbated his proud and defiant nature. He knew and he did not care. He had

nothing to lose. He might as well enjoy annoying people who had annoyed him. How well or ill founded this opinion was the reader should be better able to decide when he has finished this book. But there can be no doubt as to the fervour with which it was held.

Fervour, indeed, was the keynote of his personality. The mild distastes, the faint enjoyments, the neutralities that make up so much of everyday life were all but unknown to him. His response was always vigorous and vivid, though not necessarily lacking in subtlety or discrimination. None the less the speed and force of his perceptions, impressive, stimulating, provocative, denied him the insights incident to slow recognition except in those departments of exact historical scholarship where minuteness and particularity are both essence and entirety. The long, hard slog through documents difficult to interpret or even to make out, what researcher is not familiar with the sense of inching one's way towards what is very likely empty of meaning or value? The tedium, the sense of pointlessness, the guilty and resentful awareness of wasting time are intensified by physical trivialities. The room is too cold or too airless: one's wrist aches or one's back is stiff: half-heard chatter annoys. To the cool temper these are trying. To the ardent, still more to the consciously superior, they are exasperating.

Rowse was both. His ardour needs no demonstration. His consciousness of superiority took strong hold in childhood. Who can forget the little boy standing at the top of the stairs while his parents were still in bed and proclaiming at the top of his voice, 'Everyone's a fool in this house but me'? The successful struggles, against what in his day were enormous odds, to win a first-class education fortified this conviction. His election to a Fellowship of All Souls, a place where viceroys, archbishops and other figures in the front rank of public life as well as men of legendary learning mixed on equal terms with young men who only a year before had been undergraduates, concluded the matter. Indeed, All Souls came to take the place of religion, philosophy, ethics (a concept for which Rowse, in his journals, repeatedly expresses his scepticism).

Try as one will to avoid the word 'elitism', a nasty linguistic formation heavy with overtones of spite and envy, the cost to reader and author is too high. Rowse, at any rate, would have embraced, did embrace, the notion at its widest and most unqualified. In what became during the last half of his life a dark, despairing, but still defiant view of the human condition, there was on the one hand the vast mass of what he called the Idiot People, contemptuously ignorant and actively resentful of literature and the arts which constitute the light shining in darkness; on the other the handful of men and women who create, care for and seek to preserve them. Clearly discernible among this sacred band was, of course, himself.

So crude a summary may sound sneering. Certainly those who disliked him or were shocked by his intemperate and provocative assertions will so regard it. But, however clumsy the expression, that is far from the author's intention. It is impossible to understand or appreciate Rowse – or indeed any character worth exploration – without at times representing them in postures offensive to the *bien pensant*. Mr Podsnap would not have made much of a biographer. Rowse, had he been *per impossibile* his own biographer,<sup>4</sup> looking at himself from the outside with a sympathetic but observant eye, would at once have detected inconsistencies in a position which he liked to think

of as intellectually impregnable. Solipsism, the view that oneself is the only reality, that other people and the world of ideas exist only as far as they impinge on one's consciousness, was his repeated profession. Nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so. He thought Shakespeare and Michelangelo good, the Idiot People preferred football and pop music. The simple fact of his preference was warrant enough for a superstructure of aesthetics and morals.

Morals? Here and there in the journals one can find hurried, almost furtive, but recognizable denials of the existence of right and wrong. Yet his history books and still more his journals, letters and private conversation show no such thing. On the contrary they ring with moral judgments, both approving (his temperament was warm and generous: when all is said and done he was an artist) and censorious. At times, particularly in his more popular history books, he likes to suggest that all such judgments are pragmatic and relative. We call an action good or bad according to whether it is in its context appropriate and rational. This gives us a comforting sense of being in touch with the great intellectual currents of our time.

But when it came to people he knew and had dealings with there were no hesitations. Take for instance his grateful and affectionate biography of Sir Arthur Quiller Couch (1988), 'a great gentleman, the greatest I have ever known'. Rowse was always quick to recognize baseness and generosity and to characterize them in unambiguously moral terms. Besides these simplicities, shared, one fears, with the Idiot People, there were moral obligations implicit in being one of the Elect. Talent, given the opportunity to develop it, imposed its own duty on its possessors. Gifted undergraduates who were his exact or near contemporaries, Graham Greene, W. H. Auden, Cyril Connolly, were never pardoned for their profligate neglect of their studies. Shirking hard work was a moral offence: and hard work, if one was clever (as they were) was all that was necessary to get a first in schools. *Ergo* not to have obtained a first showed that all is not sweet, all is not sound.

Rowse's claim to the reader's attention is not as a systematic thinker; and if it were the present author would be ill-equipped to write about him. He was an artist, a poet and a scholar. If he were to be compared with the Englishmen of the mid-seventeenth century Evelyn, Clarendon, Aubrey and Pepys would all be in point: Hobbes, Locke or Newton not at all. A sense of period, even a power of identifying oneself with a historical person as an actor identifies himself with a *dramatis persona*, a sense of place, of atmosphere, these were natural gifts which he diligently cultivated. The supreme master of them was his contemporary and friend John Betjeman. Indeed they once collaborated in an anthology of topographical photographs *Victorian and Edwardian Cornwall* (1974). The poetic, the intuitive, how these notes insist themselves in any contemplation of Rowse. In Betjeman's case these were combined with a good nature and a sufferance of fools that were apparently limitless. No one would think of saying any such thing of A.L.,<sup>5</sup> kind-hearted though he often showed himself to be. Impatience, anger, egocentricity, were simmering away even when they did not burst through the surface.

Betjeman leads – what better guide? – to Cornwall. Here, even deeper than love of Oxford and All Souls, than hatred for destructiveness and philistinism, lay the wellsprings. Partly it was simple patriotism, partly the strength of the first dawning perceptions of beauty. 'What my heart first awaking, Whispered the world was' but

chiefly it was the sureness of independence, of knowing that one was different. A.L. for all his scorn for the Idiot People was fond of playing the proletarian card, of priding himself on working-class horse sense as opposed to the high-minded self-delusion of the bourgeois intellectuals. He and D. H. Lawrence, he repeatedly implies, shared a fierce realism denied to public school men, even to those who had, like R. H. Tawney or George Orwell, chosen to go slumming in maturity. But beyond the clarity born of the bareness of working-class life he prided himself on the perceptions derived from his Celtic antecedents. He was not an Englishman, but Cornish born and bred. This in his eyes explained or excused a certain deviousness not to say slipperiness of which he knew himself capable and which, if practised against him, he would have resented. Decency, gentlemanliness, qualities which in fact he admired, were not part of the Celtic inheritance. He explains the matter with his usual lucidity in the following passage (pp. 197–8) of his biography of Quiller Couch already mentioned.

Rowse relates how in 1940 the Cornish landed gentry, who had been appeasers almost to a man and thus his bitter opponents in the previous Parliamentary election,

... were willing to come round and be friends with me. They were too late. I had turned my back on the county. Q was saddened at the breach, but he had no idea how far it would go, how absolutely I would react. He wasn't a Celt; he had a nice English nature. He called me over to the Haven [Q's house at Fowey], the so familiar study, and told me a thing or two about the proprietor of the local newspaper that had attacked *A Cornish Childhood* (as if they could get away with it with impunity: I had too much of that sort of thing throughout the thirties). He then said a wonderful thing: 'The best revenge is not to be like them'. That was Q: not me. I registered that he was right and at the same moment that I was not going to follow his gospel.

The concluding sentence exactly echoes a famous passage of Horace – except that the Latin poet advances no racial or cultural justification of his choice.

Perhaps a closer examination of this parallel may be enlightening. Ovid wrote

video meliora proboque  
Deteriora sequor.

'I see what is better and I approve of it; I practise what is worse.' The statement invites no sympathy, still less approval. If anything it is a recognition, so characteristic of the writer, of the truth about himself. It is certainly not a plea, direct or covert, for moral relativism or ethical pluralism. Anything but. It is a sharp assertion of black and white.

Rowse's remarks, looser and less succinct – after all he was not writing a poem but reminiscing about himself and an old friend – also present truths, not singular but plural, about himself. Their plurality is their most characteristic feature. He admires Q.'s clear application of his own creed as a gentleman and as a Christian. He even accepts its validity. 'I registered that he was right.' At the same time he rejects the general notion of a moral imperative which in common speech as well as in moral philosophy is implied by the word 'right'. 'That may be all very well, indeed admirable, for Q.,' he says, 'because Q. is an Englishman. I am not, and have never claimed to be. As a pure bred Celt I owe my moral allegiance to a starker, harsher code.'

It would be easy to demonstrate the inconsistency, the double standards, of such a position. But Rowse did not set up to be a moral philosopher, indeed often and emphatically expressed his scepticism towards the value of such an activity. What he is here stating and, unlike Horace, seemingly expecting approval for, is pluralism. To

commit oneself to one standpoint is, in his eyes, to limit, not to intensify, perception and understanding of one's fellow men. Homosexuality, he asserts in his journals and sometimes suggests in print, equips a man with feminine as well as masculine insights into character, psychology, motive. Truth may be one but that does not preclude its having many aspects. The poet, the novelist, the historian who has grasped this will be the better for it. Rowse is explaining the secrets of his trade, showing the reader his tools and the use of them, not designing an unsinkable vessel to be launched on the strange seas of thought.

Yet the most striking quality of Rowse's pluralism is that it most certainly did not issue in a general indifferentism, an indulgent assent to the fashionable proposition that Anything Goes. No writer of the century was more censorious. Indeed the last decades of his life resound with denunciations of the world into which he had survived, with predictions of doom as dark as anything to be found in the Old Testament. This element had always been to some degree present in his work. It is not only his contemporaries but the historical personages of his studies that incur reproof. Dr Noel Malcolm in an eminently fair, indeed favourable, review of *Four Caroline Portraits* (1993) raises the objection 'that its whole method of tut-tutting and ticking off the past is somehow unhistorical'. The point is well taken: Rowse is both a professed sceptic and an inveterate moralist. It is yet another contradiction.

Dr Malcolm points us to one more. It is profoundly unhistorical, inexplicable in so sensitive, so learned and so imaginative a historian, to castigate the men and women of the Middle Ages or the sixteenth century for religious belief. Their historian is not obliged to share it but he must accept the fact of it. Even in the history of religious art and iconography the personal creed of scholars is beside the point. The work of Emile Mâle, an agnostic, is no less sympathetic to or perceptive of the ideas of the medieval glass-painters or stone carvers than that of M. R. James, a believer. One of the most powerful motives to become a historian is the desire to enter minds and worlds other than one's own. One could illustrate this, abundantly, from Rowse's own books. Yet, in the same volume in most cases, one finds him lecturing his subjects for the inadequate grounds of their beliefs.

The question of religion exemplifies his intellectual duality. Ready, indeed anxious, to demonstrate to Cranmer or Sir Thomas More the baselessness of their, or anyone else's, religious position he objected strongly to being described as an atheist. 'Agnostic' was the term he chose because it admitted a mystery at the heart of things while rejecting definitions and systems. But having disembarassed himself of credal allegiance he enjoyed, vicariously, a partisanship in English Christianity. He liked the High – though not the extreme – Anglicans. He disliked Low Churchmen and detested Puritanism. He had never, unlike Gibbon and other historians later celebrated for their scepticism, been drawn to Roman Catholicism. Much might be pardoned for the patronage of the arts in which the Church of Rome had for centuries played the leading part. On the other hand the encouragement of superstition and downright silliness, typified for Rowse by Cardinal Newman's belief in the miraculous transport of the Virgin's house from Nazareth to the Italian town of Loreto, put it beyond the pale. But far, far worse were the Puritans who combined silliness with a deadly destructiveness, defacing carvings, smashing stained-glass windows, throwing paintings into the Thames.

Yet as he himself came ruefully to recognize Puritanism had got its own back on him for all his denunciations. What else but Puritanism animated his moral outrage at people like Cyril Connolly squandering time and talent on menus and wine lists that should have been devoted to the perusal of texts prescribed for the Final Honours Schools? Puritanism in its current secular sense stands for the triumph of the will, the imposition of self-discipline on the appetites of the natural man. Rowse had had to force this on himself to win his passport to the Republic of Letters. In an unpublished short story, of which the hero is a thinly disguised self-portrait, he wrote:

Was he himself a trifle inhuman? Certainly his iron control of himself was, and it took it out of him physically, in a chronic recurrence of gastric ulcer. Such discipline certainly was not natural to man.

The poverty and ignorance of the household into which he was born were unbearable to a vigorous, questioning intelligence. Questions demanded answers. Books, of which there were none in the house, were the obvious place in which to look for them. The educational ladder by which one climbed from a virtually illiterate home had in the years before the First World War few rungs. To contrast then and now is almost to contrast an escalator and a greasy pole. The struggle so vividly described in *A Cornish Childhood* developed characteristics in the author that were never to be effaced.

[1.](#) *A Cornish Childhood* (1942), pp. 24–5.

[2.](#) *The Little Land of Cornwall* (1986), pp. 1–3.

[3.](#) For Rowse's considered view of Laski see Chapter 9.

[4.](#) He was, in several volumes, his own autobiographer; but that is not the same thing.

[5.](#) His preferred style of address among his intimates.

## Origins

What is a historian? Nowadays, hoping to be taken for a scientist, he sometimes appears as a statistician or puts on the false beard of a sociologist. Opponents of this conception point out that in French and Italian the word for history and the word for a story are the same. Rowse's views, expressed in one of his earliest books and enlarged in *The Use of History* (1946) incline markedly to the second understanding of the function. But the Greek verb, from which French, Italian and English derive, means to inquire, to ask questions.

If ever a cap fitted, that does. In his first, most brilliant, autobiographical composition *A Cornish Childhood* (1942) Rowse achieved a self-description that triumphs by its unself-consciousness:

I admit that I was exceedingly inquisitive, devoured by an insatiable desire to know and in every direction; but I was never encouraged ... There was a blank wall all round. The result was that I was very much thrown in upon myself, my head teeming with ideas and questions and comments of all sorts and kinds, which were, it seemed, never welcome and usually bitten off with: 'Little boys should be seen and not heard'. When I first heard this dreary, discouraging remark, I wondered quite what it meant: why should little boys be *seen*? Were they to be looked at as if on exhibition? And what was the point of that? And then the point that they were to be unheard – *seen* but not *heard* – sank in, and I realized that that was the point of the remark. How I resented it. I could feel a blush going down my neck, bristling the hairs on the way down. And always when cut off in the midst of some – to me – entrancing exordium, some trope of imagination, which I cannot but think intelligent grown-ups would have found fascinating from a small child of five and known how to deal with, but which the plain working-people in whose family I was born and brought up never showed the slightest interest in and cut short – always I remember the hot blush of shame and the confusion which overcame me when I heard: 'Little boys should be seen and not heard.'

I grant that I must have been an altogether too knowing little boy, or would have been if the questions had been answered – if they had been capable of answering them. But this process of stubbing every shoot of confidence on the part of a naturally sanguine and vivacious temperament had all sorts of unforeseen consequences, some of them detrimental to happiness. For one thing, this repressive, discouraged youth drove me in upon myself and made me excessively ambitious: not until I was thirty-five and nearly lost my life over a couple of duodenal operations did this pressure relax, and, with the possibility of enjoying life returning (for the first time since I was nineteen), there came a more natural attitude to life.

*A Cornish Childhood* is such a pellucid book, fresh, astringent, tender, that it seems irritating to gloss it. But it throws so much light on so much that is to follow that it can hardly be avoided. From the first the little boy, though mischievous and, as he says himself, vivacious, was fond of being on his own. And like another solitary boy of an inquisitive disposition, John Aubrey, he loved hearing about the past. Intellectually this can be explained as the necessary consequence of curiosity. The past is all there is to be curious about. The present, as soon as one's consciousness has apprehended it, is already past. And the future offers scope not so much for curiosity as for speculation. This argument was to be deployed in *The Use of History*. It can hardly have been present to the awareness of a small boy. What was undoubtedly present, and was to remain, indeed to strengthen with his strength, was a nostalgia, a topographical loyalty

to the scenes of his early life. In time this assumed the forms of religion. In his nineties he sent me a copy of his poem; entitled 'Home':

Christ keep the cliffs and coves  
The land that gave me birth.  
And let no harm come near to them  
When I am gone to earth.

Christ keep them as they were  
When I was but a boy:  
To walk the roads and come to them  
Was all my summer's joy.

A sense of place implies a sense of its past. The combination of them is one of the springs of poetry. 'Home' to Rowse was the Cornwall to which his awakening perception thrilled, not the love and cherishing of the family into which he was born. It is a constant theme of his journals that love was a word to which he could attach no meaning so that the first conventional axiom of Christianity 'God is Love' conveyed nothing to him. But whether he knew what it meant or not he was certainly conscious of feeling affection and of needing it. His own self-analysis already quoted proves that.

Yet the portraits of his father and mother drawn in *A Cornish Childhood* are not without touches of tenderness in the depiction of his father, and of understanding, sometimes rising to an unwilling admiration, for his mother. They are at least presented as human beings, unlike the icy James Mill who stalks through the early passages of his brilliant son's autobiography with no word of encouragement or affection. This retrospect was written in 1941, some six or seven years after the death of his father, and before the obdurances of his mother, who kept house for him in Cornwall, had exasperated him to frenzy. The book had, he tells us, shaped itself in his mind in the intervals of recuperation while he was undergoing a series of operations that he and most of his friends thought quite likely to be fatal. The tone was therefore more subdued, the vision more elegiac, than was usual with him.

Neither parent showed the boy affection. The father, he suggests, rather through ineptitude, an inability to communicate born of his own bullied and joyless early life: the mother through a hard, cold, angry practicality that had no time for such things, a trait that, in his maturity, he was to remark in his own character. His elder brother George, from the start aggressively masculine and determinedly unimaginative, was naturally antipathetic. He is seen in the book simply as the product of a social environment itself distasteful, rather as Clarendon described the generality of victims in the Civil War 'dirty people of no name'. Only his sister Hilda, his elder by nearly ten years, broke this circle. She

had a growing girl's devotion to the baby of the family ... It was 'Hoola' who made me say my prayers, dressed dolls for me, looked after the brown teddy-bear, and tended me in bed when I had the measles ... One day I remember my mother stupidly posing the question before somebody else 'Oo do ee love best?' The answer was of course, firmly and uncompromisingly 'Hoola'. This was very ill received, with a frown and a scolding; but I was as obstinate as devoted, and wild horses would not have made me give the expected answer. It wasn't true and I wasn't going to say it: I think there was even thus early an instinctive resentment at the feeling of rejection, the importance of which in my make-up (or case history) I leave it to the Freudians to disentangle.

The obvious truthfulness of this account thaws the ice-bound vision of a childhood empty of affection. But it supports the author's contention of damage suffered and held

as a grudge against his mother. Rowse from his earliest days seems to have had a keen sense of genealogy, like a horse-breeder, seeing people first as specimens of a collective heredity rather than noticing them as individuals. His description of his father and mother takes shape and life from his apprehension of their family characteristics: the Rowses fickle, combative, devil-may-care, reckless, improvident; the Vansons, his mother's family, clever, cooler, more controlled, physically more elegant and sexually attractive. Before composing the book he had enumerated and catalogued these strains in his own nature. Autobiography he tells us in his opening paragraph had long been among his favourite reading. The Rowses and the Vansons of whom we are given such vivid sketches set against a compellingly realistic background of Cornish village society at the opening of the twentieth century owe not a little of their vitality to the author's close observation of himself.

Autobiography can hardly be written without disclosing feelings about people who are still alive. This imposed a certain moderation on what Rowse then wrote about his mother. But it is permissible to wonder what she made of the paragraph following that in which the reader has been told that before her marriage she had been in domestic service at one of Cornwall's greatest houses, St Michael's Mount, whose history and situation are then romantically evoked.

Not much of all this, it may be supposed, entered the head of a very young, very lovely housemaid, with those wonderful dark eyes and perfect features, the exquisite line of mouth and nose, the small ears under wavy black hair, drawn straight back. A *bonne bouche*, a discerning eye would decide. Age: twenty. The reaction on her part, in terms of how many bedrooms (so much larger than Tregrehan) [the country house near St Austell where her father and mother were lodge-keepers] so many stairs and tunnels and passages in the rock; here you had to go downstairs to bed; you were for ever losing your way in such a large place. Here, too, the sacrosanct, mysterious routine of the gentry, on an even grander scale: at the apex of it the remote, the unseen figure of 'his lordship' [Lord St Levan]; the strangeness of a house upon an island in the sea, going to and fro to Marazion by boat, or, when the tide was low, over the causeway; the gale of wind blowing against those high, defensive walls. (And always against that background, the interminable passages, the Chevy Chase Room, the Chapel with its family memorials, the figure of the young Captain, invalided home from the East. Only a few years ago, with strange emotion, I saw his memorial, dead a year or two after that brief time, there along with the rest.)

The significance of this passage is thinly concealed in order to avoid embarrassment and preserve the decencies. His mother had had an affair with one of the sons of the house resulting in an illegitimate daughter. The St Aubyn family had evidently behaved well, had found another situation for the young mother and had made provision for the upbringing of the child. The father, a regular army officer, died while serving in Hong Kong two or three years later.

Why, it may be asked, did Rowse exhume, or if not exhume at least indicate the site of this long buried secret? His mother surely would have found it disturbing. The answer is that Rowse, at the time of writing, was convinced that Dick Rowse, the china-clay worker, was not his natural father. How could his own sensibilities, his innate fastidiousness, his distaste amounting in adolescence and young manhood to active repulsion from working-class habits and pleasures, be accounted for except on the supposition that his true father was someone else? The young Captain had been dead some years before Rowse's birth, but the more he observed both the sexual promiscuity of Cornish villagers and the nature of his mother, the more probable it seemed that she had deceived the husband who was touchingly and simply devoted to her. The diaries often recur to the topic and settle ultimately on a lively but not