

Marcus Cunliffe, 1922–1990

For many of us the familiar question, “How did you become an Americanist?,” has a simple answer: Marcus Cunliffe. There is always explanation enough in the bare mention of his name, with its power to evoke a richly coloured personality and an inventive founding father of American Studies in Britain. When still in his thirties Marcus was attracting students to Manchester, and there, as later at the University of Sussex, the combination of the novelty of American history (or culture) and the magnetism of Marcus Cunliffe provided a heady start to many an academic career. Marcus never stopped opening doors for his junior colleagues and students.

From the beginning of his own career Marcus Cunliffe’s academic interests transcended conventional disciplinary boundaries. His first job at the University of Manchester in 1949 was to teach three concurrent courses on American History, American Foreign Policy, and American Literature, and his first major book was *The Literature of the United States* (1954), in which American writers were lightly but firmly placed in their social and historical context. The insights of social science informed *George Washington: Man and Monument* (1958), and an absorbing history of the early republic, *The Nation Takes Shape* (1959), is sprinkled with literary allusions. In *American Presidents and the Presidency* (1969) Marcus stalked the boundary between history and political science. At a time when other leading British historians of America were writing about Atlantic connections, Marcus Cunliffe was using his multidisciplinary interests to make American culture as a whole his subject. There was room for more specialist pursuits within this ambitious intellectual adventure. The study of George Washington reflected an interest in military matters which was given fuller expression in *Soldiers and Civilians: the Martial Spirit in America* (1968), while a book edited with Robin Winks, *Pastmasters* (1969), spoke to a deep interest in historiography. Marcus was also an advocate of comparative history, as demonstrated in *Chattel Slavery and Wage Slavery* (1979). In his curiosity about American life in all its aspects, not least its comparative context, Marcus was constantly probing the idea of American

uniqueness, in a host of essays as well as in his books, and doubtless too in his recent unpublished work on ideas of property and on republicanism. His eclectic mind and graceful prose could not fail to engage his readers.

Yet Marcus Cunliffe's larger-than-life personality probably won even more converts to American Studies than his publications. His ebullient good humour, his hospitality, his perceptive commentary on his world, and the very verve and style of his life fortified the academic communities of which he was a member. (In the rather drab Manchester of the early 1960s his students were fascinated by his clothes, especially his ties, then even more wondrous than later; we tried to count the number of seminars before we saw the same outfit twice, but had to abandon the attempt.) His fifteen years at Manchester were followed by fifteen at Sussex. For someone with little taste for administration, Marcus Cunliffe was remarkable in building up and winning international recognition for two centres of American Studies. He drew to them able students and colleagues and a succession of glittering visitors, conjured monies for their libraries, donated books of his own, and infused them with his distinctive interdisciplinary enthusiasms. Marcus also gave his services to the development of American Studies in Britain nationally, as in his chairmanship of the BAAS and his part in the founding of this journal. He has been the only member of our editorial board to have served from the beginning. His contributions to the British Americanist community, the characteristic mixture of fun and serious intellectual purpose, survived his departure for George Washington University in 1980. Even in his absence Marcus Cunliffe seemed the personification of American Studies in this country.

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