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*The Accidents of a European Historian*<sup>1</sup>

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All historians are surely accidental historians. At the most basic level, the opportunity to be a historian—at least in the more conventional understanding of the term—is the consequence of multiple accidents of timing, circumstance, and unequal opportunity: success in examinations, in grant applications, and simply being in a particular place at a particular time. But, more profoundly, an engagement with History is the product of the myriad and essentially accidental influences of social background, of location and generation, and of the impulses and consequences of curiosity.

All of that, and more, is certainly true of me. There was no single path that led me from an upbringing in rural Wales in the 1960s and 1970s, to study at Oxford, and then to end up staying there, teaching and writing History. Instead, I was initially carried along, rather in the manner of a paper bag caught in a breeze, by the influences of education, friendships, emotions, and of certain opportunities seized and others spurned. None of that is probably of much interest to anybody other than myself. But, in brief, I was born in 1960, the only child of parents in the Welsh coastal town of Aberystwyth who supported and encouraged me in my schoolwork, in a broad range of other interests from birdwatching to classical music, and who—unusually for that time and place—took me off in the family car on journeys across Europe, west and east, from bourgeois Switzerland to post-1968 Czechoslovakia. Aberystwyth was an interesting place to grow up: a very particular mixture of rural Wales and the more cosmopolitan community generated by the university. It was also a community where History seemed to matter, most immediately through the campaigns for Welsh language rights and political independence, but also through the sense of living on the edge of the wider histories of Britain and Europe. All of that could have led almost anywhere, but in fact it took me towards History at Oxford, partly through the encouragement of two of my teachers at Penglais School, David Barnes and Noel Butler, and partly because reading and writing about History became something I discovered I enjoyed doing, I certainly did not get there directly. After leaving school I took what was called a ‘year off,’ profiting from a modest scholarship to do research on the regional development policy of what was then the European Economic Community (EEC). That took me to Brussels. I ended up spending the best part of a year working there, relishing the differentness of this cosmopolitan city from small-town Wales, and the pleasures of living ‘in Europe’ (as I then thought of it), and even speaking French.

Again that could have carried me on to many places; but, when I landed back at Wadham College in Oxford, I was keen to succeed. I worked harder than most, but also profited from the oxygen provided by some great tutors—most notably Cliff Davies and Colin Lucas<sup>2</sup>—and by being around people full of views about the intellectual issues and politics of Margaret

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Camilo Erlichman and, as always, to Denise Cripps for their valuable comments on a first draft of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> C.S.L. Davies, *Peace, Print and Protestantism, 1450-1558* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1976); Colin Lucas, *The Structure of the Terror: The Example of Javogues and the Loire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). Re. Cliff Davies, see also the

Thatcher's Britain. It is difficult to be precise about the impact that the people and the place had on me. They reinforced my engagement with the political left, as well as a hope that Europe would somehow provide a better model. But, in terms of historical methodologies, I remained within the mainstream of established models of historical writing. I was too late to engage wholeheartedly with Marxism; and, though I shared in the enthusiasm of many in Oxford at the time for French post-structuralist ideas, their influence was barely visible in what I thought and wrote. I recall that, when I won a book prize, I spent it on Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen* and the two imposing hardback volumes of Theodore Zeldin's *France 1848-1945*.<sup>3</sup> They were imaginative but hardly radical choices, which reflected quite well the gentle spirit of innovation in modern European History in Oxford at the time.

It was my curiosity about the history of modern Europe, reinforced by the lack of alternatives in the depressing political context of Britain in 1983, which encouraged me to continue on—as one could in those days—directly from my first degree to a doctorate. Knowing French, and having studied the French Revolution with Colin Lucas for my Special Subject, I could easily have opted to join the Oxford tradition of historians of the Revolutionary era. But that lineage was drawing to a close by the 1980s; and my greatest enthusiasm during my undergraduate years had been for the years leading up to what was then the terminal date of the History course in 1939. As I had continued to spend time in Brussels, and had learned enough to know that the history of Belgium in the twentieth century did not lack for unexplored themes, I opted to explore pro-German collaboration in Belgium during the Nazi Occupation of 1940–44. This struck many as a bizarre choice. Belgian history, especially that of the twentieth century, barely featured on the known map of European History in Oxford; while Belgium itself, undermined by its political divisions, and host in the manner of some poor songbird to the cuckoo of the institutions of the European Union, had become the butt of British disdain and humour.

No matter. I had decided with the myopic obstinacy of youth that the cocktail of local politics, Catholic militancy, and opportunistic adventurism, which constituted the Rexist Movement led by Léon Degrelle in wartime francophone Belgium, constituted a subject that I could explore with greater freedom than more crowded historical fields, and that would provide me with a congenial mixture of differentness and controversy. I also had an ally, in good times and in bad, in Richard Cobb. He was just at the point of retiring as Professor of Modern History; but the History Faculty, at a loss for anybody qualified to supervise my putative thesis, had turned to him. Cobb was anything but a historian of twentieth-century Belgium, but he had played a very modest role in its liberation in 1944 as a singularly undisciplined member of the British army. From that time he had retained an interest in the history of what he invariably termed *la petite Belgique*, which matched his fascination with the marginal and the forgotten in the French Revolution. Cobb was largely ignorant of the formal duties of a supervisor, but as his last doctoral student I benefited hugely from his engagement, his unaffected interest in what I found and wrote about, and his simple partisanship. I had already read much of his work, and have read most of the rest subsequently; but I don't think he had a specific influence on my interests and approach. What I did gain from him, however, was the conviction that one should follow the archives wherever they lead, and then one should write about them. Almost up to his death, Cobb was an indefatigable writer, who hammered into me the mentality that no historical research is worth the effort unless you write it up, and send it out into the world, preferably with proper footnotes.<sup>4</sup> That is

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*Festschrift*: George Bernard and Steve Gunn, (eds.), *Authority and Consent in Tudor England: essays presented to C.S.L. Davies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: the modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976); Theodore Zeldin, *France 1848-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973 and 1977).

<sup>4</sup> See notably: Richard Cobb, *Les armées révolutionnaires: instrument de la Terreur dans les départements, avril 1793 – floréal an II* (Paris: Mouton, 1961 and 1963) translated by Marianne Elliott as *The People's Armies: the armées révolutionnaires: Instrument of the Terror in the Departments, April 1793 to Floréal Year II* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987); *A Second Identity: essays on France and French History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969); *A Sense of Place* (London: Duckworth, 1975); *Paris and its Provinces 1792-1802* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975); *Death in Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); *French and Germans, Germans and French* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983); *The end of the line: a memoir* (London: John Murray, 1997).

something I have sought to remember, when the three imposters of prevarication, perfectionism, or zeal for administrative procedure, present themselves.

And so, with a scholarship from the British government and a small grant from the Belgians too, I went off to Brussels again in 1984, gradually inserting myself within the small community of Belgian contemporary historians. Though I was not really aware of this at the time, the mid-1980s were a good moment to be commencing such a project. The initial energies invested in the military history of the war years, and the complex political divisions between the King, the government in exile, and the various Resistance groups, were coming to an end; and the different nuances of accommodation and collaboration with the German occupier were for the first time coming into focus. However, nobody in Belgium had taken on the challenge of writing about the Rexists, who over the course of the war year evolved under Degrelle's volatile leadership from a small Catholic authoritarian movement to enthusiastic followers of the Germanic racial dreams of the Schutzstaffel (SS). Their history was that of categorical failure, which—in contrast to the wartime collaboration of the Vlaams Nationaal Verbond (VNV) and other Flemish Nationalist groups<sup>5</sup>—had left barely any trace on the subsequent history of Belgium. But that too, I discovered, worked to my advantage. Belgium is not a country which delivers up its secrets, or its archives, easily; the emphatic nature of the Rexist defeat, however, meant that its records were scattered across the state archives, and more especially of the military justice authorities who prosecuted those Rexists they managed to apprehend at the end of the war. They remained officially closed to historians; but, as is often the case in Belgium, a personal introduction to the then military prosecutor from Albert De Jonghe—himself prosecuted for wartime collaboration, but who had become in later life a pioneering historian of German wartime rule in Belgium<sup>6</sup>—led to me spending many quiet days in the Palais de Justice in Brussels. Out of this, I was able to construct not only a narrative of the wartime trajectory of the Rexist Movement, but also the wider world of wartime collaboration, with its eccentric cast of would-be leaders, frustrated intellectuals, and military and economic opportunists.

There were also still some survivors. As I advanced in my work, and published a first article in French, so I came into contact with the world of aging former Rexists, many of whom had been categorically burned by the war years, but who had found different ways of surmounting the misfortunes of prosecution, imprisonment, and exile. Foremost among these was Degrelle himself. His implausible transition from a Catholic journalist to an SS officer on the Eastern Front had culminated in him crash-landing in a plane on a beach in northern Spain in May 1945. Negotiations for his return to Belgium ensued, but a deal satisfactory to both the Belgian government and the Francoist regime was never found; and Degrelle lived on, under a transparent assumed identity, in Spain. By the time I spent a day with him in the summer of 1988, he was living in a rather splendid apartment on the top floor of a seafront block in Malaga, surrounded by the flags of the SS *Légion Wallonie*, but looking out appropriately enough on an infinite view of sea and sky, entirely separated from the contemporary world many floors below. Degrelle had a well-honed speech of justification about his wartime actions, laced with the bitternesses of defeat; but my work in the archives meant that I was much better informed than him about the lives of his fellow Rexists in wartime Belgium, whom he had essentially abandoned to pursue his military adventures on the Eastern Front. And, so, as the day evolved, my attempts to interview him gave way to him asking me questions about his wartime followers, interspersed with a fund of anecdotes about their personalities. None of it transformed my account of Rex; but, as Cobb commented with enthusiasm, even he would have loved to have spent just one day with Robespierre.

In the meantime, I needed a job, or at least an income. One of the psychological challenges of doing doctoral research in one's twenties is that it leaves you feeling as though you are being left behind, as contemporaries launch themselves into professional careers, buying houses, and all the other qualifying tests of becoming a recognisable adult. If you know it is going to work out well in the end, then it can all be tolerated; but of course you never can know with confidence. Throughout my

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<sup>5</sup> Unknown to me at the time, another historian of the same generation was engaged upon a parallel project on the VNV. See Bruno De Wever, *Greep naar de macht. Vlaams-nationalisme en Nieuwe Orde. Het VNV 1933-1945* (Tielt and Antwerp: Lannoo, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> See notably, Albert De Jonghe, *Hitler en het politieke lot van België: de vestiging van een Zivilverwaltung in België en Noord-Frankrijk* (Antwerp: Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1972) and “La lutte Himmler-Reeder pour la nomination d'un HSSPF à Bruxelles,” *Cahiers d'histoire de la seconde guerre mondiale* 3 (1974), 4 (1976), 5 (1978), 7 (1982), and 8 (1984).

doctoral and post-doc years, I retained a strong sense that I was running out of road, and would soon enough be obliged to find a ‘proper job,’ most probably with the Foreign Office, which seemed intermittently interested in employing me. That, however, never quite came to pass, initially because of a one-year scholarship from the Institute of Historical Research in London, and more substantially because I was successful in getting a Junior Research Fellowship at Christ Church in Oxford in 1987. Of all the various professional accidents, this was probably the most influential. The moment of maximum danger, then and now, for most early-career historians comes after the doctorate, in making the transition towards a permanent post. Britain in the late 1980s was not an easy place to try to be a historian, but Christ Church gave me a refuge at a crucial moment, enabling me to complete the doctorate, write some articles, and launch myself upon turning the doctoral thesis into the book which would be published—through a Cobb connection—by Yale University Press in 1993 as *Collaboration in Belgium: Léon Degrelle and the Rexist Movement 1940–1944*. It had only a relatively modest impact among anglophone historians, whose established lack of interest in Belgium remained solidly in place. But it arrived at just the right moment in Belgium, where public discussions of the sins of collaboration aligned with a wider questioning of the project of the Belgian nation-state. The book sold well in French and Dutch translations (assisted by the timely death of Degrelle in Spain), and I found myself on the television news, in the newspapers, and a participant in various television programmes, of which I retain a particularly vivid memory of the trial of a two-hour live phone-in at the TV studio in Charleroi. Of course, little of this had anything to do with the inherent value of the book; it was the accidental conjuncture of the subject and the moment. But it also demonstrated how, as the twentieth century came to a close, the revelations of past histories became one of the ways by which the populations of many European states discussed their identity.<sup>7</sup> Page | 4

It also made me a historian. That self-description was slow to develop in my head, but the success of the book combined with my good fortune in landing a permanent job at Balliol College in Oxford in 1990, did remove uncertainties about my professional future. Of course, the Balliol job was again an accident. Rather unexpectedly, Colin Lucas left Balliol to take a senior post at the University of Chicago. I had already failed to be appointed by a number of universities, which had made the decision that a historian of Belgium was not the best means of filling their teaching needs in contemporary European history. But at Balliol, which was the last in the round of appointments in that academic year, this proved not to be the case. I rapidly threw myself into the increasing range of activities which go with a Fellowship at an Oxford college: tutorial teaching, pastoral care, service on committees, and tours of duty in College and subsequently Faculty offices. All of that can be quite intense, and a distraction from History; but the challenge of teaching across a wide range of dates and places has undoubtedly made me a better or simply a better-informed historian, by obliging me to think and teach about a wide range of subjects. That was reinforced too by the collective research culture of Oxford. Early on, I had set up a research seminar with my friend, colleague, and sometime co-writer Tom Buchanan, which over thirty years or so has served as a forum for discussion of European history, outside of any national tradition.

In that way, Oxford has become the rather accidental location of my career. Balliol has been a supportive institution, providing me with generations of students whom it has been great fun to teach, while the intellectual stimulus generated by my History colleagues—most notably Maurice Keen, Lyndal Roper and John-Paul Ghobrial—has done much to widen my horizons. There have been other options; but they have never been sufficiently compelling or have not arisen at the right time to have provided an alternative location which would have worked for me, or for Denise and Nick. History has to work with life, and my shared life with Denise, and subsequently with our son Nick, has always counted for more than individual opportunity. Denise and I met as undergraduates at Oxford, and have remained together ever since. This initially required some accommodation of different trajectories, as Denise went off to work and study in Japan. But she subsequently developed a successful career as a publisher in and around Oxford; and, when Nick arrived in 2000, we made the sensible decision to move out of the city and establish ourselves in a village, Combe, where we have built lives more diverse than the rather claustrophobic world of the university. All of this matters, and explains why I have adopted the well-meant but

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium. Léon Degrelle and the Rexist Movement 1940–44* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993). Published in French and Dutch translations as *Léon Degrelle: les années de collaboration* (Ottignies: Quorum, 1994) and *Collaboratie in België* (Groot-Bijgaarden: Globe, 1994). Republished (with a new Introduction) as *Léon Degrelle: les années de collaboration* (Brussels: Editions Labor, 2005).

probably annoying habit of challenging younger scholars to weigh more than professional factors before accepting a particular post.

The continuity of Oxford has also provided me with a favourable environment for making the transition from the history of Belgium to a wider European history. One of the principal conclusions I drew from my work on Rex was the inadequacy of a simple template of fascism. The Rexists were many things but they were never fascists, and many of the most interesting among them were militant Catholics, whose political ideal was the devolved but authoritarian society that had been the major theme of Catholic intellectual thought since the late nineteenth century. This was not unique to Belgium. Indeed, the influence of the work of friends such as Jim McMillan and Mary Vincent prompted me to realise just how far the influence of Catholic political ideas in twentieth-century Europe tended to be occluded by a secular-minded approach, which assembles the opponents of liberal democracy under categories such as fascism or authoritarianism. I brought all of that together in an article in *Past and Present*, a short book on inter-war Catholic Politics, and finally a collective volume edited with Tom Buchanan, which emphasized the strength of Catholicism as a political ideology in Europe across the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

This proved to be an influential template for my subsequent ways of working. Over the last twenty years or so I have been involved in six further such projects, all of which have had three characteristics: they have been European; they have been thematic; and they have been the products of forms of collective working. For once, this was not accidental. All three characteristics have been deliberate choices, which reflect my own attitudes, but also those of a generation of historians with a broadly convergent understanding of contemporary history. The first element—European not national—was a consequence of wider events: the stimulus provided by the collapse of the Cold War division of Europe, as well as the availability of funding for trans-national research projects. But it also reflected a shift in mentality and in interest among contemporary historians in the 1980s and 1990s, away from the exploration of national narratives—and crimes—and towards a broader understanding of Europe's twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

This also implied the second recurring characteristic: a thematic approach. All of the projects in which I have been involved have evaded too tight a chronological or geographical definition, in favour of the exploration of more amorphous themes. In part, this risks becoming nothing more than the overused rhetoric of revisionism. Defining ourselves against a somewhat caricatured older historiography which we claimed was everything we did not want to be—too national, too focused on the cardinal dates provided by the two world wars, and too marked by the partisanship of the Cold War partition of Europe—we wanted to pursue themes which cut across borders and time periods to generate new shapes and perspectives. But, for all of its slightly too easy emphasis on novelty, this mentality has done much to revivify, and above all lengthen, the European twentieth century. As my doctorate demonstrated, European history remained stalled in 1945, which had been succeeded by an undifferentiated present day. Now, twentieth-century history extends without difficulty to 1989 or beyond. Regardless of whether one accepts Eric Hobsbawm's definition of "the short twentieth century" from 1914 to 1991, the century has grown to its full length, at the same time as the geographical frontiers of Europe have become much larger from west to east.<sup>10</sup> And this has provided the space to explore new themes. After the Catholicism project, my next venture was a project and a volume on *Europe in Exile*, which explored the still rather neglected history of the exile groups who gathered in Britain during the Second World War, and the diverse ways in which their legacies were evident in Europe after 1945.<sup>11</sup> This was

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<sup>8</sup> Conway, "Building the Christian City. Catholics and Politics in Inter-war Francophone Belgium," *Past and Present* 128 (1990): 117-151; Conway, *Catholic Politics in Europe, 1918-1945* (London: Routledge, 1997); T. Buchanan and M. Conway, eds., *Political Catholicism in Europe 1918-1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> These issues are discussed in the contributions on <https://europedebate.hypotheses.org>.

<sup>10</sup> E.J. Hobsbawm *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Conway and José Gotovitch, eds., *Europe in Exile: European Exile Communities in Great Britain, 1940-1945* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2001).

followed by a second project with Tom Buchanan on *Democracy in Twentieth-Century Europe*. Written in the years after 1989, it had something of the air of ‘what we can now see’: democracy was not a constant in twentieth-century Europe, nor its endpoint, but a contested phenomenon, ownership of which had been claimed, or simply grabbed, by diverse groups from left to right across the century.<sup>12</sup> A similar mentality motivated the next project on *Political Legitimacy in Europe*, undertaken with my Dutch friend and colleague, Peter Romijn, and made possible by one of the last funding schemes provided by the European Science Foundation. This was a much more emphatically European venture, with working-group and plenary meetings held in different locations across Europe. The atmosphere resembled at times the rituals of European diplomacy more than those of historical research; but the collection of essays and the collective book that Peter and I brought to fruition with a committed group of colleagues was an innovative attempt to explore what happened beneath the surface of the Second World War, by exploring what Europeans understood legitimate government to be. That was about respect for rituals and laws, but also about the predictability of process, the provision of services, and a tacit contract between rulers and ruled.<sup>13</sup>

The exploration of the less visible contours of political culture was also at the heart of the next project, on Europeanization. At a moment in the 2000s when the emergence of a more unified, even standardized, Europe appeared almost ineluctable, it seemed a quietly subversive task to work with a German colleague Kiran Patel to bring together a group of primarily British and German historians to explore the ways in which diverse political, economic, and cultural processes of Europeanization had waxed and waned across the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> One of the purposes underpinning that project was the perceived need to integrate the Oxford History Faculty within European networks of collaboration, and that also provided the impulse for the subsequent project on *Political Violence*, involving a team of historians from Edinburgh, Oxford, and Dublin.<sup>15</sup> The idea that Europe’s twentieth century had been peculiarly violent needed no further demonstration, especially since the publication of Mark Mazower’s *Dark Continent* in 1998.<sup>16</sup> But we wanted to get beyond perceptions of the generalization of violence to identify the matrix of factors that caused acts of violence—the violence that hurt, as we called it—to become the primary tool of political action in some cultures and eras, and not in others. This idea of rethinking the familiar was also central to what was the longest of these projects, which used a grant from the French CNRS to bring together a team of historians from all areas of Europe to explore the three post-war periods in Europe, after 1918, after 1945, and after 1989. For fear that this might seem too conventional, we decided we should do this backwards, with each of us taking a theme and exploring its history backwards across the three eras from 1989 to 1945 and 1918. This regressive methodology, as John Horne elegantly termed it, proved easier to imagine than to practise; and, if you add in the complexities of French academic structures, a dose of mutual incomprehension, and the simple difficulty of studying the different moments and areas within a single frame, it seems somewhat remarkable that we managed eventually to produce a volume which opens with an Introduction by me defining its purposes with rather retrospective clarity.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Special Issue of *European History Quarterly* 32:1 (2002).

<sup>13</sup> Conway and Peter Romijn, eds., *The War for Legitimacy in Politics and Culture 1936-1946* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008). See also the special issue of *Contemporary European History* 13:4 (2004).

<sup>14</sup> Conway and Kiran K. Patel, eds., *Europeanization in the Twentieth Century. Historical Approaches* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Donald Bloxham and Robert Gerwarth, eds., *Political Violence in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge etc: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Conway, Pieter Lagrou, and Henry Rousso, eds., *Europe’s Postwar Periods—1989, 1945, 1918* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

These various experiences demonstrate that the third shared characteristic of these projects—their collective nature—made each of them both less and more than a book. Like a good number of historians of my generation, I have often been frustrated by the individualist spirit of much historical writing. The image of the omnipotent author processing the knowledge of many through (all too often) his particular mind to produce a book which alone carries his name seems all too obviously the outmoded legacy of a past era. And yet it has persisted, supported by the expectations of publishers and audiences alike, but also by the competitive spirit which inhabits academic culture. Much of that I continue to find irksome. History is more fun when it is done sociably, but also often better when written in a group. Collective ways of writing are of course not easy; and there has been a moment in the genesis of all of the projects in which I have been involved when I have felt that it would have been easier simply to have written a single-authored book. But that is not the point. It is the sheer difficulty of bringing together historians from different traditions and with diverse forms of knowledge which provides the rationale for the activity. If the results can at times be less fluent, or distinctive, they are also often exercises which have benefits that go well beyond the printed word.

Prominent among those, at least for me, have been the networks of friendships and intellectual engagement they have provided. Writing and debating contemporary European history has become a collective activity, that has involved me in working with colleagues from notably Finland, Denmark, Poland, the Czech Republic, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Italy, France, Ireland and of course Belgium in a way which has been much richer than I could have anticipated when I first crossed the Channel by ferry to Belgium with a book of travellers' cheques and a stammering grasp of French. This reality that European history has become European in personnel and form, as well as in subject matter, has been my overriding experience, as well as that of many others of my generation. Workshops, exchanges, and schemes of modest co-funding, made the era around 2000 one of mobility, joint projects, and simply of enjoying the diversity and stimulus it provided. It was, I suspect, a particular moment, which is now giving way again to more inward-looking historical cultures. For those of us based in Britain, Brexit provides an all-too-visible explanation, and a congenial means of casting ourselves as victims, expelled by a perverse act of self-harm to the margins of Europe. But, in truth, the reasons probably go deeper than that. The 'Europeanization' of European history was a phenomenon which relied on institutions, funding, but also a collective will, not all of which still possess the same political or academic momentum.<sup>18</sup>

Through all of these wider ventures, Belgium has remained a consistent focus for my work. In the interstices of teaching and other forms of writing I worked for a long time on a large study of Belgium from its liberation in September 1944 through the numerous crises of the subsequent years to its achievement of a rather tentative form of political stability in 1947. This was a much more individual project, and one into which I poured a wide range of questions I had in my mind about why this hard-won rescue of the Belgian nation-state was also at the origin of many of its subsequent political crises, and ultimately the possible disappearance of Belgium itself. The research it required gave me many reasons to visit different Belgian archives, most notably those of the postwar Prime Minister Achille Van Acker in Bruges. But it also gave me reason to spend time with a number of historians in Belgium—most notably José Gotovitch, Pieter Lagrou, and Dirk Martin—who became close friends and colleagues. The end result was *The Sorrows of Belgium: Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944–1947* published in 2012.<sup>19</sup> It is a book which perhaps suffers a little from trying to be three books in one. It provides a detailed analysis of those decisive years, as well as a contribution to the wider history of immediate postwar Europe, and an explanation of Belgium's subsequent troubled history. Like my Rex book, this one had little impact in the Anglophone world; but again I was fortunate that its publication came at one of those moments when Belgians were contemplating how their nation-state had effectively disappeared. I was able to get funding for a French-language translation, and a wider public audience.

The integration which that has provided with another academic culture, but also with a wider journalistic and intellectual world, has been rewarding, even liberating. I have never identified strongly with Britain, partly as a consequence of my

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<sup>18</sup> I have discussed these evolutions in my contribution to <https://europedebate.hypotheses.org>.

<sup>19</sup> Conway, *The Sorrows of Belgium. Liberation and Political Reconstruction 1944–47* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Published in French translation as *Les chagrins de la Belgique* (Brussels: Editions du CRISP, 2015).

Welsh upbringing, and partly because for almost all of my adult life Britain has been engaged on a trajectory which I find alienating: too accepting of social and economic inequality, too blind to the legacies of its imperial past, and simply too reluctant to embrace a new identity which would reflect its inherent diversity. Belgium has therefore long served for me as an alternative which—partly because it so readily recognises its failings and divisions—seems to express a better way of living. Most Belgians have a healthy suspicion of claims of scientific objectivity, and it has long amused me how many of my conversations with Belgian interlocutors have often ended up—generally over a glass or two—trying to identify whether, for all my apparent status as an outsider, I am by family background, marriage, or some other affiliation, really Walloon, Flemish, Socialist, Catholic, or any of the other labels by which Belgians situate each other within their complex society. My lack of any such connections has also on occasions made me one of the last advocates of Belgian history. As the unitary nation-state has quietly imploded over recent decades, so historical agendas have moved from the national to the regional, prompting some to read back the present-day reality of regionalized linguistic communities into the past. Belgium, by this account, was somewhere between an accident and a crime, rooted in the state-building projects of an avaricious bourgeoisie. There is much that is justified in such an approach, but I have found it my role to emphasize that during much of the twentieth century Belgium was a nation-state possessed of an identity which percolated through large sectors of the population, and created a fund of solidarity, emotions, and a shared way of doing politics.

It is the exploration of the distinctive political culture of Belgium which is at the heart of *Sorrows of Belgium*. By drawing together political narrative, analysis of social relations—of class, of gender, and of language—and the evolution of ideologies, it seems to me to reflect the methodological convergence which has occurred across contemporary European history in recent decades. Not only have national historiographies come closer together, but also the sub-divisions within History have diminished. The interplay of the political, the social, and the intellectual has become part of a shared culture of historical research, albeit one from which economic history, with its distinctive methodologies and concerns, remains somewhat distant. On the rare occasions when I have looked back at my earlier work, I am struck by how it is marked by an emphasis on the power of ideas, as reflected notably by the way in which the intellectuals of the 1930s and 1940s adopted particular world-views that in turn prompted them to make decisive political and personal choices. In contrast, both *Sorrows of Belgium* and my broader work on European history, notably my contributions to the *Legitimacy* volume, adopt a more socially-rooted approach. Ideas were shaped by milieux—those of class certainly, but also of generation, location and of gender—out of which emerged eventually from the 1960s onwards the more individualist and identity-related politics of our contemporary era.

All of this is visible too, I hope, in my most recent book. *Western Europe's Democratic Age, 1945–68*.<sup>20</sup> This takes up where I had left off in my previous work on democracy, by exploring why the truncated Western Europe that emerged from the Second World War and the Cold War division of Europe adopted a limited and managed model of democracy. What was at first a pragmatic choice on the part of elites became over the postwar decades something larger: an integral element of a new language of European self-identity, a means of critiquing other regimes to the east and south, but also a new ethos of less hierarchical social relations. The book's inspiration and purpose are historical; but finishing writing it amidst the overlaid crises of Brexit, of populist and 'illiberal' democratic regimes in some areas of Europe, and of the crises of governance within the European Union, it has been impossible to avoid an awareness that once again the events of history have been catching up with the writing of history—and not in a good way.

That porous frontier between present and past has long been inherent to the project of contemporary European history.<sup>21</sup> We no longer inhabit the twentieth century and what historians of my generation have been accustomed to regard as 'our' century has been replaced by another, with a different character. But that transition has not fundamentally distanced the twentieth century. We cling to the last witnesses of the mid-century past, as if we fear the consequences of that era

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<sup>20</sup> Conway, *Western Europe's Democratic Age, 1945-1968* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Pieter Lagrou, "De l'histoire du temps présent à l'histoire des autres. Comment une discipline critique devient complaisante," *Vingtième Siècle* 118 (2013): 101-19.



disappearing over the horizon of experience. The twentieth century has become a place of memories, a *lieu de mémoire*, against which Europe continues to measure its present-day reality. It would be perverse for historians to complain too strenuously about the perceived relevance of their subject-matter; but it also fixes the twentieth century in particular patterns, imposing an internal logic on the history of Europe, while expelling other themes—notably the experiences of empire—to the margins. The consequent need to make the history of Europe simply less European has become the major preoccupation of recent years, as reflected by the insertion of the term ‘global’ into myriad titles of books, projects and grant applications.<sup>22</sup> But this change needs to be more than simply adjectival. It also implies deconstructing narratives of European history to reassemble them within stories which are both larger in scope and more specific in focus.

That was brought home to me by my experience as Chair of the History Faculty Board in Oxford from 2015 to 2018, at a time when we were carrying through a curriculum reform intended to make the syllabus more thematic, diverse, global, and also less colonial. These periodic moments of syllabus change capture the intellectual preoccupations of the moment, as well as reflecting the changing patterns of student preferences. Twenty-five years ago the major narratives of European History—the Reformation, the Revolutionary era, and the upheavals of the mid-twentieth century—constituted central building blocks of that curriculum. Now, however, their place is no longer so assured. It is the history of the global east and south which is most demanded by students, and the interconnections between those histories and those of Britain and Europe which are the focus of the work of many colleagues in Oxford and elsewhere. That awareness was reinforced too by my tenure in the early 2000s as the editor of another venerable institution of Oxford’s historical culture, the *English Historical Review*. Though always far more diverse and pluralist in spirit than its late-Victorian title would imply, its ambition to serve as a universal historical journal, open to work on all eras and places, always risked being undermined by the inequalities that derive from inherited tradition, professional esteem, and the backgrounds of authors. That required a certain amount of swimming against the current, encouraging submissions on more diverse topics, but also simply trying to throw open the doors to make the journal a place where new topics, methods, and indeed forms of archives and publishing, are discussed.

This awareness of contemporary European history as a field, a subject matter, and even a title, which needs to justify its value, without pretensions to essentialism or centrality, seems to be where we have ended up in the early twenty-first century. At a collective level, it underscores the need to continue to rethink categories, chronologies, and subject-matters. But more personally, it also emphasizes the need to keep moving on. All historians risk becoming old-fashioned; that is the way the discipline demonstrates the influence of changing times and contexts. But, rather than charting a specific course to avert this danger, it is also sometimes better to allow things to happen by accident.

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Patrick Boucheron, Nicolas Delalande, Florian Mazel, Yann Potin, and Pierre Singaravélou, eds., *Histoire mondiale de la France* (Paris: Seuil, 2017).