Jack Simmons, 1915–2000

Jack Simmons was born at Isleworth, Middlesex, on 30 August 1915 and died in Leicester on 3 September 2000. In those eighty-five years he had been at Westminster School and Christ Church, Oxford; he then progressed first to be the valued assistant to Sir Reginald Coupland in completing several of his books on the British Empire in Africa. Then he established and built up at Leicester (University College, University from 1957) a school of historians who developed many areas of new, or newly perceived, interest, especially in English local history and in museum studies; he played a full part in Leicester activities, from its museums and libraries to the Archaeological and Historical Society and the shire's volumes in the *Victoria County History*. He was much embroiled in the administrative labours involved in the expansion of the university; and he was co-founder and regular contributor of *The Journal of Transport History* from 1953 until he laid down the editorship in 1973. Above all, his writings and his leadership made him the undoubted doyen of British railway historians.

Simmons was always 'Jack', never John. The story he told me was that when he was born word was sent to his father, then serving with the Royal Fusiliers in France. He was asked what name he would like the baby to have, and he went to the nearest post office to send a telegram saying that his choice was 'James'. But the local telegraph office was a civilian one and refused to transmit a wire in a foreign language, so the 'James' had to be changed to 'Jacques'. By the time it got to Isleworth this had become 'Jack'. That was his story, anyway. When he was admitted as a King's Scholar at Westminster, in the Latin form of words still then in use, he was addressed by the Dean as 'Johanniculus', but he was never any kind of 'John'.

An article by H. J. Dyos celebrating his work appeared in this journal (n.s., vol. 3, February 1976) with a comprehensive bibliography of his writings published up to that time compiled by Diana Dixon. *The Times* published an obituary on 15 September 2000. I was a friend of Jack Simmons ever since the evening in September 1929 when we both walked into college at Westminster as newly elected King's Scholars. He had already been in the school for a year but, by the arbitrary operation of a rule which began each school year on 1 September, although our birthdays in 1915 were only nine days

apart he was in the year senior to me both at Westminster and at Christ Church, Oxford. The rest of this article is a somewhat anecdotal account of the points where our lives came together.

On that first evening in College, the new 'election' – as each year's crop of King's Scholars was called – began to find out something about one another. I remember this about our conversation that evening: we were both interested in railways. I came from Hampstead Garden Suburb in Middlesex, he from Carshalton in Surrey, and a few minutes' talk revealed him to be dismally ignorant (as I saw it) about affairs at King's Cross, St Pancras and Euston. We probed each other's knowledge, and he finally challenged me to say what the headcode was for South London line (Victoria to London Bridge) trains. I said it was 2 (which was right); and that, though neither of us could have known it at the time, was the beginning of a friendship that was to last for seventy-one years less one month.

We were at first on the Classical side at Westminster, though he switched to History after School Certificate (as O level was then called). The historians at Westminster were a small number – rather select, they thought themselves – under L. E. Tanner and John Bowle; I stuck to the more orthodox Classical side. We enjoyed talking to each other. The chance came on the coach rides between Westminster and Morden, where the playing fields were (and where the Southern Railway's new Wimbledon and Sutton line was being constructed close by). We talked about all manner of things, except games, which we hated, to the point where the other boys began to think us pretentious for talking about national politics. (This was when Ramsay MacDonald was Prime Minister.) We followed the election results of 1931 with attention; he was for the left and I for the National Government. If he had any left-wing inclination at that time, it was not evident later in his career.

Jack went up to Christ Church, Oxford, in 1933; I followed him there in 1934. Christ Church was a splendid place to be in at that time: big enough to accommodate many sorts of people, where nobody was obliged to conform with sports or other activities they didn't care for. I am not sure who Jack's tutors were, except that J. C. Masterman, the Double-cross man, passionate for nineteenth-century German history, was one of them. After his first year Jack had a room on the second floor of Peckwater Quad, looking south straight at the great building of the library. It was so attractive that I put in for it when he moved out, and I got it. We levelled up again because he had to get an extension for taking his history degree – he was sick for nearly a year. So we graduated at the same time, summer 1937; and he went to live in Paris for a year to learn the language, while I went to Vienna and removed to Geneva after the events of March 1938 there made it a disagreeable place to be.

Through our undergraduate years we managed to find time for railway studies, in an amateur sort of way, with the university railway society and in a little journal called *Locomotion*, to which he contributed ten articles between 1931 and 1939. These were not listed in the 1976 bibliography, perhaps because they then seemed to be juvenilia; but they indicate pretty

clearly the range of his interests in the 1930s: locomotives (and their names); biography (Dr Dionysius Lardner and George Bradshaw); museums and collections. He read a splendid paper to the railway society on railways and railway stations at Oxford (if I remember the title right) which regrettably never got printed. Apart from this area of specific interest, we enjoyed visiting the countryside together. I remember particularly going to the remote village of Brill for the last day of passenger working on the branch line there from Quainton Road, and a long Sunday excursion trip from Oxford to Cardiff (and Barry Docks) and back: and, after I had got the use of a car, visiting Woodstock, Wittenham Clumps and, on coronation day 1937, the town of Chipping Norton.

For a long time then our paths diverged. His lay in and about Oxford – his mother and he went to live at Boars Hill; mine were in military service, at Derby, Aldershot, Crewe, then far away in Persia, Iraq, Egypt and Greece. We kept in touch by post, but it was not until 1946–47 that we began to meet again regularly. By this time he had been appointed to the new chair of history at Leicester and had become heavily involved with the developing University College. This part of the East Midlands was unfamiliar to him, but, spurred on by W. G. Hoskins, then the Reader in his department, he began to explore it thoroughly. I sometimes went with him; one day we got as far as Oakham and Burley on the Hill in Rutland (then still a wartime hospital or convalescent home), observing and absorbing the characteristics of its towns and villages and churches. Then the idea came to him that there was a need for a country-wide series of books, county by county (and a few cities) which would provide both a history and a gazetteer. He persuaded the firm of Collins that this would go well alongside their successful 'New Naturalist' series. He was telling me about this project when staying overnight on one of his visits to London. I asked him who would write the texts, and he told me Professor This and Doctor That, an impressive list; and in a flippant kind of way I said, 'When you come to Middlesex, you'd better think of me.' I was no historian – not after the end of the Roman Empire, anyway – and I didn't mean to be taken seriously. But he took me up, and five years later (1953) Collins published *Middlesex* in the New Survey of England. W. G. Hoskins's *Devon*, a very good book which was reprinted more than once, followed; and then the supply dried up. Collins decided that they could not go on waiting indefinitely; and they cut the throat of the series with only two volumes in it – a great loss to topographical writing about England. Jack was to have done Berkshire, but he did not get on very far with it; he was too busy editing. He edited very firmly, having a clear notion of what he wanted the contributors to do. He wrote a specimen article on a Berkshire village – Uffington, I think it was – which was set up and circulated to the authors as a pattern to be followed. I hope that a copy has survived somewhere. All this was on top of an expanding range of administrative work at Leicester, and plunging more deeply into the history of transport.

For a time it looked as though Jack's interests were too wide and various for any of them to prevail: the West Country, Leicester and Leicestershire,

the Lake poets (his *Southey* of 1945 was remarkable in its line), museums (*Transport Museums* of 1970 was his only book to deal with countries outside Britain, in western Europe), transport history. He found time to edit a substantial series of reprints of the classic county histories, but increasingly it was the history of railways in Britain that engaged him. His thirty-four-page book on the Maryport & Carlisle Railway (1947) is a small-scale and very characteristic example of how he deployed his particular talents: use of documents, attention to technical points, an eye for the landscape and a sense of place, economy and clarity in writing – and an allusion to literature, here to Wilkie Collins's *Woman in White*.

These activities did not come up to his idea of what was wanted. By 1951 or 1952 he must have been becoming increasingly aware that the outlets for publication of articles on the history of transport were inadequate, and he decided that a journal should be established to fill the gap. It should deal with transport of all kinds, at all periods, and in all countries, and its contributors, provided their standards were good enough, should not be solely academics: people actively engaged in the business of contemporary transport should be sought too, both as contributors of articles and as reviewers. Jack persuaded his university college to adopt the idea and publish a journal twice yearly; and he asked me to join him as co-editor. So I did, and between us we produced twenty-four numbers between May 1953 and November 1965. The extra-mural idea was my contribution to the debates we held on editorial policy; Jack accepted the idea immediately. It proved harder to manage articles from such possible authors, who generally had to be pressed into writing, than with academics, to whom being published was essential. I think it a pity, though perhaps inevitable, that the journal has lost this feature. We worked together with extraordinary harmony, considering that we lived a hundred miles apart and had most of our editorial consultations by post. Jack was always the final link with the printers. In the end we had to conclude that the arrangement was too complicated; both of us had increasing responsibilities in our primary occupations, and small signs of overstrain were beginning to show in the journal – for example, one review was printed twice over in successive issues – so we decided that from the end of 1965 he would be the sole editor. The university was told of this change. It was noted, without a word of acknowledgement, let alone of thanks, for my unpaid labours on their behalf.

Pressure on Jack at Leicester was then very intense, and the university was impatient with the commercial results of the journal. There followed a confused period, in which publication faltered; a New Series began in 1971, which ran until 1979; then things settled down with Manchester University Press as publisher, with the usual maddening practice common among academic journals of starting a new series (the third) of volume numbers.

In his time as joint and then sole editor, Jack was particularly concerned to ensure that transport historians should make use of all the original sources available – objects in museums as well as documents in archives – rather than secondary, already published material; and that what was written was based firmly on the places concerned. His sense of place was very acute; he quoted

with approval E. A. Freeman's dictum that historians should look less to their books and more to their boots (or words to that effect); and he got his school of historians at Leicester, where W. G. Hoskins had given the lead, to widen and deepen this sense. The idea is now often expressed by writers, with an extension of meaning, as 'context'. He did not ignore politics or religion or economics – how could anyone who had written about the history of the British Empire have done that? – but he did keep on coming back to the configuration of places and landscapes. In England particularly, if you travel fifteen miles away from any point you are almost certain to find yourself on different soil, with different crops or industries, and a different social inheritance. Jack had a very keen sense of the differences between places, and this illuminates his writing, especially in reviews, and particularly about the West of England. His own *Selective Guide Book to England* (1979) displayed his feeling for 130 different places.

Out of all this lively background of interests, which might have led to specialisation in one of several different spheres of study, Jack finally, and not surprisingly, chose the history of railways in Britain – really the high railway age from 1825 to 1914. In a series of books from 1978 onwards he treated the railway as part of the English (and occasionally Welsh and Scottish) scene in a series of compelling narratives, firmly based on original sources, often discovered by him, linked with geography, personalities, finance, personal letters and diaries, all put together with accuracy and pungency. What proved to be his last major work was the preparation and editing, with Gordon Biddle, of *The Oxford Companion to British Railway History* (1997). He wrote about one-third of this big volume, on subjects ranging (to take the letter P only) from Parliament to punctuality. There were twenty-four articles written by him under P, of which eleven were a column or longer. It was a triumph.

Jack Simmons was not everybody's man. He was at his best with a small group of like-minded people who enjoyed his directness and the wit of his talk on all kinds of subjects. He had many long-standing friends; he tended to keep them in separate compartments. He was not a great 'joiner' of societies or movements; but to those he did adhere to he gave full-hearted support, by writing and lecturing, and in committee work. The National Railway Museum at York recalled with gratitude his services to them by naming a reading room in its library after him. Belatedly, he was awarded an OBE in 1999.

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