

In memoriam

JACQUES ROGER (1920–90)

The sudden death of our colleague occurred in Paris on 26 March 1990, some months short of his seventieth birthday and anticipated retirement from official duties. He was in full vigour at a meeting of the Council of the Centre de Synthèse in December 1989, and was equally engaged in making plans for the International Academy of the History of Science. He was eagerly looking forward to fresh activities within these bodies, to which he would be able to devote more time and energy, and elsewhere. He had accepted an invitation to take part in a series of lectures at Oxford on recent French historiography. Soon afterwards his last illness began.

Jacques Roger often remarked on the kindness of fate which just saved him from conscription into the French army in 1940, and inevitable loss of vital years as a prisoner of war. Instead, he could proceed with his academic development. Born on 24 October 1920, he had followed classical studies, reaching his ‘first degree’ as *Agrégé en Lettres Classiques* in 1943. In a manner still, or until recently, more common in France than in Britain he spent several years teaching in lycées at Douai, Lille, Suresnes and Paris. After being *chargé de recherches* at the CNRS during 1951–53, his first appointment to a university was as *assistant* at Poitiers, in 1954, where he rose to be *maître de conférences* and then professor. Ten years later (1964) he moved to the University of Tours, becoming eventually Dean of the Faculty of Letters and Director of the Centre of Renaissance Studies. In 1969 he was appointed to a Chair in French literature at the Sorbonne, and in 1970 to the new Chair in the history of science at the University of Paris I.

Jacques Roger had begun to devote himself to this subject in 1951, his interests being first publicly manifest in an edition of Buffon’s *Epoques de la nature* (1962), though probably his *Panorama du XVIIe siècle Français* of the same year was a book of wider effect. The work on which Roger’s justly high reputation as an historian of biology was founded appeared in the following year: *Les Sciences de la vie dans la pensée française du XVIIIe siècle: La génération des animaux de Descartes à l’Encyclopédie* (1963; 2nd edn, 1971). This had been his successful thesis for the degree of Docteur ès Lettres, and won him the Priz Gobert of the Académie Française. He was considering a third edition of this celebrated work shortly before his death. The generation of animals, the work in that field of Redi, Malpighi, Leeuwenhoek, Swammerdam, Bonnet and many more, the long debate between ovists and animalculists, were familiar enough topics but Roger brought to them a breadth and depth of learning, a sense of context and a power of conceptual analysis that quite transformed their historiography and, by example and implication, related areas in the history of biology. He also published many special studies on these and other topics, and particularly (the fruit of thirty years’ labour) a biography of *Buffon* (1989).

One characteristic, coming certainly from his particular literary background, that contributed to the special quality of his historical work was his sense of the intellectual context and general philosophical assumptions of the biological debates. This he made explicit in his close attention to philosophical philology, and in his involvement in the history of scientific vocabulary published by the Institut National de la Langue Française. He insisted that in the history of biology terms and the ideas they expressed could be properly understood only within a whole particular historical context which was far wider than simply the biological. The meanings of such terms as species and genus and of their transformations, of atom and germ, of nature, providence, design and chance, were all subject to change with changes not only in their scientific but also in their cosmological and theological ambience. Terms of Greek origin could be given very different meanings by the very different questions to which they became related in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and again by the further changes of questions through to the nineteenth century and later. This approach enabled an authentic treatment of the filiation of ideas and of the subtle question of precursors. As he wrote of Maupertuis in *Les Sciences de la vie ...*: ‘il ne suffit pas d’être un disciple de Lucrèce pour être un précurseur de Darwin’ (p. 471 n.).

When Jacques Roger (realizing the ambition of every French academic) came from the provinces to the Sorbonne, the study of the history of science was dominated by an able group (Canguilhem, Costabel, Daumas, Taton), established leaders of the field, of whom only the first-named was at all concerned with biology. Roger, as an historian of *Les Sciences de la vie*, was set rather apart. Less than ten years later, as the slightly older generation withdrew from the scene, he emerged as its sole successor, for although France has within recent years produced many distinguished younger historians of science, Roger was unique in his seniority and experience. He became in 1978 director of the Fondation ‘Pour la Science’ and its Centre de Synthèse, and within a few years director of studies at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, director of the Centre Alexandre Koyré, first President of the newly formed Société Française d’Histoire des Sciences et Techniques, and (shortly before his last illness) Permanent Secretary of the International Academy of the History of Science. This was a tremendous burden to be imposed upon a man who also gave of himself freely as a visitor to other universities (among them Buffalo, Cambridge, Cornell, Geneva, Marburg and Oxford) and especially on regular visits for many years at the University of Virginia. Jacques Roger was in demand everywhere, not least in the United States, and he was unquestionably the pre-eminent scholar in his field. He was created Officier des Palmes Académique in 1965 and Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur in 1967, and later was elected to the Deutsche Akademie der Naturforscher-Leopoldina and received an honorary doctorate from the University of Geneva.

As had been the case with Koyré before, Roger’s ties with England were less close than those with the United States, though he knew and liked this country. Both Jacques and his wife Marie-Louise were, of course, eloquent in English (he knew enough nonchalantly to modify the pronunciation of his surname to suit the British norm!). The Rogers were generously hospitable to English scholars visiting France, many of whom will deeply regret a lost, delightful friend. A tall man, a heavy smoker, Jacques was talkative on all subjects, always excellent company, a man of great energy and power of work, a penetrating intelligence, also (in his adopted village of Sury-en-Vaux, which he loved) a devout

supporter of his Church. Perhaps among the many institutions with which he was connected he felt most at home in the Centre de Synthèse at 12 rue Colbert, of which he was head for twelve years. It seems appropriate to conclude with a few lines written by its Secretary-General, Pierre Monzani:

Ses qualités de disponibilité, d'accueil, de générosité provoquaient l'envie du travail et le goût de la rigueur pour soi-même. Qualité suprême du maître qui suscite sans jamais imposer, qui reste à votre portée constamment et chez qui l'exigence se revêt d'affectueux conseils, Jacques Roger était un humaniste exemplaire et sans ostentation (*Revue de Synthèse*, (1990), 111, pp. 1–2).

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