

OBITUARY - ROGER ANSTEY

Roger Anstey, who died on 26 January 1979, just before his 52nd birthday, did not regard himself primarily as an Africanist; but his historical studies of British and Belgian interest in the Congo and of the eighteenth century slave trade and British 'Abolition' were contributions to modern Atlantic and world history with much significance for African studies. Educated at Shrewsbury and at St. John's College, Cambridge, in the mid-1950s, Roger taught history at the new university of Ibadan. In 1957 he returned to England and worked for a dozen years at Durham, where in a small and hard-worked department his teaching and administration gained general respect. Translation to a chair at Canterbury in 1968 provided a breathing-space which allowed him to develop and publish the Abolition researches he had begun at Durham; and in the early 1970s he served for a time on the Council of ASAUK. His Congo books were sound and useful, and the incursion of an Englishman into the study of francophone colonial Africa helped cross-Channel contacts in African studies. Particularly in Belgium, among a small circle of scholars Roger's expertise was as much admired as his friendship was valued. But it was with his publications on Abolition that his work reached impressive maturity. He showed himself capable, first, in a notable paper on the course of Abolition, of teasing out the complex strands of political debate, and then, in his 1975 volume, The Atlantic slave trade and British abolition, of examining and lucidly expounding a rich slice of the history of ideas. The argument he put forward, that Abolition found effective support in Britain only when it was received into the ethic of evangelical Christianity, was subtly and convincingly presented, and this with no trace of special pleading despite Roger's own very deep personal acceptance of evangelical values. Latterly he had been working on the quantitative elements of the later slave trade, including profits; and aware that in this aspect of his earlier publications had not always gone unchallenged from economic historians, he was striving to acquire the mastery of evidence and forms of analysis he had already gained in other fields. Had he lived, much more would have been achieved - but he himself would have regarded such a speculation as pious only in a wrong sense. The sorrow of his colleagues, admirers and friends in Europe and America cannot but be mitigated by their respect for his conduct in the sorrow of his own last years. His wife, Avril, died a year before he did. During her illness Roger wrote privately and out of the blue to a pupil of mine who was also dying of cancer, to share with him his medical and Christian hopes. He knew of his heart condition, he worked on after his wife's death, he saw his children into adulthood. Tall, greying, with a distinction that remained youthful, he was outstanding in his conversation, as in his writing, for courtesy and a total lack of abrasiveness.

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