David Cesarani – An Appreciation

With the passing of David Cesarani we have lost a first-rate scholar, our foremost spokesperson for Holocaust education in the UK and a friend. David was a man of boundless energy and not the least sad part of his untimely death is the certainty that many projects will now remain unfulfilled. Many others have already set out David’s career trajectory, from his studies at Cambridge to his directorship of the Wiener Library at a remarkably young age to his research professorship at Royal Holloway. I would like here to offer some more personal reflections.

I first encountered David through his work. His early essays on Zionism and anti-Zionism in Britain, for example on the Conservative antisemite William Joynson-Hicks or his collaborative work on anti-alienism with Tony Kushner, were foundational for my own work on the British far right. A combination of original archival research and a penetrating analysis of the dominant, complacent view of Anglo-Jewish history, made these pieces exciting and highly productive, setting a new agenda for understanding the place of the Jews and antisemitism in British culture. His developing interest in the history of the Holocaust in the 1990s was no less significant. David was crucial to the development of what is now called “Holocaust consciousness” in Britain. His work on war criminals and his deep involvement with the Imperial War Museum’s Holocaust exhibition were just two of the ways in which David’s critical intelligence and fearless determination to speak truth to power bore fruit. It is hard to imagine the landscape of Holocaust education in Britain as it stands today without David’s crucial guiding hand. His work made it easier for a young British scholar to enter the world of Holocaust Studies in the 1990s than it would otherwise have been.

David was first and foremost a scholar. His monographs – on the history of the Jewish Chronicle, on Arthur Koestler, on Adolf Eichmann, and on Major Farran – indicate his wide-ranging research interests and his ability to command more than one field. Each was revisionist, provocative and challenging. Each was based on original research and a deep understanding not just of the existing scholarly debates but of why the subjects about which he wrote were of such importance in national and international debates. They touched on serious subjects but he wrote with an unpretentious light touch and guided the reader through complex issues with a sure hand. His presentation of Major Farran’s Hat to the research seminar at Royal Holloway’s History Department was a perfect case in point: his audience were in stitches although the argument was nothing less than scholarly and rigorous and the subject matter nothing less than fundamental for understanding the mess that is today’s Middle East.

David helped many people. His networking skills were legendary, his ability to win grants intimidating. But he had time for all who sought him out, as his many MA and PhD students will affirm. He helped me at many points in my career, from helping me
with getting work published to offering to teach my courses when I was on research leave – he never played the role of the research professor too grand to teach or to take on major administrative roles in the department – to getting my edited book *The Historiography of the Holocaust* off the ground. Originally intended to be a jointly-edited book, David moved on to other projects, but the book would never have happened without his initial input.

We often agreed to disagree. David’s book on Eichmann was closer in my opinion to the position of Hannah Arendt than he cared to believe and we often argued the toss over specific books. But on fundamentals we were in agreement and his devotion to the Holocaust Research Centre, the Holocaust Studies MA at Royal Holloway, and to supporting research were inspirational. It is sad that he will not now see the publication of his last major work, *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933-1949*.

David’s extraordinary energy touched many people. He knew and was open to everybody. His passing has left many people feeling diminished. David liked to talk. He talked at conferences, on radio, on television; he liked to talk at workshops, with students, with colleagues. He liked to talk in departmental meetings. Having worked with David closely for over ten years at Royal Holloway, it hardly needs to be said that the Holocaust Research Centre has been left with a gaping hole at its heart. Most of all, I will miss David knocking on my office door in order to tell me about a book he had just read, another research grant he had just won, or just to gossip or to vent his spleen. David Cesarani was a singular personality; he will be sorely missed. Let us continue the conversations and the debates he threw himself into with such pleasure with renewed vigour – that will be the best way to honour his achievements and his memory.

*Dan Stone*

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