

Obituaries

Mark Fiennes Prestwich

Mark Prestwich, Emeritus Professor of Historical and Political Studies at the University of Natal, died in Kidlington, near Oxford, on March 18th, 1985, his seventy-fourth birthday.

He was an outstandingly intelligent, sensitive and cultivated person — perhaps indeed one of the most distinguished people to have lived and worked in Pietermaritzburg.

Born in Manchester, he had a brilliant career at Cambridge, before coming to the Natal University College (as it then was) in 1938. He soon acquired a reputation as a highly accomplished and witty lecturer, and was an animated participant in various campus activities, most notably those of the dramatic society. He left South Africa in 1951, in order to take up a post at Queen's University, Belfast, but returned in 1953, and was for a few years the editor of the *Natal Witness*. In 1957 he rejoined the university staff, as senior lecturer in History and Political Science, and in 1963 was appointed to the chair, on the retirement of Professor Edgar Brookes. He himself retired in 1976, and went to live in England in the following year. He is survived by his widow, Rose, and by his two sons and two daughters.



Professor M.F. Prestwich.

(Photograph: *Natal Witness*)

Mark Prestwich was an historian, and his life was steeped not so much in the past — for he was no mere antiquarian — as in what he felt to be the best value that could be carried forward from the past. His particular love was the eighteenth century: English eighteenth-century history was his very special interest; he delighted in some of the great battles for human and civil liberties that took place in Britain in that century; and he had a profound devotion to, and insight into, the work of Edmund Burke. (Burke, it must be remembered, propounded the view that a society — if it was of any value at all, that is — should grow and change and develop in an organic way. Burke was in some ways the patron of the more respectable strand of British Toryism; and for that reason Mark Prestwich, in his last years, was distressed by the rather theoretical, monetarist conservatism of Mrs Thatcher.) In some ways, indeed, he was an eighteenth-century man. There was something pre-industrial about him. (He once confessed to a friend that he had never been able to master the mechanical principle that lay behind the working of a tin opener.) And in his superb command of the English language, his particular way of using and choosing words suggested a kinship with Burke, Gibbon, Samuel Johnson.

Yet it would be wrong to suppose that his interests were confined to the eighteenth century. He had a deep and searching knowledge of many aspects of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not to mention earlier eras, and there were numerous people and events and concepts from these periods that he had a grasp of and (so to speak) incorporated into his own way of life.

What was his way of life? He was a man, a husband and father, a friend, a university teacher, a writer. In each of these roles he was able to live out his beliefs, his values. He was also, at certain crucial moments, a leader-writer for — and, as has been said, for a few years the editor of — the *Natal Witness*. As a commentator on political events, he was able to apply to the ever-dramatic South African situation the full wealth of his cultured and vigorous wisdom.

Perhaps the word 'wisdom' is a little unsatisfactory: it doesn't suggest the dynamic quality that characterized his perception and his imaginativeness. There was nothing merely solemn about him. He often had a gleeful eye, a good-humouredly ironical twist to his lips. Indeed his humour was one of the deepest things about him. As with some of his admired eighteenth-century writers, and as with writers like Sydney Smith and Dickens, humour was no mere ornament but an essential facet of his vision of life and of society. He had such a faith in the values that he knew to be sound and alive, and such confidence that those who opposed these values were hopelessly and often absurdly off the track (and daily contact with the statements of certain cabinet ministers could not but strengthen this conviction), that he was often able to see the battle for right thinking and just action as in some ways tremendous fun. It was a certain deeply rooted joy — a joy that would flash out from time to time in memorably, dazzlingly witty formulations — which helped to sustain him, and some of his friends, and many of the readers of *Witness* editorials, in the especially dark days of the late 1950s and the 1960s.

In the end one can only do justice to Mark Prestwich by thinking of him as an artist — an artist of living. He loved life and the richness of life.

The question that he often asked of a book, or of an editorial written by someone else, or of an experience, was whether it was *enjoyable*: his imagination was in many ways aesthetic rather than merely moral or gloomily factual. His colleagues remember that there were two things that mildly vexed Mark at Arts Board meetings: unwise contributions to the debate, and anything which prolonged matters beyond the time when it was normal to have a late afternoon drink. On some occasions, in his amusingly circuitous way, he would produce a speech which charmingly articulated both of these irritations.

It would be quite wrong to regard him, however, as a highly-cultivated jester. That is what he was, partly; but of course he was very much more than that. He was a man of profound seriousness, a man of conviction and devotion. He was indeed a living embodiment of the quality and the subtlety of the humane values that he dedicated his life to.

C.O. GARDNER

