Bob Bushaway (1952-2013)

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Dr Bob Bushaway died suddenly on 11 February 2013 at the age of 60. He played a seminal role in the development of War Studies at Birmingham. He was founder and co-host of the series of Birmingham University Day Schools on the Great War that began in 1986. He was one of the key figures in setting up the part-time Birmingham BA in War Studies, which became the inspiration and model for the MA in British First World War Studies. And he was the presiding genius of the internationally-acclaimed Birmingham University First World War Summer School that ran for many years at Ludlow and more recently at Worcester.

Robert William Bushaway was born in Battersea on 2 September 1952. This was well before the area's reincarnation as 'South Chelsea'. Bob was proud of his working-class roots, but his pride was without self-congratulation. He understood that roots were what allowed you to grow in life and that life was about growth. He belonged to that almost-extinct species, the working-class grammar school boy. Bob was especially proud that Battersea Grammar School was also an alma mater of one of his favourite poets, Edward Thomas. Bob went on to Southampton University, where he took First Class Honours in History before undertaking doctoral research under the supervision of the late Professor John Rule, to whom he was devoted. Bob's original academic interest, which he never lost, was on rural custom and practice in eighteenth and nineteenth century England. He often broadcast on events such as Shrovetide football games or the Lewes Bonfire. His book *By Rite: Custom, Ceremony and Community in England 1700-1880* (1982), which was republished in 2011, established popular custom within the mainstream of English social history. Bob was never content, however, to spend the rest of his life working the same narrow seam. He had the sovereign quality of a good historian, curiosity, to which he brought wide reading and acute observation. Bob loved, even coveted, books, but he could read a landscape or a painting as well as he could a document or a poem. During even the most casual conversation with him it was possible to learn something new, either a new fact or a new way of viewing an old one. Knowledge sometimes stultifies the imagination, but Bob's learning was never derivative. He always came to his own conclusions.

Bob had a lifelong interest in the Great War, especially in the lives of ordinary soldiers. He was driven to this – I do not think this is too strong a word – by a visit he made as a cocksure fifteen-year old to a school friend's grandfather in Sussex. When Bob learned that the old man was a veteran of the Western Front, he trotted out the standard 'lions led by donkeys' view of the war that had become established by the mid-1960s. Bob was astonished, even frightened, by the violence of the response. Once the incoherence of the old man's rage had subsided, he succeeded in explaining to Bob that the views he had so fluently and unthinkingly espoused were not those of him and his mates and that he had no right to mock the sacrifice of those who had died for a cause in which they believed. This was a painful lesson, but Bob learned it. From then on he recognised that the people of the past had to be understood on their own terms. One of the saddest aspects of his death is that we will now never get the book he envisaged as a tribute to his friend's grandfather, 'Glum Heroes'.

Bob spent most of his working life as an administrator at Birmingham University, rising from Administrative Assistant in Science and Engineering to become the University's first Director of Research and Enterprise Services, but he never lost his academic and intellectual interests. He continued to research and write and, above all, to lecture and teach. He had a lifelong commitment to liberal adult education, a commitment that sadly most universities have now abandoned. He ran numerous courses for the University of Birmingham Centre for Continuing Studies until its demise. Although nominally 'retired', in the week he died he was due to teach 'The Rise of Industrial Britain' to his WEA class in Wolverhampton, 'A Reconsideration of the British Empire' to his long-standing evening class in Astwood Bank and 'The BEF' to his MA Military History students at the University of Chester. He supervised and inspired generations of masters and doctoral students, both in the fields of English popular culture and of the social and cultural history of the Great War.

Bob Bushaway was a big man, in every sense of the word. His passing leaves a huge gap in many lives, more I suspect than Bob himself realised.

Dr John Bourne, Founder of the Centre for War Studies, University of Birmingham

Bob Bushaway, far left, with atendees of one of his Ludlow Summer Schools

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