

THOMAS ANTHONY BIRRELL, 1924–2011

It was not easy to get to know Tom Birrell who was a very private man. But as our friendship developed over the years, I was able to appreciate that his philosophy of life and his philosophical impetus in historical research and writing were very much in tune with the view expressed in *Gaudium et Spes*. It was a philosophy in which the unfolding of historical events not only registered the individual and social life of man but also the nature of the cosmic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness.

Tom was thus not a scholar who concentrated solely upon a narrow period of time or particular events, or simply in only one favourite period of history. Very much the polymath, he seemed a man born out of his time. Indeed, Tom was somewhat impatient of that breed of historian impelled unduly by motives of self-aggrandizement or the attraction of an aggressive publicity, or of those who were happy to be among the modern ‘publish or perish’ brigade. His concept of research was always located in the need to see the wider picture and evaluate as much contextual material as possible. There was a close link in this process to his personal faith in the working through historical events of the wise and benign guidance of the Creator.

It was the ability to see the wider aims and purposes in historical research that impelled him to be such a kindly guide to young historians seeking aid and advice. His friendships among many young researchers were expansive and caring, considerable numbers of them benefiting from Tom’s ability to point them into paths and directions hitherto obscure. In that process Tom’s life-work can be seen to have been all of a piece, his scholarship, his faith, his Catholicism and his meticulous guidance towards challenging explanations based upon authoritative documentary and printed sources.

In the Catholic Record Society we have much to be grateful for to Tom for his invaluable labour and support. He saw the deepest meaning of history as going beyond history. Blessed John Paul II once put the latter point remarkably well: ‘*The Kingdom of God*’, he wrote, is ‘*grafted onto human history, and there it grows, but its goal is the life to come.*’ Tom’s spirit fully records today that destiny as deeply as he appreciated it in his lifetime.

V. Alan McClelland