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Intellectual History: Biographical and Archival Sources

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My area of speciality is the history of ideas in late-seventeenth-century England, on which I have published various books; my research has focused on the Royal Society in its early years, and on such thinkers as John Aubrey, John Evelyn, Robert Hooke, and Samuel Jeake. Though in the past I have attempted a general survey of the ideas of the period in my *Science and Society in Restoration England* (1981), I have come to feel that such surveys almost inevitably involve undue simplification. Instead, it has increasingly been my conviction that the ideas of a period like this can only be properly understood by intensive study of the ideas of individual thinkers, preferably involving close scrutiny of the archival remains that they have left us. For that reason, I am myself committed to a sustained programme of research on Robert Boyle, whose extensive papers I am trying to understand and exploit, in conjunction with a new edition of his writings for the 'Pickering Masters' series, which I am currently preparing in collaboration with Antonio Clericuzio and Edward B. Davis.

In parallel with this, I am trying to persuade others to adopt a similar approach, thus encouraging comparisons between different thinkers which should result in worthwhile broader conclusions. To this end I have organized a conference on 'Archives of the Scientific Revolution',

which took place at the Royal Society in London from the 11th to the 12th of April 1996. This comprised a series of papers looking at the archives both of individual intellectuals and of scientific institutions. It has undoubtedly opened up a new dimension on the history of ideas in the period by stimulating questions about how ideas were transmitted, recorded, and reprocessed at the time.

Beyond this, I should like to make a couple of points about the past and future of the history of ideas. My first point is that we need to decide how the ideas that we study are to be defined. Are they all the ideas of a society, or just some of them? In particular, how do they relate to an area of study that has burgeoned in recent years, the study of popular culture? Is our subject matter to be defined as 'unpopular ideas'? I hope not. In fact, as recent work on subjects like demonology by authors like Norman Cohn, Carlo Ginzburg, and Stuart Clark has demonstrated, there is a crucial interconnection between learned and popular ideas, and neither can be properly understood in isolation from the other.

Secondly, it seems to me that part of the difficulty for the history of ideas in general has been the disproportionate attention lavished on specific traditions within it. As for 'high' ideas, a slightly disquieting tendency has been for certain traditions in their study to become institutionalized in their own right. Whatever the positive benefits of this, it has had a distorting effect, leading to the neglect of broader aspects of the period which do not fit into these traditions. A case in point is the history of political thought, the study of which in my view dominates intellectual history to quite a disproportionate extent in some published series.

A similar state of affairs exists with the history of science. Again, a disproportionate emphasis on this has had a distorting effect, particularly in the early modern period, where all too often commentators have misunderstood what we would identify as science by overestimating its significance in early modern intellectual life as a whole. A third instance is the influence of the study of literature, which has had a similar distorting effect due to its obsession with a canon of great names. To avoid such distortion it is essential to try to get away from these rather narrow traditions (which often involve rather anachronistic conceptualizations of the subject), and to study the ideas of the period in their own right. The encouragement of that seems to me a worthy goal for the society.