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JUSTIN A. I. CHAMPION

Conferring with Dick Popkin

It was the obscure Egyptian physician, Dr. Henry Morelli, who brought Dick Popkin and myself together in 1989–90 although I had been intellectually intimate with his work since the late 1970s. The History of Scepticism was a powerfully formative book for a young man predisposed to look for arguments useful against any form of authority: it ought to be prescribed reading for any adolescent who wishes to be provided with effective rebuttals against the tyrannies of teachers, parents, society, etc. In the spring of 1989, I was working in a research institute in London University. I had recently completed my Ph.D. research into irreligion and blasphemy in the later seventeenth century and was searching for new avenues of research as well as tying up the invariably loose ends of earlier work. The focus of my research had been the life and writings of John Toland (1670–1722), a maverick republican scholar who was intimate with most of the counter-cultural milieux of his age. Toland’s letters bristled with obscure names and dangerous connections. One of the most obscure letters involved Toland giving a succinct account of Giordano Bruno’s Spaccio. In his preliminary material he had mentioned a Dr. Henry Morelli with whom he had the occasional conversation. Who this man was had repeatedly eluded me over the course of six or seven years of investigation. At the same time as I was pondering publishing a short piece on Toland’s letter, I heard rumours of a Fellowship, funded by the Foundation for Intellectual History, to do research into the Traité des trois imposteurs. For some reason, although the deadline for applications had expired, I sent a fax to Popkin including a brief description of my interests and a photocopy of Toland’s letter. Almost by return of fax I had a response from Popkin: who was I? What did I know about Morelli? How did Toland know him? As an afterthought was appended an offer of a Fellowship at Leiden. I have had a fondness for Morelli ever since.

The Fellowship at Leiden was a revelation. It was my first extended
contact with a scholar of Popkin's reputation and character. Dick's company was erudite, witty, and wicked. He talked to all, young and old, with the same respect and interest. Whether at dinner or at lunch, Dick, although not in the best of health, would entertain and illuminate. The first seminars Dick led in Leiden were spell-binding; although on reflection one might dispute or disagree with some of his points, when listening to his gruff voice weaving a web of connections, personal and intellectual, one was drawn into his narrative. Since Leiden I have met Dick in Dublin, London, and Los Angeles: he is without doubt one of the most innovative and generous historians I have ever encountered. For Dick the point of scholarship is to make connections, to explore blind alleys, to challenge shibboleths: unlike many historians of stature these objectives are not contrived to puff his own reputation or ego. Dick dispenses ideas to younger scholars with enormous liberality: how often has he started off a conversation with the phrase "You might want to look at..." For Dick the point is to get the work done not to garner kudos. Almost single-handedly Dick has kick-started a series of historiographical questions: he still seems two steps ahead of the game half of the time. The point of his commitment to historical enquiry is that we all benefit from his enthusiasm and encouragement: Dick not only provides the intellectual infrastructure but also, and perhaps more importantly, the material and social context for historians (young and old) to communicate across cultural, linguistic, and political boundaries. Most of our correspondence is now done by email: inquiries for reading on obscure individual are always met promptly usually accompanied by some treasurable remark about the British Monarchy. This combination of erudition and political engagement sums Dick Popkin up.