Professor Roy Foster pays tribute to Professor Eric Hobsbawm in an extract from the eulogy he delivered at Eric’s funeral

I’m speaking as a friend of Eric’s for 37 years, and for several of them, a colleague. When I spoke at Eric’s 90th birthday, I said that a suitable Hobsbawmian title for this stage of his life, might be the ‘Age of Apotheosis’: five years later, the reaction to his death has borne that out. It’s as if a President had died: a President, perhaps, of that platonic, cosmopolitan world of historical letters where Eric bore this out. He also once said that, if the chance had come his way, he’d rather have been an anthropologist than a historian. Eric’s lively and quizzical interest in cultures, in people, and in the paradoxes of their lives, made him a wonderful companion, and a legendary teacher. Among the many tributes, I was struck by a letter from a Birkbeck student, remembering his enthralling lectures, his sympathetic supervisions, and an unexpected phone call to congratulate her on a brilliant dissertation. Many could tell such stories. Birkbeck was rightly proud of Eric, and he was rightly proud of it. Its ethos of fellowship and equality of opportunity matched him perfectly – not to mention the evening-teaching which enabled him to live the night-owl schedule so suited to a jazz-man and party-goer.

There’s much that’s inspirational about Eric’s life: from the insecurities, upheavals and unhappiness of his youth, through to the extraordinary achievements of his maturity. He knew that history was more than ‘what actually happened’ and he did not, as he put it in Interesting Times, give up on the Grail, while all the time knowing that searching for it was what mattered, not the impossibility of finding it. What he found in his personal life with Marlene and his family underpinned all that he so generously shared with his friends: that overwhelming appetite for life and thought and good company, which lasted to the end. To know Eric was to be touched with gold. And that sense of fellowship, of partaking in a golden age, will endure, along with so much else that he gave the world – a world which is suddenly and sharply poorer without him.

Roy Foster (above) is the Carroll Professor of Irish History at the University of Oxford. A Fellow of Birkbeck, he taught at the College from 1974 to 1991.