Working together for Birkbeck

Professor David Latchman recognises the major contributions to College life made by Professor Eric Hobsbawm and Lord Marshall

As you will read elsewhere in this issue, Birkbeck sustained two significant losses in 2012 with the passing of our President, Professor Eric Hobsbawm, and of Lord Marshall of Knightsbridge, who was Chairman of Governors from 2003 until his retirement due to ill health in 2010. I had the great pleasure of working closely with both of them and experiencing their dedication to Birkbeck and its mission.

In November 2012, I attended the Memorial Service for Lord Marshall. Both HRH the Duke of Edinburgh and HRH Prince Andrew were represented and I was surrounded by captains of industry representing amongst others the companies of which Lord Marshall was Chairman, including British Airways, Nomura and Pirelli.

As I sat listening to the tributes to Colin and to the poetry and music which he loved, I reflected that those attending from Birkbeck were probably the only people in the congregation who would also be present at the Memorial Meeting we are organising for Eric Hobsbawm in the spring of 2013. This led me to the further reflection that only Birkbeck could unite Eric Hobsbawm, the Marxist historian and academic, with Colin Marshall, the leading industrialist who was admired by Mrs Thatcher for his key role in the modernisation of British Airways.

Yet, united they were in their passion for Birkbeck and their desire to help it flourish. Eric, of course, came to Birkbeck as a lecturer in 1947 and demonstrated his commitment to its ideals over a 65-year association. In contrast, Colin left school at 16 and, as he put it, “ran away to sea” as a cadet purser. Although he subsequently had an extraordinarily successful business career, without going to university, Colin was a passionate believer in the importance of access to higher education at all ages. This, combined with his passion for London, made him accept the Chair of Governors position at Birkbeck, even though he had refused similar positions at other universities. As Chair, he not only worked directly for the College but also introduced us to many of his contacts, who became our supporters.

The legacy of Eric Hobsbawm and Colin Marshall will therefore live on in Birkbeck. Eric via the staff and students whom he personally inspired and will continue to inspire via his many books, and Colin via the example he set for those of us who worked with him and via the many individuals whom he introduced to the College and who became its dedicated supporters.

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