Parkinson-the man and his Law

The opportunity for greatness might have come during his period in Malaya, where Parkinson first drafted the essay—it was published in the *Economist*—on which *Parkinson's Law* was based. "Malaya was the swansong of Empire (India had already gone) and was working towards the independence that came in 1957. There was a ferment of political ideals as well as a civil war, a jungle war, which I reported for the *Manchester Guardian*, going on. Our job in the university was to turn out the administrators of the future, which we did. Many of my former pupils are in high office there now. I became close to both Sir Gerald Templer and to Lee Kuan Yew: it was in many ways the most stimulating period of my life."

Just as the war had put an end to his idea of becoming a headmaster, so the success of *Parkinson's Law* ended his university career. But there are a number of other, more serious books, dating from this academic period, of which he remains proud: *Trade in the Eastern Seas* (1937) and *War in the Eastern Seas*, largely written before the war but not published until long after it (1954), are likely to remain definitive studies. His most important book he considers to be *East and West* (1963), an examination of what is truly Oriental and what is truly Western, particularly where political attitudes are concerned. "*Parkinson's Law* was a book about the *means*, but beyond that there is what you are actually *trying to do* in the world and that's where a book like *East and West* comes in. The problems of business administration are trivial, after all, compared with the impact of one civilization on another."

At this point the second Mrs Parkinson (his first marriage was dissolved in 1950) interrupts our conversation with the news that Channel Television are on the phone wanting Cyril to appear "live" that evening in a discussion about the position of Guernsey within the Common Market. He accepts with alacrity and suggests that we might use the interim to tour his property and drink a cup of tea. What *does* he think about the Common Market? "Well, I am basically in favour because I look upon it as the lesser of two unimaginable evils. The only thing that worries me about my position on this is that my friend Enoch Powell (he comes here to stay in the summer) is against it and it seems to me that, since he is usually right about everything, I may be wrong about it. I have the most profound respect for his mind."

We tour the estate of an acre or so. I am shown the stables, a private theatre where one of his own plays was performed, a baronial hall complete with minstrels' gallery and coats-of-arms and other remnants of feudalism, and the beds in which Enoch Powell and his family sleep in the summer. Parkinson is touchingly proud of this comparatively recent association. It occurs to me that he is, if anything, well to the right of Powell in political terms, although once, many years ago, he stood as a Liberal candidate.

Ann Parkinson, a highly intelligent woman, a descendant of Elizabeth Fry and Anthony Trollope—the Parkinsons are very strong on heredity—presides over a formal tea in the dining-room. Beautifully executed oil portraits of husband and wife in earlier years stare down at us. Enlivened, perhaps, by the prospect of his imminent television interview, Parkinson becomes quite jovial, a little less portentous. He recalls a TV appearance on the *Eamonn Andrews Show* some years ago when he found himself sitting next to Raquel Welch. A very nice girl, I say to him. "Not the adjective I would have chosen myself," he replies.

Parkinson is and always has been a shrewd promoter of himself and his books. He personally kept *Parkinson's Law* in the American best-seller lists by brilliantly timed coast-to-coast television appearances. He is a tireless treader on that *via dolorosa*, the American lecture circuit, for which he commands enormous fees wherever he goes. He is a believer in striking while the iron is hot where his books are concerned, and this policy has paid off most handsomely. As well as his academic works and the *Parkinson's Law* series, Parkinson is the author of such diverse publications as *Ponies Plot* (1965), a tale for children set in his own back yard, and *The Life and Times of Horatio Hornblower* (1970) as well as two full-length plays, both of which have been performed in Guernsey. He is a prolific journalist and essayist. He declines to name any literary influence apart from G. K. Chesterton. He has a first novel, *Devil to Pay*, with a nautical theme, coming out this spring. It took him six months to write and he has high hopes for it. He says he has eight books in the pipeline at any given moment.

It is time for him to change in preparation for his television appearance. "I've always wanted to do everything, you see," is almost his parting shot to me and, recalling the travel, the lectures, the books, the plays, the journalism, the essays, and now the novel, I begin to understand why. He has never been content to be simply an academic, but throughout his life has kept in touch with everything and everybody. C. Northcote Parkinson is a highly original man who defies even the categorization that the man of thought is no more than the man to whom action has been denied ●

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Protecting Britain's canals

From Mr W. A. King-Webster

In his article in the January issue Mr Michael Wolfers gave an interesting account of the contemporary waterway scene, but he brushed aside the question of the future of commercial water transport in Britain. Contrary to what he indicated, recent improvements to the inland waterways of Europe, and the development of barge-carrying seagoing ships, have opened the way to a corresponding growth of inland water transport in this country, which could relieve pressure on much of our road system.

Waterway potential is not generally appreciated in this country because the neglected state of our antiquated canals has given them a poor image. The narrow canals, which formed a network connecting the industrial Midlands with the Mersey, Severn, Thames and Trent, were designed for horse towage 200 years ago, the standard narrow boat having to fit into a lock 72 feet by 7 feet by 3 to 4 feet. This gave a load capacity of between 25 and 30 tons which, moving at around 3 mph behind a single horse, was a tremendous advance on the eighteenth-century long-distance wagons with their teams of six or more horses.

However, the full potential of narrow canal transport was reached in the 1930s by the evolution of motorized pairs of boats, in which one boat sacrificed enough cargo space to install a diesel of around 30 hp, and towed the second unpowered boat or "butty". This system enabled two people to transport about 50 tons of cargo at not more than 4 mph between locks, and at a correspondingly slower average rate over heavily locked sections. So long as wages represented a small part of overheads, narrow canals were competitive but, in our present affluent society, the narrow boat's ton/miles per man/hour are pitifully few. One has only to think of the tons shifted by one wild young man terrorizing the public in a large tipper lorry on a door-to-door shuttle service.

The few remaining narrow boat carriers can therefore be likened to those farmers who prefer to use carthorses instead of tractors. They are dedicated to a picturesque and interesting tradition, but are outside the main stream of development. One should admire their dedication and appreciate the picturesqueness of their craft, but to regard them as the most efficient transport that canals can offer is most misleading. Even the relatively large waterways radiating from the Humber limit the size of craft using them to a fraction of what is regarded as economic on the Continent.

In contrast to our neglect of inland waterways, Continental nations have developed theirs continuously and now have a standard barge size of 1,350 tons. The amount of freight carried has increased enormously during the past few years, and they are at present constructing a through route to take 1,500 ton vessels from Rotterdam to the Black Sea within the next ten years. The North Sea is a barrier to craft small enough to use most British waterways, but it would be easy to design seagoing craft to Continental canal dimensions if our waterways would allow them to reach their destinations here. There is therefore a strong case for enlarging waterways or constructing new ones wherever there is a large-scale movement of bulk or containerized freight, and thus make them an extension of the existing Continental system.

W. A. King-Webster
Innerwell Fishery, Garlieston
Scotland

From Mr E. D. Jackson

I read Michael Wolfers's article in the January issue of your magazine with considerable interest, as I can remember many happy holidays on the Broads 50 years ago, when yachts were more common than motor boats, not to mention camping holidays on the Thames when punts were still the order of the day.

I understand that today there is little pleasure on the Broads in the summer months, due to overcrowding, but it should be possible to provide ten times the mileage on the canals if the thing was approached from the right angle.

Those who expect Whitehall to do the job are living in the clouds. The measures which the present Government are proposing are mainly aimed at providing the country with an adequate water supply for the rest of this century, and the preservation of the canals is of secondary importance and its priority will be rated accordingly.

The younger generation would be helping themselves and their children if they enlisted the help of private enterprise and formed a £10 million Public Company. The breweries and the boat building interests would be blind if they could not see the sense of providing £2½ million each, and the camping equipment firms could get a very good return on an investment of £500,000 or more.

If Whitehall could be persuaded to take a 40 per cent interest in such an enterprise and in return provide free use of the canals and suitable rivers, they might be receiving a handsome dividend within ten years, and they could be expected to provide additional sites when required for hotels and boat and yacht moorings.

E. D. Jackson
Four Oaks, Sutton Coldfield

Image © Illustrated London News Group