

## Historians for Britain in Europe – a personal history

Andrew Knapp

Dans le cadre de ce dossier spécial, nous avons demandé à Andrew Knapp, historien spécialiste de l'histoire contemporaine française et professeur émérite de l'université de Reading, de revenir sur la mobilisation d'historiens britanniques réunis au sein de l'association « Historians for Britain in Europe ». Andrew Knapp fut l'un des principaux inspirateurs de ce mouvement plaidant pour le maintien de la Grande-Bretagne dans l'Union européenne. Il revient dans cet article sur son expérience vécue lors de la campagne autour du Brexit en 2016. L'historien met en lumière l'engagement de ses pairs sur cette question cruciale de la vie politique européenne et souligne les difficultés éprouvées par ces derniers pour se faire entendre dans un débat caractérisé par les fortes dissensions entre les défenseurs du maintien et de la sortie de l'Union européenne, même parmi les historiens britanniques. [Comité de rédaction]

Historians since Macaulay and Carlyle and Michelet have gravitated to the role of public intellectual. But only a minority of historians, and probably a relatively diminishing minority as the discipline has expanded and professionalised. The reluctance of most of us to take on the mantle is readily understood. Scepticism is part of the historian's job description, perhaps even more in Britain than elsewhere. We value the unique, and mistrust what we see as the plausible generalisation or the glib analogy between past and present. To scruples grounded in a claimed intellectual rigour may be added less elevated motives. How much easier it is, after all, to remain within the comfort zone of one's own speciality than to explain to a wider audience its importance, or even its relevance to contemporary concerns, in terms both rigorous and accessible. So too, the ever-growing demands made on our time by our employers, often in the name of thankless administrative tasks, militate against an activity that necessarily involves stepping back not only from academic routine but from one's own research. Only the –still-recent– demand made of UK university staff to demonstrate 'impact' may push us, willingly or not, in that direction. And television historians, impactful though they may be, are not the same as public intellectuals.

Before 2016, my own interventions in the public sphere had been, to put it mildly, selective: a couple of articles in *Le Monde* about the finances of the RPR, talks to a group called *Présence et Action du Gaullisme* (its members welcoming and convivial, though neither very young nor very left-wing), and then a third *Le Monde* piece and work on two documentaries about the Allied bombing of France. Each of these forays was designed more to bring specialised knowledge to a wider audience than to persuade anyone of any larger truth. But 2016 was different. The issue at stake, Britain's relationship with the EU, was one I care about very much indeed. And

having taken early retirement in September 2015, I really had no excuse not to get involved.

Aside from help in organising a campus debate at Reading in Autumn 2015, involvement took me to the mainstream Stronger In campaign. It began in December 2015 at the *Goose* in Bracknell (an ill-chosen pub: it was a stronghold of the Leave campaign), where five of us –one active and one lapsed Tory, a Liberal Democrat, a Labour party member, and me– met to organise the campaign in East Berkshire. This was grass-roots activism, largely disconnected from my (residual) university role. Academic activism only really began in January when I decided to write to the *Times*. This project was provoked by a very belated awareness of the existence of our opponents, ‘Historians for Britain’.<sup>1</sup> The idea that a small right-wing group, sharing its Westminster address with (among others) the Thatcherite Centre for Policy Studies, the Taxpayers’ Alliance (opposed to taxes) and the Global Warming Policy Foundation (opposed to tackling climate change), could claim a monopoly on being ‘for Britain’ was sufficiently preposterous to prompt a riposte; and I was too much of an ingénue to know that at least three had already been written.

Getting a group of people, let alone a group of academics, to agree on a text is an art in which I had little experience or tuition. The draft was done by my colleagues Beatrice Heuser and Richard Overy, plus myself. We argued that the UK’s centuries-old engagement with Europe has been close and positive, that we have been weakest when we have shuffled away from the continent, and that breaking our link with the EU, with all its imperfections, would do lasting economic and political damage. Then we sent our piece to thirty or so eminent historians known to us, several of whom suggested changes which then had to be submitted to the whole of the larger group. Then the *Times* asked for something barely half the length of what we had, necessitating a further round of e-mails. It was *Le Monde* that accepted the full version in translation<sup>2</sup> (I have known *Le Monde* ask me to *add* to a text, a request unthinkable of a British editor). Finally we were in print on 30 January in London – just after David Cameron had completed the negotiations in Brussels– and in Paris on 3 February.

There the matter rested for some weeks. My efforts turned towards campus, where I leafleted for Stronger In and organised speakers for the second of three debates, and to Reading and the neighbouring towns where we ran street stalls. But a letter in the *Times*, however satisfying to its authors, has only a little more impact than a letter written in sand. ‘Historians for Britain’ had a website, smartly designed if rather full of the gloom of an Oxford autumn, and well positioned on the search engines. So we should have ours. It should be bright and positive. It should show who we were,

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<sup>1</sup> Pour une copie de la page internet de la campagne du groupe « Historians for Britain », voir : <http://archive.is/historiansforbritain.org> [1.3.17], la page originale n’étant plus *online*, voir également, par exemple : <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/eureferendum/12103724/Historians-for-Britain-warn-against-pro-EU-scare-tactics.html> [1.3.17] ; <http://www.historytoday.com/david-abulafia/britain-apart-or-part-europe> [1.3.17] [note de la rédaction].

<sup>2</sup> [www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/02/03/la-grande-bretagne-doit-rester-dans-l-union-europeenne\\_4858298\\_3232.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/02/03/la-grande-bretagne-doit-rester-dans-l-union-europeenne_4858298_3232.html) [1.3.17] [note de la rédaction].

collectively (Historians for Britain IN Europe<sup>3</sup>, with the long version of our *Times* letter as our common statement) and individually. It should include our own texts, long or short. And it should attract a lot more of us than the coterie on the other side. Indeed, it should show that the overwhelming majority of the profession was for In. We had no money at all but we did secure the services of a wonderful website designer, James Sheahan, on the promise of an appeal for funds. That was in early April.

Once the website was live, on 8 May, we could seek new supporters. Belatedly, I had discovered the long and excellent ‘Fog in Channel’ response to our adversaries that had appeared in the May 2015 edition of *History Today*<sup>4</sup> over about 250 signatures, many from Royal Holloway (University of London). So they all had to be invited, one by one. Not everyone agreed immediately. The EU’s record on southern Europe in general and Greece in particular put some off –but only temporarily, in most cases, as the tone of the wider campaign became clear. And the earlier effort of our *History Today* authors proved indispensable to the making of our site, because it began a snowball effect as our new supporters drew in their own colleagues.

A further boost came, unexpectedly, from no. 11 Downing Street. Chris Skidmore, Parliamentary Private Secretary to George Osborne and author of several books on the Tudors, had invited Richard Overy to a historians’ meeting at the Chancellor’s official residence, and Richard passed the invitation to me. This did inspire some misgivings. I valued the independence of Historians for Britain in Europe, I have never voted Tory, and I suspected that relatively few of our supporters had either. But Skidmore and Osborne could deliver some high-profile names who had so far escaped us, plus the press coverage we had hitherto lacked. The balance was fine enough to merit a consultation of all of our supporters to date, which rather to my surprise drew no objections. So to Downing Street some of us went, on 24 May, to hear speeches from Chris Clarke, Keith Thomas, Linda Colley, and Niall Ferguson (to me, our most unexpected recruit). I got two minutes to say, with some vehemence, that what we were chiefly about was winning. The media effect of our gathering, with particularly good coverage in the *Guardian*<sup>5</sup>, was as strong as expected. So were the sneers from the enemy camp, as we suddenly became ‘George Osborne’s pet historians’. But by polling day, we had dwarfed the opposition, with 380 historians on the site. We are a mixed bunch, ranging from conservatives like Ferguson to Gareth Stedman Jones and others associated with the radical *History Workshop Journal*. Among us are four successive Regius Professors at Oxford: Michael Howard, J.H. Elliott, Robert Evans, and Lyndal Roper, as well as one former ‘Historian for Britain’ who had supported Cameron’s renegotiation but left when his erstwhile companions called for a No vote. Some signatories are EU (and not UK) citizens residing in the UK; others UK citizens living abroad. I wondered about these groups, but not for long: whether or not they had been given a vote at the referendum, they had at least as great a stake in the outcome as anyone else, and an equal right to a voice. I only drew the line at non-UK citizens living abroad, however welcome their solidarity.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://academicsforbritainineurope.org/historians/> [1.3.2017] [note de la rédaction].

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.historytoday.com/various-authors/fog-channel-historians-isolated> [1.3.2017]

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/25/vote-to-leave-eu-will-condemn-britain-to-irrelevance-say-historians> [1.3.17].

Getting the numbers and the names was far from the whole battle. The site, and even more the wider media, also needed supporters to weigh into the debate and to become public intellectuals, however temporarily. In the end the site carried some 34 articles, long and short<sup>6</sup>. Some, like the ‘Fog over Channel’ or ‘Historians for History’ pieces, or Timothy Garton Ash’s succession of excellent *Guardian* articles, had already appeared elsewhere; others, like Glen O’Hara’s brilliantly fierce and detailed blogposts, appeared more or less simultaneously on our site and in another outlet; others still were ours alone. A few focused, like the national Remain campaign, on the (real) economic dangers. Most, however, placed the Remain case on other ground.

Some went for some salutary bashing of the other side. Diarmaid MacCulloch, prompted by comparisons between Brexit and England’s departure from the Roman Catholic Church, pointed out that the English Reformation was steeped in ideas and language borrowed from continental Europe. If Henry VIII, he went on, was a sort of Brexiteer, he was a pretty unattractive one: ‘Donald Trump with a bit more style and a Holbein bonnet’. Niall Ferguson, meanwhile, laid into our opponents’ ‘scissors-and-paste history, clipped from the pages of *Our Island Story*, with a blithe disregard for most modern scholarship,’ while Felix Klos, author of a new book on Churchill and Europe, belaboured Boris Johnson’s ‘barbarically simplified and ill-informed picture of what Churchill stood for’. ‘By 1950’, Klos points out, ‘Churchill had founded the United Europe Movement, a well-funded British pressure group for a European Union; organised the unofficial but foundational Congress of Europe in The Hague; helped create the international European Movement; pressured the European governments west of the Iron Curtain into creating the Council of Europe, Europe’s first political institution; championed and helped pass the European Convention on Human Rights in Strasbourg; secured West Germany’s re-entry into the European family of nations; and even launched the controversial idea of a European army.’

The dangers of Brexit, our supporters warn, are not only economic. Keith Thomas opened his Downing Street speech with the threats Brexit represents to our own Union with Scotland, to the still fragile peace in Northern Ireland, and, on a more parochial scale, to the freedoms enjoyed by members of our profession to travel and live and research and work in continental Europe. Ferguson, meanwhile, observes that ‘British isolationism has often been associated with continental disintegration’; Michael Howard, that while Brexit will not trigger a European conflict any time soon, it is likely to ‘hasten a process of political, economic and military disintegration that will ultimately destroy the world order that has been painfully created over the past half century, and on which we now depend to deal with the dangers of political and social disintegration that threaten all our societies.’ Is this scaremongering, to use the tired phrase beloved of the right-wing press? Maybe, as Timothy Garton Ash argues, ‘I suppose you might call it scaremongering if someone asks you not to jump off the deck of an ocean liner, without a lifebelt, in a force nine storm. Actually, it’s common sense.’

Most of the contributions, though, struck a positive note about the EU that was sadly absent from the mainstream campaign. Heuser called European integration, along with NATO, as ‘one of the twin pillars supporting European security’, the outcome of

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<sup>6</sup> The names, and the articles cited below, all appear on <http://historiansforbritainineurope.org/>

a ‘Copernican revolution’ in which the nations of Europe resolved differences through institutionalised dialogue not confrontation. For Keith Thomas, if the EU has structural defects, ‘so do the constitutions of every country, our own included’, while the EU’s positive achievement ‘remains an inspiration to other regions of the world; and its goals, of peace, cooperation, respect and reconciliation remain as noble as they ever were.’ Ferguson paraphrases Churchill to call the EU ‘the worst of all ways of bringing prosperity and peace to Europe – apart from all the others that from time to time have been tried’; Richard Davenport-Hines, more enthusiastically, calls the EU flag ‘an emblem of political reassurance, cultural pride and constructive economic ambition.’

Snippets cannot do justice to the range and the vigorous logic of nearly three dozen pieces. For me, the most compelling of all was Richard Overy’s *History Today* contribution because it highlighted the schizophrenia of nineteenth-century Britain, torn between increasingly liberal and progressive values at home and ‘warfare, violent imperialism and national self-assertion’ in the wider world. Today, however, ‘That strand of historical identity which emphasised Britain’s place in encouraging the development of parliamentary institutions, economic freedoms and a tolerant, liberal society is the one that matters, not the memory of military and imperial glories, or the belief that there is something historically unique or special about Britain’s past that separates its experience from the rest of Europe. If these values were worth fighting for in ten years of bitter warfare in Europe between 1914-18 and 1939-45, they are worth defending in today’s Europe. But that can only be done from the inside. British involvement in Europe is not solely about this or that economic advantage. It represents a commitment to ensuring that the narrow nationalism, ideological divisions, imperial jealousies, economic rivalry and overt racism that plagued the emergence of modern Europe from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century will never be repeated.’ That battle has become a harder one to fight since 23 June.

In the last weeks of the campaign we extended the site to other disciplines, inviting an individuals produce a short text and choose an image appropriate to their discipline that would start up a new website section. This did not always work: neither lawyers nor political scientists came through. Nor did meteorologists, though the wider scientific community had a head start on us with Scientists for EU<sup>7</sup> . But classicists did join us, and so –an obvious and, it turned out, a prolific choice– did linguists. So did economists. They had already got their own *Times* letter published, and some then used a full-page advertisement in the *Telegraph* to make the economic case for Remain. Justice Minister Michael Gove’s reaction –comparing them to the Nazi scientists who denounced Einstein in 1931– was one of the Leave campaign’s emblematic moments.

Between them, the four groups allowed us to claim over a thousand Academics for Britain in Europe just before polling day. But any hopes for another media splash were dashed as the murder of Jo Cox on 16 June overshadowed the campaign’s last days.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://scientistsforeu.uk/#> [1.3.17].

And we lost. The reasons for the national result were well summed up by Peter Mandelson: David Cameron had taken a spoon into a knife fight. He failed to offer a positive view of the EU (and, by controlling Stronger In's national media campaign, largely prevented anyone else from doing so either) and for the sake of his party avoided serious confrontation with his Cabinet colleagues, however they behaved. The Leave campaign's victory, meanwhile, was based on barefaced lies, dirty smears, pie-in-the-sky promises, and a 25-year campaign of xenophobia in the right-wing press.

My own time over the final month was split between the Historians' and then the Academics' websites and the campaigns on campus (increasingly restricted by the University, in the name its charitable status and of political balance), in my own neighbourhood, and in the town of Reading. The last of these made at least an apparent difference. In January 2016, Reading was expected to turn in a 50-50 result. On 23 June, strongly against the national trend, it voted 58-42 to Remain. Perhaps the January pollsters got it wrong, but the very strong mobilisation of Remain campaigners that I witnessed in the last weeks, at times against intimidation from our enemies (our people were spat at, their leaflets torn from them and ripped up) was, I am sure, important in securing this local result.

Did Historians for Britain in Europe have any comparable effect? Our only assessments can be intuitive. We did, building on the efforts of those who replied to 'Historians for Britain' in 2015, ensure that the historical field was not left to the opposition, and indeed, by the end, that it was dominated by Remainers. We did –to the satisfaction of how many of the previously unconvinced?– demonstrate not only the fatuity of Boris Johnson's Churchillian posturings or his comparisons between the EU and Hitler, but also the weakness of overblown arguments about British difference and the complacency of claims that our security was disconnected from our EU membership. Equally, however, the historians' Remain campaign suffered from serious flaws. For all its energy (shown night after night by James Sheahan as the new names and profiles and photographs went online), we were amateurish, unsystematic, and above all late. For too long, I allowed the 'Historians for Britain' site, and the several responses to it of 2015, to pass me by; for too long I thought a letter to the *Times* was a sufficient accomplishment. This had consequences, not so much for our numbers as for the impact of our arguments. Varied, thoughtful, forceful or elegant as our contributions were, they were put together in a short time, they overlapped, and they could not add up to a consistent body of thought that might seep into the media, into the speeches of thoughtful politicians, and provoke a proper debate with the other side. To do that would have required a much earlier start, probably a collection of essays drafted over months, and quite possibly something published in book form as well as on the Web. Stepping further back, perhaps too many of us (myself included) have been too shy in the past of becoming even part-time public intellectuals. If there is one lesson from the campaign, it is surely that things we value need defending over the long haul. For the right-wing nationalists, having secured their tainted victory on 23 June, show no sign of laying down their arms.

### L'auteur

Andrew Knapp is an Emeritus Professor, and former director of European Studies, at the University of Reading (UK). His publications on politics include *Le gaullisme après de Gaulle* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1996) ; *Government and Politics in Western Europe* (co-author with Yves Mény : 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Oxford University Press, 1998) ; *The Government and Politics of France* (co-author with Vincent Wright: 5<sup>th</sup> edition London, Routledge, 2006); and *Parties and the Party System in France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004). His historical works include *Forgotten Blitzes: France and Italy under Allied Air Attack* (co-author with Claudia Baldoli: London, Continuum, 2012), *Les Français sous les bombes alliées* (Paris, Tallandier, 2014) and (as editor) *The Uncertain Foundation : France at the Liberation, 1944-47* (Basingstoke : Palgrave, 2007). He has also contributed to documentaries on *Nantes sous les bombes alliés* (Aber Images/France 3, 2012) and *La France sous les bombes alliés* (Phares et Balises/France 3, 2014).

Andrew Knapp est professeur émérite à l'Université de Reading (Angleterre), où ses activités d'enseignement et de recherche portaient sur la vie politique et l'histoire contemporaine françaises. Il a notamment publié, en français, *Le gaullisme après de Gaulle* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1996) et *Les Français sous les bombes alliés* (Paris, Tallandier, 2014). Il a aussi collaboré à deux documentaires : *Nantes sous les bombes alliés* (Aber Images/France 3, 2012) et *La France sous les bombes alliés* (Phares et Balises/France 3, 2014).

### Résumé

Andrew Knapp, historien spécialiste de l'histoire contemporaine française et professeur émérite de l'université de Reading, revient sur la mobilisation d'historiens britanniques réunis au sein de l'association « Historians for Britain in Europe ». Andrew Knapp fut l'un des principaux inspirateurs de ce mouvement plaidant pour le maintien de la Grande-Bretagne dans l'Union européenne. Il revient dans cet article sur son expérience vécue lors de la campagne autour du Brexit en 2016. L'historien met en lumière l'engagement de ses pairs sur cette question cruciale de la vie politique européenne et souligne les difficultés éprouvées par ces derniers pour se faire entendre dans un débat caractérisé par les fortes dissensions entre les défenseurs du maintien et de la sortie de l'Union européenne, même parmi les historiens britanniques.

**Mots clés :** « Historians for Britain in Europe » ; Brexit ; Grande-Bretagne ; Union européenne ; historiens britanniques ; engagement.

### Abstract

A historian who specializes in contemporary French history and Professor Emeritus at the University of Reading, Andrew Knapp considers the mobilization of the British historians who came together in the “Historians for Britain in Europe” association. Knapp was one of the leading instigators of this movement arguing for Great Britain to remain in the European Union. In this article, he discusses his experience as part of the 2016 Brexit remain campaign. The historian sheds light on his peers' involvement in this crucial question for European political life and underscores the difficulties they encountered in trying to make their voice heard in a debate characterized by strong disagreements between the two camps – disagreements that also affected British historians.

**Key words :** “Historians for Britain in Europe”; Brexit; Great Britain; European Union; UK Historians; Part-time Public Intellectuals.



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