

British History

in the Long Eighteenth Century Seminar¹

By Penelope J. Corfield [Pdf 72]

**Published in David Manning (ed.),
*Talking History:
Seminar Culture at the
Institute of Historical Research, 1921-2021*
(University of London Press, 2024),
pp. 115-33**

Essay dedicated to all participants and organizers post-1921.

On its best form, the Long Eighteenth-Century Seminar can generate a genuine intellectual excitement, which is truly energising and inspiring. It doesn't happen at every meeting. Yet it happens often enough to keep participants mentally on their toes with expectation. As a result, the seminar's sessions on alternate Wednesday afternoons at 5.15pm, during London University terms, are almost invariably both crowded and attentive.

One key contributing factor is that the standard of presentations is high. Colleagues know the seminar's reputation for probing debates. Wisely, therefore, they tend to present their best work, hoping for a stimulating mix of criticisms and constructive responses. In effect, they are getting a free consultancy from a large congregation of experts.

Another significant component is the dedicated participation of the seminar 'regulars'. They embody continuity. Well versed in the seminar style, the regulars often ask incisive questions. But they don't all feel obliged to intervene every time. Their intent listening is enough to foster a receptive atmosphere.

¹ With warm thanks for recollections from Arthur Burns, Mary Clayton, Amanda Goodrich, Kent Hackmann, Karen Harvey, Tim Hitchcock, Sarah Lloyd, Mary-Clare Martin, David Ormrod, Alice Prochaska, Robert Shoemaker, Michael Townsend and Kathleen Wilson.

Simultaneously, the seminar attracts many ‘occasionals’. They are just as welcome. Characteristically, they are scholars from out of town, who attend when they can. They add the spice and zest of the unexpected. And that applies to ‘known’ occasionals as much as it does to complete newcomers. The seminar’s popularity means that, for the last thirty years, it has been one of the IHR’s largest, attracting live numbers in the range of thirty to sixty people. And in the Zoom years 2020/21, literally hundreds of scholars, from across the UK and overseas, have joined on-line.

The variety of colleagues in attendance can cause surprises. Once a young postgraduate was giving a strong critique of an eminent scholar who works on British history while living in Australia. As the presentation began, the Antipodean expert in question opened the door and slipped in quietly. Head-to-head confrontations do happen from time to time. But it’s fairer when both parties know that their antagonist is present. Accordingly, the chair discreetly alerted the speaker, who paused briefly before resuming with intellectual rigour combined with personal courtesy (as best practice prescribes). A rousing debate ensued, in which all participated. It was a shining example of how to confront basic disagreements with frankness and dignity. The moral is that any scholar from any country may join an open-access seminar at any time, without prior notice.²

With the dynamic mix of regulars and occasionals, another essential requirement is a strong team of organizers, with a range of ages and expertise. They propose speakers for the programme, while a sub-team settles the details. Another valiant colleague simultaneously manages the communications network – an ever more vital task as seminar numbers grow. Turn by turn, the organizers chair the sessions. They ask timely questions, being prompt to

² PJC adds: As a young postgraduate at another seminar, I once referred favourably but rather loftily to a rare work, published many decades earlier, with a clear implication that the author was long since dead and buried. A sepulchral voice responded: ‘Thank you’. The venerable but very much alive author was present in the room. It was a useful lesson.

intervene should debates flag. They all attend without fail (emergencies excepted). And they act as unofficial hosts for the crucial ‘après-seminar’ sociability over drinks and dinner, ensuring that no-one is left moping on the fringes.

Collectively, the aim is to get a scintillating debate after every presentation. That’s exciting for speakers, even if being under the spotlight for an entire evening can be tiring. And it’s energising for everyone. In earlier eras, it often happened that the most senior professor asked the first question, followed by colleagues in rank-order. Yet today, happily, procedures are less formal. The chairs usually take questions as they come, though sometimes grouping interventions on one specific point. They also try to get contributions from all corners of the room, to uphold inclusivity.

There is no quest for unanimity – fortunately, as there is no standard seminar ‘line’. Yet there is collective intellectual effort, neither designed to refute totally nor to uphold the speaker’s case entirely; but instead to give it a good work-out. And, afterwards, the ‘après-seminar’ drinks-and-dinner provide a splendid time for all to wind down and to reflect upon the shared experience,³ Incidentally, postgraduates pay a pre-set price, since otherwise the cost of dining in central London would preclude their attendance. The convenors cover the costs, with spontaneous contributions from any generous colleagues who also wish to sustain the scholarly community.

In the late-1990s, there were some complaints that questions at this seminar were too tough and aggressive. A number of feminists, in particular, found the style too ‘macho’. If the speaker hesitated or evaded the point, then people would press robustly to get an answer. Yet not all agreed with the critics. Prof. Karen Harvey, who began her London PhD in 1995 and became a seminar

³ It is helpful to find a roomy restaurant that can seat everyone at one long table (even if re-arranged as rectangle or L-shape), to ensure an inclusive atmosphere.

regular, has a different memory. Writing in 2021 (in response to an appeal for reminiscences), she recalls the 1990s style as tough but fair:

I myself experienced what I felt had been a pretty gruelling encounter at the seminar as a PhD student, but I understood that the work needed to be improved and that I was being held to an academic standard that applied to everybody And this principle – that I would be charged on the basis of my work, not my identity [as a young woman] – was terrifically important to me. What mattered was my research, my ideas and my arguments. I found this liberating and remarkably enabling.⁴

That said, no seminar is an island. As further noted below, the twenty-first century has seen a general ‘softening’ in academic debating styles. And the Long Eighteenth-Century seminar has not avoided the trend. Yet Harvey ends her account with the reasonable hope that scholars will continue to speak their minds. Coing approval for every presentation – good, bad, or indifferent – would not help anyone. A rigorous but fair exchange is the desideratum.

Today, the crowds at this seminar indicate that things continue to go well. Nonetheless, nothing is set in stone. The format has changed since 1921, as shown in the next section; and will continue to evolve.

Updating the Format

Interestingly, there are no surviving myths or memories of this seminar’s very early days. Not only is the membership transient over the decades, but the format has changed substantially. So, while today’s participants are pleased to learn that they are contributing to one of the foundational seminars at the esteemed Institute of Historical Research, they know little more.

This centenary exercise of retrieval thus provides a welcome chance to put current practices into a long-term framework. Historically, a seminar (from the Latin *seminarium* or seed-bed) referred to a teaching class of students, led by a

⁴ Recollections from Karen Harvey, Professor of Cultural History at Birmingham University, sent to PJC, 28 May 2021.

professor.⁵ Indeed, in many Universities today, entire courses are known as seminar programmes. Yet there is also a more specific application. Special research seminars were organized for postgraduates, who were learning their craft. Such sessions constituted an updated forum for Socratic dialogue between tutor and pupil, extended into a collegial network.

First adopted in nineteenth-century German Universities, the research seminar was gradually adopted in progressive academic institutions in Britain. Advanced classes were attended by senior historians and their postgraduates. Sessions were select, not open to everyone. The postgraduates usually reported their latest findings, while the academics responded with crisp assessments.

Within London University, the nascent seminar culture gained a massive boost in 1921, when historians began to convene in the friendly ambience of the new Institute of Historical Research. Sharing a common venue encouraged the sense of a community of historians. Scholars and postgraduates attended from many, though not absolutely all, of London University's constituent Colleges.

Among the foundational seminars was that focusing upon eighteenth-century history. Its original emphasis was upon political and constitutional affairs (reflecting the then current state of research), although, as will be seen, many changes were to follow. In 1921, its first convenor was Hugh Hale Bellot, a newly appointed History Assistant at University College London. His time at the seminar lasted until 1927, when he moved to Manchester, as next step in a varied career that included wartime secondment to the Board of Trade (1940-4) and a later stint as President of the Royal Historical Society (1952-6).⁶ Bellot's commitment and affability (he was later described as 'an old-fashioned English

⁵ See A. Goldgar, *Impolite Learning; Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680-1750* (London, 1995); A. Grafton, *Worlds Made by Words: Scholarship and Community in the Modern West* (London, 2009), esp. pp. 1-2, 6-7, 197-204, 211-15; and J. Östling, *Humboldt and the Modern German University: An Intellectual History* (Lund and Manchester, 2018).

⁶ H.H. Bellot (1890-1969), an expert on constitutional law, also wrote the centenary history of his College: H. Hale Bellot, *University College London, 1826-1926* (London, 1928).

gentleman')⁷ launched the seminar well. In effect, he was one of those pioneer historians – himself without a doctorate – who encouraged the professionalization of postgraduate studies among following generations.

Then from 1927 to 1932, the baton was passed to Guy Parsloe, also History Assistant at University College London.⁸ He was notably devoted to the Institute of Historical Research, where he became its Secretary and Librarian from 1927–43.⁹ Eighteenth-century historians were thus leading activists within the IHR and, in parallel, on London University's History Board of Studies.

Initially, this seminar was named *English Political History: Eighteenth Century*. And at times, specific dates were added to delimit the chronological range. From 1931 to 1975, however, the name was standardized into an ecumenical *English History in the Eighteenth Century*. (The Anglocentric focus, which seemed 'natural' to first convenors, was subsequently shed). Throughout the 1930s, the lead organizer was Mark A. Thomson, who moved to a chair at Liverpool in 1945. But he returned to London in 1956, leading the seminar again until his death in 1962.¹⁰ His fellow organizer from the mid-1950s was Ian R. Christie. Between 1962 and 1972, he carried the baton single-handedly, then continuing the task, with colleagues, until his retirement in 1984.¹¹

⁷ I. Poulton, 'Remembering the Bellots' (2019) in <https://somerseblad.com/2019/11/10/remembering-the-bellots> (accessed 1 Sept. 2021).

⁸ For an affectionate biography, see J. Parsloe, *Charles Guy Parsloe, 1900-85* (Epsom, 2018).

⁹ Parsloe then moved to become Secretary of the Institute of Welding (1943-67) and Secretary-General of the International Institute of Welding (1948-66) – a highly unusual move, even by the eclectic standards of the early historical profession.

¹⁰ M.A. Thomson (1903-62) published a Historical Association booklet *Macaulay* (London, 1959) as well as *A Constitutional History of England, 1642-1801* (London, 1938).

¹¹ I.R. Christie (1919-98) began (1948) as Assistant Lecturer in History at University College London and ended by holding the prestigious post of Astor Professor (1979-84). Notable among his publications are *The End of North's Ministry, 1780-2* (London, 1958); *Wilkes, Wyvill and Reform: The Parliamentary Reform Movement in British Politics, 1760-85* (London, 1962); *Crisis of Empire: Great Britain and the American Colonies 1754-83* (London, 1966); *Myth and Reality in Late-Eighteenth-Century British Politics, and Other Papers* (London, 1970); and *Stress and Stability in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain: Reflections on the British Avoidance of Revolution* (London, 1984).

During these post-war years, the seminar format changed decisively. It was no longer a closed class but became a discussion forum, as is the preferred model today. That innovation enabled students to learn, not just from a few teachers but from the wider historical profession as well. Instead of many short reports from postgraduates, one invited scholar (whether a regular or not) gives an opening paper, followed by another hour of questions and discussion. Those attending come not simply to hear a lecture but to debate it. That format allows the programme to be advertised in advance; and much greater numbers to attend, both from within and outside London University. Over time, the long eighteenth-century seminar has sought to invite a great range of external speakers. The aim is to test the entire field, not to advance one seminar ‘line’.

Booking a full roster of speakers did initially increase the organizers’ workload and anxiety levels. In the era before high-speed email and social media, they chiefly relied upon exchanges of letters, which could be agonisingly slow to arrive – as well as occasional phone-calls. By such efforts, however, the pedagogic experience, in this as in other seminars, was decisively transformed.

Postgraduates continue to learn; but they do so by taking their turn as the lead presenters; and by witnessing a cross-section of senior and junior experts in the profession do likewise. It’s instructive to work out what it takes to give a strong presentation and how to answer questions well. And it can be an eye-opener when (rarely) a great name in the profession arrives without adequate preparation and offers nothing more than a few anecdotes. The postgraduate indignation is then vociferous. It’s a sign that they have high expectations, which motivates them to to perform well themselves, when the time comes.

A further change, in the later 1970s or early 1980s, made the whole seminar experience much healthier. It was always considered impolite to smoke a pipe or cigarette during the presentation. Once the speaker ended, however, inveterate smokers would immediately reach for their nicotine fix. The kerfuffle acted as a boundary-marker, giving people a moment to think of good questions.

Nonetheless, the resulting fug of smoke was unhealthy and disagreeable. Participants among this particular group were not among the IHR's heaviest smokers. But it was still a relief when the practice was stopped by agreement within each seminar (long before any official ban upon indoor smoking).

Ending the rustle of reaching for cigarettes then left scope for the advent of a new ritual, although these two habits were not direct alternatives. Initially, no one dreamed of clapping at the end of a presentation. It seemed far too theatrical. And it might imply that fellow scholars were passive audiences.

Nonetheless, sporadic applause began in the 1990s. Initially, the organizers in this seminar discouraged the practice. They thought that hosting the speakers for drinks and dinner afterwards was a better form of thanks. Yet wider *Zeitgeist* shifts are hard to resist. When crowds began clapping, the organizers could hardly sit on their hands. From the 2000s onwards, applause became more common. By c.2010, it was routine, adding to the performative element of presentations, then usually given by Powerpoint. Today, chairs often close the evening with another round of clapping. And, in the current era of virtual meetings by Zoom (2020-21), indications of silent applause or thumbs-up help to counteract the chill of remote debate. Collective appreciation of effort encourages debates that are both frank and mutually respectful.

Culturally, this shift towards a softer, gentler debating style had many roots. At its most basic, it reflected a welcome desire, among seminar organizers and participants alike, to broaden access to academe and to prevent its procedures from seeming intimidating. Clapping presentations, and prefacing questions with kind words, are necessary preludes to inclusive debate in the twenty-first century. The seminar has shifted seamlessly into this style, without losing its capacity for intellectually tough interventions.

Developing an open-doors policy has also taken the form of designating at least one session per year as an 'outreach' event. It is held in a novel venue, outside the IHR, to attract a different audience. So for example, in February

2015, a panel on ‘Exhibiting the Eighteenth Century’ was hosted at Kensington Palace, jointly by this seminar and by the Centre for C18th Studies at London’s Queen Mary College. It was a stimulating event, with searching exchanges, attended by 70+ colleagues, including many from the museum world.

Since 2014, such innovations have been funded by the seminar’s two sponsors, Mark Storey and Carey Karmel. Their generous support, which came out of the blue, has also permitted the introduction of an annual prize for the best presentation by a postgraduate or early career scholar. So, while the format mutates, the seminar’s key aim, to encourage the next generation of scholars, endures.

Expanding the Thematic Remit

Continuities as well as change apply to the big questions for research and debate. Throughout its first fifty years, the seminar’s chief focus was undoubtedly upon political history. Bellot, Parsloe and Thomson were all interested in the advent of constitutional and legal norms. And in the 1950s and 1960s, the seminar was absorbed in the debates which followed the explosive impact of Lewis Namier’s new approach to eighteenth-century British politics.¹² He focused not upon laws and constitutions but upon place, patronage and politicking. Those interested in other big eighteenth-century themes, such as colonial expansion or commercial/industrial growth, would have been directed to other London seminars, such as those in imperial or economic history.

Particularly under the aegis of Ian Christie in the 1950s and 1960s, the seminar was a known centre of support for Namier and his allies, known as Namierites. Not that dissent was excluded. Arguments over Namier were conducted with vigour, as they were over the continuing strength (or otherwise) of the Jacobite cause post-1715. The tenacious Eveline Cruickshanks, then and

¹² For Lewis Namier (1888-1960), see L. Colley, *Lewis Namier* (London, 1989); D. Hayton, *Conservative Revolutionary: The Lives of Lewis Namier* (Manchester, 2019).

for many years a seminar regular, was quick to remind colleagues of surviving support for Toryism and, in 1745, for Bonnie Prince Charlie¹³ – arguing with her characteristic force, knowledge and good humour.

Namier offered a conservative vision of historical individualism. He, opposed both Marxist doctrines of class conflict and Whig/liberal theories of the march of ideas. Namier had in his youth attended lectures at Lausanne University by the influential Italian sociologist/economist, Vilfredo Pareto. A determined anti-Marxist, he saw history as an endless circulation of ‘elites’.¹⁴ Namier was no direct disciple. But Pareto’s claim struck a chord. Focusing upon the 1750s and 1760s, Namier put England’s leaders – in both government and opposition – under his research microscope. Thereupon he argued that an individualized quest for place and patronage was far more significant than was competition between rival ideals or competing political parties.¹⁵

Instant debates generated both great heat and fresh light.¹⁶ Namier’s biographical approach was borrowed for application to other periods, with mixed results. As the widespread dust died down, it became clear that political parties cannot be air-brushed from British history, though their format and power varies greatly over time. In the same way, the role of ideas, and the role of sectoral/class economic interests, can be highly important; but not always and not always in the same way.

Yet, equally, it is notable that the quest for place and the power of patronage operate, even if diversely, within many political systems. Personal

¹³ E. Cruickshanks (1926-2021), *Political Untouchables: The Tories and the '45* (London, 1979).

¹⁴ See J. Femia, *Vilfredo Pareto* (London, 2016); and survey in T. Bottomore, *Elites and Society* (London, 2nd ed. 1993).

¹⁵ Esp. in L.B. Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London, 1929; and later edns).

¹⁶ Contrast criticisms in H. Butterfield, *George III and the Historians* (1957), esp. pp. 10-11, 200-15, 293, 297-9, with sympathetic overview in J. Brooke, ‘Namier and Namierism’, *History and Theory*, 3 (1964), 331-47; and context in M. Bentley, *Modernizing England’s Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism, 1870-1970* (Cambridge, 2005).

motivations, as well as links and contacts between individuals have impact. Thus Namier proved to be one parent of a powerful research technique, known as prosopography or group biography.¹⁷ The methodology is widely used today by both historians and sociologists, though users have no obligation to endorse Namier's ideological stance and his downplaying of ideas.

Immediately, one big new prosopographical enquiry into *The History of Parliament*, launched in 1951,¹⁸ got great input from participants at London's eighteenth-century seminar.¹⁹ Many wrote model biographies of individual MPs, whether famous statesmen or unknown back-benchers. Two notably active contributors were Eveline Cruickshanks and Ian Christie. They disagreed on many points; but concurred on the significance of the eighteenth century.

Animated by such interests, the seminar's atmosphere was purposive. Fortnightly numbers rose from the ten or so who gathered in pre-war days, to twenty or more. Alice Prochaska, who later became IHR Administrator & Deputy Director (1984-92), recalls the presence in the 1970s of scholars with distinctly varied approaches. 'The much admired George Rudé turned up, on a sabbatical year, with his insights into the links between the French Revolution and politics in Britain.'²⁰

All these London seminars were confident gatherings, far from deferential to the traditional claims of 'Oxbridge'. This seminar certainly shared that collective spirit. Most students were by now studying for a doctorate, although many went on to get jobs before they had completed. Topics for debate were

¹⁷ K.S.B. Keats-Rohan, *Prosopography Approaches and Applications: A Handbook* (Oxford, 2007). For the related technique of network analysis, see: I.A. McCulloh, H.L. Armstrong and A.N. Johnson, *Social Networks Analysis with Applications* (Hoboken, NJ, 2013).

¹⁸ The project, long mooted, was launched in 1951 with cross-party support and Treasury funding: see <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org>.

¹⁹ Thus among the project's earliest fruits were L.N. Namier and J. Brooke, *The House of Commons, 1754-1790* (London, 1964); and R. Sedgwick, *The House of Commons, 1715-54* (London, 1970).

²⁰ George Rudé (1910-93) had a distinguished academic career in Australia and Canada, writing numerous studies including *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848* (New York, 1964; and later re-issues).

also diversifying. It is true that Prochaska still recalls some tedious sessions on old-style administrative and military history,²¹ but the vigorous tides of research diversification were impossible to resist.

Throughout, Ian Christie was a reticent but diligent chair. Prof. Kent Hackmann, who arrived in 1978 as a new visiting postgraduate from Idaho, gave a short presentation on the mid-century merchant-politician William Beckford. And got an immediately impressive response:²²

Professor Christie ... took command of the table. For about 40 minutes, without having taken notes, he critiqued my paper with a professional expertise and human kindness that I came to realize were hallmarks of his personality. He reviewed my paper, pointing out generalisations that could be clarified and ideas that needed to be developed. More importantly, he pointed me in directions I had not considered.

Again Kent Hackmann had an equally positive experience, when he rejoined the seminar on sabbatical leave in 1987-8. Colleagues advised on his new project; and four senior professors, including Ian Christie, provided constructive criticisms of draft chapters. It was a fine practical example of the strong Anglo-American links that the IHR had always encouraged.

Nonetheless, Christie's plain, terse manner was not always productive.²³ In 1980, Prof. Kathleen Wilson, then just arrived in the UK to work on her PhD, outlined her topic to the seminar. Thereupon, she writes: 'Professor Christie looked at me and said, matter-of-factly: "You'll never do it; at least not from those sources."'”²⁴ He feared that the Georgian provincial press would not yield the information that Wilson was seeking. Undeterred, if somewhat irked, Wilson completed her doctorate successfully and progressed to a productive

²¹ Recollections from Alice Prochaska, later (2010-17) Principal of Somerville College, University of Oxford, sent to PJC, 29 July 2021.

²² Recollections from Kent Hackmann, Professor of History at University of Idaho, sent to PJC, 17 Nov. 2020.

²³ For some examples, see N.B. Harte, 'Obituary: Ian R. Christie', *The Independent*, 5 Dec. 1998.

²⁴ Recollections from Kathleen Wilson, Professor of History at Stony Brook University, New York, sent to PJC, 9 Aug. 2021.

academic career.²⁵ Later she notes, charitably, that Christie was probably ‘in his own way’ trying to warn her of pitfalls ahead – as no doubt he was. Yet this response was symptomatic of his growing conservatism – about themes, sources, and even access into the profession – which was not helpful. As always, rival viewpoints are best offered with tact and ecumenical inclusivity.

Agreeably, meanwhile, a pleasant coda to Christie’s time at the seminar ensued in 1992, eight years after his retirement. He had ceased to attend. But, one evening, he arrived in radiant good humour to announce that he had just got married for the first time, at the age of 73. It was touching that he wanted the seminar to know. And, from such a reserved man, this acknowledgement of academic comradeship was positively startling.

By the 1990s, the seminar’s thematic remit was becoming much more adventurous. Adaptations had begun under the aegis of John Dinwiddy, a humane and witty scholar.²⁶ He became joint seminar organizer in October 1972 and strove to broaden the themes. There were presentations on trade unionism; crime; madness. Discussions regularly stretched beyond the strictest century boundaries.²⁷ In acknowledgement, the seminar’s name was extended to include explicitly the early nineteenth century. In October 1989, it became *British History in the Long Eighteenth Century. 1688-1848*. And by 1991, when the concept had become familiar, the restraining dates were quietly dropped.²⁸

²⁵ Yale University PhD (1985), expanded into a prize-winning book: K. Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-85* (Cambridge, 1995).

²⁶ J.R. Dinwiddy (Royal Holloway, London University) was author of *From Luddism to the First Reform Bill: Reform in England, 1810-32* (Oxford, 1986) and *Bentham* (Oxford, 1989). From 1977-83, he was also senior editor of the Bentham Project at University College London. See obituary by I.R. Christie, ‘John Rowland Dinwiddy, 1939-90’ (1990): <https://www.cambridge.org/core> (accessed 15 Sept. 2021).

²⁷ For example, in Jan. 1990, J.R. Jones (University of East Anglia) gave a presentation on Hanoverian blue-water naval policy, followed by discussion ranging from Elizabethan times to Britain post-WW2.

²⁸ The term emerged in research circles in the later 1980s, first appearing in book title by F. O’Gorman, *The Long Eighteenth Century: British Political and Social History, 1688-1832* (London, 1997).

When making these adaptations, the organizers were keen to extend the seminar's remit from 'England' to 'Britain'. But they were unfussed by precise start and end-dates. The 'long eighteenth century' acted as an umbrella term, used by researchers of many specialisms. And it avoided programmatic names such as 'Age of Enlightenment'. The new term was quick-and-easy to use and soon became popular. There were a few nervous jokes about the eighteenth century's 'imperialist' chronology-grabbing from the adjacent 'Victorian' seminar. However, a mutual flexibility in crossing artificial time-barriers and acceptance of overlap had long operated in practice; and continued to apply.

Sadly, there followed, in spring 1990, a major blow. John Dinwiddy's abrupt death by drowning, at the age of 50, was a grievous loss. Thereupon Penelope Corfield, recruited as fellow organizer in 1984, resolved to continue and extend his work. She had been earlier involved in the IHR's Economic & Social History seminar and also helped to found the new Women's History seminar. (All groups worked together amicably; and from time to time held joint sessions together). But Corfield eventually decided to concentrate upon this seminar. She particularly welcomed the challenge of resynthesizing many specialisms in the round, as well as in the long.

As the seminar developed an inclusive and adventurous agenda, the aim was not to drop political history. Far from it. A broader and deeper political history remains a vital part of the seminar's expanding remit. Indeed, the task of studying and understanding the past, properly viewed, is always and must be cross-disciplinary. From this period onwards, the number of seminar participants rose into the thirties and often well above. A 'big name' or a 'hot' topic might lift attendance into the sixties, or sometimes even above.

Gathering a broad team of co-organizers, with diverse interests, was an essential step. Julian Hoppit (University College London) joined in 1988, followed in the early 1990s by Arthur Burns (King's College, London) and Tim Hitchcock (Hertfordshire University; later Sussex University). The invitation to

a colleague from outside London University seemed to the organizers an entirely natural step; and was received without comment by the IHR. Other seminars were doing the same. And this trend further strengthened the IHR's ecumenical role as a regional and national hub for all historical researchers.

Later in 2010, Hoppit left to focus on the Economic History seminar. But new organizers include Joe Cozens (Essex University), Margot Finn (University College London), Amanda Goodrich (Open University), Sally Holloway (Oxford Brookes University), Sarah Lloyd (Hertfordshire University) and Gillian Williamson (independent scholar). A further vital change in 2015 was the recruitment of early career and postgraduate reps, bringing fresh perspectives. This last initiative particularly enhances the seminar's inclusivity.

Expanding themes have no limit. Eighteenth-century studies during the last forty years have been transforming themselves. The result is a veritable 'exploding galaxy'.²⁹ Impetus comes partly from deepening research into old themes, plus much scintillating new research into new themes, using the mass of under-studied eighteenth-century materials in archives, museums and libraries. Social, urban, cultural, linguistic, ethnic and women's history have thereby been joined by studies in 'identities' (personal and collective) and emotions – all aided by the democratized access provided by digital history.³⁰

Big arguments add further fuel. Poised between the (controversially defined) 'early modern era' and the (equally controversial) 'modern times', the eighteenth century calls for re-definition. Was it a crucible of change? And, if so, from what to what? Among many lengthy debates were those prompted by

²⁹ P.J. Corfield, 'British history: the exploding galaxy', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 34 (2011), 517-26; also in www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com; and in <https://www.penelopejcorfield.com/british-history/pdf24>.

³⁰ In 2003, a path-breaking project in eighteenth-century digital history was launched by seminar organizer Tim Hitchcock (Sussex University) and frequent contributor Robert Shoemaker (Sheffield University), with the digitization of London's criminal records from *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey, 1674-1913*: see <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org>.

E.P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* (1963).³¹ Did an earlier social structure of ordered ranks shift into a new society of competing classes? Or, if not, what (if anything) happened instead? Such debates were paralleled by even longer-running arguments in economic history. Did Britain experience industrial revolution – industrial evolution – or neither – or elements of both?³² (And today climatologists and eco-historians ask pointedly: with what long-term impacts upon the global climate?)

Separate contests were then newly triggered by Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation* (in English, 1965) and his later *Discipline and Punish* (in English, 1975).³³ He detected drastic eighteenth-century shifts in welfare and penal policy. Furthermore, he argued that all social order is constituted by a collective 'discourse', which Foucault defined as the summation of knowledge-systems, underpinned in turn by power relations.³⁴ These intelligence-grids dictate the nature of 'reality'. Discuss. And they did.

Related questions about the role of language immediately became a recurrent theme for debate, from many perspectives. For instance, in March 1993 the eminent German historian Reinhart Koselleck addressed a joint meeting of this seminar with the German Historical Institute of London. His theme was 'People and Nation: Structural and Semantic Approaches'. It was a packed session. colleagues came to debate both the specifics and the theory. Similar issues were crystallized by a panel on 'History and Language: Post the "Linguistic Turn"'. Held in January 2002, the speakers were Alun Munslow, Gareth Stedman Jones and John Shaw. Their disagreements invited everyone to consider the challenge of defining precisely the remit and power of 'language'.

³¹ E.P. Thompson (1924-93), *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963); and esp. 'Postscript' in *ibid.* (1968 edn), pp. 916-39, for EPT's response to critics.

³² See overview in P.N. Stearns, *Debating the Industrial Revolution* (London, 2015).

³³ M. Foucault (1926-84), *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (Paris, 1961), transl. R. Howard (New York, 1965); *idem*, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Paris, 1975), transl. A. Sheridan (New York, 1977).

³⁴ A.W. McHoul and W. Grace, *A Foucault Primer: Discourse, Power and the Subject* (London, 1995).

Further stirring these complex brews, in 1985 Jonathan Clark (a frequent seminar visitor in the 1970s) urged a return to a conservative interpretation of the eighteenth century.³⁵ He dubbed Britain an ‘ancien regime’ on a par with the absolute monarchies of Austria or pre-revolutionary France. To support his case, he cited the continuing power of kingship and of the Anglican Church. Clark’s revisionism was explicitly anti-Marxist and anti-Whig/liberal. Yet it was not at all pro-Foucault. Nor did Clark revive Namier’s methodology or Namier’s dismissal of the importance of ideas. Thus, while controversies often circle around repeated issues, the claims and evidence may vary significantly.

Similarly diverse conclusions are emerging from recent research into ‘identity’ – whether sexual, gendered, ethnic, religious or cultural – and from meditations about how best to respond to a world-historical crime (albeit legal in the eighteenth century), like the trans-Atlantic trade in enslaved Africans. Complex questions, with complex data, evoke complex debates, within which individuals seek to find and share valid pathways.

Accordingly, the seminar participants from time to time take collective stock. Panels entitled ‘*Where stands the Eighteenth Century?*’ or ‘*Was there a Long Eighteenth Century?*’ – or some variant – appeared in its programme in January 1992, in January 2000, and in November 2007. Moreover, a day-long outreach Conference on the state-of-play was held on a sunny Saturday in April 2019. It attracted well over 170 participants. Such events sharpen definitions and debates. They also encourage both consolidation and further renewal.

Summary Reflections

Positive memories feature a powerful opening from Roy Palmer, talking in October 1986 on songs as a source for social history.³⁶ With no other

³⁵ J.C.D. Clark, *English Society, 1660-1832: Religion, Ideology and Politics during the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge, 1985; reissued 2000).

³⁶ Roy Palmer (1932-2015), *The Sound of History: Songs and Social Comment* (Oxford, 1988).

preliminaries, he launched into a solo rendering of a 1720s ballad which had survived purely in oral transmission, until he first recorded it. His performance brought the house down. And then, by way of conclusion, Palmer orchestrated communal singing of early nineteenth-century protest songs. Unforgettable.

Quixotic memories include the time in 2011 when a mouse ran in to sit on the speaker's shoe, while he, unaware, discussed environmental degradation in eighteenth-century London. Cue muffled laughter from those in the front rows. Another occasion in December 2016 was marred by insistent drilling, produced by repair work in the IHR basement. The sound echoed along the leaden pipework, giving the impression that an irately buzzing giant was about to pulverize the entire building. The speaker, Prof. Jeremy Black (Exeter University), carried things off with characteristic panache. But it was deeply disappointing; and should not have happened.

Plentiful intellectual memories, meanwhile, confirm that most scholars who publish on long eighteenth-century history do, at some stage, talk to this seminar. In June 1989, for instance, the ever-fertile ever-debating E.P. Thompson presented his paper on 'The Moral Economy Revisited'. He energetically scribbled notes on all criticisms, as part of his retrospective self-criticism and -justification, which before long appeared in print.³⁷

Participants and speakers attend regularly from across Britain, Ireland, and continental Europe. Colleagues from North America visit whenever they can. As do scholars worldwide. Notably in the 1990s and 2000s, the seminar gained from a goodly contingent of Japanese scholars, either studying or on sabbatical leave in London. And international contributors (2021) continue to make their welcome presence felt in today's virtual sessions.

London's Long Eighteenth-Century Seminar is thus like a long-running river: its course outwardly similar but its flow always in renewal. There are

³⁷ Published as E.P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy Revisited', in *idem*, *Customs in Common* (London, 1991), pp. 259-351.

deeps as well as shallows; patches of turbulence, as well as calm. There is scope for pioneering new routes, as well as deepening existing ones. No-one has to attend. Many do. The result is the creation of a genuine intellectual community.³⁸

Finally, this seminar not only contributes to the life of the IHR but has a wider hinterland too. Historians now attend in growing numbers the annual meetings of the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (founded 1971).³⁹ And, through that body, they belong to the International Society (founded 1967),⁴⁰ with its thirty-five national and regional affiliates.

Impressively, indeed, this global network forms an updated version of the eighteenth-century Republic of Letters. It links scholars across disciplines and national boundaries. These societies are voluntary bodies, without an institutional base. Their bond is not place or patronage but a shared fascination with all aspects of the long eighteenth century in the round. No participants and organizers are paid specifically for these tasks. They labour for love. *Where stands the long eighteenth century today?* Answer: thriving – looking outwards – and keenly debating the full significance of this pivotal era in world history.

³⁸ For a distillation of shared seminar experiences, see P.J. Corfield and T. Hitchcock, *Becoming a Historian: An Informal Guide* (in press: London, 2022).

³⁹ See <https://www.bsecs.org.uk/the-society> (accessed 15 Sept. 2021).

⁴⁰ See https://oraprdnt.uqtr.quebec.ca/pls/public/gscw031?owa_no_site=304 (accessed 15 Sept. 2021).