



**Roger Vernon Scruton** was born on 27 February 1944 and died of cancer aged 75 on 12 January 2020.

Roger Scruton was one of the College's most distinguished intellectual figures of the post-war years. Philosopher, novelist, composer, musicologist, journalist, lawyer, political thinker, farmer, wine critic, and much more, he was a well-known 'public intellectual' whose views were controversial, running contrary to what he saw as dominant liberal-left political and academic opinion. For this he paid a price, was made the object of often vicious and unfounded attacks. Only recently he was sacked from the Government commission *Building Better, Building*

*Beautiful* after quotations from an interview with him in the *New Statesman* deliberately misrepresented what he had said. The interviewer, gloated that he had 'brought down' Roger Scruton; when the interview tapes were published in full, the magazine apologised unreservedly and Scruton was reinstated by the Government.

Born in the Lincolnshire village of Buslingthorpe, he was raised with his two sisters in High Wycombe where he attended the Royal Grammar School (a state-funded school) from 1954-1961. It was not a happy childhood. His father, from a Manchester working-class background, had left school at 14 to work as a labourer; after war service, he followed a training course for ex-servicemen and became a primary school teacher. His dislike of the upper classes was visceral and he resented his son's grammar school successes as social climbing, a class betrayal; his mother, 'born and bred in the genteel suburbs of London', was different in both background and nature. Between his parents, there prevailed what Roger described as a 'sort of Lawrentian class tension' and he quickly left home after his Cambridge Scholarship exams. Once accepted at Cambridge, his father no longer spoke to him. When in later years Roger talked of his life as in three parts, the word for this early part was simply 'wretched'. Despite the tensions it caused at home however, school was a different matter. Though he studied science subjects, he found a circle of friends with whom talking and arguing about the arts proved essential. Music in particular was already important in his life; he sang in the school choir and also, unbeknown to his father, in the choir at the local Anglican church – further evidence of social climbing. In his early teens, the family inherited an upright piano; Roger had some lessons, taught himself to sight-read, and, with a gifted school friend, worked his way through the piano repertoire, entertaining fellow pupils at lunch times with the four-hand version of *The Rite of Spring*.

He came up to Cambridge in 1962, where he felt 'although socially estranged (like virtually every grammar-school boy), spiritually at home'. His scholarship at Jesus was for Natural Sciences but between school and Cambridge his passion for literature and the arts had displaced interest in the sciences. After an initial meeting with his Tutor, Laurence Picken, a meeting he described with much affection in Peter Glazebrook's *Jesus: The Life of a Cambridge College*, he switched to Moral Sciences (as Philosophy was called), graduating in 1965 with a double first. Moral Sciences at Jesus was in the hands of A.C. Ewing, nearing retirement and not a stimulating teacher (in later years, however, Scruton always cited Ewing's *Short Commentary on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, 1938, as the best introduction in English). Scruton and Malcom Budd, a year above him, joined forces to teach each other (Budd later achieved distinction as UCL's Grote Professor of the Philosophy of Mind and Logic).

Philosophy in Cambridge in those days was analytical philosophy, dealing with philosophical problems through analysis of the concepts and language in which they are

expressed, seeking to display their hidden logical structure or show the misleading forms of ordinary language from which they may arise. It gave Scruton an 'extraordinary education' that trained him in the art of lucid thinking, implanting the firm sense of the distinction between real and fake thinking that informed his work thereafter. At the same time, its concerns were judged remote from any recognisable human predicament and no more satisfactory for Scruton than the natural sciences. What he wanted of philosophy was engagement with the modern world and its existential problems. Hence his and others' 'disappointment with British philosophers who seem to ignore entirely the thoughts and emotions that cause us to philosophize in the first place'; hence the appeal of the very different continental philosophical tradition. For Scruton, philosophy was nothing if not 'the attempt to find a comprehensive picture of what we are, of where we are and of how we are'. The encounter with philosophers who were also literary figures – Sartre, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche – was fundamental: 'this is what redeems philosophy that it can translate itself into great literature'.

During his time at Jesus, Scruton published only 'a little essay in an undergraduate magazine'. The magazine was *Circuit*, started by Jesus students. His contribution was the Nietzsche-inspired 'Theology; The Immoral Science', half of a debate with Terry Eagleton, a young Jesus Research Fellow, who countered with the anti-Nietzschean 'Dishonest to God'. Eagleton was later made an Honorary Fellow, a distinction wrongly denied to Scruton. In later years, Roger and Terry would often be brought together for public discussions; their views and ideas were sharply opposed, but both shared a concern with matters of culture and society, politics and religion, and always argued their differences with great civility.

After graduation Scruton taught as a *lecteur* at the Collège Universitaire in Pau, and then lived in Rome with a friend and her bohemian hippie circle. If at the time he thought of himself as 'bohemian', this Roman experience prompted the discovery that he was in fact 'a normal bourgeois person': 'without knowing much about it, I was on the side of order'. The events of May 1968, witnessed at first hand in Paris, confirmed his conservatism. When he returned to Jesus as a graduate student in 1967 for research on aesthetics, he was also seeking an alternative to the prevailing 'politics of rebellion'. Elected to a Research Fellowship at Peterhouse in 1969, he gained his PhD in 1972, and published his thesis: *Art and Imagination: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind*, in 1974. In 1973 he married Danielle Lafitte, a teacher met during his time in Pau; they divorced in 1979.

In 1971 he took up a Lectureship in Philosophy at Birkbeck College, London where he was subsequently appointed to a Readership in 1979 and a Professorship of Aesthetics in 1985. Thus began the second part of his life, not 'wretched' but 'ill at ease'. Birkbeck was strongly left-wing and he stood out as a political pariah. Unsure of his future, he read for his Bar exams at the Inner Temple, passing both parts in 1975 and 1976 and winning Temple prizes. Called to the Bar in 1978, he never practised, unable to afford pupillage. In 2015 he was elected an Honorary Bencher of the Inn; when he died, the Inn's flag was flown at half-mast in his memory.

Birkbeck's practice of teaching in the evenings left the days for writing, beginning what would be his over fifty books, as also for his prolific journalism. The books, too many to list, cover many subjects: aesthetics, animal rights, architecture, desire, beauty, Lebanon, human nature, culture, globalisation, terrorism, wine... They include novels and short stories, as well as libretti for three operas and the music for two of them. Music indeed was always a source of joy and deep reflection, as exemplified by *The Aesthetics of Music* (1997), a substantial philosophical account of musical meaning.

His conservatism was affirmed in *The Meaning of Conservatism* (1980), defending Tory values against 'their betrayal by free marketeers'. From 1982, for almost twenty years,

he edited the *Salisbury Review*, championing ‘genuine conservatism’ – not competition but attachment – and the defence of civil society, of ‘a certain way of life’. He favoured Brexit and responded to the leave vote with *Where We Are, The State of Britain Now* (2017), addressing ‘the difficult and troubling question of our national identity.’

He was a constant defender of freedom of speech and the legitimacy of disagreement. Civilised debate was his *modus vivendi*. Writing in the *Church Times* after Roger’s death, his local parish priest described him as a great example of someone with whom you could have radical disagreements ‘and still get along – a skill that has disappeared in the public forum in recent years’. His commitment to unfettered debate and the principles of a free society was nowhere more evident than in his tireless work in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland during the Cold War. Under the code-name *Wiewiórka* (Polish for squirrel, an allusion to his red hair), he gave clandestine lectures, smuggled in books, helped dissident activists, established various educational trusts. Under constant Secret Police surveillance, he was eventually arrested in 1985 and expelled from Czechoslovakia. His experience of the time is captured in his novel *Notes from Underground* (2014). After the fall of the Iron Curtain his work was recognised by official honours: the Medal for Merit (First Class) for services to the Czech people (1998); the Lech-Kaczynski Award for intellectual courage, integrity and friendship to Poland (2016); the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland (2019); the Middle Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit (2019).

In 1992 he left Birkbeck for a University Professorship and a Chair of Philosophy at Boston University. In 1995 he resigned his Boston posts and came back to England to live from freelance writing and lecturing. In 2005 he took an appointment as Research Professor at the Institute for the Psychological Sciences in Arlington, Virginia and in 2009 worked at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington where he wrote *Green Philosophy: How to Think Seriously about the Planet* (2011). He held numerous Visiting Professorships; most recently at Oxford, St Andrews, and Buckingham where he developed an MA in Philosophy.

In 1993 he purchased Sunday Hill Farm in the Wiltshire hamlet of Garsdon. Here he wanted to *settle*; it was his *somewhere*, his ‘Scrutopia’ as the composer Robin Holloway called it. For this third part of his life one word sufficed: ‘hunting’. Through hunting he met his second wife, Sophie Jeffreys, when she came to his help after he was thrown from his horse during a meet of the Beaufort Hunt. Hunting and farming – rural community – gave him a new ease, reflected in the autobiographical underpinning of his later books, notably *News from Somewhere: On Settling* (2004), full of vignettes of this settled life – neighbours, country occasions, everyday realities. If the feeling is often elegiac, there is no lamenting an idealised past, but rather a clear-sighted appreciation of the values and difficulties of his somewhere community. He and his wife’s consultancy, Horsell’s Farm Enterprises – involved them in a range of activities relating to conservation, environmental management and the future of the countryside. An annual ‘Scrutopia Summer School’ is devoted to philosophical issues; participants are promised – characteristically Roger – ‘ten days of glorious eccentricity in beautiful countryside’.

These Sunday Hill Farm years saw Roger preoccupied with two related concerns: Wagner, Religion. While he had always regarded religion as integral to human communities on sociological and anthropological grounds, he was no less clear that science gives the truth of our world, not some theological doctrine; no place is left for any “divine hypothesis” and another way needs be found to resuscitate the religious worldview. In *The Face of God* (2012) and *The Soul of the World* (2014), Scruton explored God’s place in a disenchanted world, arguing that the sacred and the transcendental are ‘real presences’, essential to human life. Kant, ever central in Scruton’s philosophical thinking, ‘showed the limits of human reason, pushed to ‘that place where the empirical gives out and the

transcendental glimmers'. The glimmering of the transcendental Scruton's three books devoted to key works by Wagner: *Death-Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's Tristan and Isolde* (2004); *The Ring of Truth: The Wisdom of Wagner's Ring of the Nibelungen* (2016); Wagner's *Parsifal: The Music of Redemption* (2020); powerful philosophical, musical, and personally felt explorations of his conception of the sacred, his understanding of redemption. Scruton's question is Wagner's: how to live in right relation with others, even if there is no God to help us. This too is what Wagner explores, and, what Scruton shows in these works, above all in his detailed analysis of the music as where indeed the transcendental glimmers.

Even in the absence of faith, Scruton's religious sensibility was strong. He talked of regaining his religion but 'at a distance from the old religion' *In Our Church: A Personal History of the Church of England* (2012) he provided an account of what the Church of England had meant to him. On Sundays he regularly played the organ in his local church.

He was made Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2003 and Fellow of the British Academy in 2008. In 2016, he became Sir Roger Scruton, knighted 'For services for philosophy, teaching and public education'.

On the evening of Roger's death, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, taught by him at Cambridge and a long-standing friend, wrote fittingly of him as 'immense in the scope and depth of his mind . . . a living reminder of what the philosophical mind can be at its most expansive'. He was 'a gentle man and a gentleman': someone to whom 'in human emotional terms' he owed a great deal.

*Stephen Heath*