



## Nicholas Henshall

Inspirational schoolmaster who became a leading scholar of 18th-century Europe.

**David Armitage**

GREAT TEACHERS never die: they endure in the lives they change. Nicholas Henshall, who lost a long struggle with cancer on September 16th, shaped countless pupils in three decades as a history master at Stockport Grammar School. In retirement, he reached even wider audiences by writing and lecturing on his passion, the culture and politics of 18th-century Europe.

Nick was the kind of committed, charismatic, contrarian teacher everyone should have. As a ten-year-old, I had no idea how lucky I was. Indeed, I found Nick's energy and eloquence more than a little frightening and certainly hard to take in: his report on my first year briskly noted: 'He works sensibly and carefully but is not very enterprising.' That might have been enough to put anyone off history and to avoid 'Mr Henshall' ever after. I stubbornly stuck with it and returned to his classroom for my A-Level. By then, I had a much better idea of Nick's talents. Thirty years of friendship confirmed what an inspiration he was: resolute in discussion, endlessly curious and emphatically engaged until the cancer and the treatments that kept it at bay together took their toll.

**Charismatic contrarian: Nicholas Henshall (left) at the History Today awards party, 2013.**

Born in Rugeley, Staffordshire, in 1944, Nick moved with his parents to Stockport and became a pupil at the school where he would later teach. He read History at Cambridge (he took a First) and remained as attached to his old college, Emmanuel, as he was to the Tudor century he studied there with Geoffrey Elton. That must have been a memorable encounter – the irascible meeting the implacable – and it left Nick with an exhaustive knowledge of the Tudors but the urge to do research on a completely different period. He began a PhD on the possibility of revolution in late 18th-century Britain yet gave it up after spending too long reeling microfilm in the bowels of Manchester University library (or so he said). For the rest of his career, his head was with the Tudors and his heart was in the Enlightenment. The Age of Reformation and the Age of Reason remained the twin poles of his teaching, but the 18th century was the source of most of his tastes and convictions.

Nick prepared all his classes, from the ascent of Henry VII to the downfall of Louis XVI, with a rigour that may have been lost on many of his pupils and a vigour none of them forgot. His notes – on fragrant purple cyclostyled sheets – were miracles of organisation and compression, larding apt quotations into beautifully structured summaries of the latest scholarship on economic, political, diplomatic and cultural history. (Social history came some way behind; his was a history from above.) Hours before an exam, he could hand out copies of a new article on the Marian Privy Council and point to what we needed for our essays. Nick's talents were more inspiring and less intimidating the longer you benefited from his teaching.

The effort he expended on his pupils, inside and beyond the classroom, was all-consuming but must have had a cost. He retired very early in 1997 to pursue history in other fashions but with undimmed passion. He had already published one major synthetic work, *The Myth of Absolutism: Change and Continuity in Early Modern Monarchy* (1992), which spanned from Britain to Russia between the 15th and the 19th centuries. He was touchingly proud that his provocations stirred debate and that the book's pan-European sweep earned it

translations into Italian and Russian: a rare accolade for any historian but surely unique for a retired schoolteacher. He held a Schoolmaster Fellowship at St John's College, Cambridge, while writing it and later became a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in recognition of his contributions to early modern history.

In retirement, Nick painstakingly, and somewhat painfully, wrote a sequel to his first book. *The Zenith of European Monarchy and its Elites: The Politics of Culture, 1650–1750* (2010) showcased his ever-expanding erudition and distilled generations of scholarship on the cultural politics of power and the political power of culture in a pivotal period. He also taught occasionally at the University of Manchester, wrote for *History Today* and edited *History Review*, its sibling magazine aimed at sixth-formers. The highlight of his social calendar was the annual *History Today* awards party.

Nick taught you how to think by showing you how to write. Grab the reader's attention. Keep sentences punchy. Avoid clichés like the plague (but never miss a good metaphor). Make every paragraph a miniature essay. And say what you mean even if you don't always mean what you say. In short, he passed on the classical arts of rhetoric – after all, he taught at a 15th-century grammar school – combined with the Augustan virtues of Pope and Johnson, liberally laced with caustic Humean scepticism and the wit of his great intellectual hero, Voltaire.

If I can turn a proper sentence, it is thanks to Nick. If I can make a halfway decent argument or hold my own in debate, that's his doing, too, not least because our politics diverged and conversations became more hammer-and-tongs over time. My lasting interests in early modern politics and culture are also his fault (or his achievement, given the rough material he had to work with). Nick made me a historian and showed me why history matters. He introduced me to Mozart's operas, Fielding's novels and the palace of Sanssouci – great gifts from a great teacher and a lifelong friend. His loss is incalculable, but then so is his legacy.

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