

In Memoriam
William Humphrey Beik
(1941-2017)



My dear friend Bill Beik who died on the 31st August in Pittsburgh was one of the most talented of that galaxy of Anglo-American historians who transformed our understanding of France in the age of absolutism. It was, he said, his parents ‘who started it all’. His father, Paul Harold Beik, was himself an immensely distinguished historian of revolutionary France; his librarian mother is known today for her translations of Made de Stael’s memoirs written during her enforced exile by Napoleon and of the travel diaries of Flora Tristan an early nineteenth century utopian socialist and feminist. Bill’s upbringing was francophile with a leftish cum radical flavour. For about a decade from 1948 he spent much time crossing the Atlantic with long periods—up to a year or more—in Paris where the family lived as Paul pursued his research. At his Pennsylvania high school Bill was affectionately described as the ‘American in Paris’; but far from disrupting his progress the times spent in France only whetted his historical appetite.

Bill graduated from Haverford College in 1963 and took a doctorate at Harvard in 1969. He taught at Northern Illinois University for 22 years before moving to Emory. Of his numerous publications two major works stand out. The first is the prize-winning *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France. State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (1985). This original and meticulous picture of the social and political dynamics at work inside Languedoc’s ruling institutions blew away older ideas about the way in which the Monarchy extended its control over distant provinces: not by

subjugating them but by a process of ‘collaboration’ with their ruling elites. Equally meticulous, *Urban Protest in Seventeenth-century France. The Culture of Retribution* appeared in 1997. Material culled from over twenty provincial archives is finely deployed to dismantle all the major tenets of conservative historiography. Rooted in their daily experiences, formed by their own culture, the movements of the populace did not require, as some insisted, leadership from above; nor were they motivated by a desire to return to a golden age, driven by myth or rumour and lacking in coherence.

After retirement from Emory in 2007, Bill and his wife Millie, a miner’s daughter and accomplished Labour historian, retired to Pittsburgh. Life in this old industrial city suited them both. Bill, a devoted, hospitable and generous family man, was happy to support Millie in the activities of the Battle of Homestead Foundation, where they found a ‘small group of congenial activists and ex-union officers’ which ran many educational programmes. Sadly, his retirement was badly affected by Parkinson’s disease with which he contended for nearly twenty years. His determination despite his declining agility was remarkable as I saw when we met for the last time in 2009 at a conference in London at which he was the keynote speaker. Our family lunch the next day was a happy occasion. The following year, Bill courageously went unaccompanied to Paris to do the research for a book on the ‘inner workings of French Absolutism ...in the 1690s’ In the end the effort of finishing it was too much; but how much we already had to admire.

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