

# The New Regius Professor

Interview by  
Mick Le Moignan (2004)

**T**he appointment of one of the College's most distinguished and prolific writers and historians, Professor

Richard J Evans (1998) as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University has been greeted with great pleasure at Caius.

It is seen as a well-deserved accolade to a hard-working professional historian who has done much to ensure that the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century is fully understood by the generations who were born after it was all over.

Richard Evans becomes Regius Professor on 1 October 2008 and, with impeccable timing, the third volume of his trilogy on Hitler's Germany, *The Third Reich at War*, is published thirteen days later, with a boxed set of all three books to come from Penguin in time for Christmas. He was the principal expert witness in the "Holocaust denial" libel trial of David Irving in 2000 and, perhaps on Santayana's principle, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it", he believes passionately that we must face the terrible truth of the cataclysm that almost engulfed the world, less than a lifetime ago.

His work is impeccably researched, the product of copious reading and brilliant analysis. For all the importance of his own studies, he is scrupulously careful not to cut himself off from the daily round of academic duties in College and University. He agreed, by chance, to become Head of the History Faculty at the same time as assuming the role of Regius Professor. As well as lecturing, examining and supervising students, he will act as an informal adviser to junior members of the Faculty and will give his inaugural, public lecture as Regius



Yao Liang

Professor in the Spring of 2009, probably on the subject of why British historians' fascination with events on the European continent is not generally returned.

He is reluctant to reduce any of these commitments, believing strongly that: "Teaching and research are interdependent: it's what a university is about. Teaching forces you to find a way of enthusing students and making them interested. The challenge of students is essential: historians who only research can lose the ability to communicate."

The Regius Chair was set up by George 1 in 1724 and Evans will be the 21st Professor. He is, he says "extremely honoured and a little bit daunted" by the long list of extremely distinguished historians who have held the position. His immediate predecessor, Professor Quentin Skinner (1959), an early student of Neil McKendrick (1958), "has achieved an unequalled dominance in his field of political thought." Evans also admires G M Trevelyan: "He's not fashionable but his detailed research has stood the test of time – and he was a brilliant writer. It's important to write for a wider public without sacrificing scholarly integrity."

Trevelyan's *English Social History* was one of only two books in English in his Welsh parents' bookcase (the other was Palgrave's *Golden Treasury of English Verse*). His parents met after both had moved from Wales to London. His father was a bank clerk and his mother a teacher, who

corrected his father's Welsh so often, when they were first married, that he decided the family should become English-speaking and stay in London!

Evans passed the 11-plus and went to Forest School on a state

scholarship before winning an open scholarship to Jesus College, Oxford. By then, he was "completely gripped" by history and leaped at the chance to plunge into the library and work very hard. He was, he says, "almost obsessed" by the subject.

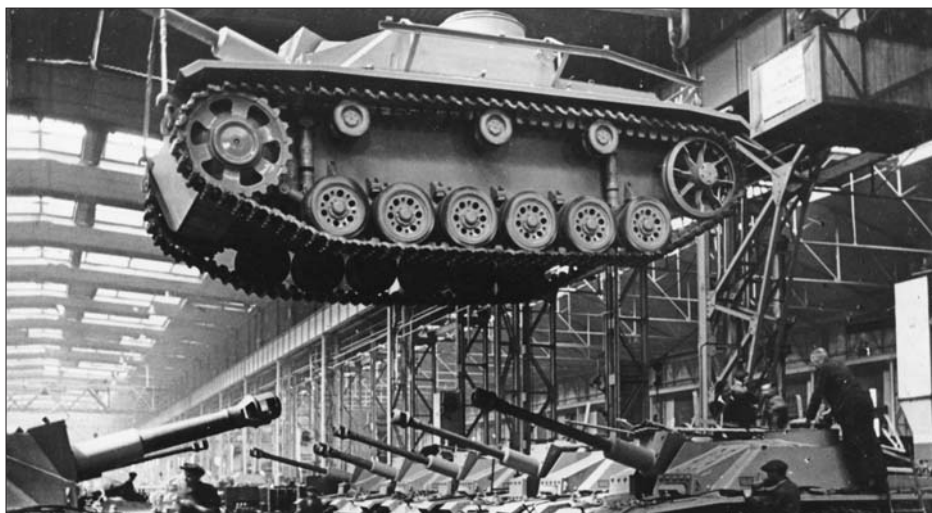
His interest had been sparked by two things: on childhood visits to Wales, he visited derelict slate quarries and wondered who had worked there and what their life was like; and growing up in the immediate post-War years, he heard his parents talking about the Blitz – his father had gone through the campaigns in North Africa and Italy as an RAF radar operator, arriving in Milan in time to see the bloodstains on the pavement after Mussolini was executed.

Evans moved to St Antony's College, Oxford to do his doctorate, later publishing this work as *The Feminist Movement in Germany 1894-1933*. He was interested in discovering why earlier liberal values had collapsed. He felt that nineteenth century nationalism in Germany had been a liberal force until unification in 1871, but then the growth of the nationalist movement "from below" had encouraged a more active foreign policy and dreams of empire...

In 1972, he was appointed to a Lectureship in History at Stirling University, "where I spent four years learning to teach and revised my thesis for publication." He moved to East Anglia University in 1976, "attracted by a great concentration of brilliant historians", was appointed Professor of European History in 1983, wrote several



Bundesarchiv, Koblenz



Tiger tanks in production, summer 1943.

USHMM, courtesy of Anonymous Donor



Camp commandant Richard Baer, camp doctor Josef Mengele and former camp commandant Rudolf Höss in relaxed mood at Auschwitz in 1944.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Instytut Pamięci Narodowej



German air force troops round up a group of terrified Jews in the diarist Zygmunt Klukowski's home town of Szczepleszyn.

Bundesarchiv, Koblenz



Three and a half million Red Army prisoners of war died in German captivity, many of them while being transported from the front in open goods wagons like this one, photographed at Witebsk railway station on 21 September 1941: when winter set in, the wagons became death-traps.

more books and edited a number of others.

His research was still very much focused on German life – society and politics, the family, the working class, the peasantry – and in 1987 came the first book for a wider readership, *Death in Hamburg*, about a cholera epidemic in that city, which won the Wolfson Literary Award for History (for which he is now a judge). More books on Germany followed and evolved into a major project which used the history of capital punishment to study the relationship of authority and obedience in German society and politics between 1600 and 1987.

He moved to Birkbeck College, London, in 1989, becoming Vice Master and finally Acting Master for his final year. But he regretted doing no teaching and becoming a full-time manager, which partly prompted his move to Cambridge and Caius in 1998.

He had met Dr Jo Whaley (1986) and Professor Vic Gatrell (1967) through common academic interests but had only been to Cambridge as a tourist until Neil McKendrick invited him to speak to the Caius History Society in the mid-90s. He had not been a member of a collegiate university since his undergraduate days, but "people were incredibly welcoming" and he enjoyed meeting colleagues from different disciplines. There were those who warned him that college life was a snakepit: "But I spent the first year looking for snakes and couldn't find any – people resolved their differences in a very civilised way."

It was a relief to get back to teaching and he devoted himself to building up a group of postgraduate students and set up an M.Phil course in modern history. His major research projects take about a decade to complete: the first examined movements of emancipation and social reform, including feminism and the labour movement in Germany, the second looked at disease in German society, then crime and retribution and, at Cambridge, his great work on the Third Reich. The inaugural lecture as Regius Professor may well set him off on his next area of academic exploration, the differing mutual perceptions that people in Germany and Britain have of each other.

Richard Evans carries his honours and achievements lightly: he is now "the leading professor in the world's leading History Faculty" but still finds time to play the piano and is devoted to his wife and two young sons (who gave a reading of *The Owl and the Pussycat* at their parents' wedding in Caius Chapel in 2004). He enjoys gardening, cooking and other country pursuits in a village outside Cambridge.

In short, the new Regius Professor is refreshingly unpretentious and approachable and a very great credit to our College.