Peter de Beauvoir Brock: Scholarship in Action

John Stanley

Professor Peter Brock challenged people. The most polite and solicitous of men, he challenged his family and its traditions with his pacifism. He challenged historians with the fields and eras that he chose to study. He challenged some activists by his emphasis on non-violence. He attempted to make every aspect of his life contribute to challenging oppression wherever it may happen, abroad or in his adopted homeland Canada.[1]

Born on Guernsey, one of the Channel Islands, on 30 January 1920, the family of Peter de Beauvoir Brock had a long association with the island (as signified by his French middle name). The family's military tradition went back centuries: his ancestor Sir Isaac Brock died at the Battle of Queenston Heights (October 1812), stopping an American invasion. Since family members were always officers, they were ensconced in the upper middle class. (He once confessed that his mother was "something of a snob.") Raised by a nanny, whom he remembered fondly, he spent his early years on Guernsey before being sent to Oxford for his education.

There was nothing in his family history that would have indicated an interest in either Eastern Europe or pacifism, the two fields to which he made such a large contribution and which moulded his life and work. However, it was clear from an early age that he was a rebel, best evidenced by his refusal to kowtow to the family's military role. For example, he never addressed his elderly maternal grandfather as "General," as did everyone else in the family, but rather "Grandfather." Indeed, his sister-in-law Helen Brock recalled that his pacifism started while he was still on the island, at Guernsey College.

He attended Exeter College, Oxford, and it was there that he became a secular pacifist. Disillusioned by the Church of England, he had no religious attachments, but he joined a pacifist society in Oxford. During World War II, he refused military service. For this refusal, he spent two months at Wandsworth Prison and another four months at Wormwood Scrubs. (He was always cautious about sharing his prison experiences and he only recorded his memories in the privately printed, *From Wandsworth to Wordwood Scrubs: One Man's View of Prison*, in 2000.)[2] He was released to alternative service and worked in a hospital for the remainder of the war. During this period he came to admire the Quakers' pacifism and compulsion for social justice, but he did not join the movement.

Nonetheless, it was this newfound link to social service and familiarity with the Quakers that first led him to Eastern Europe. Eastern Europe played no role in his youth or early education. Interwar England paid little attention to the eastern half of the Continent. In dealing with the international crisis over the Sudetenland in 1938, Neville Chamberlain, then British Prime Minister, referred to the Nazi threats to Czechoslovakia's integrity as "a quarrel in a far away country between people of whom we know nothing." The Munich settlement revealed an extraordinary naïvité on the part of the British elite, but most intellectuals would have agreed that there was lit-

tle of value or interest east of Berlin. In the aftermath of World War II, Peter Brock joined the Anglo-American Quaker Relief Mission in post-war Poland. This task linked his social service experience with a well known pacifist movement. Poland had been devastated by the war. Most of its great cities had been purposely destroyed and huge population transfers were taking place – Germans being moved west, Poles fleeing from the east, for much of inter-war Poland had been annexed to the USSR. To carry out his duties he learned Polish, but his interest in the country soon went beyond work: he admired the Poles working with the relief effort, travelled through the war-torn country, and began to understand that this land had a long and significant history.

He wanted to learn more about a country that his Oxford education had ignored and so enrolled as a doctoral candidate in Polish history at Jagiellonian University in Cracow in 1948.[3] Cracow was one of the few Polish cities spared total destruction. (The Russians had liberated it before the Germans could destroy it.) While much of its faculty and student body had been murdered, its ancient Jagiellonian University slowly returned to academic life. To take a Ph.D. in Polish history and at a university in a country that was in the process of being engulfed by the Soviet system was a curious, even risky, choice.

The young man's decision was typical of a pattern: Brock demonstrated his devotion to causes that he cherished by exploring and writing their past. In taking on Eastern European history as a field of study he was going against a long tradition of ignorance and indifference. Since the nineteenth century, Europe's history has been considered to be that of southern England, northern France, and western Germany. Ranke, the great Prussian historian - still regarded as a key figure in historiography - infamously remarked that the Slavs and Hungarians had made no contributions to Western civilisation.[4] Some nations might enter this narrative for brief moments – Italy during the Renaissance and under Fascism, Spain and Portugal in the Age of Exploration, Russia at the time of Peter the Great and in 1917. Others – Scandinavia, Switzerland - were completely excluded by this approach.

Poland only entered this traditional narrative at two points – its disappearance as an independent state in 1795 and then as the site of World War II's beginning in 1939. It was treated as a peripheral state and its history as marginal by virtually all English-speaking historians. In deciding to focus his scholarly focus on Poland, Brock was rebelling against a centuries-long consensus just as he had previously gone against family tradition, His very choice of field and place of study confronted Ranke's and Chamberlin's beliefs while validating the importance of studying the past of a "far away country."

By broadening his scholarly interests to other East European peoples, he underlined his refusal to accept this hackneyed view, rejecting an academic consensus by making Eastern Europe central to his scholarship. His choice was no accident: his scholarship was a political act - validating another people's story - and it followed a life-long tradition of making his principles his life. He saw the consequences of this traditional historian's attitude: in his relief work in Poland, in finding a permanent position, in discussions with academic colleagues, in the difficulties that he had in placing his students.

He was among the very few foreign students in Poland as Stalinism became Poland's order of the day. During his time in Cracow,

there were only two foreign students enrolled at Jagiellonian, but he successfully defended a dissertation on an important Polish peasant leader, Bolesław Wysłouch, in 1950 and returned to England, at the height of the Cold War.[5]

Unable to find appropriate employment – for short times he held jobs as day labourer and school teacher – he entered a doctoral programme at Oxford University, completing a dissertation on the Unity of The Czech Brethren in 1953.[6] His second doctorate was thus also in East European history, but in contrast to his Jagiellonian doctorate dealing with the nineteenth century, his work on the Czechs took him back to the Reformation. This work consciously or unconsciously undermined academic routine in another way.

For decades, historians have concentrated more and more on the twentieth century and, indeed, students are most attracted to this period. Brock never gave in to this fad: in addition to the modern era, his work encompassed the Ancient World and delved into the Renaissance, Reformation, and Counter-Reformation.

Brock was still trying to find his place in the academic community when he married Carmen Williamson, a Quaker born in Jamaica, in 1958. This marriage linked Brock to the Friends' movement for the rest of his life. While they had no children, they enjoyed travelling and Brock dedicated many of his books to her. Carmen never took a particular interest in his work, although she typed many of his manuscripts. However, she set the tone for his home life, providing a structure of everyday life while pursuing her own political activism, particularly supporting to refugees. The couple's home on 82 Moore Avenue in Toronto frequently served as home for newly arrived refugees to Canada.

Even with two doctoral degrees, Brock had a difficult time finding a position. There was suspicion of a Polish Ph.D. and there were few positions in East European history anywhere in the English-speaking world. For a while, he served as a research assistant to a historian writing a history of childhood. (It was never completed, despite mounds of notes.) Encouraged by English colleagues, such as John Keep, he eventually left England for North America, taking up a contract position at the University of Toronto for the 1957/8 academic year. This one-year contract was followed by others at the University of Alberta, Smith College, and Columbia University. He stayed on at Columbia and enjoyed living in New York City.

As an interracial couple, their life could not have been easy at this time, even in the northern United States. When looking for a home while taking up a position at Smith College in Massachusetts, the couple was refused housing. However, it was the Viet Nam War that impelled them to leave the United States.

Ontario's university system expanded enormously in the 1960s as the baby boom matured and the provincial economy expanded. The University of Toronto was a chief beneficiary of the provincial government's new found interest in post-secondary education. The university's history department suddenly was funded for new positions and Brock won a tenure-stream position at the University of Toronto, taking up his new, permanent post in 1966.

He was an impressive candidate. By this time he had written four books (three of them in Polish). He was already starting to branch out beyond Polish history by publishing articles on the Circassian, Ukrainian, and Czech past, He had also written his first articles on

the history of pacifism. He taught courses in Polish history and participated in the teaching of undergraduate European history courses. He also supervised the work of six successful doctoral candidates. He never taught an undergraduate course or graduate seminar on pacifist history and he never supervised a Ph.D. candidate working in this field. In this sense, he was isolated, but the history department's professors were known for their individualistic, non-collaborative approach to scholarship. Professor Brock was never threatened by most faculty members' lack of interest in his work and he made good friends in such colleagues as Ann and Harvey Dyck. He and Carmen felt at home in Canada and became citizens.

As a historian, Professor Brock's greatest contributions may be found in the work devoted to the history of pacifism. His imprisonment had only confirmed his dedication to pacifism and he was clearly immersed in the topic. His major, groundbreaking work announced that a new field was birthing. The thousand-plus page *Pacifism in the United States: From the Colonial Era to the First World War*, published in 1968 by Princeton UP was followed in 1972 by *Pacifism in Europe to 1914*.[7] Quakers were treated in these volumes as were Mennonites; Brock dealt with all pacifist groups, favouring none. (He noted that he devoted as much space as he did to the Quakers because they left such abundant records in contrast to the Mennonites.) These two books established the foundation for a new field of history, the history of pacifism. While Brock had predecessors in this field – he noted his particular debt to Bart de Ligt, the Dutch author - none had focussed on the *history* of pacifism.[8] "No ideology owes more to one academic than pacifism owes to Peter Brock," wrote Oxford political scientist Martin Ceadel.[9]

Brock's work in Polish history was of an entirely different nature. While he produced significant works of synthesis, such as his seminal essay on Polish nationalism, he never produced huge monographs in that particular field.[10] Most of this work was related to populism or nationalism. He had a special interest in groups seeking political recognition and social justice, whether it was Poles struggling to regain their independence or peasant parties attempting to carve a political role for a majority of the population. His preferred method was to write tightly focussed scholarly articles that he would eventually gather together in a volume of related essays. This approach led him to explore the history of most of the East European peoples including the Kashubs, Lusatian Sorbs, Slovaks, Belarusans, Russians, and Hungarians, discovering unifying elements in those diverse histories. While he produced, short monographs on Eastern Europe, there was nothing to rival the "Brock-busters" in pacifist history that astounded his editors at the University of Toronto Press. The distinguishing traits of his scholarship on Eastern Europe was his deep erudition in addition to a distinct even-handedness. He liked the peoples of Eastern Europe and he lived among them. However, he did not idolise and he did not internalise their nationalism (a common trap for historians). No matter how difficult the issues – such as the conflicts between Germans and Poles – he tried to present all the relevant facts and was always open to new interpretations. He valued his Polish colleagues' contributions, but he paid no credence to the wilful ignorance of the German contributions to the history of what is now western and northern

Poland.

This approach of filling in gaps with focussed scholarship while promoting fairness in interpretation made his work significant not only to Anglophones who knew little of Poland, but also to Poles who saw a different perspective in Brock's work. His articles and essays were known, cited, and published in Poland, even under the Communists. His Polish-language books, published in London, were available for purchase in Warsaw. Prof. Brock's approach emphasised scholarship over synthesis, detail over broad narrative, and an emphasis on comprehensiveness and fairness. These qualities have made his writing a gold mine for scholars over many decades. By the 1980s, he was the foremost historian of Eastern Europe in Canada. (Admittedly, even by that date, there were few scholars of the region in the dominion.)

A remarkable feature about Brock's scholarly activities is that he always undertook to study the language of whatever topic interested him. In the English-speaking world, historians have frequently attempted to research broad topics with limited linguistic resources, insisting that a few major languages are enough to do research. If special languages are required, a research assistant or translator may be engaged. Brock's style of work contradicted and challenged this approach. In order to write a single article on the Tolstoyan movement in Hungary, he spent two years learning Hungarian. In order to write on Gandhi he learned Gujarati and spent a year in India.[11] By the time he died, he was able to work in English, French, German, Norwegian, Dutch, Polish, Czech, Lusatian Sorb, Slovak, Belarusan, Ukrainian, Russian, Italian, and Gujarati in addition to the Latin and Ancient Greek he had learned early in life. In his final years of life, he studied Japanese and Hindi. He clearly enjoyed learning languages, but more importantly he recognised the necessity to master them well enough to carry out scholarly work for he did all his own research.

Although he retired from the University of Toronto in 1985, he continued his prodigious scholarship. In a single year – 1991 – three monographs appeared.[12] He was honoured by an international conference at the University of Toronto celebrating the field that he had founded.[13] In his last year of life, he completed two works – one in Polish historiography, another on conscientious objection.[14] The bibliography of his work runs to 29 pages.

I have emphasised the great scholar, but he was a well-rounded individual. He could sometimes appear unworldly. Harvey Dyck, his colleague at the University of Toronto's History department, related an anecdote about his interview for a position at Columbia University. Others might ask about salary, pension, workload, but Peter Brock asked about students – and where one might walk on Manhattan.[15] He delighted in listening to classical music on CBC Radio Two and was a long-time NDP supporter. (He would have been appalled at what has happened to the programming at his preferred radio station.) He believed in openness and acceptance and it should not have surprised me – as it did – when I saw his name in a whole page of *The Globe and Mail*, purchased to protest the 1981 bath house raids by the Toronto police. With Carmen he attended Toronto Symphony Orchestra concerts for many years. While he surrendered these pleasures upon Carmen's death, he continued to go to the opera occasionally. For example, the last performance he attended was that of Poul Ruder's opera *The Handmaid's Table*, performed by the

Canadian Opera Company and based on the novel by Margaret Atwood. He also did not remain tethered in old ways. Late in life he became a vegetarian, noting that he wanted no more animals to die on his behalf. While marriage to Carmen had involved him in many facets of Quaker work, after her death he returned to his Unitarian roots; Upon his death at home on 28 May 2006 – after a ten-month struggle with prostate cancer - his funeral was preceded over by a Unitarian minister.

Brock's success as a historian, as in other aspects of his life and work, was centred on an insistence to make his life count. He focused on what was most important to him and this effort produced a wave of scholarship.[16] His contributions have proven useful to scholars in many countries, drawing attention to figures, movements, events, and even whole peoples that otherwise might have been ignored. His lack of prejudice but also sympathy for his subjects was a model to scholars and students.[17]

It would be easy to look at the hundreds of articles and books authored by Professor Peter Brock as simply reflecting a diversity of broad interests, but as a group they reflect a central concern of Prof Brock: a struggle against injustice and oppression. He always looked at events from the underdog's point of view. This concern for justice unified his scholarship as it did his life.[18]

Recognition was important to Professor Brock, not for his own self-esteem, but rather to bring attention to his scholarship. Late in life, he learned that some friends were planning to put his name forward for an Order of Canada. He immediately put an end to this initiative; he was not interested in political honours. However, in 1991, he was awarded the Doctor of Letters *honoris causa* from the University of Toronto and he enjoyed the occasion, displaying his honorary degree in his study at his final residence on Avenue Road.

He learned that he had prostate cancer ten months before his death. While he had to abandon research, he continued reading travel guides and studying ancient Greek. His excellent caregivers took him out in a wheelchair; he used cabs to go out to restaurants with friends. Within a few weeks, all of the taxi drivers on St Clair Avenue were acquainted with the elderly gentlemen who knew all about their various homelands and tipped well. In his last month, he could not go out, but friends visited and he would call me regularly for books from the library or other errands, my Ariel to his Prospero. He died painlessly in his sleep on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. The Bulgarian building superintendent and I waited with his body until the funeral attendants arrived. A private funeral was held at the Mt Pleasant Cemetery in Toronto and his ashes were scattered. The executors of his estate were a Quaker, Trevor Sput, and a Mennonite, Ann Dyck. While he was comfortable even in retirement, he was not interested in possessions or even his own papers. Drafts were often disposed of after a book was finished, correspondence was thrown out once he had replied to it. The papers that remained were deposited in the University of Toronto Archives. (There is also some family correspondence that Prof. Brock donated to Pickering College, Newmarket, Ontario.)

Prof. Brock's eighty-six years left an extraordinary legacy for scholars and activists alike. His scholarly is not only an aid to scholars, but a goad to broaden historical horizons. In giving a place in history to the slighted and the ignored, he had found his own voice. Through scholarship he made a

deeply personal commitment.

Endnotes:

[1] Many biographical details of Brock's life may be founded in Harvey L. Dyck, "Peter Brock and the History of Pacifism," *Conrad Grebel Review*, 7, no 2, (1989), pp. 147-57. Despite any misgivings he might have had about his ancestor's military feats, he and Carmen motored to Queenston Heights to see the towering monument to his ancestor on their first visit to Canada..He also held a deep interest in his family geneology.

[2] It was ultimately published as *The Black Flower: One Man's Memory of Prison Sixty Years After* (York, 2001)

[3] His memories of his time in Cracow are recorded in "From Oxford to Toronto via Cracow: The Vicissitudes of a Young Historian in People's Poland," *Polish Review*, 43 (1998), pp. 46-67. The article is based on a speech delivered at his retirement party organised by the History Department at the University of Toronto.

[4] Ranke had limited his concept of Europe to the Latin and Germanic peoples, noting that the Hungarians and Slavs did not "belong to the unity of our nations" and that they received "only the impact of the West. They failed to exert an independent influence upon affairs." *Latin and Teutonic Nations*, p. 6 and *Vorrede* to German 1824 ed., cited by Herbert Butterfield, *Man on his Past. The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship* (Cambridge, 1955), p. 115

[5] The dissertation became his first scholarly article, Peter Brock, "Bolesław Wysłouch, Founder of the Polish Peasant party," *Slavonic and East European Review*, 30, (1951), pp. 139-63.

[6] This dissertation was published as *The Political and Social Doctrines of the Unity of the Czech Brethren in the Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries* (The Hague, 1957).

[7] A.A. Ekirch Jr, writing in the *American Historical Review*, 78 (1973), p. 655, termed the work "definitive."

[8] In a dinner in his honour held at Massey Colleage a few months before his death, Brock noted the importance of de Ligt's *La paix créatrice: Histoire des principes et des tactiques de l'action directe contre la guerre* (Paris, 1934), a French translation of *Vrede als daad: Beginselen, geschiedenis en strijdmethoden van de direkte aktie ten oorlog*, vol. I (Arnhem, 1931). Brock ordered the translation from a London bookdealer and it arrived shortly before war broke out in 1939.

[9] Martin Ceadel, "Ten Distinctions for Peace Historians," in Harvey L. Dyck, ed., *The Pacifist Impulse in Historical Perspective* (Toronto, 1996), p. 17

[10] Peter Brock, "Polish Nationalism," in Peter F. Sugar and Ivo J. Lederer, eds., *Nationalism in Eastern Europe* (Seattle, 1969), pp. 310 - 72. I have read this long essay on three different occasions – as an undergraduate coming to terms with the shape of Polish history, as a graduate student preparing for the comprehensive exams seeking out details and patterns, and finally as an author of an essay on Lelewel, the foremost Polish historian. On all three occasions, I have been impressed how well this work stands up to varying times and differing needs.

[11] *The Mahatma and Mother India: Essays on Gandhi's Nonviolence and Nationalism* (Ahmedabad, 1983). A second edition appeared as *Mahatma Gandhi as a Linguistic Nationalist* (Bhubaneswar, Orissa, 2005)

[12] *Freedom from Violence: Sectarian Nonresistance from the Middle Ages to the Great War*, *Freedom from War: Nonsectarian Pacifism 1814 – 1814*, and *Studies in Peace History*.

[13] Harvey L. Dyck, ed., *The Pacifist Impulse in Historical Perspective* (Toronto, 1996)

[14] *Against the Draft: Essays on Conscientious Objection from the Radical Reformation to the Second World War* (Toronto, 2006) and *Nation and History: Polish Historians from the Enlightenment to the Second World War* (Toronto, 2006). The latter work was co-edited with John Stanley and Piotr Wróbel, his successor as the University of Toronto's professor of Polish history.

[15] Harvey L. Dyck, "Peter Brock as a Historian of World-wide Pacifism: An Appreciation," in Dyck, ed., *The Pacifist Impulse in Historical Perspective* (Toronto, 1996)

[16] See John Stanley, compiler, *Scholarly Publications by Peter de Beauvoir Brock (Revised Listing)* (Toronto, 2006).

[17] His colleagues and students organised a special issue of a journal upon his retirement. See *Canadian Slavonic Papers* Vol. XXXI, no. 2 (June 1989).

[18] Obituaries by colleagues and former students appeared in scholarly journals, such as Harvey L. Dyck and Andrew Rossos, "Peter Brock (1920 – 2006)," *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 49 (2007), pp. 1-4; Joseph W. Wieczerzak, "Peter de Beauvoir Brock (1920-2006)," *Polish Review,* 51, no. 2 (2006), p. 54 John Kulczycki, "Peter Brock, 1920-2006," *Slavic Review*, 65, no. 4 (2006), pp. 894-5; and John Keep, "Professor Peter Brock (1920 – 2006)," *Slavonic and East European Review*, 85, no. 2 (2007) pp. 322-4