Black ’47, Bob and Me

The Roving Reader Files

Get yourself a coffee and sit down. Here’s another intriguing tale behind what looks like an innocent volume parked on the Centre’s shelves…

Have you seen Black ’47. Britain and the Famine Irish by Frank Neal, with its bleak black and white cover and title printed in green? Haunted by the image of a gaunt famine-starved couple with a baby, it doesn’t look a relaxing read. Published in 1998, it appeared during the 150th anniversary commemorations of one of the most catastrophic transformational experiences ever to scar the collective psyche of any community in the world – the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s.

As Professor of Economic and Social History at the University of Salford, in this book Neal had produced path-breaking statistical analyses revealing hidden facts behind the mythology of the Irish experience in Britain, focusing particularly on the year 1847. Through manipulation of laboriously-collated data, he was able to sketch out new grassroots local studies, presenting a much-needed counter-weight to other publications appearing at the time, which took a broad-brush large-scale approach.

But all that’s not what caught my imagination. No. It was the handwritten dedication on the flyleaf:
To Bob. With best wishes. The Simon Research Fellowship helped me to prepare the ground for this book. Frank.

That University of Manchester Simon Research Fellowship again! We've met it before, funding work by Africanist Basil Davidson. But even that nugget of information wasn't the attention-grabber. I'd been bowled over by 'Frank' and 'Bob'.

Sometimes it's not just the content of a book that's significant, though with Black '47 the content's significant enough. Sometimes a copy has intrinsic value in itself. Here, perhaps we were glimpsing the shadow of a close personal and professional relationship.

The identity of 'Frank' seemed obvious, but who was 'Bob'? I wanted to find out. And in trying to do so I tapped into the supportive world of the 'research community' at its cooperative best...

Contacting Frank Neal was the natural starting point. “A quick internet search should do it” I thought – but in amongst the impressive lists of academic achievements was a brief obituary. A Prof Frank Neal had died almost three years before. Sadness… But was it our ‘Frank’?

Frank’s old colleagues at the University of Salford ought to know. Let’s introduce Prof Martin Bull: “Dear Prof Bull. Has your colleague Frank Neal really passed away? (And do you know ‘Bob’?)” Quick as a flash the answers bounced back: “Yes” to the first question, “No” to the second. Frank Neal had indeed sadly died, and Prof Bull didn't know ‘Bob’. But he knew a man who might…

So, “Dear Prof Tonge. Prof Bull thinks you might know ‘Bob’. Is that true?” Quick as a flash: “No, but I know a woman who might. I'll get back with any news.” The hero of the piece! Prof Jon Tonge of the University of Liverpool was going straight to the horse’s mouth to ask Frank’s widow, who thought she might know ‘Bob’ but wasn’t sure. “Here’s a name and number; why not ring and ask?”

With shaking hand and bated breath, I phoned the potential ‘Bob’: “Bob, is that you?” “Yes and no,” came the reply. “Indeed I’m Bob, but not the ‘Bob’ you seek.” So back to Prof Tonge, who said, “Ask Frank’s good friend Mervyn Busteed…”

By now, professors across the North West region were delving into every nook and cranny, leaving no stone unturned to find ‘Bob’. To no avail, I’m afraid, because ‘Bob’ has eluded us all. But in hiding away
so successfully, he’s helped reveal the goodwill and generosity which drives the ‘research community’ I mentioned before.

Take a bow Martin, Jon and Mervyn, as well as the wrong Bob and the helpful Mrs Neal. All lent a hand in trying to find the mysterious ‘Bob’. Without cooperation, we may never find that elusive name or fact; history may well not be written. And your ordinary Jack or Jill is as likely to hold the key as anyone in academia. Everyone’s experience is worth preserving, and everyone has a unique story to tell...

To me, that’s the Centre’s mission in a nutshell: bringing everyone together, to help everyone learn from everyone else. Black, white, red or yellow, we all have something of value to offer.

So ‘Bob’, if you’re out there, put us out of our misery and get in touch. We’d like to shake your hand – and bring to a fitting conclusion the story of Black ’47, ‘Bob’ and Me.

As well as Black ’47. Britain and the Famine Irish (published 1998), Frank Neal wrote other important works about Irish history. His Sectarian Violence: The Liverpool Experience, 1819-1914: an Aspect of Anglo Irish History (published 1988 by Manchester University Press) is in Manchester Libraries, whilst Irish Protestant Identities (published 2008, also by Manchester University Press) can be found up in the University of Manchester Library. This latter volume was edited by Frank Neal along with our friends Mervyn Busteed and Jon Tonge.