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Charting our liberties
Andrew Jotischky takes a look at the document - and its copies - considered the foundation of individual rights

The recent discovery of another Magna Carta in the municipal archives of Sandwich, in Kent, in its 800th anniversary year, has led to speculation that there may still be more versions of the Charter lying around waiting to be uncovered (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-31242433). Most reports referred to the new discovery as a 'copy' of Magna Carta. More accurately, it was one of several re-issues of the document made in the course of the thirteenth century for specific occasions or at the request of particular communities. It served, in the case of Sandwich, as confirmation of the town's status and as a general guarantee of its municipal privileges. 24 re-issues of Magna Carta are known, but it is thought there may have been as many as 50. The original Magna Carta survives in four versions, but the drama at Runnymede in June 1215, when King John was confronted by his barons and forced to give his assent to the Charter, was only the beginning of the story.

Magna Carta was drafted as a peace treaty to bring an end to the civil war that had broken out a year earlier between John and about half of the major barons of England, including a majority from the north. A number of factors led to the outbreak of war, but at the root of it all was serious dissatisfaction with John's governance. Having lost the Angevin dynasty's territorial possessions in France – principally Anjou and Normandy – John needed to find new sources of income in order to be able to recover them, and this meant arbitrary imposition of taxation on landowners. It was not so much John's right to tax that was questioned as his right to set capricious and unwarranted rates of taxation. Chief among the complaints was that he demanded inheritance tax at unjust rates that ignored custom. Setting pre-determined rates for inheritance taxes was one of the achievements of Magna Carta. But it was not only taxation that the barons opposed to John resented: he also humiliated them publically, on some occasions slept with their wives, and settled his mercenary captains on lands they considered had been stolen from their rightful owners. This is why specific clauses in the Charter demand the expulsion of the relatives of John's unpopular mercenary leader, Gerard d' Athée. The clause that has proved to be the most enduring in its legal legacy in the English-speaking world – the stipulation that one could be tried only by judgement of one's peers – was also a response to specific cases of John's arbitrary imprisonment and sentencing of particular barons.

As a peace treaty, Magna Carta was a failure: the war broke out again weeks later, and John proceeded to break its terms with impunity. When he died in 1216 the war was still raging, and in fact it only ended in 1217 when the rebels and the French allies were defeated by the loyalist barons acting on behalf of the nine-year old King Henry III. Yet Henry and his advisors re-issued Magna Carta in 1216, 1217, 1225, 1237 and 1253, and as the case of the Sandwich Magna Carta shows, it came to be applied in situations far removed from its original intention. It became, in fact, a symbol of royal assent not only to observe its specific terms but more generally to rule within reasonable parameters. Even after the specific cases in the minds of its drafters had been long forgotten, Magna Carta symbolised limits to royal authority. This is why John's descendants were often forced to confirm the terms of Magna Carta in return for grants of taxation by Parliament.

The real achievement of Magna Carta was its ability to enter legal as well as political memory. When Charles I in the seventeenth century tried to impose arbitrary taxation without Parliament, the protests against him invoked a long-distant day on the Thames: 'Magna Carta,' declared the MP Edward Coke, ‘is such a fellow that he will have no sovereign.’ More than a century later, the notion that nobody could be deprived of liberty except by the law of the land or judgement of his peers was at the centre of the Bill of Rights drafted in state after state of the new Republic in America. It is still held as a touchstone of individual liberty.
Whenever a British subject is seized by foreign militias, bandits or pirates and a ransom demanded, we are reminded by politicians and media that the British government ‘never pays ransoms’. According to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), refusal to make ‘substantive concessions’ to hostage-takers is a ‘long standing’ policy, designed to deprive ‘terrorists’ not only of immediate financial reward but also of the incentive and means to commit further crimes. By implication, if paying ransoms generates more kidnappings, consistent refusal to pay will, over time and at whatever human cost, reduce their number and weaken the forces that commit them.

The FCO’s description of Britain’s non-payment policy as ‘long standing’, while condescendingly unspecific, is certainly justified. To be precise, the policy dates back 134 years. It was in late July 1881 that Earl Granville, foreign secretary in Gladstone’s second Liberal administration (1880-85), issued the following instruction to British embassies and consulates around the Mediterranean and in parts of Latin America:

Where British subjects are captured by brigands, when in no public character, but in pursuit of their own pleasure or business, no advance whatever for the purpose of ransom should, under any circumstances, be made from the British Exchequer.

The immediate origins of this measure lay in two kidnapping episodes in Ottoman Macedonia (now part of northern Greece), involving the capture of British subjects by ethnic Greek brigands. Early in 1880 Henry Synge, an Anglo-Irish retired army officer employed, with the rank of colonel, in organizing a gendarmerie (rural police force) in Ottoman Europe, was captured in the northern foothills of Mount Olympus and set free only on payment of a £10,000 ransom. Just over a year later in March 1881, when Harry Suter, a young Englishman working for a French-owned mining company, was seized in Halkidiki, east of Salonica, his release cost over £20,000.

Earl Granville: the 2nd Earl Granville (1815-1891) was Colonial Secretary in Gladstone’s first administration from 1868 until late June 1870 when, following the death of Lord Clarendon, he became Foreign Secretary.
£13,000. These two cases, involving a combined outlay of well over £2 million at present-day values, would have raised eyebrows in the foreign office even had the ransoms been paid by the captives’ families, friends or colleagues. What aroused genuine consternation, not only in the foreign office but also, more crucially, in Her Majesty’s Treasury, was that both ransoms were ‘advanced’, at the request of Britain’s consul-general at Salonica, from the consular bank account – which ultimately meant from the pockets of British taxpayers.

With the frugal Gladstone acting as his own Chancellor of the Exchequer, Granville came under sustained Treasury pressure to put an end to such acts of profligacy. His response was to circulate all British embassies and consulates in southern Europe, the Balkans, the Levant and Latin America, requiring details of all cases since 1861, in the countries or districts for which they were responsible, in which British subjects had been kidnapped by brigands and held to ransom. The period in question had witnessed an upsurge in brigandage across wide areas of the regions concerned, and several related ‘outrages’ against British subjects. Having held high office during over half of this period, Granville must have known roughly what his circular would bring to light.

Granville’s kidnapping report, based on the carefully tabulated returns to his circular and laid before Parliament, fell short of clearly justifying either the Treasury’s concern or, therefore, the policy on ransoms soon to be adopted. It nevertheless remains a fascinating document. Fourteen cases are listed, three from Mexico and the rest from Spain, Italy, Greece and the Ottoman Empire. The ransoms paid ranged from £200 (present-day value c.£16,000) for factory-owner Robert Rankin, seized in Denía, south-eastern Spain, in 1871, to the £13,000 (p.d.v. c.£1,000,000) that freed Harry Suter. Most fell between £1,000 and £3,000, though two others exceeded £5,000. In 1865 it took a ransom of £5,100 to end ex-stockbroker William Moens’s three-month captivity in the mountains of southern Italy. In June 1870 a ransom of £5,600 bought the freedom of John Anthony Bonell, a Gibraltar merchant seized with his uncle, John Bonell, just inside Spanish territory. A colossal ransom of £25,000 (p.d.v. c.£2 million) was negotiated and organized in April 1870 for three Englishmen, two of them aristocratic relatives of prominent statesmen, captured by Greek brigands within twenty miles of Athens. Before the ransom could actually be paid, however, the brigands, suddenly put to flight by the pursuing Greek army, panicked and slew their captives. The so-called ‘Marathon murders’ provoked a crisis in Anglo-Greek relations and remain a classic Victorian cause célèbre.

Perhaps the most striking revelation of Granville’s report, given its principal purpose, was that apart from the already familiar cases of Synge and Suter, only one was shown to have involved the disbursement of public funds. In 1870 the Bonell ransom, in Spanish gold and silver, was drawn from Gibraltar’s Colonial Treasury, on the order of the colony’s governor and with the government’s acquiescence. The Colonial Secretary at the time was … Earl Granville. As if to underline official approval, the money was transported to Càdiz, for the hand-over, in a Royal Navy gunboat.

This was not the only unusual aspect of the Bonell episode. Throughout the period covered by Granville, Britain’s leaders had insisted that governments guilty of allowing brigandage to persist within their country’s borders bore responsibility for paying, advancing or at worst reimbursing ransoms demanded for British hostages. At least one foreign government agreed: when faced with the Bonells’ capture, the then Spanish government promptly undertook to reimburse the ransom. Some three years later, to the great satisfaction of Her Majesty’s Treasury, a different Spanish government made good the promise. Once bitten, however, twice shy. When the Englishmen Robert Rankin (in 1871) and Arthur Haselden (in 1874) were kidnapped in Spain, no similar promise was forthcoming. Spain’s conduct in the Bonell case was, it turned out, not just unusual but unique. In relation to Synge and Suter, and following months of unproductive pressure on the Ottoman authorities, the British taxpayer’s £2 million was quietly recovered by deducting the sum from the annual ‘tribute’ due to Turkey in return for its recent cession of Cyprus. All accounts were now squared – but the future ‘long standing policy’ was by this time firmly in place.

The policy adopted in 1881 was unquestionably suited to the times for which it was designed, and largely through its sheer simplicity was able to survive unchanged and unchallenged for well over a century. Nothing suggests that the diminishing number of kidnappings involving Britons between, roughly speaking, 1910 and 1970 owed anything to official non-payment, any more than did the increasing incidence and gradually changing nature of organized kidnapping from 1970 onward. If no British kidnap victims died between 1881 and the emergence of new kinds of hostage-taking late in the 20th century, this had more
to do with the mentality of kidnappers and the resources of victims than with the increasingly 'long standing' policy. During both the twenty years before 1881 and most of the century after, those who carried out kidnappings for ransom, while hardly pacifists, were generally reluctant actually to carry out their routinely issued death threats. A murdered hostage, after all, was both literally a dead loss and – especially if foreign – a guarantee of intensified pursuit and likely retribution. As for their victims, it is important to stress that throughout this long period ransoms were almost always paid – not by the state but by the usually wealthy victims and those close to them. This raises the question: how appropriate is a policy devised in 1881, however 'long standing', in a twenty-first century setting wherein death threats can be seriously meant and often carried out, by ideologically-driven kidnappers for whom the highly public 'execution' of captives possesses a propagandistic value as welcome as any ransom? In these conditions – where, moreover, ransom-inflation runs rampant and hostages are far from certain to be wealthy, flat refusal to make 'substantive concessions' carries implications never faced by Earl Granville. Events over recent years in north Africa and the Middle East suggest that if citizens of European countries whose governments are known to pay ransoms are more likely than Britons to be taken hostage, British subjects who are seized are far more likely to die. This is not to suggest that the 'long standing policy' should stand no longer, so much as that both government and public will need to face up to its limitations – and its potential cost.

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2. 'Carried off into the mountains': a phrase much used in press accounts as most Mediterranean brigands use mountainous areas for cover and refuge. This is taken from the edge of Manzo’s home village of Acerno, inland from Salerno, with the rugged and thickly wooded Picentino range into which Moens was ‘carried off’.

3 and 4: Place of capture and place of detention. The Bonells, too, were ‘carried off’ a long distance from their place of capture. 3 shows a nondescript corner of modern La Línea, the closest Spanish town to Gibraltar. In 1870 there stood here, in what was still open country, the Ventorillo de Zabal, a rural inn where five Spanish bandoleros seized the Bonells. After a fifty-mile journey through the Andalusian sierra the Bonells were held hostage at the ermita (hermitage) of La Ina (4), a few miles east of Jerez de la Frontera. The elder victim, John Bonell, was freed after a few days to arrange the ransom for his nephew, who remained a prisoner for 18 days.
The Marathon murders of 1870, in which three Englishmen and one Italian were slain by their Greek brigand captors, caused an international sensation, because three of the four murder victims were aristocrats. Edward Herbert, secretary at Britain’s Athens legation, was cousin to Earl Carnarvon, and Lord Muncaster, leader of the ambushed excursion party, was freed to arrange a ransom and therefore survived, incurring unjustified public criticism and even contempt on his return home. William Moens kidnapped in 1865, whose story was kept alive by his ‘captivity narrative’. This portrait is from the title-page.

Below: Contrasting fates. Few brigands had long lives. Below are the corpses of three of the Bonells’ five captors, ambushed and gunned down by the Spanish Civil Guard as they rode towards Seville with the ransom money. Two brigands escaped, and the money was never recovered. The photographs were taken at the request of the British authorities.

Back page: The formal photographs of the Bonells, included in the same National Archives file, provide a stark contrast to those of their captors.

With thanks to Irene Blinkhorn, also on the back page is the map in W.J.C. Moen, English Travelers and Italian Brigands: A Narrative of Capture and Captivity (New York, 1866) - available through The Internet Archive.
The disintegration of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 led to a whole series of international problems that remain unresolved to this day. The territory of the former USSR stretched from central Europe to the Pacific Ocean and from the Arctic to central Asia. More than one hundred languages were spoken by the people who lived within its borders. There were large numbers of Christians – mostly Orthodox but also Protestants and Catholics – along with millions of Muslims and smaller numbers of Buddhists and followers of various other faiths. When the USSR broke apart, it did not leave behind a neat patchwork of ethnically homogenous regions. The diverse populations in many of the successor states has often been the cause of tension and conflict. Wars in Chechnya during the 1990s and 2000s were partly fuelled by the desire of the local Muslim population to free themselves from rule by far-away Moscow. In countries like Latvia, many ethnic Russians believe they have suffered from discrimination, a reversal of the situation before 1991 when native Latvians often felt that it was they who were treated as second-class citizens. As the disintegration of the Austro-Hungary Empire showed a century ago, the break-up of vast multi-ethnic states seldom takes place without violence and turmoil.

Shadows of the Past
Michael Hughes explores the historical roots of the Crisis in Ukraine
The case of the Ukraine has been brought to prominence by the recent violence there, along with the decision by the Russian government to annex Crimea. National identity is always more vexed than one might at first think. Is it defined by language? What role does religion play? Is national identity something objective, or do people choose how they define their nationality? The territory of modern day Ukraine has for centuries been central to Russian identity. In medieval times the loose federation of east Slavic tribes, generally referred to as Kiev Rus, stretched from the Black Sea far up into northern Europe. The conversion of Prince Vladimir to Christianity, in 988 CE, led to the spread of Orthodoxy across a large swathe of eastern Europe. Although the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century destroyed Kiev Rus, the area stretching from the Black Sea northwards towards Poland has long been identified by Russians as the fountainhead of their cultural and religious identity.

For many centuries, the territory of modern day Ukraine was ethnically diverse, with large minorities of Jews, Germans, and Poles. The majority was, though, made up of people who spoke a language that belonged to the family of East Slav languages. Were these people Ukrainian? Or were they Russian? And what exactly was the distinction? The first half of the nineteenth century, the period sometimes referred to as 'the Springtime of Nations', witnessed the beginning of a growing Ukrainian national movement. The historian Nikolai Kostomarov argued that the people of 'Little Rus' – who lived in the region we now think of as the Ukraine – were culturally and linguistically distinct from the Great Russians to the north and east. Kostomarov also believed that 'Little Russians' were more individualistic than their northern neighbours, and less willing to accept autocratic rule by St Petersburg far away to the north. Nor was he alone in expressing such ideas. The poet Taras Shevchenko also played an important role in championing the cause of Ukrainian identity and promoting greater freedom for its people (‘The time is near when on our plains / A shackled folk will burst its chains’). Shevchenko played a major role in trying to promote Ukrainian, widely spoken in the far south-west of the Tsarist Empire, reflecting his belief that every nationality needed its own language if it was to thrive. Like Kostomarov, he was also involved in the illegal society ‘The Brotherhood of St Cyril and St Methodius’, which sought to create freedom for the Ukraine within a new liberal Russian Empire.

Every nationalist movement is based on a beguiling mix of myth and history. The Ukrainian national movement that developed in the middle of the nineteenth century emphasised the existence of a distinctive Ukrainian language and culture. In the west of the country, there were also large numbers of Uniates, members of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, who acknowledged the authority of the Pope but followed a rite similar to that of the Orthodox Church. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Tsarist government introduced harsh policies to ‘Russify’ its western borderlands, including the territory of modern-day Ukraine, promoting religious conversion and stamping out attempts to promote Ukrainian culture and language. The government in St Petersburg hoped that such policies would increase the loyalty of the population of the western provinces, and make them less likely to rally to foreign powers in case of war. And yet, as often happens, such clumsy attempts to eliminate Ukrainian national identity probably only served to create resentment.

The people who lived on the territory of modern-day Ukraine at the end of the nineteenth century were, therefore, diverse in terms of language and culture and religion. In the eastern parts, most people spoke Russian and belonged to the Russian...
Orthodox Church. In the west of the country, many spoke a rather different language, and were more likely to be Uniates. But the boundary was not always a clear one. Ukrainian and Russian are mutually intelligible (both also use a version of the Cyrillic alphabet). The boundaries between Russian and Ukrainian culture are often uncertain. The nineteenth-century writer Nikolai Gogol was proud to come from Little Russia, but he wrote in Russian, and believed that the whole country was blessed with a unique spiritual identity. The distinction between nations can sometimes be as much in the mind as in more objective differences of language and culture.

After 1917, the Soviet government paid lip-service to preserving the cultural identities of the various national minorities, but it was always perturbed that these might become a rallying point for dissent. Opportunities for the expression of national identity were carefully limited to formulaic ceremonies celebrating folk song and national dress. During the 1930s, the great famine created by the collectivisation of agriculture claimed huge numbers of victims in the territory of modern Ukraine. For many Ukrainians today, the millions who died in the holodomor (the Ukrainian term for the famine) were victims of genocide, a deliberate attempt by Stalin to smash their existence as a nation. In reality, a large number of those who died in the region we now think of as Ukraine were ethnic Russians, and the holodomor may have been an expression of the brutality and mercilessness of Stalin's government, rather than a deliberate act of genocide. The pain of the holodomor has nevertheless helped to shape the modern Ukraine. When the Soviet Union finally collapsed at the start of the 1990s, the famine was often presented in Ukrainian schools and history books as evidence of the vulnerability of Ukraine to its eastern neighbour.

In the ten years following the creation of the new Ukrainian state, in 1992, most ethnic Russians living on its territory were cautiously ready to accept the legitimacy of the new government in Kiev. Their quiescence may have been helped by the fact that, during much of the 1990s, the Russian economy was in crisis, while many Ukrainians were still hopeful that their own country would soon join the European Union and share in the prosperity of their western neighbours. Since President Putin first came to power in 2000, though, the Russian economy has boomed (at least until the recent fall in the oil price). The economy of the Ukraine has by contrast performed poorly (not least because of poor government and high levels of corruption). The situation was made more complex still by President Putin’s vocal Russian nationalism, which has at times extended to a commitment to defend the interests of ethnic Russians living in neighbouring states. It is this combination of nationalist rhetoric and considerations of material self-interest that has encouraged millions of ethnic Russians living in the Ukraine to look with favour on their eastern neighbour. The overthrow of President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014, and the subsequent appointment of a new government that emphasised its Ukrainian nationalist credentials and its determination to look to the West rather than Russia in international politics, was greeted with dismay by many Russian speakers in the east and south of Ukraine.

Crimea has become such an important flashpoint in the recent crisis between Moscow and Kiev precisely because the peninsular has for centuries played an important part in Russian history. Putin often refers in his speeches to the battles that have been fought there to defend Russia against its foreign enemies (not least Britain and France during the Crimean War). Crimea was indeed only handed over to the Ukraine in 1954, by the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, a move that had little significance at the time since Ukraine was then little more than an administrative unit within the old USSR. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, though, Ukraine’s possession of Crimea has been resented both in Russia itself and among many ethnic Russians living in the region. The referendum that led to the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 was ‘rigged’, but there is little doubt that most people living in the region wanted to join Russia, just as most Russians thought that Crimea should be restored to their own country.

This brief glance at the history of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict shows that it is more complex than one might think when reading the Western or Russian press. Putin’s Russia has repeatedly violated Ukraine’s sovereignty. The President has done this, at least in part, because he knows that such actions strengthen his image at home and abroad as a strong leader and champion of Russian nationalism. But there is, equally, little doubt that many ethnic Russians living in the east of modern-day Ukraine are anxious about becoming a disadvantaged community in their own country (Russian is not even recognised as an official language in Ukraine). The siren call of Russia is very strong. Putin’s intervention may have stirred up many long-term problems, but it has helped cement his popularity at home, and been welcomed by many residents of the eastern Ukraine. Any resolution to a conflict deeply-rooted in history is only going to be resolved over a long period of time.
Aristotle Kallis has spent several months studying at The British School at Rome, the prestigious home of Anglophone research into the art, history and culture of the Western Mediterranean. Here, he discovered his

**Eccentric Rome - an encounter with a phantom building**

*My Rome* is a rather quirky one. It is not the city of imposing ancient ruins, echoes of one of the most powerful and inventive civilisations of humankind. It is not the city of bell towers piercing the Mediterranean sky, of Renaissance elegance and symmetry, of fascinating baroque excess. It is not the city of the imposing modern monuments that celebrate kings and national victories. My Rome was forged in the 1920s and 1930s, in the dark, repressive years of Fascism. It is the Rome that hordes of visitors as well as the city's inhabitants fail to even register. And yet it is a constant presence in Rome's contemporary space and cityscape. Ironically, the contemporary visitor sees very much the kind of Rome that Benito Mussolini would have wanted them to experience. The Colosseum emerges at the end of a monumental avenue carved through the ancient city in 1932. St Peter's Square opens into another avenue that was inaugurated for the 1950 Jubilee Year but was actually designed in 1936-40. The city changed and expanded significantly in the 1930s, taking much of the shape that it holds even today. The Fascist 'lens' refracts Rome, the historic city and the modern capital, in a myriad of unexpected ways.

I recently spent three unforgettable months hosted by the British School at Rome. My research on the architecture and city planning of Rome in the years of Fascism allowed me to seek and see in real life what I had been encountering in books and documents as abstract names and imaginary locations. I do remember the day when, buried into a small archive, I encountered the name of Innocenzo Sabbatini (see below). Sabbatini was an architect from the small town of Osimo, near Ancona, who nevertheless spent the most productive years of his professional life working in Rome. Although he was the chief architect of the Institute of Popular Housing during the 1920s (the state organisation providing social housing for the masses), his name is not inscribed in the annals of architectural history. His architectural work is respected but his star has been eclipsed by other, more flamboyant figures of the profession.
My own architectural heroes are the towering figures of modernist architecture, in Italy and elsewhere, who broke the rules with combative defiance and produced path-breaking new architecture that marked a rupture with tradition. At first sight, Sabbatini could not have been further away from this category. His design approach was marked by sensitivity to architectural traditions, seeking continuity rather than a break. His major works fell in the category of social housing, not grand monuments or extravagant private houses. Sabbatini was no maverick, no heroic non-conformist figure. He worked under strict deadlines and constantly limited resources, in a state organisation that afforded him limited design freedom when compared with many of his professional colleagues following private practice.

And yet …

A faded photograph of a block of flats in the Trionfale quarter of Rome (very close to the Vatican but back in the 1920s on the edge of the metropolitan area) caught my eye on that morning. The design for an “economical block of flats” told its own fascinating story about Sabbatini’s philosophy as an architect - to mine the architectural traditions of Rome but also to innovate quietly and tease the norms; to design social housing of decent quality within limited financial means but without sacrificing style or attention to detail. Here was a statement of the most fiercely innovative abstraction - learning from the master architects of baroque (apparently his model for the distinctive pediment was the seventeenth-century church of San Carlo al Corso in Rome) but adapting and updating design elements to match the modern sensibilities of social housing in a metropolis.

The building turned out to be a phantom. Hard as I tried to find more information about it, I could not even figure out if it existed. The photograph I had unearthed in the archive showed a finished constructed work. But nowhere was there any indication of its location in Rome. I walked around the entire area where it was supposed to be but could find no trace of it. It could of course have been demolished, like so many of the social housing projects executed in Rome; or remodelled to the point of being unrecognisable. As days went by and the list of my fruitless explorations of the Trionfale quarter grew longer and longer, I had almost decided to throw in the towel …
Days later, however, browsing through my photos revealed an intriguing find. A slim facade of a building buried within the dense urban plan of the Trionfale quarter seemed inexplicably familiar. I decided to go back. It was getting dark by the time I arrived. As I was approaching, I felt like an excited kid who discovered their favourite toy that they thought had been lost forever simply hiding, conspiratorially, among the other, less loved ones. It was there - Sabbatini’s ‘economical social housing’, in perfect condition and only recently restored, its long facade with the distinctive pediment tucked next to a modern block of flats, barely visible from the street. Mission accomplished…

Or not. We stumble upon small things that sometimes expand in our lives fortuitously and stay with us for a long time. For me, the chance encounter with Sabbatini's housing block in Rome’s obscure Trionfale district has opened up a little treasure chest. I have been working my way through it since, visiting more unknown corners of the city, unearthing more snippets of information about social housing in Rome in the period between the world wars, encountering new architectural projects and their relatively unknown designers, accumulating more and more photos of abstruse, forgotten buildings on my computer. My Rome is about to become even more eccentric.
Students may also fear that university work in their chosen areas will demand too much of them. In one sense, this is to be expected. What is the point of university study if it does not greatly expand both your knowledge of given subjects and your ability to understand, and eventually master, key concepts with which experts in those subjects engage? That's what 'progression' means. In History, as in all other subjects studied to GCE Advanced level, examination boards are required by the Government to publish the 'aims and objectives' of the syllabuses they run. Whatever the periods of history, and the nations studied, syllabus developers must provide opportunity for the development of relevant skills. Among others, they must provide 'a broad and balanced course of study' helping students to 'develop the ability to ask relevant and significant questions about the past and to research them'. Students should also understand 'the nature of historical study' by appreciating that history is concerned with judgements based on available evidence. In researching subjects and coming to conclusions about historical topics and debates, they should organise
their historical knowledge and understanding in different ways, arguing a case and reaching substantiated judgements.

This is quite an agenda. A-level students owe a substantial debt of gratitude to their teachers who have ensured that they cover all the bases. They must also give their students appropriate opportunities to ‘demonstrate, organise and communicate knowledge and understanding’ such that they will be able to make ‘substantiated judgements’ and explore key concepts. In addition, students must be taught how to ‘analyse and evaluate appropriate source material’ contemporary to the period being studied and also show understanding of how, in a given historical context, aspects of the past have been interpreted.

University History courses are also subject to overall guidance. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has produced what it (rather clunkily) calls ‘Benchmark Statements’ for each subject. History’s ‘Statement’ offers a surprising degree of similarity with A-level ‘aims and objectives’. As with A-level, no agreed core of historical knowledge is required: ‘historians do not recognise a specific body of knowledge’ which all must have. It also rejects the idea that particular types of historical skill are necessarily connected to particular subject matter. Thus, ‘any idea of mechanical progression is rejected since skills and qualities are acquired cumulatively and iteratively’ [i.e. by repetition].

To this point, the analysis has stressed the importance of similarity over difference in the design of history courses at sixth-form and university levels. There are, of course, important differences, which are best understood in the context of ‘progression’. For example, compared with even the ablest sixth-formers, successful undergraduates are expected to have more extensive knowledge of more lengthy and/or diverse historical periods. They will be expected to analyse extensive and complex source material in order to reach more sophisticated judgements about its validity, reliability, typicality and utility for the purpose of a given historical enquiry. They will normally have produced a more lengthy and intellectually challenging piece of historical writing (usually called a dissertation), grounded in critical use of a range of source material. This should be both contemporary to the period being studied and may also encompass historical interpretations either of the wider context or the specific area under scrutiny.

The most important differences between sixth-form and university history, however, does not relate to more, or less, demanding historical themes or topics but to how they are studied. Good teachers of A-level History – and most are very good (see below) – will give students every encouragement to ‘fly solo’. They may offer guidance on what can be discovered over and above what is found in a textbook or in a teacher’s worksheets. They will encourage students to find things out for themselves and to formulate their own historical judgements. Basically, though, most sixth-form historians ‘learn more history’ during scheduled lessons two or three times a week than at any other time.

At University, lecturers encourage a different balance. They recognize, of course, that first-year students are likely to need more support and guidance than students in their final year of undergraduate study. They may well encourage first-years to make use of those ‘Office Hours’ which almost all university teachers are now required to publish over and above ‘contact house’ in lectures, seminars or supervisions. The overall aim, however, is to enable students to become ‘independent learners’. Among other attributes, independent learners in History know where to locate material which will give them deeper knowledge about, or fresh perspectives on, a
given historical problem. They will learn for themselves how to weigh historical evidence of different types. By handling larger, and more complex, types of evidence, they will increasingly understand the weight which should be given to a particular piece of evidence in the wider context of a given historical problem or debate. In the words of the History Benchmarking Statement: ‘History programmes do not impart knowledge and skills to be passively absorbed: questioning, reading, discussion and writing, along with engagement, exploration and discovery through independent learning on the part of the student are essential’. In this agenda, too, self-discipline becomes the natural partner to independent learning.

Above all, successful teachers will have sustained and enhanced their students’ interest in, and enthusiasm for, their subject. OFSTED judgements suggest that History teachers are in the top three when it comes to enthusiastic and effective teaching. It is to history teachers’ credit that applications for History at University remain buoyant despite occasional sniping, not least from a Government which argues that the nation needs to produce more graduate scientists and mathematicians. Though, it may well have such needs, we must not lose sight of the fact that the nation has equal need of arts and humanities graduates. History graduates will have experienced challenging programmes of study aimed at the development high-order skills, not least in critical thinking. They bring to the world of work: confidence in researching problems and issues; effective techniques for testing and presenting evidence; effective problem-solving skills; critical awareness linked to what we might call ‘informed and constructive scepticism’; appreciation of complexity and diversity in social interactions, political attitudes and otherwise; the ability to distinguish between informed argument and assertion, however trenchantly expressed; high literacy levels, developed through wide reading.

Finally, what changes are proposed for A-level History from September 2015? The first two of the coalition’s proposals are radical and wide-ranging. Firstly, it wishes to re-establish History as a ‘linear subject’. This means that assessment should take the form of examinations at the end of a two-year course. Secondly, AS assessment would be de-coupled from A-level. It will still be available as an intermediate qualification between GCSE and A-level but its assessment would be ‘stand-alone’. No credit can be carried forward to A-level in the same subject. Thirdly, the coalition has concerns about ‘grade-inflation’ and the integrity of course-work assessment: ‘How can we be sure that parents didn’t do it?’ These it has addressed by reducing, or eliminating, course-work from assessment. In History’s case, course-work carries a maximum assessment value of 20 per cent. Fourthly, the chronological range to be covered by A-level historians has been doubled. The present minimum of 100 years will become 200 years.

These changes necessitate liberal use of the conditional tense. Much depends on the forthcoming general election in May 2015. There is limited support for the proposed changes outside the coalition – and a fair bit of opposition within it. The Labour Party proposes to revert to the status quo on AS. Many critics have argued that the proposed new status of AS will make the qualification less attractive in those schools with limited funding and squeezed staffing levels. This could be politically embarrassing. Several University admissions tutors have identified AS scores as a useful A-level predictor. Aware of this, schools with ample funding (located disproportionately in the private sector) will keep them on and thus hold the line against that narrowing of subject choice which is almost certain to be the consequence for many (most?) schools on ‘breadline funding’. Since a broadening of the sixth-form curriculum is that rare jewel – something on which the educational great and good are virtually unanimous – lively and prolonged debate is likely.

Whatever the future status of AS, teacher opinion generally takes the view that 2015 is far too early for effective implementation of so many substantial changes. Of course, ‘far too early’ is the standard default position in the educational world, but sometimes the educational world is right. Delays have already been conceded in some science subjects and little clever money is being placed on the whole package in its present form going ahead next Autumn.
The exotic (re)imaginings of Henry Purcell

At the struggling English National Opera, controversial American director Peter Sellars comes to the end of his six-month stint in charge with his comprehensive reworking of an incomplete baroque work. Sarah Barber went to see it.

Several writers have been intrigued and bemused by the tragic history of the indigenous peoples of America both before and in the wake of European colonisation. In 1664 Sir Robert Howard, son of the Earl of Berkshire and a man so unpleasantly boastful and arrogant that he became a literary caricature in his own right as Shadwell's Sir Positive-At-All, published the tragedy of The Indian Queen, in this case about pre-conquest civil broils in Peru and Mexico. Howard's brother-in-law was John Dryden, with whom he collaborated, despite there being no love lost, and Dryden would later expand and revise Howard's original play. Dryden now collaborated again with Henry Purcell to create a semi-opera, as the pair had done before with King Arthur and as Purcell had successfully adapted A Midsummer Night's Dream as The Fairy Queen.

The new semi-opera, closer to the masque of the earlier Stuart court than the all-sung opera of Italian style, was a mixture of music, dance and spoken sections. Only in his mid-thirties, 'Orpheus Britannicus' died in November 1695, and the score for The Indian Queen was incomplete, so Act v was completed (after a fashion) by his brother, Daniel. The combination of the 'mixed-media format', continuous re-writings, incompleteness, collaborations and initial weaknesses made for a confused and confusing narrative and some sublime music.

Now Peter Sellars has added to the list of collaborators and continual adapters of the story of an Amerindian queen in a production between Tchaikovsky Perm Opera and Ballet Theatre, the Teatro Real in Madrid, and English National Opera. In keeping with the seventeenth-century traditions of collaborative creation and episodic masquing, he has incorporated several new elements. There has been a major rewriting of the narrative, so that it no longer tells of civil unrest amongst indigenous American communities, but is now about conquest and contested and acculturated values. The action has moved to central America – Darien is particularly mentioned. It now recreates elements of Nicaraguan novelist, Rosario Aguilar, who claims as her inspiration human, and particularly female suffering, both in the face of disastrous incidents, and every-day trauma through which female agency is created. Her 1992 novel, La Niña blanca y los Pájaros sin Pies, was published in English in 1997 as The Lost Chronicles of Terra Firma. The Spanish title is better: the little white girl of Aguilar's title is the miscegenated daughter of Pedro de Alvarado y Contreras, conquistador of much of central America in the early sixteenth century, whom the Aztecs named after their sun god, most probably for his blondy-red hair and beard, and the Indian Queen, given as tribute/treaty to the conquistador, turning it from conquest narrative, to seduction, to betrayal, and its resolution in their daughter.

Knowing any of this, however, will not help you, and might be a disadvantage in the face of Sellars' typically bold, creative licence. Spanish audiences both booed and cheered him, as he told a story of a conquest with which they have still to come to terms, but which renders the conquerors automatic weapon-wielding insurgents in combat fatigues, blurring the lines between Meso-American freedom fighters and US shock troops, and the stylisation of the executions and massacres added to, rather than detracted from the power of the drama. British audiences at the ENO were equally split down the middle (some, who departed at the interval, literally), and many, like me, and it seems most British Press critics, found the richness of the mixture hard to digest.

The music was gorgeous: not just the quality of Purcell's score(s), but the performances of musicians, conductor, Laurence Cummings, chorus, and singers. The sensory version of this opera and its production was precisely and exquisitely executed. The opening
dances were interspersed with sounds from the rain-forest, and, with clever lighting, managed to convey the steamy, exotic and hypnotic effect of the tropics. Neither the exceptional musicians, true to the baroque tradition of *basso continuo*, nor the excellent dancers (although praise for the choreographer, Christopher Williams whose modern-dance interpretation of deities, animals, spirits and abstractions was gorgeous to watch), received the named credit they deserved. The visual feast was placed against a set designed by the Mexican-American Giugio Nicandro, known as Gronk, whose huge panels of pattern and colour, which form the basis for the cover of this edition of *Clio50*, were lowered and raised throughout the performance (though on the occasion on which I saw the production, one of the hydraulics stuck, which was more distracting than it should have been).

But – and they are big buts…

I started out thinking that a rendition of European conquest in America provided an opportunity for singers of colour, with the prologue sung by Julia Bullock as Queen Techihuatzin, and Korean, Vince Yi, as the deity Hunahpu. Then it became clear that the casting was colour-blind, as Don Pedro the Spanish general was Noah Stewart. So, not only was disbelief suspended that he might be rendered ‘the red’ in Nahuatl, but for such a fine tenor, there was nothing for Stewart to sing until the one aria in Act III, scene 5, in which ‘Ah! How happy are we’ is rendered as ‘The Conquistadors Don Pedro de Alvaro and Don Pedrarias Dávila Have a Drink in a Bar in Chiapas’. Until that point, and beyond, Stewart has to be mute – no song, no speech – which is not only a waste of a great tenor but unlikely in a mighty conqueror. His acting was convincing though. Similarly, the costume design did not work. I personally found the fatigues jarring, but while the bright primaries of central American design were kept for the costumes of the indigenes, it failed to distinguish between different characters. The chorus looked like Skegness Rotary Club Mexican night. Both Yi and Anthony Roth Costanzo played Mayan heroes and trickster twin deities, which may well have been toying with transcendental notions within animist and shamanic belief, but a change of costume would have helped distinguish times when they were being one or other side, since the music and lyrics could not provide that detail which was not part of the original story.

There were worse confusions. Bass, Luthandro Qave,
was both a shaman and a Zapatista. Having put the Spanish in camouflage, it might have made more sense to have had indigenous insurgents dressed this way. But this Zapatista was executed with a bullet in the back of the head, which left me, on his reappearance as a shamen in the same orange jerkin, thinking ‘haven’t we just shot you?’ The part which I, and most of the doubters in the audience found hardest to accept, was the constant shadow of the Puerto Rican actor/vocalist Maritxell Carrero. Carrero can sing, but did not. I presume she is a fine melodramatic actor, but it was incongruous and annoying here, when other intertwining of seventeenth- and twenty-first century elements were not. She was, apparently, playing a single character, Leonor, the daughter of Teculihuatzin and Don Pedro, and she may have been voicing the thoughts and feelings of the mother through the daughter, but it felt as if she, who had the greatest number of words by far of any of the protagonists, was declaiming and emoting on behalf of both. The mix of characterisation, and the modernistic allusions were, no doubt, designed, and the audience was expected to go with the flow of the interweavings and transitions in and out of spirit and flesh, native and newcomer, old and new worlds, generations and ancestors, but Carrero was trying too hard for intensity – adding what Sellars referred to as the ‘emotional preparation’ – in her overblown delivery, and when she had to be quiet because a character was singing, she was stranded on stage in a black flamenco-manqué outfit to do some static arm-acting.

When Purcell died in November 1685, he left behind just forty-five minutes of music for Dryden’s version. Sellars called this the ‘torso’ and his early attempts to produce it showed it to be a series of ‘crazy non sequiturs’.

Well, yes: Howard and Dryden did not produce a coherent story, and Purcell did not finish the score, but Purcell’s songs and the sets, and the incidental sounds, and the *basso continuo* and the lighting and the dance made for an evening of wonder and amazement which was already transporting. In other words, it was a superb masque. And it should have stayed that way. It didn’t need the Spaniards. Everyone said the same thing in different ways: ‘I was glad when it ended. I was pleased to have gone’ (*The Guardian*); ‘with some severe editing things could be different’ (*The Spectator*); ‘Whatever one makes of the mannered staging or the contentious scenario … Purcell’s unique genius shines through’ (*Daily Telegraph*). Sellars’ production of *The Indian Queen* will not, as *The Independent* agreed ‘save the ENO’, but it did at least more than fulfil his mission for art, in austere and dangerous times, to ‘speak out with candour [and] courage’ if not, in this case, with ‘authority’.

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I am grateful to the ENO for their generous permission to use the publicity images from the 26 February 2015 production at the ENO.

The dancers, above, are Lucy Starkey, Jack Thomson, Alistair Goldsmith and Sonya Cullingford.

Below them is Lucy Crowe as the pious wife of the Spanish Governor.
Above: Moens’ map: ‘the Author’s wanderings with the Brigands’.

Above, John Bonnell Snr; and below, John Bonnell Jnr in portraits in the National Archives.