Introduction

The right hand and the left hand of history

On 10th April 1998, Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, and Bertie Ahern, the Irish Taoiseach, signed the Belfast Agreement (the “Good Friday Agreement”), which, after three decades of what were known as, “The Troubles”, resulted in peace in Northern Ireland, and began a period of economic growth and prosperity that has survived to this day. In signing the agreement, Tony Blair, in his typically felicitous way, said that, “I feel the hand of history upon our shoulders”. The “hand of history” was a compelling phrase, and would seem to be originated by Blair himself, who later said, “it had just popped into his head”.¹

In signing the documents, Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern showed the hand of history in their own separate ways, for while Tony Blair signed with his right hand, it was with his left hand that Bertie Ahern signed.² It is only a small detail, but the fact of it being worth commenting on at all, reveals how left-handers are, to a large extent, a people without a history. Despite one in ten individuals nowadays being left-handed, there is little historical study of the role of left-handers in history, their treatment by right-handers, their problems, or even their prevalence. The occasional exceptions, such as Pierre-Michel Bertrand’s *Histoire des Gaucheurs* (Bertrand, 2001), emphasise the scarcity of such studies.

Bertrand subtitled his book, “Des gens à l’envers”—a people who are back to front—a quotation from a French translation of *Los Sueños (Visions)*, written between 1606 and 1622 by the Spanish writer Francisco de Quevedo (1580–1645). De Quevedo’s book was first translated into English as *The Visions of Dom Francisco de Quevedo Villegas* in 1667 by Sir Roger L’Estrange (1616–1704).³ The entire passage, from the Sixth Vision,

---

¹ [http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/mar/19/northernireland.northernireland](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/mar/19/northernireland.northernireland)
² The image itself is distributed by Associated Press (www.apimages.com) as number AP98041001694. Unfortunately it is only available for distribution in North America, and can only be seen at the website by firstly registering as a user (which is free), when the serial number can then be entered.
³ The full text is available at [http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=csMPAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=roger+l%27estrange+quevedo&client=firefox-a](http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=csMPAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=roger+l%27estrange+quevedo&client=firefox-a)
from which Bertrand took his excerpt, merits complete quotation, for it is little known in the literature of handedness and lateralisation, and shows well a particular historical view of left-handers. The narrator on a nocturnal walk finds two paths, the one being hard and difficult, whereas the other path, which is broad and easy, is that which leads to Hell. Not surprisingly it is, “the Left-hand way”. The narrator describes how,

... my next Discovery was, of a great many People, Grumbling and Muttering, that there was no body lookt after them; no, not so much as to Torment them: As if their Tails were not as well worth the Toasting as their Neighbours. Answer was made, that being a kind of Devils themselves, they might put in for some sort of Authority in the Place, and execute the Office of Tormentors. This made me ask them what they were. And a Devil told me (with Respect) that they were a Company of Ungracious, Left-handed Wretches, that could do nothing Aright. And their Grievance was, that they were Quarter’d by themselves: But not knowing whether they were Men or no, or indeed what else to make of them, we did not know how to Match them, or in what company to put them. In the World they are lookt upon as Ill-Omens; and let any Man meet one of them upon a Journey in a Morning. Fasting; ‘tis the same thing as if a Hare had cross’d the way upon them; he presently turns Head in a Discontent, and goes to Bed again. Ye know that Scævola, when he found his Mistake, in killing Another for Porsenna, (the Secretary, for the Prince) burnt his right Hand in Revenge of the Miscarriage. Now the Severity of the Vengeance, was not so much the Maiming or the Cripling of himself, but the Condemning of himself to be for ever Left-handed. And so ‘tis with a Malefactor that suffers Justice; the Shame and Punishment does not lye so much in the Loss of his Right Hand, as that the other is Left. And it was the Curse of an old Bawd, to a Fellow that had vex’t her, That he might go to the Devil by the stroke of a Left-handed Man. If the Poets speak Truth, (as ‘twere a wonder if they should not) the Left is the Unlucky Side; and there never came any Good from it. And for my last Argument against these Creatures; the Goats and Reprobates stand upon the Left Hand, and Left-Handed Men are, in Effect, a sort of Creature that’s made to do Mischief; nay whether I should call them Men, or no, I know not. (L’Estrange, 1708, pp. 178–179)

It was clearly not always the case that left-handers such as Bertie Ahern, or for that matter, Barack Obama and his fellow left-handed American Presidents, could have risen to positions of power and status.

The papers in this special issue of Laterality are not a systematic review of the field, but instead are a group of studies that came together at the same time in the editorial offices, and it was realised that they would make more sense published as a group, to emphasise the general paucity of such material. Three of the papers in particular are by Lauren Harris, who is undoubtedly the doyen of historians of handedness and lateralisation, and we are particularly proud to publish these papers of his. Together we hope
that the various studies will stimulate further research in this neglected but important area.

Chris McManus
Mike Nicholls
Giorgio Vallortigara

REFERENCES
