The following is based on material and information which I have collected during the course of this project and which may not have been seen by others who are more qualified than I to write the story of Roy's life and career. My overview is intended to fill in some of the gaps and to draw attention to some of the relevant articles which I have placed in his archive.
ROY PORTER – LIFE AND IDEAS

Roy was born on 31 December 1946, the son of a Bermondsey jeweller, and grew up in Camplin Street, New Cross Gate, before moving to Norwood in 1959. He recalled his childhood years so evocatively in London, A Social History.\(^1\) Brought up in what he described as a ‘completely un-intellectual and un-academic’ home,\(^2\) Roy claimed that he learned to read ‘as if by magic’, confounding his mother by picking up books at ‘a very early age indeed.’\(^3\) It was she who bore the brunt of coping with a hyperactive child who ‘never slept and constantly argued … I’d say, “Let’s go to the Tower of London”, and she’d drop everything and take me. Once there, I’d say I wanted to go to St Paul’s, and off we’d go.’\(^4\) Nevertheless, until the age of 11, Roy’s education was largely unstructured and he had dismal memories of his primary school.

In September 1958, after passing the ‘eleven plus’ examination, Roy became a pupil at Wilson’s School in Camberwell, a grammar school founded in 1615 by Edward Wilson, Vicar of the parish church of St Giles, for the sons of his parishioners.\(^5\) From thenceforth, ‘school was never bleak house to me. It was terror, tedium, the exam treadmill, the cybernetics of wasting time. But it was also the discovery there were intelligent, witty, cultured, engaged adults, anxious to share with you. And the window on the world, the ladder with the skylight at the top, though the climb was always giddying.’\(^6\) Roy remained particularly indebted to his English teacher, David Rees: ‘A brilliant guy … who was just down from Cambridge, knew Jonathan Miller, had been on the fringe of “Beyond the Fringe”, etc … took me and some others in hand and invited us into the world of thought and culture, took us to the National Theatre, took us to hear Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn, took us punting in Cambridge and on holidays in the Lake District, and opened up an intellectual world that had never existed in a home where

\(^3\) Ibid.
there were no books.’7

During his grammar school years, he was always known as ‘Rosey’, an abbreviation of his name, Roy Sidney. His teachers and school friends remember him as an outwardly friendly and fair boy who, nevertheless, always held something in reserve. Even during his early teens he was an early riser and gave short shrift to time wasters, as fellow campers on a school holiday to North Wales in 1964 discovered:

‘… a certain Rosey Porter was on night duty and it was his job to see that everyone was up at the stipulated (phew!) time of 7.30. Pete and I were sleeping peacefully when there was a dreadful noise outside our tent. Someone was shouting, “C’mon chaps, time to get up” … We picked up our “weapons” … a geology hammer with a three inch piton on one side and … a wooden mallet used for banging in [tent] pegs … Rosey started to undo our tent. He put his hand in to grab our sleeping bags and tip us out when suddenly, wallop!! wallop!! We had struck! Rosey’s hand quickly disappeared and unrepeatable language could be heard outside. Pete and I looked at each other, smiled a defiant smile, and quietly we stretched out on the floor to catch another half hour’s forty winks … [Eventually] a voice could be heard shouting, “Anyone not up yet is going in the Estuary at 7.30 tomorrow morning.” Pete and I were out of our sleeping bags, dressed and out of the tent in two minutes flat … Rosey was delighted – I suppose it was the thought that HE, the one and only (thank goodness), Rosey Porter, had been on night duty on the first day that we had ever been up before 8 o’clock. We later apologised for hurting his hand but I think he was too overjoyed to realise it.’8

Both David Rees and Ken Daynes (then Head of English) tried to persuade Roy to follow


in their footsteps and read English at Cambridge.\(^9\) Roy, of course, chose history and later admitted ‘stabbing them in the back … as a sort of adolescent revolt’,\(^10\) but Wilson’s undoubtedly benefited when, a few years after leaving, he took on the role of school historian, returning every year on Founder’s Day, to give what he described as ‘a pious talk on the school’s past glories’.\(^11\) Later, he extended these visits to include a special introduction to the school and its history for ‘new boys’.\(^12\) These talks always made him nervous – he would picture 500 upturned faces forced to listen to an ageing windbag and mentally vowing not to go to university ‘if that’s how you end up’.

In December 1964, Roy sat the entrance scholarship examination to Christ’s College, Cambridge. The examiner was Quentin Skinner who recalled that ‘Roy received some of the highest marks that even the most experienced examiners could remember awarding’ - an early indication ‘that someone of extraordinary intellectual talents was coming to the College’.\(^13\) Quentin later became Roy’s Director of Studies. However, the day before his ‘A’ level examinations, Roy sustained a severe facial injury from a cricket ball during his stint as opening bat in a First XI match against Bromley Grammar School at the Oval. One eye swelled to such an extent that he was unable to open it and the school persuaded the examination board to allow him to dictate his answers to a third party rather than jeopardize his chances of achieving the required university grades. David Rees was assigned the task ‘and claimed afterwards that he had never worked harder in his life’.\(^14\) Roy was the first from Wilson’s School to be admitted to Cambridge and the school was given a half-day holiday in his honour.

The transition from Camberwell to Cambridge was not without its difficulties. ‘I felt completely out of it in one sense, being working-class, but at the same time incredibly superior. So many had had silver spoons in life. I couldn’t understand them wasting

\(^9\) Letter from Ken Daynes to Carole Reeves, 21 May 2002.
\(^10\) ‘Roy Porter; historian of science extraordinaire’.
\(^11\) Roy Porter. ‘The old boy’s tale’.
\(^12\) Letter from Ken Daynes.
their time, riding to hounds, staying in bed all day, when there were all these facilities for
study. It galvanised my mind. I was totally engrossed. I feasted on studying.\textsuperscript{15} Roy
considered his most influential teachers at Cambridge to have been Quentin Skinner
‘who taught me how to think’ and Sir John Plumb ‘who shows why history mattered.’\textsuperscript{16}
However, it was Bob Young, who’d just started teaching in Cambridge, who introduced
him, during his final undergraduate year, to the history of science through a new course
which he had organised for historians and HPS students on Darwin, Darwinism, and
public debate. Quentin Skinner had whetted Roy’s appetite for the challenges of
intellectual history,\textsuperscript{17} so ‘history of science was a treat. It was a double treat for me
because [Christ’s] was Paley’s college; it was Darwin’s college; it was Charles Raven’s
college … evolutionism was sort of in the blood of the college.’\textsuperscript{18}

Before he graduated with a double First in the Historical Tripos, Roy had decided on his
postgraduate project. He recalled thinking that ‘we know a great deal about Victorian
science and religion; genesis and geology. Do we know so much about the precursors
of that – the eighteenth-century debate? … I got fascinated by what would be called the
“pre-paradigm” state of geology. Kuhn was very much in the air then, and I thought:
“Let’s do a PhD thesis on pre-paradigm geology in Britain.” That turned into a thesis
called “The making of geology in Britain from 1660 to 1815”\textsuperscript{19}. The writer, Sue Limb,
who first met Roy in Cambridge University Library’s Anderson Room where he was
reading James Hutton’s \textit{Theory of the Earth} and she was poring through Sir Walter
Raleigh’s \textit{A Historie Of The Worlde}, recalled being warned that he was ‘frighteningly
brilliant’ but ‘solitary and dedicated … I was very taken by his combination of towering
intellect and cockney accent. “I’m doing the ‘istory of geology,” he informed me. I was
startled. I didn’t know geology had a history … I didn’t realise at the time that Roy was
an exceptional scholar. I just began to think I couldn’t possibly compete … If to be an
academic you had to be like Roy, I thought, I’d better give up now. So, after 18 months I

\textsuperscript{15} ‘Four weddings and a few books’.
\textsuperscript{16} Interview in \textit{The Lancet} 1997; 350 (9088), \url{http://www.lancet.com/search/search.isa}
\textsuperscript{17} Roy Porter. ‘Acknowledgements’. \textit{Enlightenment: Britain and the creation of the modern world}. Penguin
\textsuperscript{18} ‘Roy Porter: historian of science extraordinaire’.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid}.
Sue, nevertheless, became Roy’s first wife (he married five times), and he simultaneously began a lifelong passion for the eighteenth century, the seeds of which may have been sown at Wilson’s where his final school camp to the Lake District in 1965 brought forth several essays in which he pondered eighteenth century writers’ attitudes towards Nature. Consider this extract from one entitled ‘A guide to the guides’:

‘The eighteenth century on the whole was rather overawed by, and disapproved of mountains (once called by Doctor Johnson ‘unnecessary protuberances’) preferring the wildness of Nature to be tempered by man’s Art, and a cult of the picturesque grew up, in which those parts of Nature were most appreciated which corresponded to man’s idea of balance, proportion and landscape painting. Therefore if it is remembered that most of these writers never actually climbed the mountains, it is not surprising that much writing of the period about the Lake District was wildly inaccurate, exaggerated and ‘Romantic’. Mountains were always ‘sheer, jagged, sublime’, irrespective of their actual features, and eighteenth century prints also bear little relation to reality.’

On 30 April 1987, Roy began a talk to the Linnean Society thus:

‘We must not … assume that educated Englishmen of the Georgian century imbibed a love of Nature with their wet-nurse’s milk … Dr Johnson for example took a very down-to-earth view of Nature as adjunct to human survival: “That was the best garden”, he dogmatized, “which produced most root and fruits; and that water was most to be prized which contained most fish” … Nature was good provided it was conquered and cultivated …’

Officially, Roy’s doctoral research was supervised by Duncan Forbes, the great Hume scholar, ‘and that was partly because I admired him immensely as a lecturer and he was interested in the Scottish Enlightenment; and I knew that was where he would come from.’ As an exceptional first year research student, Roy was included in the ‘so-called King’s Seminar’ where the doyens of the profession – ‘DP Walker to Frances Yates to

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23 ‘Roy Porter: historian of science extraordinaire’.
Pio Rattansi to Joseph Needham to Charles Webster, etc – came together about once a month in King’s for a weekend of high-level discussion.’ Roy recalled being ‘the only person around who was interested in the eighteenth century’ and recognising ‘a huge gap there’.24 He became deeply involved in theoretical debates between historians and philosophers of science – ‘those were the days when Marxist approaches were popular, but being questioned as well’ – and was influenced particularly by Mikuláš Teich ‘who had a sort of grand Marxist/materialist vision of the interplay of knowledge and society.’25 Between 1981 and 1997, he and Roy collaborated on 12 books beginning with The Enlightenment in national context (1981), and including Revolution in history (1986), Sexual knowledge, sexual science: the history of attitudes to sexuality (1994), Drugs and narcotics in history (1995), and Nature and society in historical context (1997).

The book which Roy considered to have had the most effect on his own work was Edward Thompson’s The Making of the English Working Class (1963) which ‘opened my eyes to how history could be written.’26 In the year of Thompson’s death in 1993, Roy interviewed him for an edition of Night Waves, broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 20 May. He suggested to Thompson that ‘the eighteenth century is unpropitious territory for a left-wing historian, because there’s an old view of the century as an age of elegance, of oligarchy, of patrician values, a very stable kind of society. Clearly you had a great passion to dynamite that view.’ Thompson replied that there were moments ‘of flash point, of confrontation’ during the eighteenth century ‘which could only be explained in terms of something like the antagonism of class’ but did not result in ‘class consciousness’. Roy pointed out that Thompson’s story was not, in fact, of the creation of a powerful Marxist proletariat, but of the defeat of a traditionally powerful rural culture which was undermined by the coming of capitalism.27

Roy claimed that his own interest in this period stemmed from his early teaching at Cambridge: ‘Jack [Plumb] showed me that the eighteenth century, far from being the

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Interview in The Lancet 1997; 350 (9088), http://www.lancet.com/search/search.isa
stylised high political comedy of manners so commonly presented, was rather a time of
turbulence, indeed a great watershed.28

In 1972, Roy left Christ’s College for Churchill College, having been appointed Fellow
and Director of Studies in History. He was awarded his doctorate in 1974, the same
year in which he was appointed to an Assistant Lectureship in the Faculty of History.29
By this time he had discarded the ubiquitous ‘duffle coat’ image of his student days and
was sporting what one of his students recalls as ‘1970s florid complemented by a creaky
leather jacket and leather boots [which] struggled to contain his animated frame’.30
Chunky bracelets, rings, medallions, ear-rings and denim were later taken up and
dropped at whim whilst Roy cultivated the look which his friends came to regard as
classical Porter but which a ‘quality’ daily newspaper once drolly summed up as
‘scruffbag’.31 Roy’s intense enthusiasm for history was tempered with an informal
teaching style. He was fond of hosting ‘at home’ discussion groups where students piled
into his small terraced house in Clare Street to sup on his ‘exotic stews’ and liberal
quantities of Bulgarian red wine.32

His first ever lectures given to the Cambridge History Faculty were on the English
Enlightenment – ‘then, for sure (and still now, I suspect), a topic which raised quizzical
eyebrows.’ These were typed by candlelight in 1974 during the miners’ strike power
cuts.33 A surviving typescript from that period, entitled, “Whatever is the
Enlightenment?”34 was fiercely critical of historians who continued to define the
Enlightenment essentially in terms of what a number of geographically disparate
intellectuals believed; and he set out – perhaps for the first time – an approach for
analysing the Enlightenment which he followed in all subsequent publications related to

29 Quentin Skinner. ‘Obituary: Roy Sidney Porter’.
2002.
32 David Howlett. ‘Roy Porter: The Churchill years.’
34 Donated by Professor Martin Rudwick.
this period. Roy was fundamentally opposed to the historical method of defining and distinguishing the Enlightenment by what it was (supposedly) fighting against and which produced the line-up of ‘Progressives versus Reactionaries; Liberals versus Authoritarians; Optimists versus Pessimists, etc.’ He suggested that the only ‘constructive way out of this impasse’ was to ‘put all the opposites, ambivalences, irreconcileabilities together’ and to make these paradoxes ‘tell us about their history at a deeper level than the history of programmes or ideologies’:

‘The Enlightenment is when people – the same people – believed in political virtue and independence and out of interest succumbed to the influence of the regime; is when they believed in the dignity of man and reduced him in their psychological analyses to a mere mass of animal drives or customary associations, in their economic analyses reduced him to crude accumulative self-interest, and reduced him in their scientific researches to a tiny irrelevance in the enormous infiniteness of the universe; is when philosophical sceptics were political conservatives; is when gentlemen saw themselves as Roman senators and patricians, and built Gothick follies, and mercilessly enclosed their rolling acres; is when philosophers believed in the essential uniform humanity of the human race, justified slavery on economic grounds and allowed the slave trade to be abolished by evangelical Christianity; is when men talked atheism, but not in front of the servants…’

From the early days at Churchill and particularly after he became Dean of the College, Roy was plunged into a frenetic round of teaching – ‘often doing 20 or 25 hours of tutorials a week’- plus administrative duties. He also ventured for the first and only time into theatre direction with a production in 1974 of what he considered to be ‘the most exquisite comedy in the English language’ - Richard Sheridan’s *The Rivals* (1775) - at the ADC Theatre in Cambridge. It remained his favourite version of the play and featured the late Douglas Adams as Sir Lucius O’Trigger. ‘It was also the first time that Griff Rhys Jones, who played the servant Fag, had been on the boards at Cambridge.’

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36 ‘Roy Porter: historian of science extraordinaire.’

At the same time, Roy 'discovered' Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767), a book which he claimed that he had 'never got to the bottom of and probably never will', but which he perceptively deconstructed in two important articles published in 1984 and 1989, and which he used regularly throughout his publications as a medico-literary reference.

Roy's first book, *The making of geology*, was published in 1977, and in 1979, he left Cambridge to join the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, London, as a lecturer in the social history of medicine – the first appointment to the Institute of a social historian. During an interview on the *Talk Show* (BBC4, 5 March 2002) several days after Roy's death, the historian Lisa Jardine told Waldemar Januszczk that geology 'was too dead' a subject to maintain Roy's interest and that when he discovered the history of medicine, it was for him the 'live place' to be – where science met humanity. Roy, however, regarded geology as central to his work. Interviewed by Christopher Wood for the *Times Higher Education Supplement* in 2001, he said that, 'There’s always remained in my way of looking at the world a sense that there are three different bodies. There’s nature – the body natural; society – the body politic; and the inner body as well. All thinking and experience is an attempt to relate nature, society and self, and if you like I got the nature bit out of my system first. But it’s always been there as rock solid.'

There is no doubt that Roy was attracted to the Wellcome Institute by the 'ferment of thinking' being whipped up by its core of young historians such as Christopher Lawrence, Michael Neve, Bill Bynum, Mike Bartholomew and Bernard Norton, who were trying to develop new academic approaches to medical history rather than the

38 Ibid.
41 *Foundation News* (Wellcome), April/May 1980.
‘traditional, narrow … top-down accounts of doctors, by doctors, for doctors’. For his part, Roy wanted to develop a history of medicine “from below”, which involved looking at doctors and patients from the patients’ rather than the doctors’ point of view’ and to which he attributed the influence of Edward Thompson. This had not really been done before and he pioneered this important approach. He also claimed that his administrative duties at Cambridge left him no time for writing. ‘Just before I left, I totted up and found I was serving on 32 committees, disciplining students, worrying about the costs of college breakfast.’ Perhaps also there was a more fundamental reason for Roy’s desire to escape from what he might have perceived as the life of an overly-cloistered pedant. ‘I had a wonderful fifteen years at Cambridge, but one day I thought, “I wanna get out”. I didn’t feel to the manor born as an Oxbridge historian. I wanted to be laddish or Londonish. I wanted to be in a world where there were more than dons around me in the supermarket and cinema … As a way of life, being donnish has a very limited appeal for me.’

Roy kept very few of his newspaper interviews – indeed, was ashamed of some – but apparently delighted in those which accurately interpreted his persona, particularly at the expense of the ‘ivory-towered, prattish, Oxbridge’ don. Particularly enjoyable was Michael Glover’s report of the interaction between Roy and Richard Dawkins at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in 1998:

‘The historian, Roy Porter, introducing the neo-Darwinian populist Richard Dawkins (who is about to deliver a lecture on the subject of science and sensibility), hurtles in from the wings with scarcely a glance to left or right, as if shot from the rubber band of some mischievous child. Porter looks scrubbily bearded and genially crumpled, wrenched into the spotlight from a terrific snog. Dawkins, by contrast, gliding across the stage on

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44 ‘Roy Porter: historian of science extraordinaire.’

45 ‘Four weddings and a few books’.

46 ‘The books interview – higher stages of enlightenment.’

47 For example ‘Four weddings and a few books’, in which he comes across as loutish, Peter Pan-ish, and chauvinistic.

invisible wheels, looks seamlessly plausible in his grey suit and savagely centred tie – natural selection has evolved the very acme of the sprightly and infinitely trustworthy insurance agent …

It is perhaps not surprising that Roy’s first published paper on the history of medicine was entitled ‘Medicine and the Enlightenment in eighteenth century England’. He began by making the observation that ‘general social historians have seen no need to connect medicine and the Enlightenment to developments in English society’ and went on to suggest that ‘it would be indeed paradoxical if English medicine and Enlightenment thought had not significantly interacted, because numerous philosophes were medically active, and many medical men were men of letters, from Locke, Berkeley and Mandeville, through Smollett and Hartley, to Erasmus Darwin and Beddoes…’

Importantly, he argued that in order to assess the Enlightenment’s impact on medicine and health, we should avert our gaze from scientific medicine, bills of mortality, and the medical profession, and examine changing attitudes to life and death, health and sickness, the normal and the deviant, the stages of life. These were to be discovered, first and foremost, in the new strata of influence – the propertied classes, polite society, the printed word. This identification of medicine with culture, literature and symbolism largely shaped his future work. Whether Roy’s future medical scepticism was implanted at this stage is not easy to determine or whether, indeed, he ever really harboured a concept of medical enlightenment. In later ‘populist’ writings he appeared to play Devil’s advocate with respect to popular and professional concepts of scientific advancements whilst counter-attacking the persuasive media-gloomsters who cast a pall over our otherwise healthy lives. ‘Why,’ he asked, ‘should we now be more agitated about pollution in our lungs than during the awful urban smogs of the 1950s, when tens of thousands died of winter bronchitis.’ Why do we make such a fuss about BSE when ‘the fatal interchange of disease between animal and man, however disastrous in the short term, is the story of civilisation itself.’

49 Ibid.
51 Roy Porter. ‘Living longer: but in fear’. Untitled newspaper article from Roy’s collection.
He saw issues like these as matters of historical enquiry to be contextualised in time and place but was forthright in the belief that medical science was investing too much in the prestigious and ignoring the preventative. ‘More and more money is going into producing fewer and fewer results. At the end of the next century, we won’t look back and praise medicine for being one of the saviours of humanity. In the future, it will probably be economics that saves the world, or philosophy. I don’t know. But not medicine.’

From 1980, when he appeared on a BBC schools production with a tale of two boys growing up at opposite ends of eighteenth century London, Roy was a regular TV and radio broadcaster on history, medical, and current affairs programmes. He became, in effect, the public face and voice of medical history. When the AIDS crisis broke in the mid-1980s and there was a move to curb the disease by legal sanctions through public health agencies using notification, isolation, and prosecutions, Roy entered the debate as a government advisor. Using historical precedent to show that treating victims of sexually transmitted diseases as criminals was publicly and medically unacceptable, he wrote an influential article in the *British Medical Journal* entitled, ‘History says no to the policeman’s response to AIDS’. During Roy’s 30-year career, the history of medicine moved from a back-alley where it had no special relevance to history at large, to centre-stage where it commands scholarly attention. In Britain, there are now five Wellcome Trust History of Medicine Units and lectureships in almost 30 universities.

Historians who assessed Roy’s life and career soon after his death, seemed to be at one with the idea that although he had great sympathy with the underdog, he kept his own political beliefs hidden. Simon Schama’s forthcoming obituary, however, reads *London: a social history* (1994) as a political and autobiographical testament, and it is clear that others, including David Oldroyd, have done likewise. Roy’s response to Oldroyd’s forthright question: ‘Would you like to say something about your political views?’ was candid: ‘I’ve never done very much politically – but in terms of my stance

53 ‘Four weddings and a few books.’


56 To appear in *Social Studies of Science*. 
it’s way to the left of the Labour Party, even the Old Labour Party not to mention New Labour, which is barely a Labour Party at all. In that respect I think it’s quite important to be engaged. The pretence that there can be no professional history – the old Cambridge history idea – the Actonian idea – that somehow no matter whether you’re Catholic or Protestant, left-wing or right-wing, you should write the same sort of history: it’s such a pretence that it’s positively deceptive. 

Roy was, undoubtedly, one of the most if not the most prolific historian of his generation with wide-ranging interests. During the preparation of his bibliography, I grouped his work into 13 categories – Biography, Eighteenth Century and the Enlightenment, Geology, History (social and cultural), History of Disease, History of Language, History of Medicine (general), History of Medicine (social and cultural), History of Science, London, Madness, Quacks and Quackery, Sexuality and Sexual Knowledge. Within these categories Roy authored 20 books, co-authored 9, and edited/co-edited 75. He contributed chapters to 205 books; wrote 171 articles for journals, magazines and newspapers; over 600 book, film, theatre and exhibition reviews; broadcast regularly on radio and television; spoke at conferences and meetings throughout the world; won countless awards and honours.

Roy aimed to write accessible history and was seemingly unperturbed by the idea of sacrificing quality for quantity. Allying himself with Asa Briggs, he argued that ‘there are historians … who’ve been important because they’ve spread themselves widely – possibly thinly, you might say – but who nevertheless, through energy and industry, etc., have managed to write about an enormous number of topics in ways that one wouldn’t wish them to have gone in for something much narrower … my interests change pretty quickly …’ Roy was proud of his energy which he saw as compensation for any intellectual shortcomings. It was, he said, what made him happy and productive. ‘My ambition is to stay healthy, fit and active – then suddenly drop dead. I can’t bear the thought of being physically enfeebled.’


58 ‘Roy Porter: historian of science extraordinaire.’

59 ‘Four weddings and a few books.’