SAMUEL K. EDDY: A PERSONAL REMINISCENCE

I met Sam Eddy in early 1971, when I came to Syracuse for my job interview. At one point I found myself sitting in the outer office of the History Department. Sam strolled into the office and introduced himself. He asked about my research. I replied that I was studying blue-collar workers in Germany in the 19th century. “What about them?” asked Sam. I, already wearing out from lots of talking, sighed and said simply, “They were unhappy.” Sam’s reaction showed that he loved that answer. I later figured out why. The answer was irreverent. How can someone who claims to be a budding professional historian relegate the complicated reality of a whole category of people to “unhappiness?” But Sam Eddy liked irreverence. He relished sticking pins into verbal balloons, in demystifying what he called “cant.” And he usually talked and wrote about history in terms of the ideas and emotions of people.

Sam’s study of history was wide and deep. His book, *The King Is Dead*, examined resistance to the rule of Alexander the Great by Persians, Egyptians, Jews, and a wide variety of other peoples. He constantly investigated new scholarship and new documents to add depth and human color to his knowledge and the content of his courses on ancient Greece and Rome. At one point he became almost obsessed with the literature on the use of tree rings in California to trace climate change as far back as 650 BC. He found ways to correlate that documentation with evidence from Greece and Rome to ascertain prolonged periods of drought that were potentially important, especially in explaining the decline of the Roman Empire—hunger and disease, desperation and unrest in the broad population, anxiety and “failure of nerve” (as Sam put it) in the elites. “Decline” was the historical phenomenon that most occupied Sam’s mind. He deeply admired the “humanism and rationality” of Greek civilization in the time of Pericles, Socrates and Plato. His main intellectual endeavor was to explain why it declined. He found a modern case of decline in the stumbling and reckless lurching of European governments into World War I. And so he knew the documents almost by heart and the personalities of the main actors in detail. World War II was, in a way, a continuation of the story, and Sam knew the military history in meticulous detail. Here, too, personalities and character were a major focus. He greatly admired Churchill. He loathed Hitler and repeatedly insisted to me that talking about Hitler’s ideology or opportunism ignored the core of the man; he was “criminal.”

In short, for Sam, to study history was to study human nature. This made him a superb lecturer. I know; we once team-taught a course. Sam’s presentations were lucid, supported by just the right amount of factual detail, illustrated with fascinating personalities, and colored by—yes—biting, irreverent humor. One student’s course evaluation summarized it this way: “Professor Eddy is a combination of Albert Einstein and Jack Benny.” To be sure, Sam’s bluntness and irreverence could raise hackles. Occasionally a student took offence when Sam labelled a paper or exam “stupid.”

Sam had talents that extended beyond history. He loved classical music and could tell you the Koechel number of a composition by Mozart. He was a gourmet cook—people yearned for a dinner invitation from Sam. And he was a wonderful conversationalist: curious about everything, knowledgeable about a lot, capable of nasty putdowns but more frequently of long, “civilized” (as he would put it), humor-filled discussions and debates on just about any subject.