



Obituary: 'Grumping Away Quite Happily': Karl Miller and Dan Jacobson at UCL

Author[s]: Simon Hammond

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 **UCLPRESS**

‘Grumping away quite happily’:
Karl Miller and
Dan Jacobson at UCL

by Simon Hammond

My interviews about Karl Miller elicited a few of the same things: chuckles accompanying anecdotes and quoted witticisms; attempts to do justice to a personality that was both ferocious and generous; praise for his ardently holistic vision of journalism, criticism and creative writing; and accounts of trepidation and outright fear giving way to deep affection.

‘Have a lot of people said that?’ Mark Ford asked me after admitting that he found Miller ‘quite scary’. ‘It was a persona he kind of cultivated’, Ford reflected, ‘and I’m sure it worked well for him as an editor, as it meant people were always trying to do their best for him’. This was certainly the case for Ford himself when he began contributing to the *London Review of Books* in the late 1980s. He remembered trying to make every sentence that he wrote ‘Karl-proof’, and the ‘absolutely terrifying’ visits he made to their office to discuss his work. The same was true when Ford subsequently joined the English department at University College London. He told me about an unscheduled visit by Miller to enquire whether he had finished his thesis, which Ford had bluffed was further along than it was to get a teaching position. ‘I literally went home and wrote ‘Chapter 1: John Ashbery and ... no idea...’

When I spoke to René Weis he was particularly effusive about Miller and how much he had felt his influence, perhaps because while Ford and the other longstanding members of the department that I spoke to first encountered him as an editor or senior colleague, Weis was taught by him as an undergraduate. More often than not Weis referred to him as Professor Miller. ‘He was simply inspirational’, Weis told me, ‘formidably clever’. Weis found Miller’s teaching revelatory - ‘literally every sentence, every word mattered!’ - and he spoke fondly of standout moments from those early years: being encouraged to join a discussion about some work-in-progress poetry between Miller and Seamus Heaney, going to Miller’s house for a dinner party and spending the evening talking to Christopher Ricks. ‘That’s the kind of thing you remember later on and think “Well, have I done that?” Anyway...’

‘Emphatically yes, instantly yes’ was his answer when I asked whether he thought that Miller’s tenure as head of department, which lasted from 1974 until 1992, was a golden age. I had been paraphrasing John Sutherland, who once wrote in an essay about the history of UCL English that it was ‘a departmental

high point – only equalled, in my view, by the 1870s.’ This is in spite of the fact that when Miller applied for the position, at the age of 44, he was hardly an obvious candidate. He was not a scholar; he had no postgraduate education, having abandoned further study in favour of literary London (via brief stops at the Treasury and the BBC); and he had not a single book, scholarly or otherwise, to his name. ‘It was certainly an audacious appointment’, Peter Swaab told me, ‘a brilliant one, but rather surprising’. Ford was more definitive: ‘It wouldn’t happen, I can say almost categorically’, while Weis, who described the appointment as ‘visionary’, said that ‘it would be unthinkable now’.

It helped that Miller had backers in high places. He was encouraged to apply by his old friend Noel Annan, who was then Provost of the College, as well as the outgoing head of department, Frank Kermode. ‘Kermode admired Karl’, Weis told me, ‘and Kermode didn’t admire very many people’. With stints at *The Spectator*, the *New Statesman* and *The Listener*, Miller had established himself as the pre-eminent literary editor of his generation, and Kermode was one of many estimable contributors to his pages. Miller drew on the best writers from both in and outside the academy – other scholars on his roster included Ricks, John Carey, Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill and William Empson. As an editor he combined a modernising, eclectic, egalitarian ethos with an unwavering commitment to what Ford called ‘the highest standards of the higher journalism’.

It was the maintaining of these standards that had prompted his stormy departure from the *New Statesman* a few years before, after the new editor, Paul Johnson – who disapproved as much of Miller’s use of scholars as his coverage of pop culture – objected to a piece by Empson. Swaab explained to me that ‘as Empson got older his pieces became wonderfully eccentric and uncompromising. They might have been great journalism but they weren’t really good journalism’. Miller, who would years later publish Empson’s final pieces in the *LRB*, was defiant and resigned in protest. ‘Karl quite liked to pick fights!’ Swaab explained. Among the many signatories of a letter in support of Miller were Kermode and Annan.

As far as they were concerned Miller was the best person for the job even if his background was unorthodox, though Kermode did warn that the appointment of a journalist wouldn’t please everybody. Miller had a capacious, unsegregated view of culture, but he knew the lie of the land, and admits in his memoir that his move to the academy required ‘a certain amount of gall’. Complaints that he was ‘not one of us’ were indeed forthcoming, from scholars who in many cases had actually contributed to his pages. But these were not from within UCL, where Miller remembered feeling welcomed. The department has an unusual tradition of close ties with the wider world of letters going back to the Victorian era. In recent years Kermode had brought both Stephen Spender and A.S. Byatt into the department, and the chair that Miller took up, the Lord Northcliffe

Professor of Modern English Literature, is renowned in part for being endowed by a press magnate.

‘Coming after Kermode a lesser person might have really felt the need to prove an awful lot’, Weis told me, remembering that at Edinburgh, where he studied for a year before coming to UCL in 1974, there were four of Kermode’s books on the first year reading list alone. Along with the linguist Randolph Quirk, with whom he happened to have been at primary school on the Isle of Man, Kermode had made drastic changes in the department, breaking from the control of the wider university and remaking the syllabus. Miller entrenched this transformation, becoming a fierce defender of the department, while gradually adapting things to his liking. The head of department had more autonomy in those days, and many I spoke to jokingly used the word ‘fiefdom’ about Miller’s premiership. Swaab, who joined at its tail end in 1990, told me that by then ‘the department was, in a considerable way, made in his image’.

The department’s remit was broadened – films and bestsellers were added to the syllabus, as well as lectures on foreign and ancient literatures, and a stronger emphasis was put on social and commercial contexts. It is perhaps not surprising that a fastidious editor like Miller would give practical criticism a more essential place in the curriculum. Weis described criticism classes where two members of staff would fight over a passage, with students encouraged to join in. ‘They were bloodletting occasions’, he said gleefully. Miller was also wedded to the tutorial system. Clive James, who wrote a pioneering TV column for *The Listener*, has written that Miller preferred to edit ‘with the author present, so that obscurities could be explained to him by their perpetrators’, and likewise Miller put great emphasis on one-to-one teaching. Weis told me that the speech Miller gave when he was made an honorary fellow of the university in later life was principally an impassioned defence of the tutorial.

Miller brought with him an ethos of journalistic clarity and an aversion to jargon – this was among the reasons he had little time for literary theory. Though he later became something of a sceptic, during his time in the department Kermode was a conductor for new, principally continental currents of theory, not least through a now famous seminar where Roland Barthes, among others, was a guest speaker. The seminar didn’t last long after Kermode left. Philip Horne offered the explanation that ‘Karl was very keen on people and characters’ and so would have been averse to anything ‘abstracting or monolithic’. Weis remembered once receiving a dressing down from Miller for praising Stephen Heath, a renowned post-structuralist who had been a regular attendee of Kermode’s seminars. ‘It was a bit unfair really - Stephen Heath was brilliant. But it was a time of ferment, remember’, Weis explained. ‘Literary theorists would have seen UCL under Karl as the dark ages’, Ford responded when I brought this up, ‘and probably still do’ he said with a laugh, in reference to the department today.

Being on different sides in the theory wars, though, did nothing to diminish the relationship between Kermode and Miller. Kermode remained a regular visitor to the department for many years, and was given an office to work in whenever he stayed in London. Philip Horne remembers Kermode borrowing his typewriter on one of these occasions, and after a few days asking for it back only to have Kermode reply, Horne paraphrased, ‘actually I’m working on a really important book so I’m going to keep it for a bit longer’. Sheepish, Horne waited until Kermode had left for the day, at which point ‘I got the master key and retrieved my typewriter’.

Though Miller took a hard line about theory, the predominant spirit of his leadership was one of openness, generosity and loyalty. Swaab praised him in particular for fostering an ‘intellectually liberating environment’ – ‘he prompted people to trust their own character, to follow their own projects rather than conforming to protocol’. Miller led from the front in this regard. He had a long-held ambition to run his own review, one where he wouldn’t have to answer to anyone, and not long after joining the department an opportunity arose. In 1979, together with two former colleagues from *The Listener*, Mary-Kay Wilmers and Susannah Clapp, Miller founded the *LRB*, published ‘marsupially’ within the *New York Review of Books* until it became independent a year later.

In the early days the review was known as ‘the house mag’ in the department, and many of the staff were frequent contributors. ‘Probably it was quite difficult if you didn’t write for it’, Horne told me. Traffic also moved the other way: Horne was one of a number of scholars who joined the department after first writing for the review. Horne was still a postgraduate student at Cambridge when he was recruited by Miller, who had been impressed by a piece he had written about horror movies for the *Cambridge Review*. Horne described to me how in those days the desks of the three editors were set up in such a way that ‘you’d be hovering in the middle taking fire from all directions, sort of wondering what you were doing there and whether it was time to go yet’. It would be Horne, a few years later when he began working at the department in 1985, who would lead UCL English’s study of film.

Swaab pointed to a shelf in his office stacked with aging copies of the review when I ask him about it – ‘I keep thinking I should chuck them out but then sometimes as a work avoidance thing I’ll pull one out...it’s amazing when you look back at it’. He told me a similar story to Horne’s. His piece in the *Cambridge Review* that caught Miller’s eye was an appreciation of Empson. He remembers being filled with both ‘pleasure and alarm’ to pick up the phone and hear ‘Hello, this is Karl Miller’ and be asked to write for him. Only an unexpected call from Harold Pinter has had the same effect since. ‘He had a playful way of doing his own formidableness’, Swaab explained.

‘Literature was a way of life for him’, Weis told me when I asked how Miller managed to run the department and the review at the same time. ‘He was a workaholic’, Weis continued, ‘he worked all the time, but never in a flashy way’. Everyone I spoke to remembers Miller editing proofs constantly, often while sitting in lectures and seminars – ‘he was just always doing something’ Horne said. Swaab remembered finding it ‘a little disconcerting’ when presenting a paper to have Miller listening ‘with a bit of his mind’ while editing with the rest of it. Speaking about Miller’s own lectures, Swaab joked that they would sometimes consist of ‘one of his greatest hits’ from an old issue, ‘often not entirely adapted to the occasion’. ‘His lectures were wonderful performances’, he went on, ‘but I don’t think that they were absolutely pedagogically utilitarian to the highest degree’. They were full of ‘side lights and ironic reflections’, and ‘if you had been called on to summarise them afterwards it wouldn’t have always been that easy’.

Perhaps Miller was the only member of the department who could say ‘I’m going down the road’ at around three o’clock and walk to his other office in nearby Tavistock Square, but he wasn’t the only one moonlighting. Others with literary or journalistic ambitions were encouraged and supported. Michael Mason founded the publisher Junction Books, later to become 4th Estate, while he was a lecturer. Two others, Jeremy Treglown and Allan Hollinghurst, took up editorial positions at the *Times Literary Supplement*. Successful writers also emerged from the student body, including Mark Lawson, Amit Chaudhuri, Blake Morrison, and Lynne Truss. ‘Doubleness really was the theme: double lives, everybody doing two things’, Horne told me. It’s an image of the department he’s reluctant to relinquish; he emphasised how liberal it has remained in spite of the increased pressure to specialise.

Horne was making a reference to Miller’s critical study of ‘the double’ in literature, *Doubles* (1985), one of a number of books Miller published after joining UCL. Miller was particularly interested in Scottish literary culture – a biography of Henry Cockburn, which he had been working on for a number of years, was completed shortly after he arrived. Rather like his lecturing style, Miller’s prose in these books is eccentric and entertaining – though he fostered clarity and directness in others, his own work could be wilfully idiosyncratic.

As well becoming more of a scholar himself – he described himself as a ‘hackademic’ – Miller also excelled at bringing new scholarly talent into the department. In his life as an editor Miller was particularly known for his acumen, having been an early champion of VS Naipaul, Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie and many others. Weis told me about a visit Rushdie made to the department the night after winning the Booker Prize for *Midnight’s Children* (1981), where he explained to gathered students that he owed a great deal to Miller as ‘he used to publish me when I was just a businessman in a sharp suit’.

As head of department Miller was just as prescient; Weis listed the many brilliant scholars Miller spotted, among them David Trotter, Danny Karlin, Henry Woudhuysen, and Rosemary Ashton. ‘I think his nose for appointments was flawless’, Weis said, and admitted how proud it made him to be one of those selected by Miller. His break came when the scholar who was supposed to be delivering the *Anthony and Cleopatra* lecture fell ill, and Miller asked Weis to step in. He talked of himself as one of a great many people who owe their careers to Miller.

One of Miller’s canny appointments was the South African writer Dan Jacobson. Jacobson had lived in London for most of his adult life, but made his name with a series of precise, compassionate novels preoccupied with the inequities of his homeland. This period of his work, which began in 1955 with his debut *The Trap*, culminated with an inter-generational saga called *The Beginners* (1966), after which Jacobson had been exploring new territories, producing work less directed by autobiography and more inclined to obliqueness and sleight of hand. A prodigious writer who had had his share of success, Jacobson nevertheless found joining the department in 1979, at the age of 50, a welcome respite from the struggles of literary life. ‘I remember him saying,’ Ford recalled, ‘that he couldn’t believe it when he arrived at UCL, that a pay cheque came in every month whether he’d done anything or not.’

Though he too had no further degree or scholarly works to his name, Jacobson was hired to teach English alongside the rest of the faculty. There was a sense in the department, Ford explained, that ‘if you could write a good sentence and you were a literary person then you could do it all’. It’s a sense that still endures to some degree – Ford believes it is still ‘less professionalised, less specialised than other departments’. Weis, in a similar discussion, laughed about how David Trotter used to describe it as a department of ‘*amateurs*’ (pronounced with a French accent). This was not to say that Jacobson was anything other than extremely learned, as I had emphasised to me by many I spoke to – ‘Dan was encyclopaedic’, I was told, ‘he had a photographic memory for Tolstoy, for Dostoevsky, for Dickens’; he was ‘one of those old fashioned quoters of big chunks of poetry’.

Jacobson, who taught at UCL until retiring in 1994, did, however, bring a personal intensity to his teaching that most I spoke to associated with his perspective as a writer. His lectures, which tended to be delivered without notes, could be very personal. ‘I think Dan’s engagement with literature was often very direct’, Swaab told me, and he remembered a striking lecture Jacobson gave about Jane Austen’s *Emma* where ‘he spoke very powerfully about jealousy, and about how humiliating it was to experience it’. Horne, who said that Jacobson was a ‘spellbinding lecturer’, described a lecture he gave about Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that ‘made an impression on everyone’, in which Jacobson spoke about race in South Africa. ‘Entertaining and engaging the

audience of undergraduates was a very serious project for him, one that he really cared about’, Anthony Julius told me when I visited him at the offices of his law firm, a short walk south from the department. He recalled a conversation between Jacobson and Miller about their lectures where they spoke ‘as performers might, as stand up comedians’, and where Miller assured Jacobson that ‘he still had it’.

Julius’s thesis, ‘TS Eliot, Anti-Semitism and Literary Form’, which he completed in the early 1990s while working as a high profile litigation lawyer, was one of the most famous PhD projects that Jacobson supervised. ‘He was very engaged with the subject, very sympathetic to the project’, Julius told me. The two became great friends in the process – ‘We would have lunch regularly, we talked on the phone once a fortnight, he came to my wedding, I know his children, he knew my children, he was very close’. I had heard from members of the department that Jacobson could be severe, that he could reduce students to tears over colons and semi-colons, and I put this to Julius: ‘I never saw that side of him, maybe because I used semi-colons correctly’, but he certainly agreed that Jacobson could be exacting. An incident where Julius saw a streak of this was in their first ever conversation on the telephone: ‘I said “nice to meet you” and he said “we haven’t met yet”. Give me a break, I remember thinking.’

Rather like Miller, Jacobson could be tough, but this was a product of how seriously he took literature, how much he felt it mattered. Everyone I spoke to characterised him as a warm and generous character who went out of his way to help students and staff, to give advice, to comment on new work. ‘He was incredibly kind and helpful’, Ford told me, ‘and really loyal to people who he sort of took up’. ‘Dan was just a delightful guy’, Julius said summatively.

Miller and Jacobson, presiding figures in the department for many years, in fact had a great deal in common. Both were outsized personalities; both had a fundamentally Leavisite constitution tempered by metropolitan sensibilities; both believed in the idea of the common reader; both saw themselves above all not as a scholar but as a man of letters. Ford, in discussing these connections with me, also emphasised their parallel trajectories. Neither had a propitious background for their chosen careers – Jacobson was brought up in a Jewish household in Kimberley, South Africa, after his parents had emigrated from Eastern Europe, while Miller, who liked to joke that his parents ‘married at leisure but repented in haste’, was brought up by his grandmother outside Edinburgh. Both in a sense came to literary London from the margins, determined to make their mark.

I had heard that they had differed politically, Jacobson tending to the right and Miller the left, but when I suggested to Julius that this may have led to conflict, he smiled: ‘Well, they were not exactly manning the barricades, they were not tearing up the paving stones in Malet Street’. He described their relationship

to me with an analogy: 'I can imagine Dan and Karl being in a room together and other people wondering how they could quite share the space with two rhinoceros, and how could the rhinoceros happily relate to each other'.

Others described them as a kind of double act. Horne remembered spending the majority of his job interview as a silent witness to the two of them arguing jovially about his work, and being unable to figure out if this meant they were giving him the job or that he didn't have a chance. Swaab told me about their rambunctious participation in graduate seminars, where together they would submit the speaker to what Miller called 'disobliging questioning' – 'it was often within the bounds of courtesy but not absolutely', he said.

Jacobson had a 'rabbinical gravity' on these occasions, giving the impression that 'he was bending a very courteous but not entirely impressed attention on you'. His questioning tended to have 'a certain urbanity' – he would politely preface his condemnation of substandard work with the phrase 'My one misgiving'. Miller, Swaab said, tended to ask questions along the lines of 'what were you really saying' – 'inculcating the speaker for having blathered on without getting to the point'. Swaab spoke fondly of these events as much for their comic theatrics as their intellectual rigour. 'Karl enjoyed the theatricality of life', he explained; 'he loved comic personas, he relished character.'

The atmosphere of the department in these years, thanks to the personalities of Miller and Jacobson, had a distinctive mixture of informality and seriousness. Horne, who described Miller as 'funnier than any stand up comedian', spoke approvingly of how 'he made you feel that making jokes all the time didn't stop you from being serious'. Jacobson too was a great wit and joke-teller, with a less dry, more rueful style. Swaab illustrated this lack of stuffiness to me with a story about Miller's enthusiastic participation, despite being in his sixties at this point, in staff-student football matches. Lightness, originality and non-conformism were all encouraged, but 'what was great about them', Ford told me, 'was that they made the study of literature, and writing about literature, meaningful, something that was connected with the whole way you lived'.

Most of those I spoke with felt they only really got to know Miller and Jacobson after the two of them retired. Both regularly saw old colleagues from the department. In Jacobson's case he would often encourage them to join him for a game of tennis, which he played regularly despite his advancing years. 'I always won, not surprisingly', Ford told me; 'I was quite a bit younger, but he loved playing'. A highlight of their matches was inevitably literary conversation: 'He was pretty dismissive in an entertaining way of most of the novels that were published, and would be amusingly denunciatory or withering about the latest this or that. I won't name names, but pretty well everyone...' Swaab played as well: 'I always felt there was a sort of Leaviste tendency to his tennis, issuing limiting judgements about shots that were played'.

Ford also told me about his visits to Jacobson's home in Golders Green. Jacobson apparently liked to joke about how he had financed the extension at the back of the house, claiming it was thanks to money he had received for the rights to his novel *The Rape of Tamar* (1970), a biblically inspired tale that was a tremendous flop when it was adapted. Peter Schaffer's production closed at the National Theatre after only a few weeks.

Jacobson had worked on an increasingly diverse set of projects during his years at UCL – an iconoclastic meditation on the Hebrew bible, a memoir in vignettes, a collection of criticism, and a number of distinct, inventive novels that transposed his concerns into both the past and the future, experimented with fantasy and the counter-factual, and could turn in on themselves to examine the practice of writing. 'He was never better', Julius said about his late work, 'but there was a sense that he was pretty big in the 60s and the 70s and then things sort of tailed off. I think he felt he'd had his moment as a novelist'.

In retirement Jacobson barely let up, turning his attention to his heritage with two travelogues melding memoir and history, one set in South Africa, the other following threads of family genealogy back to Lithuania. 'He said he would be bored otherwise', Ford told me, and as proof of Jacobson's unbiddable intellectual energy reminded me that one of his very last projects before he became ill was a work of translation for which he had to learn a new language – Dutch. Swaab similarly talked admiringly about Jacobson's 'open-minded life of the mind', citing an early example from their friendship when Jacobson had stopped by his office to ask whether he had any books to recommend. 'I was very flattered', Swaab said.

Miller I was told was also always on the look out for new things, and tended to ask a lot of questions when he met up with old colleagues, wanting them to introduce him to things he didn't yet know about. A tête-à-tête over lunch was Miller's preference for these occasions - everyone spoke very fondly of them. His last two decades were quieter than the hectic ones that preceded them. Miller resigned from the *LRB* the same year he left UCL, but he was still involved in literary life, and continued to publish essays and books intermittently, including another biography of a great Scottish man of letters, James Hogg (2003), and a wry memoir of his career, *Dark Horses* (1998).

Swaab was one of those who saw Miller often – 'I would always leave with my spirits raised', he told me. The summer before last, Swaab was 'mainly complimented, albeit a little put upon' when Miller insisted that he would only visit his old friend Christopher Ricks in Gloucestershire if Swaab drove him. They got 'hideously lost' on the drive, Swaab admits, but Karl was 'very patient and quizzical about this'. After lunch in the garden, Swaab remembers returning from a walk with Ricks's wife, the photographer Judith Aronson, to find Ricks

and Miller lying out on the grass, hands on their elbows chatting. They were ‘very affectionate friends’, Swaab said of this scene. On the drive home Swaab says he felt tired, but Miller kept him chatting all the way back to London – ‘I felt he could still outpace me even though he had 30 years on me’.

One member of the department who was very close to Miller, and saw him often in his later years, was Neil Rennie. A Miller protégé who has been at UCL ever since he was an undergraduate – Weis joked to me that Rennie was ‘always Karl’s favourite’ – Rennie spoke generously to me about Miller on a number of occasions, but was reluctant to be interviewed for this essay, finding the experience too difficult. He did, however, hand me a short note with a few thoughts, explaining how it took him a while to realise that Miller ‘was nearly always joking’, and describing Miller as ‘funny and very fierce and a friend’.

Swaab visited Miller at his home in Chelsea shortly before he died. On arriving he was ‘absolutely shocked’ by Miller’s appearance, but Swaab soon found himself reassured: ‘within a few minutes he used the words sartorial and locomotive with really ironic flare. Sartorial was to do with the overcoat he needed to wear because he had become so thin, locomotive to do with the challenges of the wheelchair he was now in’. They went for lunch at a local restaurant, where Miller insisted that the waitress was flirting with Swaab. No, Swaab insisted, it was gallantry addressed to Miller, but Miller was insistent that ‘it was all to do with Swaab, and Miller might as well have not been there at all’. Swaab told me how happy he was to see Miller still so much himself. After lunch they spoke about poetry for another hour or so. Miller expressed concern that his medication had dulled his critical faculties, but Swaab said that ‘I was happy to reassure him that he was full of mental life. It was a wonderful last meeting’.

Karl Miller 2 August 1931 – 24 September 2014

Dan Jacobson 7 March 1929 – 12 June 2014

‘Grumping away quite happily’ was VS Pritchett’s description of Miller at UCL in a letter he wrote to their mutual friend Daniel Aaron in 1974. VS Pritchett: A Working Life by Jeremy Treglown (Chatto, London, 2004) 316.