

# John Campbell Bonner Letts, OBE

English publisher, who founded the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, was first chairman of National Heritage and was a prime mover behind the Trollope Society.

18 November 1929 – 25 March 2006

John Letts, who has died aged 76, was a publisher and arts campaigner responsible for founding the British Empire Museum in Bristol and the Trollope Society.

Under the aegis of National Heritage, a pressure group he created in 1971, Letts also ran the Museum of the Year competition, which reinvigorated some of the country's dustier collections and gave him a platform for attacking officialdom.

His Earth Centre at Doncaster was one project which proved an expensive failure, closing after some £20 million in grants. But the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum was a triumph. The day it was opened by the Princess Royal in 2002, the normally reserved Letts gulped back tears of pride.

For 25 years the project had been hampered by torpor, timidity and downright obstruction from a Leftist Establishment aghast at the mere mention of "empire".

John Campbell Bonner Letts was born on November 18 1929, to a schoolmaster who was wounded three times in the Great War.

Young John was educated at Oakley

Hall, the Cirencester prep school run by his parents, and at Haileybury. A gifted schoolboy cricketer, he scored a century at Lord's in 1948 against Cheltenham (he was batting No 8). Letts won an English scholarship to Jesus, Cambridge, and graduated without having read a word of Keats, Byron or Shelley, a single novel by Thackeray, Trollope or Henry James, and only one by Dickens, *Bleak House*. He spent the next half century putting matters right by reading voraciously.

After Cambridge Letts became a copywriter at SH Benson and J Walter Thompson, then went into publishing, becoming general manager of Sunday Times Publications and marketing director for Hutchinson.

Working in London he rode around on a scooter wearing a bowler hat, and developed a taste for carving up taxis. In an altercation with one cabbie he flicked down his meter, at which the wrathful driver thumped Letts on the head - only to discover that he was wearing a hunting bowler, with a hard surface. The cabbie retired hurt, yowling with pain.

Another clash with street bureaucracy occurred in 1999 when Letts's Saab was given a parking ticket in Lambeth for having one wheel two inches over the line. He whipped out a tape measure, discovered that the parking bay was smaller than the minimum legal requirement and took his £30 fine to appeal, and won a judgment of £500.

In 1971, Letts and two partners bought the Folio Society, which publishes handsome editions of classics. Realising that newspaper colour supplements were a good market place, he doubled Folio's membership to 50,000. Wishing to make it more like a club, he encouraged subscribers to write to it in verse, which would be duly answered in matching couplets; and to hone poetic skills he organised Friday afternoon limerick-writing competitions for staff.

Two years later he published *A Little Treasury of Limericks, Fair and Foul*, which included many of his own creations. Illustrated by Ralph Steadman, it described Letts thus: "He likes having ideas but hates working them out. He has invented (in his head) a machine for fixing telephones to flat surfaces, a gadget for stapling buttons to shirts, and a pornographic game of Monopoly; none of which is likely to support him in the style to which he has become accustomed. Hence the need to publish this book."

Among the more printable limericks attributed to Letts was "The Bishop of Bath and Wells/Was wholly unconscious of smells/Throughout the whole diocese/No smell was as high as his/The odour of sanctity tells".

Although his pornographic Monopoly never appeared, Letts invented, with Steadman, the board game Bedlam, in which women tried to get men to church and men tried to get women to a hotel bedroom.

By 1976 he had become a prominent agitator for the arts. Appalled by the stuffed-dodo-in-a-glass-case tendency of many museums, his National Heritage group

argued that a trip to many museums could be more entertainingly educational.

When Letts took his children to an exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute he was so struck by its feebleness that he resolved to start a proper museum to Empire, although he was intellectually a man of the Left.

At a time of raging post-colonial guilt, when many were trying to ignore Britain's imperial heritage, he felt historians had a duty to present an objective view of the Empire to future generations. Letts sold his interest in the Folio Society in the early 1980s, by when he was rich enough not to have to work and could apply himself to his real love: the past.

The Empire Museum project's most important supporter was the Bahamas-based businessman Sir Jack Hayward, known as "Union Jack".

When the trustees met to discuss a financial crisis, "Union Jack" quietly passed an envelope along the table. Inside was a cheque for \$1 million, which Hayward later said, made him feel "a bit mean". He instantly altered the cheque to £1 million.

The Foreign Office was cold to the idea, and the hard-Left Bristol Council could hardly have been less helpful when Letts proposed buying Brunel's old passenger shed at Temple Meads railway station.

None the less a long lease on the site was bought from British Rail, and restoration work on Brunel's fine buildings began straight away. To counter accusations of jingoism the museum came up with the idea of "alternative" captions to exhibits, one giving the traditional British colonial view, the other the view of the colonised. Letts, whose bookish diffidence could be mistaken for rudeness, realised that he was not the man to front the project. His habit of drafting budgets on the back of a newspaper made him an imperfect committee man. He recruited Lord Younger, Lord Montagu of Beaulieu and others.

In 1988 Letts set about rescuing another neglected leviathan: the Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope. No one before had ever succeeded in publishing a complete edition of Trollope's 47 novels. But with the bookseller John Saumarez-Smith and the former Times editor William Rees-Mogg he

formed the Trollope Society, which now has 2,500 members.

A drinks party was held at the National Portrait Gallery where Letts, in tailcoat and mutton chop whiskers, recited snippets of Victorian literature for members who ranged from Cabinet ministers to suburban cooks.

He persuaded the Dean of Westminster Abbey to admit Trollope to Poets' Corner but failed to get the Royal Mail to honour the novelist with a postage stamp, despite the fact that he had worked for the Post Office in Ireland and had invented the pillar box.

A letter of rejection from the rebranded public utility explained that "Mr Trollope does rank high among famous employees in the history of Consignia".

Although largely retired from National Heritage, Letts still made occasional sallies into arts funding rows, dismissing Tory calls for more private sponsorship of the arts by saying: "The private sector is being overfished but the plankton is not increasing."

He was an early critic of the National Lottery awards, which demanded that museums produce "matching funding" of awards, and also of the increase in the numbers of arts consultants. The "giving agencies" of Whitehall had such high-handed attitudes, he said, that volunteer trustees and board directors wondered if they were "on trial".

One of his last suggestions was for an annual drinks party for all officers of the Order of the British Empire, he himself having been appointed OBE in 1980. A tactiturn yet kindly man, he was little interested in worldly possessions except for books and hellebores.

John Letts married, in 1957, Sarah O'Rorke, an artist and cookery writer, who survives him with their three sons and one daughter.

He died on March 25 2006, knowing that his Empire Museum now attracts 120,000 visitors a year - despite the continuing parsimony of the National Heritage Lottery Fund and its chairman, Liz Forgan.

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Courtesy Robert Letts

John Letts (left) with Kenneth Hudson, in deep discussion c1977.

