

# THE AGE OF ASA

LORD BRIGGS, PUBLIC LIFE AND  
HISTORY IN BRITAIN SINCE 1945



EDITED BY **MILES TAYLOR**



## The Age of Asa

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**Lord Briggs, Public Life and History  
in Britain since 1945**

Edited by

Miles Taylor

*University of York, UK*

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# Foreword

It is a huge pleasure to introduce this book about Asa Briggs. The original conference from which it derives could have gone on for several days, so varied, so diverse, so distinguished and so many-sided has been Asa's contribution to history, to academe and to public life. There could have been sessions on Asa as biographer: of Marx, of Rowntree, of Gladstone and of Michael Young. There could have been sessions on Asa as a labour historian, as a business historian, as a historian of publishing, as a historian of science and technology, and as a historian of medicine. There could have been sessions on Asa as a paid-up and card-carrying member of the great and the good: as chairman of government committees, member of the University Grants Committee, Vice-Chairman of the Council of the United Nations University, trustee of Brighton Pavilion, judge of the Wolfson History Prize and as President of the Social History Society, the Workers' Educational Association, the Victorian Society, the Ephemera Society and the Brontë Society. Perhaps on Asa's 100th birthday we shall finally get to these additional aspects of his work and life, although by then he will no doubt have written another half-dozen books opening up another half-dozen subjects.

But this volume focuses on three of the major aspects of Asa's work. First, Asa as a historian of Victorian Britain who in the second half of the 20th century did more than any other scholar to bring the 19th century alive: in his history of Birmingham, in his trilogy *Victorian People*, *Victorian Cities* and *Victorian Things* and in his unrivalled survey *The Age of Improvement*. All those books were pioneering in opening up new vistas and areas of historical inquiry; yet they have also proved unsurpassable, in that no one has ever treated these subjects anything like as well as he did when starting them off. And *Victorian Cities* remains to this day an unmatched tour de force, a virtuoso cavalcade of urban history and urban life in Britain, and a book that many of us would have given half our working lives to have written.

The second part of this book salutes Asa as a historian of communications; for as well as being the founding father of Victorian studies, Asa has also created an entirely new subject, namely the history of the media. Having written enough on the 19th century to exhaust several more than averagely energetic scholars, Asa has simultaneously produced five massive volumes of *The History of Broadcasting in the United*



*Kingdom*, a work which is in part a remarkable institutional study of the BBC itself, but also a pioneering foray into cultural history of modern Britain. Not for nothing was he awarded the Marconi Medal for Communication History.

But in addition to being a more than full-time scholar, researcher and writer, Asa has also been the most significant historian of his generation involved in the expansion and development of higher education in Britain. And so our third section is devoted to Asa as an academic proconsul: as a major power in the post-war renaissance of red-brick universities (at Leeds), as one of the great creative personalities establishing the new universities of the 1960s (at Sussex), as someone who breathed life and intellectual energy into an ancient university (at Oxford), and as someone who early on saw the potential of a novel and innovative form of higher learning (at the Open University).

The resulting volume is fittingly varied and appropriately many-sided: in part it is a critical and in-depth survey of a significant public life in the second half of the 20th century; in part it is a ninetieth birthday present to one of the towering figures of our time and our profession; and in part it is a thank-offering from some but by no means all of those who have benefited across the years from the advice and the encouragement which Asa has so freely given to so many of us. The achievement is all his, but the gratitude, the admiration and the affection are all ours.

David Cannadine  
Institute of Historical Research, University of London  
13 May 2014

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# Introduction: Asa Briggs and Public Life in Britain since 1945

*Miles Taylor*

In the annals of British public life since the end of the Second World War, few names stand out as prominently as that of Asa Briggs. A pioneering and best-selling historian, an architect of the new universities of the 1960s, the chronicler of the BBC, a champion of adult education, and a mover and shaker in the arts at home and in the internationalisation of British academia, Briggs has left his mark in many ways. Any one of his principal achievements – his contribution to Victorian studies, or his role in the founding years of the University of Sussex, or his history of the BBC – would suffice for most academic lifetimes. Yet, blessed with a famous energy and a restless intelligence, Briggs has accomplished so much more in his career. He has written at least 30 books, and four times as many articles and chapters.<sup>1</sup> In addition to Sussex, he has led the history department at Leeds, been Provost of Worcester College, Oxford, and Chancellor of the Open University. His capacity for public service is legend, almost spanning the alphabet from the Advisory Board for Redundant Churches to the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), and including significant spells with the British Film Institute, the Leverhulme Trust (whose history he wrote) and the Universities Grants Committee. Aptly, he has been called the 'Macaulay of the welfare state'.<sup>2</sup> And there have been laudations aplenty. He was made a life peer for services to education in 1976, a Fellow of the British Academy in 1980 and a recipient of the Wolfson History Prize in 2000. He holds 20 honorary doctorates, his 70th birthday was celebrated with a festschrift, his 80th brought a lifetime award from the Historical Association, and many accolades flowed on his 90th birthday, including a conference from which this volume is derived. Yet, compared with other historians and public figures of his generation, Briggs' career and contribution have not been the subject of any kind of analysis. Briggs is notable by

## 2 Introduction

his absence from some of the principal surveys of post-war public life.<sup>3</sup> Apart from the 1990 festschrift, which focused largely on his contribution to history, there has been no attempt to assess how and why one man was so involved in so many aspects of British academic and arts culture in the second half of the 20th century. Not that there has been no record. Briggs has told his own story, most recently in three volumes of autobiography, and also in various interviews over the years.<sup>4</sup> However, a more rounded survey is overdue, and that is the aim of this collection of essays.

In spite of his ubiquity, Asa Briggs does not fit many of the conventional stereotypes of the British post-war public intellectual. Although he commenced and ended his career in Oxbridge, his reputation was built from the provinces. Hailing from Keighley in West Yorkshire, Briggs spent over 20 years outside the ivory towers, in civic red-brick and then plate-glass universities, never seeking any of the major history professorial chairs in the older universities. Unlike fellow-Yorkshireman Herbert Butterfield, or the men from the Midlands, J. H. Plumb and C. P. Snow, he was not an outsider turned insider. Even when he did return to Oxford in 1976, within a year he had taken on the chancellorship of the newest campus of all, the Open University in Milton Keynes. Briggs also kept London at length. He retained an office in Thackeray's old house in Kensington; however, the capital was a place for committee meetings and research, and not for residence. Of the centre-left, he never became associated with any political party, whether during the 1960s when Oxford economists sided up to Wilson's Labour governments, or during the 1970s and early 1980s when notable historians, for example Paul Johnson, Hugh Thomas and John Vincent, joined the Thatcherite agenda. Briggs, by contrast, has chattered with all classes. He assisted Winston Churchill with the completion of his *History of the English Speaking People*, befriended Labour frontbenchers Richard Crossman at the beginning of the 1960s and Anthony Crosland at the end, and enjoyed an amicable relationship with Keith Joseph in the 1970s. No surprise that he has sat on the cross-benches in the House of Lords, and rarely spoken in debate.<sup>5</sup>

As a writer, Briggs does not fit the usual mould. He is undoubtedly a phenomenon whose sales, especially his Pelican Victorian trilogy, his *Age of Improvement* for Longman and his *Social History of England* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson), must place him alongside other best-selling historians of the post-war era such as A. J. P. Taylor and G. M. Trevelyan.<sup>6</sup> Yet less lucrative arrangements have characterised many of his publishing contracts. Almost uniquely amongst full-time university historians,

Briggs has been a commissioned author for much of his publishing oeuvre, receiving a payment from the organisation the history of which he was appointed to write rather than a royalty from the publisher: less reward perhaps, but no less toil. Briggs has undertaken a dozen such commissions stretching from the history of modern Birmingham, the BBC, Lewis's, Longman, and Marks and Spencer through to the history of Haut-Brion and Victoria Wine. He has also been a tireless editor: of Cobbett, Dickens, the Fabians, Halévy, Mayhew, Morley, Morris, Owen, *Punch*, Shaw, Smiles, Tollemache and Trollope. And larger projects have included the *Oxford Junior Encyclopaedia* (he advised on social history) and the 15th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (on behalf of which he travelled 46,000 miles in three months in early 1974).<sup>7</sup> None of this fits the normal pattern of scholarly endeavour in the research-intensive modern university. It is a throwback to the Victorian man of letters as editor and expert at large.

There are further paradoxes. The biographer of the BBC, and a regular radio broadcaster during the 1950s, Briggs never made the transition to television history as did J. H. Plumb or A. J. P. Taylor, or for that matter figures such as Kenneth Clark.<sup>8</sup> Unlike his new left and Marxist contemporaries such as Eric Hobsbawm and Edward Thompson, whose influence on the development of British social history is well documented, Briggs has never been associated with a particular school or a historical approach.<sup>9</sup> He has maintained a distance from Marxism and other large explanatory models, especially in urban and economic history, whilst on occasion he has also disparaged the growth of overly specialist subdisciplines.<sup>10</sup> His definition of social history as 'political history with the economics put back in' did not weather well as the subject boomed in the 1970s. And his own writing style – which might be said to favour organisation and information over argument – has sometimes been criticised for offering breadth without enough depth, and avoiding the big issues.<sup>11</sup> A founder of many schools but the master of none, a historian of the media but never a 'telly don', a liberal pragmatist in an age gradually rejecting political consensus, and a force for public good whose interests were so widespread that sometimes they were spread too thin, Asa Briggs evades easy categorisation. And yet a fuller and deeper consideration of his life and work, as set out in this volume, reveals a remarkable continuity of ideas and goals throughout his career, and belies the image of a butterfly scholar flitting from one challenge to the next. The collection of essays focuses on just three of Briggs' main areas of work: his history-writing, his work on broadcasting and communications, and his career as a university impresario. The



introduction that follows here aims to frame these themes by providing an overview of Asa Briggs' public life. It emphasises how his scholarship was rooted in a particular intellectual formation in the 1950s, as much American as British, that his commitment to education was holistic, embracing what would now be called lifelong learning and not just the student experience at university, and that the legacy of his numerous contributions is more diverse and enduring than is often appreciated.

## **The new social order**

Asa Briggs' contribution to public life and scholarship began in his late teens. A precocious intellect, he made his literary debut taking on the Keighley temperance movement in the correspondence columns of his local newspaper, and started tutoring for the WEA whilst still at school.<sup>12</sup> He went up to Cambridge in 1937 at the age of 16, and within a couple of years, at Sidney Sussex College, had secured his first academic success: the essay prize of the Royal Asiatic Society, won in 1939 for an entry on sea-power and the East India Company.<sup>13</sup> A tendency to multitask was already apparent. When the London School of Economics moved to Cambridge for the duration of the Second World War, Briggs, unknown to his college tutors, enrolled there for a second degree in economics. And after graduation in 1941, he was recruited to the code-breaking unit at Bletchley Park, supplemented by teaching at his old school. When the war ended, with his Sidney Sussex tutor David Thomson, he joined a team reporting on post-war international relations and visited occupied Germany soon after the end of hostilities.<sup>14</sup> In 1945, he took up a fellowship in Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Worcester College, Oxford, later (in 1950) becoming Reader in Recent Social and Economic History, blending his college duties with working for the WEA as part of the University of Oxford Delegacy for Extra-Mural Studies Delegacy. By his early 30s, Briggs was a regular broadcaster on the BBC,<sup>15</sup> a columnist and reviewer in the *Manchester Guardian* and the *New Statesman*, and a popular public lecturer. His reputation as an academic globetrotter was also developing. A profile of Briggs in 1956 noted that he 'prefers the airport to the ivory tower'.<sup>16</sup> There were three visits to America during the 1950s, including two long spells at the University of Chicago and at Princeton, and also lecture tours and conferences in, amongst others, India (1957), Poland (1959)<sup>17</sup> and Australia (1960, described in Frank Bongiorno's chapter in this volume). His work was being published in overseas specialist journals, notably in France and in Italy.<sup>18</sup> By the mid-1950s, his expertise on the 19th century encompassed urban

history, Chartism, public health and Victorian literature and social commentary. He moved back to Yorkshire in 1955, stepping into the chair in modern history at Leeds vacated by Norman Gash, and from there consolidated his reputation at the forefront of Victorian studies on both sides of the Atlantic, as his *Victorian People* (1954) was followed by *The Age of Improvement* and *Chartist Studies* (both 1959). Steeped in the 19th century, Briggs was also seen as someone who had much to say about the more recent past and the future. In October 1958 he was commissioned by the BBC to write its history (and that of broadcasting in the UK), and two months later, he joined the Universities Grants Committee, on the eve of the great expansion of the higher education sector. When the first of the new universities was established at Sussex in 1961, it was no surprise that Briggs should be drawn there as the inaugural Dean of Social Studies, Professor of History, and, as it turned out, Vice-Chancellor in waiting.

Briggs' early career was meteoric, a not unusual pattern in the period. In the 1950s and early 1960s, younger men were making their impact on British public life, and not all of them were angry. Richard Hoggart, E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams all produced their classic works before they turned 40. Hugh Trevor-Roper was one of the youngest Regius Professors of History at Oxford of modern times, appointed in 1957 at the age of 43. And in 1964, Harold Wilson became the youngest prime minister for over 170 years. The boys-to-men experience of the war, the expansion of middle-class employment as the country emerged from austerity, and the association of youth with some of the new technologies and media of the age opened up senior positions in many walks of life to a slightly younger generation of males. In this way, Briggs was a product of his times, and was influenced, perhaps more so than has been noted, by some of its prevailing ideas and intellectual trends.

Briggs has often described his foremost intellectual debts. From R. H. Tawney he took a sense of the duty of the historian to communicate, of the importance of understanding past cultures through their literature and ideas as much as their economic and political behaviour, and of the coexistence in British society of two contending ways of life: the pre-industrial and the industrial. It is not too difficult, moreover, to perceive Tawney's career, linking social service especially in adult education, to an ethical middle-of-the-road socialism and to research in economic history, as a model for Briggs' own early aspirations.<sup>19</sup> A second major influence has been G. M. Young, the historian and biographer, who in the interwar years made Victorianism fashionable, and from whom Briggs took over as the BBC's preferred presenter on

Victorian topics in the early 1950s.<sup>20</sup> Alongside these abiding influences, Briggs also drew formatively from key developments and debates in the 1950s: in the social sciences, within Marxism and around the voguish concept of the acquisitive society.

At Cambridge, Briggs found the economic history more impressive than the rest of the Tripos, and this was supplemented by LSE lectures. On the Cambridge side he has singled out for praise Herbert Butterfield, Michael Postan and Eileen Power, and of his LSE teachers Ernest Barker, Lance Beales, Harold Laski and Michael Oakeshott.<sup>21</sup> And although a historian by instinct, his sympathy for the behavioural sciences was clearly in evidence in his first published work after the war. In the introduction to the jointly authored *Patterns of Peacemaking*, the disciplines of politics, psychology and sociology were identified as being crucial for understanding how nations will behave in the new world order.<sup>22</sup> Briggs' early work on Birmingham is notable for its indebtedness to sociology and to a comparative economic perspective, and he would write later in the 1950s of economic history as the key to explaining conformity and divergence in societies across time and place.<sup>23</sup> However it was Briggs' visits to Chicago in the 1950s – the 'most stimulating influence on his life'<sup>24</sup> – which really cemented his work within a social science approach. With a Rockefeller Foundation grant he spent the academic year of 1952–1953 at the University of Chicago, teaching and researching. For the purposes of teaching he brought his reading up to date on Freud and other recent psychology. He also took a keen interest in the work of the Chicago school of sociology. The writings of Everitt Hughes, David Riesman and Louis Wirth gave Briggs the ammunition to criticise Lewis Mumford, then a dominant voice in the study of cities.<sup>25</sup> Compare, for example, the boldness of Briggs' defence of urban life as diverse, evolving and shaped by people and politics in the introduction to *Victorian Cities* (the subject of Francesca Carnevali's chapter) with his earlier studies of Birmingham, completed before his Chicago experience. To an extent, as the chapters in this volume by Martin Hewitt and Malcolm Chase demonstrate, Briggs' new urban history of the 1950s coincided with his move to Leeds, a city still saturated in its Victorian past. However, American urban sociology allowed Briggs to put down with methodological confidence an older Dickensian view of the industrial city as the locus of poverty and crime, as well as push aside the early 20th-century stereotype of the city as the source of alienation.<sup>26</sup>

Briggs also drew on indigenous academic traditions. As John McIlroy describes in his chapter, Briggs was part of the G. D. H. Cole stable at Oxford in its latter years and paid homage to Cole's work and influence

on more than one occasion.<sup>27</sup> But Briggs never made the step, as some did, to develop Cole's branch of labour history and indeed Labour party revisionism into a more thorough Marxist or post-Marxist outlook. He was as equally suspicious of socialist revisionism, of the kind championed by Anthony Crosland's *The Future of Socialism* (1956), which he found too optimistic and parochial,<sup>28</sup> as he was of the Marxism of some of his fellow modern British historians, such as Eric Hobsbawm and John Saville, which he found at times too reductionist.<sup>29</sup> However, this never stopped Briggs collaborating effectively with historians of the British left – in the Society for the Study of Labour History, in the volume of essays on Chartism and in the festschrift for Cole which spawned two later volumes, co-edited by Briggs and Saville. Indeed, as we shall see, there was only one significant occasion – much later in 1983 during the screening of a centenary series about Marx for the BBC – when his hawkish attitude towards Marxism was made more explicit. Briggs' mix of economics and sociology led in a different direction from the English Marxist historians, more towards the *histoire totale* of the French *Annales* school, as Rohan McWilliam demonstrates in this volume. By his own admission Briggs was only a conventional social historian *after* the event: that is, once he began work on the history of broadcasting.

Arguably, it is neither the Victorian revival, nor the Chicago school, nor even debates in and around English Marxism in the 1950s and early 1960s that fully explain Asa Briggs' intellectual formation. One set of issues above all is threaded through his work in this period: the onset of the consumer and mass media society and how this was driven by technological innovation. Throughout his life Briggs has taken a keen interest in science, even stating that he might equally well have turned out as a scientist as a historian. Later, he would recall that he had always been 'fascinated by the convergence of new technology and educational change', and on other occasions he has written about the difficulty the historian faces in aligning breakthroughs in technology with changing patterns of social behaviour.<sup>30</sup> And as James Thompson argues in his chapter, in the 1950s and early 1960s, not unlike his contemporaries Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, Briggs was preoccupied with technological and social change, and its wider effects on learning, leisure and democracy. He never wrote anything equivalent to Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* or Williams' *Culture and Society*, but from his printed lectures, prefaces and addresses of the period, it is possible to piece together a distinctive take on what he liked to call the 'new social order'. In a lecture entitled 'Adult Education and Mass Culture' (1958), Briggs welcomed the way in which mass culture was breaking down the

older traditions of class, and just as the welfare state was bringing adequate social provision within the reach of ordinary people, so too were mass production techniques increasing the marketing of commodities to everyone.<sup>31</sup> Citing Hoggart, as well as David Riesman and Dwight Macdonald, Briggs pointed to the ways in which the visual medium of cinema and TV was now supplanting the printed word, widening the gap between the experts and 'eggheads' who dominated the BBC's Third Programme, and the habitual TV viewer and cinema-goer, who was becoming a spectator of 'kitsch'. In the lecture, Briggs warned of the dangers of what Macdonald called 'middle-browism', and elsewhere expressed his concern that the acquisitive society was not only creating passive work but also passive leisure, 'a parody of social democracy'. Instead of being utilised to expand education and empower citizens, new technologies (and new subjects such as psychology) were producing apathy and conformism.<sup>32</sup> Such concerns locate Briggs firmly in two wider political and intellectual moments of the period. First, the Labour party's reaction to affluence and its effects on voter alignment (especially acute after the third successive Conservative party victory at the polls in 1959); and, secondly, the 'two cultures' controversy, in which science was claimed as more essential to national well-being and progress than the humanities.<sup>33</sup> Briggs' response to these dilemmas is best understood by examining what he did next: that is, harness new developments in science and communications to the expansion of adult education.

### **Services to education**

If the 1960s were a golden age for the universities, then Asa Briggs was its prince. As government expenditure on higher education increased sixfold between 1947 and 1965, and undergraduate enrolment rose exponentially, Briggs was at the heart of the years of expansion. A member of the powerful University Grants Committee (UGC) between 1959 and 1967, a dean and then vice-chancellor of a new university constantly in the spotlight, and, by the 1970s, a senior figure who could deal with equal effect with secretaries of state and student unions alike, Briggs went from writing to making history. Not that his writing ever stopped – as Siân Nicholas and Jean Seaton show in their chapters on Briggs and the BBC in this volume, he was perfectly capable of running one organisation at the same time as producing the history of another. However, for the moment Briggs' scholarly impact rested on the purple patch of work published in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as his attention was turned elsewhere.

Asa Briggs' years at Sussex – the happiest of his life – were the most momentous of his career. As Matthew Cragoe documents in his chapter, Briggs helped create a campus, a curriculum and a community from scratch in less than a decade. However, it is easy to overlook how the Sussex project was one part of a larger holistic vision of adult learning that Briggs developed during the 1950s and 1960s. To appreciate this more fully, it is worth looking briefly at his contribution to the WEA, of which he was deputy president (1954–1958) and then president (1958–1967). Briggs joined the WEA through Oxford via Cole's influence, during the twilight years of Tawney's presidency. Unlike other young history lecturers, for example Edward Thompson, Briggs came into the WEA mindful of its mission of outreach to all adult learners, and not just to the organised or unionised working class. He joined properly in 1953, as the WEA celebrated its jubilee, and survived a crisis over its Treasury funding.<sup>34</sup> Looking to its future, Briggs envisioned an integral place for the WEA within the universities, and spoke fulsomely of the connections between mass education and democracy. For him, the enemy of the WEA was as much the apathy that came with consumer society as it was the privileged stance of the existing universities.<sup>35</sup> Briggs championed the WEA cause in the UK, and in the new Europe and elsewhere overseas as well.<sup>36</sup> As president he oversaw what amounted to a restructuring and rebranding of the WEA. The curriculum of courses offered was revised – particularly through a new series of study outlines, entitled *The New Social Order*, with greater emphasis on science, and on practical and vocational subjects alongside the standard arts and social science offerings. Two important WEA reports of the first years of Briggs' presidency were *Education for a Changing Society* (1959) and *Aspects of Adult Education* (1960), both of which urged the WEA to develop a new 'map of adult education', to break down the gulf between the 'two cultures' of the literary arts and the experimental sciences (called in the 1960 report 'the new social dynamic'), and take advantage of new forms of communication to spread and diffuse its work.<sup>37</sup> Despite other calls on his time, the WEA mattered a great deal to Briggs and he put much effort into its operations at a time of transition. The WEA became a vehicle for his thinking about the relationship between leisure, education and citizenship, and the means of trying out some of his ideas about new curricula that were to be fundamental to his work at Sussex and later at the Open University. On his retirement as WEA president in 1967 he was praised for helping to close the gap between the expert and the ordinary man, and he himself later

argued that if the 1960s experience were to be repeated, then as much investment should be put into adult learning as into the undergraduate sector.<sup>38</sup>

Within the universities Briggs was also a moderniser. On the UGC – led by Sir Keith Murray ('a superb, enlightened chairman') and then by the 'smoother but less knowledgeable' Sir John Wolfenden – Briggs sat on two subcommittees. One was on the new universities, and the other was on the expansion of the teaching of Oriental, African, Slavonic and East European studies. In 1964, he joined another group looking at the establishment of a sixth Scottish university (eventually chosen as Stirling).<sup>39</sup> Later, Briggs would look back at the distinctive character of this phase of university development in the 1960s, emphasising how the new campuses were local, regional initiatives and not simply the result of central fiat (as in France), although that verdict perhaps underplays the executive force of the UGC.<sup>40</sup> Sussex under Briggs certainly fits his model. Although conscious of campus precedents such as Keele (est. 1948), Briggs likened his university to a new kind of corporation, much the same as a start-up enterprise. Its role was not limited to providing a service, that is to say educating students, but also to becoming a centre for initiative – in research, in the local arts community (he regarded the Falmer campus as complete with the opening of the arts centre in 1968), and, as he later argued, a means of generating wealth for the regional economy.<sup>41</sup>

As Cragoe notes, Briggs was a big catch for Sussex. He famously helped to redraw the 'map of learning' by pushing through while dean an innovative interdisciplinary set of faculties and courses. Less noticeably perhaps, he also helped develop new teaching and learning methods, championing document packs and course readers, intra-campus audio-visual transmission and he anticipated rapid data transfer via computers as one of the possible forms of learning delivery in the future.<sup>42</sup> Sleepy Sussex became a happening place in the Briggs era. The arts centre flourished. The enterprising university sowed the seeds for two publishing houses: Sussex University Press and Harvester (est. 1969 by Sussex graduate student John Spiers). Briggs joined a deputation to meet President Nixon when he visited London in 1969. And Briggs himself became part of the local arts scene, joining Glyndebourne as a trustee in 1965, and that same year helping to establish the Brighton Film Theatre. The reputation of Sussex thus owed much to Briggs' endeavours, although another way of making that claim is to argue that what Briggs actually did was to lead the way for others to consider a high-profile or even a reputable academic career outside Oxbridge and London. The

idea that Sussex was simply an extension of Oxbridge – ‘Balliol-by-the-sea’ – barely survived the first phase of press coverage in the early 1960s, and anyway referred more to the Sussex preference for the Oxford tutorial system over lectures and seminars. Briggs brought credibility to the new provincial universities. He discouraged those who sought his counsel from awaiting the call of an Oxbridge fellowship instead of taking a chair in a big civic university. In 1968, he noted with approval that the effect of the new universities had been to narrow the divide between Oxbridge and red-brick, speed up reforms in the existing universities, and ensure the recruitment of faculty in newer subjects.<sup>43</sup>

By the early 1970s Asa Briggs could look back with pride at the personal and public achievements of the previous decade. Already a veteran of leadership in scholarship and higher education as he turned 50, he was instantly recognisable as the face of higher education, his cherubic and cheerful countenance tastefully caricatured in the papers, and his opinions sought everywhere, including in the Sunday supplements, where he rubbed shoulders with Mao and Marilyn Monroe.<sup>44</sup> Astute as ever, however, Briggs realised that the golden age could not last. In 1969, he warned that the proportion of school leavers going on to higher education remained small, and they were perceived as an elite supported by the taxpayer. By the summer of 1971 he was describing the 1960s as ‘an exceptional decade in the history of all institutions not only universities’, and in early 1973 he foresaw a ‘stormy decade’ ahead, as central funding for universities contracted and the public acceptance of certain aspects of student culture waned.<sup>45</sup> The mood had changed, as Briggs knew from his own experiences on occupations and sit-ins at Sussex, described in Cragoe’s chapter. In fact, he was often seen as part of the solution to student unrest – as the *Observer* commented in 1970: ‘if anyone can stem the wave of unreason it is Briggs’<sup>46</sup> – and indeed during the University of Stirling occupations of 1973, he was the preferred choice of the student union there as arbitrator in the dispute which arose from protests accompanying the Queen’s visit to the university in October 1972.<sup>47</sup> However, Briggs was an authority figure, and even if students were assuaged by his equable manner, more seasoned radicals were not. In 1971, as one of the governors of the British Film Institute, Briggs became caught up in a major row, firstly and indirectly with Lindsay Anderson over the screening policy of the BFI, and then secondly and directly with Paddy Whannel, following Briggs’ recommendation of a complete overhaul of the BFI’s educational department. Both BFI disputes moved quickly and irreversibly from matters of policy to issues of governance, and during a feverish 18 months, Briggs and his fellow



governors endured (and survived) two votes of confidence.<sup>48</sup> It was one of the few instances in a long public career of Briggs being caught in the glare of negative publicity.

Despite the downturn in the fortunes of higher education as the utopian 1960s gave way to the gloomy 1970s, Briggs' commitment to the expansion of adult learning remained. He was an early enthusiast for the 'University of the Air' – that is, the Open University – as Dan Weinbren describes in his chapter in the volume. Briggs advocated linking public service television to adult education whilst President of the WEA at the time of the Pilkington Report on the third TV channel, and believed there to be a 'dotted line' between the new universities and the setting up of the Open University. Nowhere is Briggs' belief in deploying new communications technology for the benefit of lifelong learning clearer than in his work for the Open University, initially in planning the new university, and then latterly as its second, pro-active chancellor.<sup>49</sup> Around the same time, in 1970, Briggs took on another cause, this time the improvement of the professional education of nurses. Appointed by Richard Crossman he chaired a committee looking into the quality of nursing training in the NHS across the UK. The committee reported to the Heath government in 1972, recommending wide changes, including a new national structure. Eventually, some of the recommendations found their way into the 1979 Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors Act. Lest this commission be considered slightly outside Briggs' normal range of expertise, he explained in a 1974 lecture how the education of nurses was as much a part of adult learning as that which transpired in the universities.<sup>50</sup>

## **Futures**

In 1976 Briggs returned to Oxford, to the college where his career had commenced 30 years previously. He arrived a year later than planned, the appointment having been made the previous year. In many ways, it was a natural move. Steering Sussex from the pangs of birth into its terrible teens was a hard act to follow, and no other top job in a British university could compete, although Briggs was tempted by the opportunity to become Rector of the European University Institute in Florence, which arose in 1973.<sup>51</sup> The Provost's Lodge at Worcester College afforded Briggs more time to continue with his history of broadcasting, to pursue new work on the history of the publishing house Longman, to oversee the growth of the Open University, and later in 1991 to give the prestigious James Ford lectures in British History at the university.

However, Briggs and Oxford enjoyed a somewhat ambivalent relationship. Briggs has often written of the conservative, anti-reform tendencies in the history of the university,<sup>52</sup> and some of those seemed to remain in the present. The college went mixed under his headship, and he took pride in appointing more scientists to the fellowship, but across the wider university he had less of a role, with little regard taken of his experience at Sussex.<sup>53</sup> In his chapter, which closes this volume, James Raven charts the progress of the history of the book seminar that gathered around Briggs at Oxford. Other projects continued: a further two volumes of the BBC history, despite Oxford University Press getting cold feet over the series in 1978,<sup>54</sup> but not the final volume, which brought the story up to the 1980s. The Ford lectures proved a high note on which to end his time at Oxford; less satisfactory were the protracted and ultimately unsuccessful efforts to see them published, although elements found their way into the sections Briggs wrote for the brilliant survey *A Social History of the Media*, co-authored with former Sussex colleague Peter Burke, in 2001, discussed more fully in James Thompson's chapter in this volume.

With Oxford only partially expending Briggs' energies, there remained the wider national and international scene. This did not include the House of Lords, where Briggs spoke rarely but with purpose when he did: notably on nursing reform, and on free speech in the universities.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps more surprisingly, nor did Briggs front up for the BBC, despite the semi-official nature of his history. In 1976 he advised the BBC on establishing a proper archival service, but otherwise seldom became involved in defending its practices.<sup>56</sup> In 1983 his own BBC series on Karl Marx became the subject of controversy when his fellow contributor (and former Sussex colleague) David McLellan disassociated himself from the final script that Briggs used for the programme commentary.<sup>57</sup> For Briggs the priority was always the primacy of public service broadcasting, and not the BBC per se. His untypically outspoken book of 1986 – *The Franchise Affair*<sup>58</sup> – was a forceful indictment of IBA's (Independent Broadcasting Authority) award of new channel contracts in 1980, and a timely warning of how cable and satellite technology might expand content but diminish quality unless the standards maintained by the historic duopoly of the BBC and the IBA were upheld.

If Briggs avoided choosing sides in the increasingly partisan public life of the late 1970s and 1980s, he did nonetheless continue to build bridges. Sussex and the Open University became models for international cooperation in higher education overseas. In this respect he was a notable pro-European of the 1970s, chairing the Council of

the European Institute of Education in Paris (1974–1990) and from that position playing a leading part in the drafting of a common EEC policy on education.<sup>59</sup> Other roles were more global. He joined in the establishment of the United Nations University in 1974–1975 (serving on its council until 1980), and just over a decade later became one of the motive forces behind the Commonwealth of Learning, a remote-provider of higher education which had obvious similarities to the Open University.<sup>60</sup> Closer to home Briggs became a much-prized advisor and advocate for the heritage sector. He chaired the UK education panel of the European Architectural Heritage Year in 1975,<sup>61</sup> and from that point onwards became a fixture in the lives of many conservation groups such as the Civic Trust, the Victorian Society and the William Morris Society. Briggs' attitude towards protecting the built environment came without the misty-eyed romanticism common at the time. Harking back to the 1950s to his work on cities as evolving spaces, he called for sensible planned development of urban areas and the preservation of a 'sense of place' as much as its form.<sup>62</sup> A custodian of the past, he also had a prospective view of the future, often asked to speculate on future technologies and their impact, and on how life might be lived in decades to come.<sup>63</sup>

The 1970s and 1980s also saw Briggs' own past catching up with his present, as many of the newer history subdisciplines of the period looked back to his early work for inspiration. Whilst his star may have faded amongst Victorianists, as Hewitt argues in his chapter, there was no shortage of other specialists for whom he was a guiding light. Nascent societies for the history of medicine, of education and of social history turned to Briggs for keynotes and endorsements,<sup>64</sup> whilst he was evoked as a pioneer in other developing fields, such as the history of the media, oral history and the history of retailing.<sup>65</sup> And themes that Briggs had often spoken to in the course of writing and lecturing about history and literature, or urban civilisation, now became fashionable; for example, the literary and linguistic turn in social history<sup>66</sup> or the growth of historians' interest in the environment.<sup>67</sup> In other areas, Briggs could still blaze a lonely trail. His *English Musical Culture, 1776–1876–1976*, of which only short extracts have so far appeared,<sup>68</sup> invites serious consideration as a starting point for another branch of modern history. It seems entirely appropriate to end the opening to *The Age of Asa* by hinting at its subject's unfinished works. Still working daily as a historian, Asa Briggs is now very much part of contemporary history. The essays that follow seek to explore and document this life in its considerable depth, breadth and impact.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank the following for their assistance with my research for this chapter: Asa and Susan Briggs, Mark Bainbridge at the Library of Worcester College, Oxford, David Bebbington and Fiona Duncan at the University of Stirling, Hannah Lowery in the Special Collections Department of the University of Bristol Library, Jonny Davies at the BFI Library, Southbank, James Goddard at the Trades Union Congress Library at London Metropolitan University, Ryan Hendrickson at the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Robert Albota at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Ottawa, and Bruce Stave at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. See the bibliography of Briggs' principal works at the end of this volume, and also the more comprehensive listing at [www.history.ac.uk/making-history/historians/briggs.asa.html](http://www.history.ac.uk/making-history/historians/briggs.asa.html)
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- Chun Lin, *The British New Left* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993).
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  15. His first broadcast on the Third Programme (about the WEA) was on 31 July 1953: *Radio Times*, 27 July 1953, p. 39. Beginning in 1945 he had also written and presented talks for the Services Educational Unit, and for the Schools Department: 'Talks Asa Briggs, 1945–55', R Cont 1, BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham.
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22. *Patterns of Peacemaking*, p. 17 (although Briggs noted in the 1998 edition that David Thomson had written most of the text).
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30. 'Oral History Transcript: Lord Asa Briggs', The Open University, p. 1; 'IHR. Interviews with Historians: Asa Briggs'; Briggs, 'The Imaginative Response of the Victorians to New Technology: The Case of the Railways', in Christopher Wrigley and John Shepherd (eds.), *On the Move: Essays in Labour and Transport History Presented to Philip Bagwell* (London: Hambledon, 1991), pp. 58–75.
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  39. Briggs, 'Cost of Academe' (review of John Carswell's *Government and the Universities in Britain*), *Financial Times*, 22 February 1986, p. xvi; UGC Minutes 16 April 1959, UGC 1/7, The National Archives, Minutes 26 January 1961, UGC 1/9, *ibid.*; *Times*, 28 April 1964, p. 5.
  40. *Times*, 2 January 1973, p. 8; cf. Briggs, 'The Development of Higher Education in the United Kingdom: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in W. R. Niblett (ed.), *Higher Education: Demand and Response* (London: Tavistock, 1969); pp. 95–116, esp. pp. 102–4.
  41. *Times*, 18 October 1967, p. 4 (report of Briggs' Granada Guildhall lecture); Briggs, 'University and Community' (lecture recording, 1968), University of Sussex Library; Briggs, 'The Role of the University in Economic Development: A Perspective and a Prospective', *CRE-Information*, 54 (1981), 12–30; Briggs, 'The Higher Education Scene in Britain Today', *Journal of Higher Education* [New Delhi], 9 (1983), pp. 47–63; *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 20 May 1983, p. 11. For the Keele precedent, see: Briggs' comments on the University of Sussex jubilee website, [www.sussex.ac.uk/fiftyyears/fiftyvoices/iframe.php?id=4](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/fiftyyears/fiftyvoices/iframe.php?id=4), accessed 30 October 2013.
  42. Briggs, 'How to Bridge Disciplines', *New Society*, 14 October 1965, pp. 28–9; Briggs, 'Communications', (lecture recording, 1966), University of Sussex Library.
  43. Briggs to Sidney Pollard, 13 November 1962, Asa Briggs Papers, Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Correspondence, 1962–66, Box 194/F8; Briggs, 'New Campus for Old' (review of John Lawlor (ed.), *The New University*), *New Society*, 24 October 1968, p. 611–12.
  44. *Sunday Times Magazine*, 3 December 1972, pp. 23–36; *ibid.*, 7 October 1973, pp. 83–5, 102–7.
  45. Briggs, 'Academic Flux' (review of Christopher Driver's *The Exploding University*), *Guardian*, 29 July 1971, p. 12; Briggs, 'Decade of Disenchantment', *ibid.*, 6 February 1973, p. 15.
  46. Anthony Sampson, 'In the Hot Seats of Learning', *Observer*, 18 October 1970, p. 29.
  47. Briggs was chosen by the Stirling students' union to nominate an independent adjudicator, but struggled to find someone to take it on, and eventually, following the death of the university's principal, recommended that the inquiry not take place: Academic Assembly Minutes, 13 March 1973, University of Stirling Archives; *Brig: The Student Newspaper of Stirling University*, 17 September 1973, p. 1; *Times*, 14 March 1973, p. 6.
  48. BFI Governors' Minutes, G5/445: 20 October 1970, G5/462–3: 19 January 1971, G5/480: 26 April 1971, G5/523: 21 December 1971, BFI Archive, Southbank. Various articles by Whannel and others arising from the dispute were in the Autumn 1971 issue of *Screen*, 3 (1971), pp. 2–50. *Times*, 16 February 1972, p. 10. For the background, see: Geoffrey Nowell-Smith



- and Christopher Dupin (eds.), *The BFI, the Government and Film Culture, 1933–2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), chs. 6–7; Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'The 1970 Crisis at the BFI and its Aftermath', *Screen*, 47 (2006), 453–9.
49. Central Executive Committee Minutes, 11 January 1962, WEA Central/1/2/1/27, WEA Archive, TUC Library; Briggs, *Education through Part-Time Study: George Birkbeck's Vision in the Light of 21st Century Needs and Opportunities* (London: Birkbeck College, 1991), pp. 14–15.
  50. *Times*, 3 March 1970, p. 2; *ibid.*, 18 October 1972, p. 3; *Guardian*, 2 November 1978, p. 5; *Report of the Committee on Nursing*, Cmnd. 5115 (1971–1972); Briggs, 'Health and Education', *Royal Society of Health Journal*, 94 (1974), pp. 155–60.
  51. *Guardian*, 14 July 1973, p. 11.
  52. Briggs, 'Oxford Reformed: the Centenary of the Act of 1854', *Oxford Magazine*, 17 June 1954, pp. 398–400; Briggs, 'Introduction', in Barbara Smith (ed.), *Truth, Liberty, Religion: Essays Celebrating Two Hundred Years of Manchester College* (Oxford: Manchester College, 1986), pp. xiii–xvii; Briggs, 'Oxford and its Critics', in M. G. Brock and Mark Curthoys (eds.), *The History of the University of Oxford, vol. 6: Nineteenth-Century Oxford* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 134–45; Briggs, 'Port Not Claret in Plastic Age', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 31 May 2002, p. 26.
  53. Myfanwy Vickers, 'Mover and Shaker', *Oxford Today: The University Magazine*, 4 (1991), pp. 18–19; Interview with the author, Lewes, 28 November 2013.
  54. Concerns were expressed that volume 5 should not just be about the BBC but also include the IBA: Leonard Miall to John Brown, 5 June 1978, File 212967, Oxford University Press Archives, Oxford.
  55. Hansard, House of Lords Debates, (19 February 1979), vol. 398, cols. 1660–4, *ibid.* (30 October 1986), vol. 481, col. 841
  56. *Times*, 28 January 1976, p. 16. A rare example was the historical perspective he gave on the controversy created by the *At the Edge of the Union* programme in 1985: Briggs, 'The Right to Know is of Crucial Importance', *Financial Times*, 10 August 1985, p. 6.
  57. Briggs, 'Karl Marx: the Legacy', *Listener*, 17 March 1983, pp. 6–8; *Guardian*, 14 March 1983, p. 1. For McLellan's criticisms and Briggs' defence, see: *ibid.*, 7 April 1983, p. 10; *ibid.*, 21 April 1983, p. 12. See also: Briggs, *Karl Marx: The Legacy* (London: BBC, 1983).
  58. Briggs and Joanna Spicer, *The Franchise Affair: Creating Fortunes and Failures in Independent Television* (London: Century, 1986).
  59. *Guardian*, 25 October 1973, p. 4.
  60. *Times*, 13 May 1974, p. 5. Briggs chaired the Expert Group on Commonwealth Co-operation in Distance and Open Learning which reported in 1987: *Towards a Commonwealth of Learning: A Proposal to Create the University of the Commonwealth for Co-operation in Distance Learning* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1987); Briggs, '"Response", New Technologies: New Possibilities for Reaching the Unreached', Forum on Open Learning, London 14–17 July 2008, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDLaQuE9oCA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDLaQuE9oCA), accessed 13 May 2014.
  61. *Times*, 12 July 1974, p. 13.



62. Briggs, 'The Philosophy of Conservation', *Journal of the Royal Society of the Arts*, 123 (1975), pp. 685–95; Briggs, *Environment and Heritage: An Educational Challenge* (London: Goldsmiths' College, 1979).
63. Briggs, 'The Organisation of Leisure', *Times*, 11 October 1969, p. 7; Briggs, 'The Tube of Plenty: Towards an "Age of Television"', *Futures*, 25 (1977), pp. 519–25. As he told Oxford's alumni magazine in 1991: 'we have to prove through education that we are capable of looking into the future', Vickers, 'Mover and Shaker'.
64. Briggs, 'The Study of the History of Education'. In 1976 Briggs became inaugural President of the Social History Society, and also President of the Society for the Social History of Medicine.
65. On media history, see: Paddy Scannell, 'History and Culture', *Media, Culture and Society*, 2 (1980), 1–3. For oral history, see: Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn. 1988), p. 213, citing Brian Harrison in 1971 on Briggs' advice on oral history techniques. Briggs and Thompson collaborated in establishing the National Life Story Collection: *NLSC Newsletter*, 3 (2000), p. 2. On the history of retailing, see: W. H. Fraser, *The Coming of the Mass Market* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 260; Bill Lancaster, *The Department Store: A Social History* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995), p. 2; Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumin, 'The World of the Department Store: Distribution, Culture and Social Change' in Crossick and Jaumin (eds.), *Cathedrals of Consumption: The European Department Store, 1850–1939* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 35, n. 3.
66. Briggs, *History and Literature*, The Bowra Memorial Lecture, Cheltenham College, 7 October 1978 (Cheltenham: Cheltenham College, 1978).
67. Briggs, *Cities and Countrysides: The British and American Experience, 1860–1914*, H. J. Dyos Memorial Lecture, 12 May 1981 (Leicester: University of Leicester, 1982).
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# Part I

## History

# 1

## The Interconnectedness of Things: Asa Briggs and Social History

*Rohan McWilliam*

Threaded through the footnotes of Richard Hoggart's pioneering *The Uses of Literacy* are a number of references to his colleague at the University of Leeds, Asa Briggs.<sup>1</sup> Hoggart finds support from Briggs for his belief that working-class life in the small towns of Yorkshire 'can more easily have dignity ... than in the big cities'. This is because street life possesses, as Briggs reminded Hoggart, a 'hierarchy of specialisation', defined by people who are known for different skills, whether a man, 'good with his hands', who can help out a neighbour or a woman who puts her talent for fine needlework to good use on special occasions. These crafts or talents not only provided satisfaction but were gifts to the group, distinct from professional or individualistic services. Yet Briggs' input also suggested this was not a world to be idealised. A common part of life was the family row, which could not be concealed from the neighbourhood because the walls were so thin.<sup>2</sup> If we want to understand Briggs as a social historian, it is best to start with him as a social observer, noting the contours of everyday life, comparing the experiences of his Keighley childhood with other parts of Yorkshire. Briggs insists he has 'learnt as much from landscape and townscape as from books'.<sup>3</sup> On another occasion, he urges '[t]here is no substitute for knowing a city: reading about it is second best'.<sup>4</sup> His scholarship is notable for its concern with the texture of life but also with the way everyday life is structured. Briggs acknowledges that the 'the co-existence of smoking chimneys and heather among the bracken in the hills' in Keighley helped determine his interest in 19th-century Britain.<sup>5</sup>

Few have done more to shape the development of social history as a discipline than Asa Briggs.<sup>6</sup> He is often credited with helping launch the fields of labour history, urban history, leisure history and the history of mass communications, amongst other subdisciplines. However, the

significance of his work and those who are comparable to him (such as Harold Perkin and Brian Harrison) remains surprisingly undiscussed in the literature on trends in modern history. This has left a hole in our understanding of historiography, which this chapter seeks to begin to fill.<sup>7</sup>

The absence can be explained. The conventional narrative of the rise of social history in Britain places a lot of emphasis on those who were associated in the 1940s with the Communist Party Historians Group (such as Eric Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson) as well as the wider group of figures who would go on to found *Past and Present*. Much of this literature was formed by an engagement with Marxism or, at least, some form of theory. In contrast, Briggs' work has tended to eschew elaborate discussions of either theory or methodology. Briggs has never been a Marxist (though he has written and broadcasted on Marx) and his work carries its politics lightly; he sits in the House of Lords as a cross-bencher.<sup>8</sup> We can infer a left-leaning inclination from some of the topics he has written about (he is also clear that he regards Clement Attlee as Britain's best post-war prime minister).<sup>9</sup> But, if we can observe traces of political commitment, there is nothing approaching the passionate polemics of E. P. Thompson or the panoramic portraits of capitalism to be found in Hobsbawm's histories.

This absence of theorising or discussion of methodology is deceptive because Briggs' histories in fact offer a profound way of understanding the past of British society and elsewhere. Moreover, his writings and career make him one of the architects of the post-1945 social democratic settlement. It was the work of intellectuals such as Briggs that helped establish the common sense' of post-war politics and social policy, where the inequalities of British society had to be ameliorated through redistribution and a healthy public sector. We need to explore the meanings of Briggs' work and to place it in its historical context. In this article, I deliberately contrast Briggs' views with those of subsequent scholars who have covered similar territory. This is partly to locate Briggs' scholarship in its historical moment but also to show its enduring influence in the establishment of problems and paradigms, even if later historians have chosen to do things differently.

What was the academic subject of history like before Briggs' generation began to change things in the 1950s and 1960s? History as an academic subject in British universities was dominated by political, diplomatic and constitutional history but also, increasingly, by economic history. In addition, university history degrees often ended their coverage with the early 19th century. The rise of social history

therefore represented a challenge to the way history was being written at the time.

To some extent, social history had always existed, but it frequently took the form of antiquarian narratives that were strong on colour and a feeling for the customs and manners of the people, but which were unstructured and unsystematic. Things began to change between the wars, which saw the development of serious academic work in the field. The *Annales* school made the running after 1929 in France, whereas in Britain social history was a subset of economic history. There were figures such as Eileen Power (an influence on Briggs) and M. M. Postan, whose medieval histories blended social and economic aspects; so too did R. H. Tawney's work on the 16th century.<sup>10</sup> Dorothy George wrote extensively about 18th-century social life and the study of demography also expanded.<sup>11</sup> G. M. Trevelyan's best-selling social history of England, published in 1944 and dedicated to Eileen Power, showed how the subject could have broad popular appeal.<sup>12</sup>

The experience of the depression and then the disorienting impact of the Second World War generated new interest in the ways societies have behaved historically. The opening up of higher education after the war and the increasing attractions of Marxism to some scholars ensured that history could no longer be simply concerned with the politics of the elite. The decision by the University of Oxford (at the instigation of G. D. H. Cole, himself a social historian) to make Briggs a Reader in Recent Social and Economic History in 1950 therefore illustrated the way that the discipline was changing. Briggs was able to develop 19th-century British history as a field. If we emphasise here Briggs' role as a pioneer of social history, it should also be acknowledged that he was working with the grain of his time; there were many others (such as Keith Thomas and Peter Laslett) who expanded the scope of academic history in the 1950s and 1960s.

What distinguished the post-war generation was a desire to shift away from anything that appeared impressionistic, painterly or antiquarian. In its place came the emphasis on a scientific approach (hence the original subtitle of *Past and Present*, 'a journal of scientific history') or, at least, the attempt to engage with the social sciences. Social history was affected by the rise of sociology and anthropology as academic disciplines in the post-war period; sociologists such as Michael Young were examining the ways communities behaved whilst anthropology became a key influence for figures such as Keith Thomas.<sup>13</sup> Measuring change in precise terms became the stock-in-trade of the social historian, which meant that parliamentary papers, census data, surveys and other new

forms of evidence were pressed into service. Marxists and non-Marxists, studying Britain (and elsewhere) in the period after about 1780, were focused on the significance of class, capitalism, hierarchy and inequality. Thus, social historians became associated with putting peasants, working-class and other subaltern groups back into the historical record. This was only ever one dimension of the way in which they approached the past; figures such as F. M. L. Thompson demonstrated how it was possible to write a social history of the aristocracy.<sup>14</sup> The next generation (from the 1980s onwards) was less emphatic about class but more concerned with the categories of race, gender, national identity and selfhood when studying society.

The rise of social history was not uncontroversial. Some political historians resisted it and claimed it was less important than matters of state and diplomacy. This meant that social history (at least in its early years) had a slightly oppositional dimension. In what sense was Briggs part of this new wave? Briggs' work was of its time in reflecting deeply on changes in social structure; on the other hand, it never had the obsession with quantification that became a characteristic of social history in its early years. Social history tended to flourish initially on the fringes of mainstream academic life and particularly in adult education. Briggs significantly played a major role in the Workers' Educational Association from the 1950s onwards, serving as vice-president and then president. When Briggs was at the University of Leeds, he developed strong connections with figures in the extramural department such as J. F. C. Harrison. Briggs was therefore well connected with these intellectual currents, which challenged the curricula of many university history departments.

The interconnectedness of things is the central Briggsian insight. To say that Briggs ignores theory does not mean that his are works of naïve empiricism. On the contrary, they are examples of ideas-driven history. In Isaiah Berlin's terms, Briggs has been a fox and not a hedgehog.<sup>15</sup> Briggs' work abounds with reflections on the way modern society has been shaped. He explains that, for him, 'social history is concerned both with structures and with processes of change, but the best way of exploring these things is to focus on experience'.<sup>16</sup> If there is no explicit theory of history, there is a strong sense that the relationship between economy and society is an important driver of change. Not for nothing did he do an undergraduate degree in economics as well as in history. He has therefore been concerned fundamentally with the relationship between social groups, pushing forward understandings of class and social reform that modern historians now take for granted. Briggs'

gaze as a social historian runs from the welfare state to apparently trivial pieces of ephemera such as Staffordshire figurines. He understands the role of institutions in shaping modern life, from the BBC to Marks and Spencer. At the same time, there is a recognition of the ambiguities and complexities of social change that mean he cannot be pigeon-holed in a simple way. We catch a cautious but sensible methodology when he describes his approach to local history: 'Avoid generalizations until you were sure that could make them. Stick to particularities'.<sup>17</sup> This is precisely why he is an important thinker. It is characteristic of him that, despite helping to launch a number of subdisciplines of history, he has always disliked the way these tended to take institutional forms (with specialist journals and departments), which discourage an intellectual conversation from taking place with other forms of history or with other subjects.<sup>18</sup>

Another difference that Briggs made was that he broadened the subjects that could be taken seriously by historians. Expanding the scope of history to include labour and working-class movements was in itself an innovative way of seeing the past in its time, but so, too, was his understanding that mass entertainment required a serious history that went beyond the anecdotal. If historians now feel unembarrassed about writing about popular culture, it is partly because of Briggs. Thus, when he was at the University of Leeds in the 1950s, he encouraged the academic study of newsreels.<sup>19</sup> Not only was this ahead of its time, it is just one example of the ways in which Briggs widened the potential source base for historians. Following Briggs, it has become natural to use (so-called) ephemera such as advertisements and royal souvenirs as a way of understanding how society works. To situate Briggs more precisely, his was a form of history that existed before the 'cultural turn', which became dominant from the 1980s onwards. We catch a brief but revealing glimpse of his approach when he writes, 'I have always been sceptical about cultural studies which leave the economics out'.<sup>20</sup> Yet, in retrospect, it is obvious that it was scholars such as Briggs who made the cultural turn possible. Moreover, his work has a strong sense of the importance of images and representations, combined with an emphasis on the material base. This continues to represent the most productive ways of writing about culture.

Briggs' engagements with literature, visual culture and the histories of medicine and technology helped persuade historians to adopt a wider, interdisciplinary approach. Whilst his work is slightly different from history from below, with its focus on subaltern groups and the marginalised, his belief that society had to be studied as a whole

produced a framework in which new kinds of people's history could be written. This would culminate in his widely read *Social History of England*, which has done a great deal to popularise social history and familiarise the public with the insights it has to offer. There was therefore a profoundly democratic tendency in his writing that matched the changes in Britain after the Second World War.

With due allowance for important work that came before and after, Asa Briggs enjoyed his most creative phase as a social historian between 1952 (when his history of Birmingham was published) and 1963, which saw the publication of arguably his greatest book, *Victorian Cities*.<sup>21</sup> In those years, Briggs became an agent of what David Kynaston calls 'modernity Britain'.<sup>22</sup> As the country was remade with motorways and high-rise council housing and as the welfare state and redistributive taxation promoted a more equal society, Briggs' work demonstrated that these developments were not new. They built on the work of reformers in all social classes since the late 18th century. Before William Beveridge and Richard Titmuss, there were Seebohm Rowntree, Joseph Chamberlain and Edwin Chadwick. But the 'age of improvement' that constituted the 1950s and 1960s was also built on the evolution of social structure and currents of public opinion both high and low, which had roots long in the past. The effect of the new wave of social history that commenced in the 1950s explained how modern social change came to be.<sup>23</sup> Briggs' first significant published work was about the problem of public health in the age of Chadwick.<sup>24</sup> He was also one of the first to try and place the post-1945 welfare state in a wider historical perspective, establishing its Victorian roots. This became a common way of writing about the 19th century, which frequently became structured around a narrative of social problems and their reform. Moderns of the post-war period frequently disdained the world of the Victorians but, as Briggs showed, they were shaped by the 19th-century inheritance nevertheless.

At the same time, in his other guises as teacher and administrator, he broadened access to university, first through his role as President of the Workers' Educational Association and then later as Chancellor of the Open University. We should not view Briggs' formidable role in university administration as separate from his historical writing. The point is that they were interconnected, part of the same intellectual project. Thus at Leeds and then at Sussex University (the university he profoundly shaped), he transformed the curricula for all subjects in imaginative and innovative ways.<sup>25</sup> Briggs argued that there were no frontiers in the 'map of learning' (that phrase we most associate



with Sussex in its first decades). Teaching and scholarship needed to be interdisciplinary in orientation. An education in history that did not expose students to insights from neighbouring disciplines was not only too narrow, it was, in its way, unmodern. Students in different subjects took what were called 'contextual' courses, which were interdisciplinary in orientation. This also meant that valuable insights could come from unexpected places. At Sussex, Briggs would also appoint scholars in a number of fields who had done other things and had not just come off the PhD treadmill (something that would be unthinkable today). These included Norman MacKenzie (an assistant editor of the *New Statesman*), John Rosselli (a journalist and opera critic with the *Manchester Guardian*) and Keith Middlemas (who had been a clerk in Parliament).<sup>26</sup> This kind of life experience, combined with interdisciplinarity, created a lively intellectual atmosphere that marked all who taught and studied there. Briggs' focus on working-class history also led to the appointment of figures such as J. F. C. Harrison, Eileen Yeo and Stephen Yeo, who turned the university history department into a pioneering organisation for the development of history from below.<sup>27</sup>

It is not coincidental that one of Briggs' first published articles (in 1948) was about George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.<sup>28</sup> Briggs had been working on public health and employed this research to open up the medical contexts of the novel. Eliot, he showed, had put a lot of effort into researching the state of medicine in the 1830s. Briggs proved to be a rare kind of historian who was open to reading literary criticism. A theme of Briggs' work has been the recognition that the Victorian novel constitutes a form of social history, a vehicle through which the 19th century came to understand itself.

Nor was it entirely coincidental that Briggs' article on Eliot dealt with a 'study of provincial life' (to give the subtitle of *Middlemarch*). Briggs claims that he has never really mixed in London intellectual or literary circles. He was born into a working-class household in Keighley, Yorkshire, and this shaped not only his viewpoint but also the kind of social history that he encouraged: 'I have always been a "provincial", and my approach to history has reflected this'.<sup>29</sup> Not only did he direct attention away from the corridors of power but he insisted that the really important social developments happened outside London.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, we should see his work as part of a continuum with other scholarship boys born outside London who began to shape the cultural landscape with work that looked beyond London and the Home Counties. This would include Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and, in very different modes, figures such as Alan Bennett and Dennis Potter.

These products of provincial grammar schools would use university positions or the mass media as vehicles to explore working-class experiences that were frequently ignored or written about merely by outside observers such as George Orwell.

In Briggs' case, his researches drew him not back to his Yorkshire roots but to Birmingham. His first major work was the second volume of the official history of the city (the first, incidentally, of a series of 'official' or commissioned histories that became a feature of his career). Its genesis was in a biography of Joseph Chamberlain that was never written. Briggs declared that he wanted to 'break down the artificial barriers which separate economic and political history and to describe the evolution of a community'.<sup>31</sup> His volume covered the period 1865–1938. The choice of Birmingham was not incidental. Briggs argued that the city's history was a key part of the story of Britain as a whole: figures such as Joseph Chamberlain employed the city as a base from which to shape the national agenda. Local histories in this view did not need to be merely antiquarian in focus or tub-thumping embodiments of civic pride. Instead, Briggs revealed that it was only through an understanding of the peculiarities of locality that any real understanding of social evolution can emerge. A sense of place was a vital feature of social history. It was not insignificant that many of the key works that defined British social history thereafter were local histories.<sup>32</sup> The next generation of historians would spend many nights in bed and breakfasts as they pursued forays into provincial archives.

The commission to write a history of Birmingham was fortuitous in another respect. Birmingham in the later 19th century was not only the workshop of the world; it was also, in the words of *Harper's Monthly Magazine* in 1890, 'the best-governed city in the world'.<sup>33</sup> Birmingham led the way in developing the powers of local government ('gas and water socialism') but, more significantly, its economic base of craft workers allowed for a social consensus to emerge. In 1867, John Bright wrote, '[i]n Birmingham, I believe, the "middle class" is ready to work heartily with the "working class"'.<sup>34</sup> Briggs would later comment, 'If Engels had lived not in Manchester but in Birmingham, his conception of "class" in history might have been very different'.<sup>35</sup> It is no surprise that Briggs held the 19th century to be an 'age of improvement'. This is not a conservative proposition; rather, it is derived from a recognition of the social problems that existed in the period but also an awareness of the ways that reformers of all classes worked together to combat distress. To that extent, Briggs' approach to the 19th century was formed by the post-1945 consensus, rather than the increasing turn towards Marxism

in academic circles. Marxists such as E. P. Thompson could often be disdainful of the work of social reformers; Briggs was not.

The Birmingham history also exemplified Briggs' turn towards the social sciences, and it commenced a long period where he began to engage with urban sociology, particularly the work that had commenced at the University of Chicago in the interwar period and which had reshaped American sociology and political science. Cities were interpreted as machines, systems and networks in what became 'the first successful American program of collective sociological research'.<sup>36</sup> Research, fieldwork, surveys and theory were meant to feed off each other in order to solve social problems. The Chicago School stressed the role of the physical environment, landscape and social structure in determining the nature of community and even individual behaviour. This was an approach that had its roots in American progressivism (significantly, the reformer Jane Addams (1860–1935) was an influence in the early years). The Chicago School pioneered the study of patterns of urban growth and the relationship between culture, politics, transport and technology that influenced the way Briggs would write about the Victorian city. It fed the sense in his work that individuals should always be related to wider developments in society. Briggs claims that Chicago was his 'second university' and that he 'drew more inspiration from America in writing of a great British city than from Britain'.<sup>37</sup> But it was not just American sociologists who were an inspiration. American historians such as Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr and Oscar Handlin were also opening up social and urban history. Briggs calls his own memoir *Special Relationships*, and we might see his work as the intellectual counterpart of the (so-called) 'special relationship' between Britain and the United States (though Briggs acknowledges many non-American influences as well).

More generally, Briggs' form of social history was defined by its preparedness to borrow (if unsystematically) from neighbouring academic disciplines where appropriate. The kind of urban history that Briggs promoted showed the advantages of using local examples as ways of exploring the complexity of social development. What emerged was the sense that change in the 19th century was uneven and subject to variables, which it was the mission of the social historian to establish.

The history of Birmingham commenced ten years of innovation. Two years later, *Victorian People* helped launch what would become Victorian Studies.<sup>38</sup> Although well mannered, it was a deeply revisionist text, marking a reaction against the Lytton Strachey-induced anti-Victorianism of the interwar years.<sup>39</sup> The book examined the lives

of a series of key figures who were prominent in the mid-Victorian years, including Samuel Smiles and Benjamin Disraeli. They were chosen because they embodied certain features of what, a few years later, would become known as the 'age of equipoise'.<sup>40</sup> Briggs clearly admired the social purpose of reformers and refused to have recourse to Bloomsbury-type condemnations of the Victorians as hypocrites or as caricatures. In this, he was the heir to G. M. Young, a historian he much admired and who insisted that Victorian culture was complex and diverse. Samuel Smiles was not patronised by Briggs (as though he had written the Victorian equivalent of *How to Make Friends and Influence People*) but reclaimed as a radical.<sup>41</sup> *Victorian People* led to a re-evaluation of the mid-Victorian years. Whilst it is an elegant work, it is surprising that the author went on to become a kind of social scientist as there are whiffs of rather old-fashioned, painterly portraiture in the book (possibly G. M. Young's influence). It argued that the national mood of the 'high Victorian period' (a phrase no longer much used) was defined by the key words thought, work and progress. Nevertheless, his generalisations bristle with insight. He argues that despite 'the prolonged business prosperity' of the period, 'England did not become a business society'.<sup>42</sup> Business values were thwarted by the gentry, the civil service and the embryonic labour movement.

A few years later, Briggs wrote the biography of another Victorian (although one who lived well into the 20th century), Seebohm Rowntree.<sup>43</sup> His social investigations (along with those of Charles Booth) helped pave the way for a new diagnosis of poverty, which destroyed the moralistic approach of the Victorians. The work of Rowntree in York became a laboratory for the formation of the welfare state. For that reason, Briggs' book *Social Thought and Social Action* was more than a study of ideas. Figures such as Rowntree were prophets of the modernisation that would be implemented by Briggs' generation. The counterpart to this book in Briggs' later career was his biography of Michael Young. Both Rowntree and Young were social entrepreneurs, driven both to acquire data on social problems but also to formulate policy.

It was clear which side of the post-war political consensus Briggs belonged to. He was an admirer of G. D. H. Cole and edited with John Saville the *Essays in Labour History* in his honour.<sup>44</sup> Cole managed to combine his role as pioneer of labour history with active contributions to politics, making him an obvious role model for left-leaning historians thereafter. *Essays in Labour History* was a defining volume that shaped the development of the field (although it also built on a more avowedly Marxist earlier volume edited by John Saville).<sup>45</sup> It included

major statements, including E. P. Thompson's 'Homage to Tom Maguire' and Eric Hobsbawm on custom, wages and the 19th-century labour market. It also featured Briggs' essay on the language of class, one of the most influential articles in the canon of social history. Briggs traced how the language of 'ranks' and 'orders' in the later 18th century were replaced by that of 'class', derived from the metaphor of class in a school. This was, in his view, an important social transformation. The essay built on earlier work about the way the language of social description began to create the notion of a 'middle class' (which also fed into *The Age of Improvement*).<sup>46</sup> It remains an important and enduring work, dovetailing with the inquiries that Raymond Williams had recently commenced into the 'keywords' that make up the modern social vocabulary (the intellectual connection with Williams, another interdisciplinary thinker, was not coincidental).<sup>47</sup> More recently, historians following the linguistic turn have dealt with issues differently. Briggs assumed that changes in language reflected change in economic structure and therefore interpreted the new language of class as a key component of the industrial revolution. By contrast, some historians have argued that it is language itself that helps construct 'reality' rather than the other way round.<sup>48</sup> Historians now see the relationship between language, culture and economic developments as complex; there is a greater focus on the agency of language and representation that is very different from the kind of argument that Briggs developed in the 1950s.

Simultaneously with his work on class, Briggs helped launch the modern interest in Chartism, which became probably the most explored episode in 19th-century history.<sup>49</sup> *Chartist Studies*, which he edited, was based on a common theme in Briggs' work, his focus on local peculiarities. He drew together historians who believed that, while Chartism became a national workers' movement in the 1840s, it was nevertheless a different thing in different localities. By highlighting these peculiarities, Briggs and his contributors demonstrated the important insights to be derived from local history and from a sensitivity to regional development. Engaging with the local meant exploring '[v]ariations in local class structure, in the content of local grievances, in the traditions of political leadership and mass agitation, and in the adaptability and persistence of the Chartists themselves and their opponents'.<sup>50</sup> Briggs pulled the collection together with essays about the significance of the local dimension and about the national movement as well. A number of articles dealt with wider issues, such as the Chartist Land Plan, but even here Briggs pointed to local variations.

Class was a pivotal theme in the collection. Briggs argued that the movement needed to be related to the social history of the early Victorian years, which witnessed a rise in class-consciousness both amongst the working and the middle classes. Chartism changed fundamentally during the 1840s, moving on from political reform towards social reform (or even socialism) and to a greater internationalist concern with foreign political struggles. The contributors, however, acknowledged that the movement failed to create working-class unity. Whilst the eclecticism of Chartism's approach was a source of strength (as it extended its appeal), it also led to its failure: 'The price of a double, or rather a multiple, appeal was inconsistency and inadequate leadership'.<sup>51</sup> One of Briggs' explanations for the divergence in the appeal of the movement was the different nature of industry and employment across the country. Varying work practices and structures of employment, together with the cycles of economic growth, shaped the movement. This was therefore social history with the economics left in. Historians needed to understand something about the nature of industry and technology in order to make sense of working-class experience. They also needed at least an elementary grasp of economics. The work of W. W. Rostow on industrialisation and the stages of economic growth was an important influence.<sup>52</sup> This kind of approach would be built on by subsequent historians of the movement either through additional local studies or through attempts to explore its social and cultural impact.<sup>53</sup> It was challenged in the 1980s by revisionist arguments, which stressed that the social and economic nature of Chartism could not explain why it took such a political form (that is to say, the six points of the People's Charter had to be taken seriously).<sup>54</sup> Yet the revisionist challenge was only ever an attempt to point to other dimensions of Chartism rather than to displace the kind of approach that the contributors to *Chartist Studies* laid down, which is why the book remains worth reading despite the 50 years of intensive research that came after it.<sup>55</sup>

In *Chartist Studies*, Briggs argued characteristically that 'Chartists and their opponents belonged to two nations, but they were creatures of the same age'.<sup>56</sup> This suggests that class and the nature of class difference are part of the reality of modern Britain's development. On the other hand, consciousness of class need not generate class conflict or make class struggle inevitable. Here is a viewpoint that intersects with the Marxist view but differs from it. It also happens to be right.

Briggs' work made him the obvious person to become the first Chair of the Society for the Study of Labour History 1960. Yet it should

be emphasised that this engagement with the study of the labour movement was also conducted while Briggs was finding time to write about the making of middle-class consciousness, suggesting a holistic approach to social relations where no group could be studied in isolation.<sup>57</sup> Not only this but Briggs had written a centenary history of Lewis's, the chain of department stores that commenced in Liverpool in 1856. Briggs presented his commissioned work very much as a piece of social history in which the shopper was as significant as the shopkeeper (which is a worthy aim, though the book does not quite succeed in doing that). He argued, importantly, that the retail revolution of the 19th century was as important as the industrial revolution.<sup>58</sup> The coming of the department store was the consequence of rising standards of living in the 19th century. In other words, Briggs was unafraid to write about both capital and labour. This brought interpretive advantages. David Lewis's emphasis on selling for cash rather than credit (a marked shift in retail) could be compared with the Rochdale Pioneers.<sup>59</sup> The book ended with the comment that 'taste and preference are vital constituents of a free society, now and in the future', a hint that the book was written at the height of the Cold War.<sup>60</sup> Unlike some figures on the left who had trouble adapting to the affluent society, Briggs understood the importance of retail and shopping as a constituent of everyday experience.<sup>61</sup> *Friends of the People* is not the most heavily cited of Briggs' books but it can be seen as a pioneering work in the history of consumption, with its emphasis on advertising, lighting and marketing techniques, which Briggs explored in detail. The book is evidence of a preoccupation with the things that people bought which would lead to *Victorian Things* in 1988. He was also in effect asking a question that was not being addressed in the labour history of the period: what happens when the producers of wealth also become consumers? It is typical of Briggs that this question is not asked in a provocative form but it is nevertheless one of the issues that emerges from his scholarship. This work may have reflected the fact that Briggs had assisted at Oxford in the 1950s with short courses for people in business and thereafter developed positive links with many people in the business world.<sup>62</sup> In retrospect, this kind of approach, which was positive about both business and the labour movement, echoes the ethos of the Butskellite consensus in the 1950s and 1960s with its emphasis on the stimulation of growth through corporatist planning. Briggs recalls that in the 1950s and 1960s, '[t]here was a tacit, largely unacknowledged, collusion between business and labour'.<sup>63</sup> The other aspect of this consensus was a commitment to technological innovation. Briggs often wrote for

the *New Scientist* and promoted scientific education at Sussex University. This is another reason why he needs to be seen as an agent of 'modernity Britain'.

Where Briggs is more comparable to a figure like Eric Hobsbawm is that he has always been drawn to synthesis, combining research with attempts to take a larger view. The best example of this would be *The Age of Improvement*.<sup>64</sup> A textbook of British history from 1783–1867, *The Age of Improvement* has, if anything, improved with age. It is often considered a key volume in the development of Victorian studies, which is ironic as it does not deal with a large part of the Victorian period. What Briggs does reveal is the way society was transformed through industrialisation and the emergence of class society (some of his work on middle-class consciousness was integrated into the book). More, the book demonstrated the existence of a 'revolution in government' that took place in the early Victorian decades. Commencing the book as he did in the later 18th century, Briggs anticipated current arguments that the social and political contours of Victorian Britain did not just emerge in about 1830 but had their roots much earlier.<sup>65</sup>

*The Age of Improvement* remains in print, despite the ways in which historiography has changed substantially in recent years.<sup>66</sup> Historians have either downgraded the significance of the industrial revolution or encouraged us to see it in different ways.<sup>67</sup> Rates of industrial change have been revised downwards whilst it now appears that financial, rather than industrial, capital was where the serious money was.<sup>68</sup> Social development was uneven (in itself, a Briggsian way of looking at things). However, the style of Briggs' approach has made it one of the most used textbooks of the last half-century, and generations have come to the period through the elegance of his formulations.

This period of Briggs' work climaxed with *Victorian Cities*. He had already helped launch the field of urban history with his work on Birmingham, but in this book he combined new research and interpretation with a synthesis of much of the available literature. It was published in the same year as E. P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* but it is a very different work.<sup>69</sup> *Victorian Cities* is made up of a series of studies of individual cities, which embodied different kinds of urban experience. The comparative dimension was, at the time, extremely innovative. Manchester, he shows, was the 'shock city of the age', because it dramatised all the problems of urban growth.<sup>70</sup> But the different case studies were also meant to support a larger interpretation of urban growth. We catch Briggs' overall approach when he



argues that '[t]he building of the cities was a characteristic Victorian achievement, impressive in scale but limited in vision, creating new opportunities but also providing massive new problems'.<sup>71</sup> The problem was that '[e]conomic individualism and common civic purpose were difficult to reconcile'.<sup>72</sup> The achievement of social reformers was that they managed to persuade parsimonious ratepayers that 'the long run was worth bothering about'; in other words, that investment in public health and civic schemes was worth the money.<sup>73</sup> If the book has a target, it would be Lewis Mumford's dismissal of Victorian cities as 'insensate'.<sup>74</sup> In fact, Briggs shows, Victorian cities were diverse and complex with very different forms of social structure. Manchester and Birmingham may have been centres of industry, but there the resemblance ended. They possessed different forms of social organisation and separate provincial cultures.

Briggs also acknowledged that Victorianism was not just something that happened in Britain. He included a chapter on Melbourne as a Victorian city, demonstrating that the social patterns he identified could be found elsewhere. The book is comparative, drawing on the Chicago School to make a comparison with the American urban revolution of the later 19th century (although Briggs underplays the significance of ethnicity and race in a way that historians today would be less likely to do). As we have seen, *Victorian Cities* reflects a decade in which Briggs had engaged with British and American sociology.<sup>75</sup> However, the book does not labour this fact. It might appear to some to be untheorised, and insights derived from sociology are absorbed into the overall argument without overt theoretical discussion. For this reason, the book could appeal to the intelligent general reader (it was published originally by Odhams, a commercial press). The book is never simply populist but it does show the merit of a scholar thinking deeply and communicating in an elegant way (this is not always true of the historical profession).

Urban history thereafter became a central dimension to modern social history, promoted by figures such as H. J. Dyos at Leicester (like Sussex, another major centre of Victorian Studies).<sup>76</sup> Briggs' work has tended to focus on the urban rather than the rural. It is clear this is where his imagination has been most stimulated. He also combines a discussion of economic structure with reflections on different literary and artistic images and representations of city life. The analysis and the quality of his writing is at its sharpest in *Victorian Cities*, which is why it is such a major work in the canon of social history. However, the book is also of its time. It acknowledges that it owes a great deal to the development of

local histories but also the history of transport and technology, which were then emerging fields. It came before the move to quantification really became part of urban history. More recently, urban history has been reclaimed by Tristram Hunt's *Building Jerusalem* both for cultural history and the history of political thought, through explorations of the civic ideal. Hunt acknowledged *Victorian Cities* as a 'seminal' work.<sup>77</sup> His focus on the cultural forms and ways of living generated by city life is thoroughly Briggsian.

In the years after *Victorian Cities* Briggs devoted himself to Sussex University (becoming vice-chancellor in 1967) and to the multi-volume history of the BBC. The latter should be seen as another of his innovations. He launched the serious history of mass communications, recognising that the BBC is central to an understanding of the development of modern Britain.

However, Briggs' period as an innovator was not over. In 1988, he produced the final part of his Victorian trilogy, *Victorian Things*.<sup>78</sup> The book is the summation of all Briggs' work as a social historian and is a study in what has since become commonplace: the history of material culture. Historians of design and others have frequently found it useful. Briggs tried to make sense of the fact that Victorian homes (even those of some working-class people) were full of clutter. The furniture and fittings of their parlours and the objects that they placed on their mantelpieces were the very things that provide a point of entry into their world view.<sup>79</sup> Things tell us as much about a person as the books they read or the way they vote (probably more). Briggs took seriously the fact that people collected objects and thought carefully about their display; this was one way in which ordinary people expressed their creativity. In retrospect, the book represented a dialogue with a different kind of historian: the specialist in antiques. Matters that had been dealt with previously by collectors of 'Victoriana' were turned into the stuff of social history.

In a sense the book was about Briggs' career coming full circle. In *Victorian People* he had rescued his subjects from Bloomsbury caricatures; in the later work he went beyond the prevailing tendency to dismiss Victorian objects, furniture and other possessions as ugly, as junk or as bric-a-brac. He shows there was no real consensus at the time about the tastefulness of many Victorian things or objects. The discussion considers matches, needles, ladies' hats, postage stamps, patents and advertisements for 'Professor' Thomas Holloway's pills. Briggs has always been ahead of the game in understanding the way

in which advertising was a pivotal force as well as a major resource for the social historian.<sup>80</sup> True to the interdisciplinary spirit, *Victorian Things* includes many uses of Dickens, because the latter understood how objects had a character all of their own; the Victorian novel, like the antique dealer's catalogue, is reshaped by Briggs as social history.

Just as Briggs' work reflected the progressive politics of the 1950s, he also showed that the roots of the affluent or consumer society were very old. We might also relate the book to Briggs' friendship with (and biography of) Michael Young, who founded *Which?* as well as other consumer organisations. It is also significant that *Victorian Things* is dedicated to Ernst Gombrich, one of the leading figures in art history who pioneered the study of visual culture.<sup>81</sup> We catch something of Briggs' methodology when he uses Gombrich as part of a critique of the methods of French semiologists, who impose 'rules on disorderly "intelligible universes" rather than discovering them'. By contrast, Briggs prefers Gombrich's formulation: 'it is one thing to see the interconnectedness of things, another to postulate that all aspects of a culture can be traced back to one key cause of which they are the manifestations'.<sup>82</sup> Here we glimpse a method which links objects to the wider context and which employs interdisciplinary perspectives, but not in a way that endorses crude formulations about the past. At the same time, it absorbs the valuable insights of semiotics and its ability to think critically about ways of seeing and communication. If it appears undertheorised, it is really an exercise in taking from critical theory ideas that illuminate without constructing an overt theoretical infrastructure that is ultimately reductionist.

In recent years, cultural studies has become obsessed about 'things'. Deborah Cohen, for example, has written about the ways in which objects in the home took on an identity of their own and even became part of the family.<sup>83</sup> There is even a school of literary studies called 'thing theory'. As this essay has shown, other historians have written on Briggs' subjects and developed very different interpretations, but Briggs nonetheless got there first.

When students at Sussex University were required to study contextual courses, they were engaged in a Briggsian exercise, seeking out relations and affinities between different subject areas. 'Context' was a key word. It is also, of course, part of the basic methodology of any historian. When Briggs' work is put together, we find a holistic approach to social history that is focussed on the interconnectedness of things.

Aspiring towards 'total history' (defined through understanding society as a whole), Briggs understood that the big questions that a historian needed to answer concerned social structure.<sup>84</sup>

Given the trends in recent historiography, it is now clear there are significant gaps in Briggs' social portrait. Criticising scholars in the past for not having the research agenda of today is a pretty second-rate activity (it is also a profoundly unhistorical way of understanding intellectual life). However, we do need to think critically about Briggs' work because of its scope and influence, shaping many modern assumptions even if we are not aware of the fact. Thus we can see that Briggs' portrait of social development is not as rounded as it looks. Women and ethnic minorities do not feature strongly (none of the chapters in *Victorian People* is devoted to a woman, even though it describes the age of Florence Nightingale). His Victorians, by and large, lack a sexuality. The empire is something that is left by Briggs to imperial historians (an approach now disdained by post-colonialism) though Briggs has a long-standing interest in the history and affairs of many African and Asian countries. Ireland and the non-English parts of the United Kingdom are frequently ignored. As we have seen, the urban is privileged at the expense of the rural.

The resistance to developing an articulated theory or science of society no doubt also marks him out as a particularly English kind of intellectual (which, for figures such as Perry Anderson, is not a good thing as it is apparently introverted and resistant to continental thought).<sup>85</sup> Briggs admits that his brand of social historian 'often finds the detail more illuminating than the generalization, particularly when he seeks to identify what is distinctive to a society or to a period'. His conclusion is that '[e]verything is grist to his mill'.<sup>86</sup> This is empowering but can also produce a tendency towards the bland, a characteristic which marred some of his work after the early 1960s. Some of his commissioned histories lack the critical bite of his other work. Modern historians usually want to ask more probing questions.

The unifying narrative in Briggs' histories about the growth of class society has been dislodged by historians raising questions about the meanings of class and class consciousness.<sup>87</sup> On the other hand, an alternative to a class-based account of 19th-century social history has not really emerged. Briggs was able to talk about the Victorians with clarity because in the 1950s and 1960s we knew so much less about them. Now, the 19th century is a far more complex landscape and Victorian scholars are having to revisit their lives all over again, trying to piece the jigsaw together but this time to make a new picture.<sup>88</sup>

There is an optimistic tone in much of Briggs' writing. Technology and modernity ultimately seem to make the world a better place. The dark shadows, which were the trademark of Edward Thompson, are acknowledged but are not really there. To some extent, his work is shaped by the personality of a scholarship boy who never really failed at anything. He is closer to Thompson in his predilection for literature (they have both written on William Morris, for example).

Briggs, one suspects, would have no problem with criticism of the incompleteness of his work. His is a non-Marxian approach, which means that social structure and the economy are fundamental but they do not determine everything about social life. Not everything is sorted into neat boxes; there is room for ambiguity and complexity. What is true, however, is that Briggs' work has a Whiggish dimension to it (has there ever been a more Whiggish title than *The Age of Improvement?*). Briggs claims to have had an instinctive dislike of Whiggery but he is clearly more animated by the reformers at any given moment rather than by conservatives, although his work does not have the heroes and villains approach associated with, among others, G. M. Trevelyan.<sup>89</sup> If we look at the people he has focused on from Thomas Attwood and David Lewis (of Lewis's department store) through Seebohm Rowntree to Michael Young, they have tended to be people who helped in different ways to alter the nature of politics and civil society in modern Britain.

In the 21st century, Briggs remains relevant (possibly more so in what is, allegedly, a post-ideological age). If it is true that in the post war period, the British abandoned class politics to go shopping, then Briggs understood something about that with the studies of business and retail that he commenced in the 1950s and which continued with work on, for example, the wine trade.<sup>90</sup> If the book is about to become a thing of the past, then there is at least some important work on the history of the book from Briggs (his study of Longman).<sup>91</sup> Finally, if the United Kingdom is at risk and we need to uncover what is distinctive about a specifically English (as opposed to British) identity, then Briggs' social history of England offers some historical background.

Discussions of Briggs often focus on his extraordinary energy and his capacity to do a number of different jobs at one time. It would be a shame, however, if invocations of Briggs as a force of nature obscured the serious intellectual purpose that is there in much of his work and which gives it a unity. Failing to think about the significance of this body of work does a fundamental disservice to our understanding of the development of modern history.

## Notes

1. My thanks for comments on this article go to Kelly Boyd and Jim Obelkevich.
2. Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life, with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), pp. 22, 75, 284, 288.
3. Asa Briggs, 'Preface', in Asa Briggs (ed.), *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs*, vol. 2 (Brighton: Harvester, 1985), p. xiv.
4. Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (London: Odhams, 1963), p. 12.
5. Asa Briggs, *Special Relationships: People and Places* (London: Frontline Books, 2012), p. 4.
6. The present article develops further some of the themes first explored in my 'Asa Briggs and the Making of Modern British Social History', in the online journal *History Compass*, 9 (2011), pp. 900–9.
7. But see Miles Taylor, 'The Beginnings of Modern British Social History?', *History Workshop Journal*, 43 (1997), pp. 155–76.
8. Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 9.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
10. Asa Briggs, *A Social History of England* (London: Penguin, 1999 edn.), p. x; on Eileen Power, see Maxine Berg, *A Woman in History: Eileen Power, 1889–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
11. Jim Obelkevich (ed.), 'New Developments in History in the 1950s and 1960s', *Contemporary British History*, 14 (2000), pp. 125–42.
12. G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History: A Survey of Six Centuries, Chaucer to Queen Victoria* (London: Longman, 1944).
13. Peter Wilmott and Michael Young, *Family and Kinship in East London* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957); Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London: Penguin, 1973 edn.).
14. F. M. L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963).
15. Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953).
16. Briggs, *Social History of England*, p. viii.
17. Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 152.
18. Obelkevich (ed.), 'New Developments in History in the 1950s and 1960s', p. 156.
19. Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 69.
20. Asa Briggs, 'What Is the History of Popular Culture?' in Juliet Gardiner (ed.), *What Is History Today?* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 121.
21. Asa Briggs, *History of Birmingham*, vol. 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1952); Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (London: Penguin, 1968 edn.).
22. David Kynaston, *Modernity Britain: Opening the Box, 1957–1959* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).
23. Obelkevich (ed.), 'New Developments in History in the 1950s and 1960s', pp. 125–42.
24. Asa Briggs, 'Public Health and Public Opinion in the Age of Chadwick', in Briggs (ed.), *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs*, vol. 2, pp. 129–52; 'The Welfare State in Historical Perspective' in *ibid.*, pp. 177–211. The original articles were published in 1946 and 1961 respectively.

25. Whilst few would deny Briggs' pivotal role, acknowledgement should be made of the contributions to this approach of other key figures such as Sir John Fulton, the first Vice-Chancellor of Sussex University.
26. For Briggs and Norman Mackenzie, see Adrian Smith, 'Editor, Teacher, Writer ... Spy?', *New Statesman*, 28 June 2013, p. 14. See also Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 120.
27. Alun Howkins, 'History', in Fred Gray (ed.), *Making the Future: A History of the University of Sussex* (Brighton: University of Sussex, 2011), p. 254.
28. Asa Briggs, 'Middlemarch and the Doctors', *Cambridge Journal*, 1 (1948), pp. 749–62. This was subsequently published in a revised form in Asa Briggs (ed.), *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs*, vol. 2, pp. 49–67.
29. Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 55.
30. For a statement about the need to avoid a London-centred lens in English social history, see Asa Briggs, *A Social History of England*, p. ix.
31. Briggs, *History of Birmingham*, vol. 2, p. v.
32. For example: Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between the Classes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); Robert Q. Gray, *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution: Early Industrial Capitalism in Three English Towns* (London: Methuen, 1977); Geoffrey Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society: Kentish London, 1840–1880* (London: Croom Helm, 1978).
33. Quoted in Briggs, *History of Birmingham*, vol. 2, p. 67.
34. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 7.
35. Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, p. 116.
36. Martin Bulmer, *The Chicago School of Sociology: Institutionalization, Diversity, and the Rise of Sociological Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. xv.
37. Briggs, *Special Relationships*, pp. 12, 146, 153–4.
38. Asa Briggs, *Victorian People: A Reassessment of Persons and Things, 1851–67* (London: Penguin, 1965 edn.).
39. See Miles Taylor and Michael Wolff (eds.), *The Victorians since 1901: Histories, Representations and Revisions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); Kelly Boyd and Rohan McWilliam (eds.), *The Victorian Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2007).
40. W. L. Burn, *The Age of Equipoise: A Study of the Mid-Victorian Generation* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964).
41. Asa Briggs (ed.), *Samuel Smiles, Self-Help, with Illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance; with a Centenary Introduction* (London: John Murray, 1958).
42. Briggs, *Victorian People*, p. 18.
43. Asa Briggs, *Social Thought and Social Action: A Study of the Work of Seebohm Rowntree, 1871–1954* (London: Longman, 1961).
44. Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History* (London: Macmillan, 1960).
45. John Saville (ed.), *Democracy and the Labour Movement: Essays in Honour of Dona Torr* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1954). Briggs reviewed this volume when it appeared with a comment that is characteristic of his undogmatic approach to labour history: 'What this talented group of Marxists do not do is show why the British Labour Movement did not develop on lines congenial to them', *Guardian*, 22 February 1955, p. 4.

46. Asa Briggs, 'Middle-Class Consciousness in English Politics, 1780–1846', *Past and Present*, 9 (1956), pp. 65–74.
47. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958); *idem*, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976).
48. Dror Wahrman, for example, has argued that the category of the 'middle class' was inspired not by new forms of capital accumulation and ownership but by political debates in the late 18th century. The political extremes generated by the French Revolution generated a need for a language that favoured 'middleness'. In other words, Wahrman offers a political rather than a social reading of the emergence of the keywords of British culture: Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c.1780–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
49. Asa Briggs (ed.), *Chartist Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1959).
50. Asa Briggs, 'The Local Background of Chartism', in Briggs (ed.), *Chartist Studies*, p. 2.
51. Asa Briggs, 'National Bearings', in Briggs (ed.), *Chartist Studies*, p. 291.
52. W. W. Rostow, *British Economy of the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948); *idem*, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).
53. David Goodway, *London Chartism, 1838–1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists* (London: Temple Smith, 1984).
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# 2

## A Little Bit of a Victorian? Asa Briggs and Victorian Studies

*Martin Hewitt*

'I suppose I am a bit of a Victorian', Asa Briggs confessed to Daniel Snowman in a *History Today* interview in 1999, 'with an almost school-boyish grin which instantly offsets any suggestion of stuffiness'.<sup>1</sup> It is a natural association for a collector of Victorian narrative paintings, steam engine enthusiast, champion of the Victorian architectural heritage. The product of a smoke-clouded childhood in Keighley, 'essentially a Victorian community', as he later recalled, 'in attitudes as much as appearance', Briggs grew up five minutes from the station and from the vast textile engineering works of Prince Smith.<sup>2</sup> It was 'an environment which was totally transformed during the reign of Queen Victoria. In the background was the industrial revolution, a continuing revolution. In the foreground were Victorian institutions'.<sup>3</sup> At least until his move to Sussex in 1961, he remained entangled in these roots, and in the later 1950s, as Professor of History at Leeds, he was fully immersed in them once more, living in a Victorian house (described by A. J. P. Taylor as 'like Asa himself – small, squat and full of Victorian bric a brac'<sup>4</sup>, in a Victorian city where 'the past was a visible element in the present' and '[t]he very pace of change – social and topographical – [was] giving greater urgency to the work of the [...] historian'.<sup>5</sup> Although there had been almost no Victorian content in his undergraduate degree, living through the dismantling of the Victorian railways and the demolition of so much of the Victorian cities, Briggs felt himself even in 1962 'poised between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries'.<sup>6</sup> Hence his determination from the outset of his historical career to keep one foot firmly in both.<sup>7</sup>

In the face of Briggs' prodigious productivity and public service, the temptation to portray him as an eminent Victorian *après la lettre* has been impossible to resist. In 1988, Harold Perkin described him as 'a great Victorian, a Smilesian example of enormous energy and

self-improvement that leaves a more leisurely generation of historians panting behind him short of breath'.<sup>8</sup> The wellsprings of Briggs' career as a historian have always seemed to have a distinctly 19th-century flavour. Not only did his youth offer little temptation to modernist sneering – the hardships of the interwar West Riding were too raw for that<sup>9</sup> – but the backdrop for his Victorian scholarship in the 1950s and 1960s was an active involvement in the Workers' Educational Association, an Edwardian rather than Victorian movement, but nonetheless steeped in the Victorian championing of self-improvement, civic activism and the common culture.<sup>10</sup> Hence perhaps his powerful streak of liberal-individualism: his peculiar sympathy with Samuel Smiles and for Smiles' stress on the importance of personal character, of self-culture, of individual effort.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, for many commentators it is not just that Briggs would have made a great Victorian, but that he has also made a great Victorian historian. In 1965 Herman Ausubel described him as 'the outstanding Victorianist in the world', and nearly 40 years later he was still being billed as 'the greatest living specialist on Victorian England'.<sup>12</sup> David Cannadine has remarked that Briggs has been 'almost as much the maker of Victorian England in our time as the Victorians themselves were the creators of it in theirs'.<sup>13</sup> This reputation rests on a body of work sufficiently extensive for a single academic career (though for Briggs only a fragment of his output), most notably his trilogy *Victorian People* (1954), *Victorian Cities* (1963) and *Victorian Things* (1988),<sup>14</sup> his contribution to the Longman History of England, *The Age of Improvement* (1959), and a number of chapters, essays, edited collections and lectures, not least the survey of 'Victorianism: Prelude, Expression and Aftermath', in his *Social History of England* (1983). It is a body of work as remarkable for its commercial longevity as for its interpretative impact. Although exact sales figures are unclear, they were certainly considerable. *The Age of Improvement* alone was reprinted more than 15 times between its first appearance and 2000, by which time it was reputed to have sold almost 100,000 copies. Both *Victorian People* and *Victorian Cities* were issued as Pelican paperbacks in the mid-1960s and were regularly reprinted over the next 30 years. After the later appearance of *Victorian Things*, the trilogy was issued in matching paperbacks by Penguin in 1990 and in a cased Folio Society edition in 1996, three years after *Victorian Cities* had been dignified with a reissue in the University of California Press' 'Classics of Urban History' series.

Within a few years of beginning to publish on the 19th century in the early 1950s, Briggs was installed as a leading popular interpreter

of Victorian England. Making his first appearance on television in 1953 alongside G. M. Young, long established as the doyen of British Victorianists, he quickly became a BBC regular.<sup>15</sup> In a field awash with a backlash of nostalgia against interwar anti-Victorianism, *Victorian People* and *The Age of Improvement* established him as a sympathetic but also disinterested authority on the period. He was a young and brilliant professor, an unconventional Oxford don, capable of championing causes which could 'rouse a group of Oxford undergraduates to fevered excitement'.<sup>16</sup> By the middle of the decade he had already established a reputation as a hard-working, hard-living, wide-roaming academic, well known in America, more at home in 'the airport than ivory tower'.<sup>17</sup> He was also a prolific popular reviewer, not just of Victorian history, but of technology, of science, of 20th century politics. In the 1950s and 1960s he reviewed regularly in the *New Statesman*, *New Society*, *Listener*, *Economist*, and in the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Yorkshire Post*, the *Financial Times*, and occasionally the *New York Times*, the *New Scientist* and the *Scientific American*.<sup>18</sup> He became synonymous in the popular mind with Victorian history; the architectural historian Reyner Banham joked at the start of the 1970s that his 'imaginary Oscar for Victorian Studies' was an 'Asa'.<sup>19</sup>

Over the ensuing 50 years there can have been few general readers with an interest in the Victorians who have not been informed by Briggs' writings. It is not difficult to explain this popular success. In the 1950s and early 1960s Briggs' work provided an opportunity for Victorians of advanced years still to revel in the solaces of nostalgia the period offered to post-war struggles.<sup>20</sup> Surviving Victorians such as Harold Nicolson, diplomat and diarist, welcomed the sympathy and seriousness with which *Victorian People* treated the Victorians.<sup>21</sup> It was a process that was clearly well under way (and indeed already prompting its own anxieties) by the early 1950s, not least in the work of G. M. Young and his *Victorian England. Portrait of an Age* (2nd edn., 1953).<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, Briggs' writings struck readers as something fresh. His commitment to giving a hearing to contemporary 'voices' especially those from below, to letting the past speak, to listening and so understanding, the aptness of quotation, and his concern to 'pay particular attention to the relationship between the distinctive views of individual writers and artists and the kind of culture which they shared'<sup>23</sup> enabled him to achieve an unprecedented vividness of writing. As Briggs has often testified, much of Young's method and matter passed into his works, not least his belief that '[w]hat matters most is not what happened, but what people said when it was happening, and what lively minds are saying about it today';<sup>24</sup> but whereas in Young's hands,

as in the hands of most of the other Victorianists of the 1950s and 1960s, this had encouraged a rather narrow intellectualism, it was part of Briggs' achievement to broaden its social scope, and to balance speech with 'action, or on the events which characterise it'.<sup>25</sup> The rooting of analysis in concrete situations, and the recognition (in face of considerable writing which seem determined to proceed as if they did) that human relations did not fit tidily into abstract categories, brought him an enthusiastic readership.

Above all, the popularity of his works derived from their ability to combine scholarly detachment with understanding of the persistence of the Victorian. While professional historians seemed increasingly to retreat into the search for objectivity, Briggs refused to draw a line between the present and the past. He was disinterested but not distanced, committed throughout his career to Mandell Creighton's sense that 'historical associations are not matters of rhetorical reference on great occasions, but they surround the Englishman in everything that he does'.<sup>26</sup> While the conventional wisdom increasingly was that the Victorians had finally passed into history, Briggs recognised the powerful grip Victorian legacies retained on contemporary culture.<sup>27</sup> His study of Seebom Rowntree, a 19th-century liberal who had died only the year before Briggs moved to Leeds in 1955, reinforced this sense of presence; Rowntree, Briggs recalled, 'seemed to be around in the house when I carried out my research among his hitherto unsorted papers'.<sup>28</sup> And if the mid-Victorians survived only as ghostly echoes by the 1960s, the late Victorians were still voluble, and the Victorian cities were still present.<sup>29</sup>

This confidence in the role historical understanding should play in addressing contemporary problems has been especially appealing to successive generations of politicians of the left. Roy Hattersley has spoken of *Victorian People* as 'a book which has seen me through many Christmases':

[t]he importance of *Victorian People* is not limited to the way in which it combines entertainment and education in equally ample measure. Its size (just right for hiding in a pocket) and its structure (self-contained chapters of 30 or so pages) make it an ideal companion for escape attempts. When, during previous Christmases, joy to all men has become too much to bear, I have regularly slipped away to the lavatory with Robert Lowe, Anthony Trollope, John Bright and Arthur Roebuck.<sup>30</sup>

Tristram Hunt lists *Victorian Cities* as one of his top ten history books, celebrating Briggs' 'effortless writing style and willingness to engage

broader audiences', and the 'tremendous feel for the physicality of the Victorian city, and the mentality of its inhabitants, which charges through this slim but perfectly formed volume'.<sup>31</sup> It seems all of a piece that Briggs' picture of the vigorous civic society of the 19th-century city helped David Miliband and the Labour leadership justify its early 21st-century community and regeneration policies.<sup>32</sup>

Briggs' feel for the everyday and the ordinary has attracted admiration from across the political and social spectrum. The architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner credited *Victorian Cities* with creating a greater sympathy for the work of the Victorian Society in defending Victorian built heritage, while the critic V. S. Pritchett said that it 're-awakens one's respect for the moral energy and dramatic style of the Victorians'.<sup>33</sup> For the popular historical writer Elizabeth Longford, Briggs was

[t]he historian who gave me the flavour and the biggest general picture in which I had confidence . . . starting with *The Age of Improvement* and then his books on the Victorian cities and the Victorian people, the people who had made their way, the people who would have been ordinary people but for the fact that they achieved distinction through their own efforts in a truly Victorian way, I have found that tremendously valuable.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, his favourite insights have become the currency of popular history. Those who dare question Jonathan Schofield, the forthright figurehead of Manchester's popular heritagiers, as to the significance of the city's history are directed to the passage in *Victorian Cities* which points out how different British and even world history might have been had Engels been living in Birmingham rather than Manchester.<sup>35</sup>

All this suited Briggs fine. He had always wanted to be a writer more than merely a historian.<sup>36</sup> Reading the review of Giles St Aubyn's biography of H. T. Buckle, which he published in the *Yorkshire Post* in 1962, one gets a strong sense of his approval of Buckle's role as 'the Toynbee of mid-Victorian England, speculating, synthesizing, drawing his examples from all parts of the world, confessing "I would rather be praised in popular and, as you so rightly call them, vulgar papers than in scholarly publications"'.<sup>37</sup> In 1985, in a reflection on 'History as Communication', he singled out Trevelyan and Tawney for admiration, not only because they wanted to engage with the past for its contemporary relevances as well as for its own sake, but also because they 'separated [themselves] from professional historians who were interested only in talking to or fighting with other professional historians'.<sup>38</sup>

Not that we can dismiss Briggs' forest of cheap paperbacks, popular potboilers and ephemeral essays as of merely middle-brow significance. In fact, Briggs' 19th-century scholarship, especially his writings before the mid-1960s when his academic preoccupations shifted, was of considerable historiographical significance. His reviewing helped constitute the range of apposite interpretation of the Victorians for readers of academic journals such as the *English Historical Review*. His books were of extraordinary prescience, their insights standing muster to the end of the century. Although subsequent scholarship took his ideas in quite different directions, Briggs' early work on languages of class set one of the key contexts for many later debates around the significance of class as a foundational concept for 19th-century history. His early contributions, not least *Chartist Studies* (1959), helped open up Victorian England to the riches of the local case study.

The importance of *The Age of Improvement* (1959) belies its origins in a multi-volume survey of British history. His interpretation of the interplay of economic, social and political forces across the later 18th and 19th centuries survived largely unchallenged through subsequent scholarship. It played its part in the wider repudiation of the long-established division of political, economic, social and cultural history,<sup>39</sup> the shift to examining the interconnectedness of these spheres, rather than to compartmentalising them. It came to be seen as the archetype of the new *marxisante* history challenging Oxford traditions of high politics in the early 1960s.<sup>40</sup> Covering much the same ground 25 years later in his text *The Forging of the Modern State*, Eric Evans conceded that *The Age of Improvement* was 'full of brilliant insights which subsequent research has confirmed surprisingly often', even if the sections on politics were 'now beginning to date a little'.<sup>41</sup> *Victorian Cities*, the product of more than a decade of research and informed by the innovations in urban sociology, was one of the foundational texts of British urban history, not only for its fundamental reorientation of scholarly attention away from the metropolis and towards the new industrial north,<sup>42</sup> away from the dismissal of 19th-century urbanism as an entirely destructive process of scarring and ordeal, and towards a recognition of the (albeit flawed) dynamism and achievement of towns and cities, and away from reductionist tendencies to dismiss them as of a single type, and towards recognition that one of the most important truths of 19th-century history 'was not that Birmingham and Sheffield were like Manchester'. Along with the work of H. J. Dyos, *Victorian Cities* established cities as a proper focus for scholarly historical study, and comparison and multidisciplinary as the necessary frameworks for such study.<sup>43</sup> As Rohan

McWilliam's chapter in this volume on Briggs and social history demonstrates, Briggs' work has opened up, and continued to invigorate a variety of fields and questions in social history.

But the story for Victorian Studies as an academic field is more complicated. Peter Furtado, the editor of *History Today*, once suggested that Briggs 'reinvent[ed] Victorian Studies', and for Eric Hobsbawm, looking back on the reappraisal of the Victorians in the later 1950s and early 1960s, 'Asa Briggs played an important part in this process; in many ways the whole thing has developed from his books'.<sup>44</sup> Christopher Kent has suggested that 'Briggs surely did more than any other historian to launch both the academic boom in Victorian studies and the popular boom in Victoriana'.<sup>45</sup> Even allowing for Briggs' own claim that when he started 'there wasn't really very much interest in Victorian England... And so I think I'm partly responsible myself for a greater interest in Victorian England having developed', none of these judgements can stand without modification.<sup>46</sup>

In many respects *Victorian People* offered little that was interpretatively different to G. M. Young's *Victorian England. Portrait of an Age*; nor was its picture of the mid-Victorian years as a 'distinctive civilisation' arising out of a social balance fired with complexities and tensions, and based on 'thought, work and progress', very much different from the notions of equipoise that W. L. Burn had articulated in a number of articles and was eventually outlined in his full-length study, *The Age of Equipoise*. Although *Victorian People* cast its net a little beyond the conventional roster of great Victorians, it did not cast very much further, and in many respects it shared with Young and Burn (and later historians including Geoffrey Best) a perspective dominated by the vision of Walter Bagehot, and the Smilesian characteristics of 'the gospel of work, "seriousness" of character, respectability and self help'.<sup>47</sup>

However, *Victorian People* did break new ground. Reacting against the very assumptions that enabled George Kitson Clark to question the book's significance on the basis that its studies were of men who 'never really ruled the country, but merely assisted others who ruled', *Victorian People*, along with *Victorian Cities*, and not least *Chartist Studies*, established the importance of the provinces for an understanding of 19th-century history, and ensured that Victorian Studies paid full attention to their cities and their people.<sup>48</sup> Significantly many of the leading figures in the revival of scholarly study of the Victorians in this period (i.e. the late 1940s to the early 1960s) were Northerners (and indeed many were Yorkshiremen), including Tillotson (Keighley), Kitson Clark (Leeds), Briggs (Keighley), Burn (Wolsingham, County Durham).



As Briggs commented, '[t]he new approach to the Victorians often rests on direct knowledge of what the North of England is really like'.<sup>49</sup> His picture of 'the Victorian period [as] a provincial interlude in national history' encouraged consideration of a broader range of contemporaries than the literary scholars were often inclined to admit.<sup>50</sup> His reviewing of Victorian Studies scholarship in the 1950s and early 1960s often recurred to the importance of this sensibility.<sup>51</sup> He was horrified to note of Walter Houghton's *The Victorian Frame of Mind* that John Bright got only two mentions, and Cobden one less.<sup>52</sup>

Certainly Briggs was widely cited in the early classics of Victorian Studies, including Houghton's *Victorian Frame of Mind* and Kitson Clark's *Making of Victorian England*, and was a constant point of reference over the next 50 years.<sup>53</sup> Almost inevitably, Briggs was the most-cited historian in Dyos and Wolff's *The Victorian City. Images and Realities* (1973), one of the later seminal texts of the field.<sup>54</sup> Briggs' books were part of the mental furniture of older Victorianists and continued to be recommended to the younger as starting points at least until the end of the century.<sup>55</sup> A full assessment of the pattern of their readership and referencing would be a project in itself; but there is no doubt that the world of citations indices and impact factors held no fears for Briggs.

Briggs also played his part in the infrastructural development of Victorian Studies, serving on the advisory board and later on the editorial board of *Victorian Studies* from its inception in 1957 until 1973. Although his support for the journal was clearly valued, and for the first decade he was probably the most important point of contact between the Bloomington editorial team and British scholars, this was very much an arm's length arrangement and he largely resisted the periodic encouragement that its advisors take a more active role. He confesses in his autobiographical volume *Special Relationships* (2012) that he was 'never a great lover of seminars, and Victorian Studies, pursued as diligently in Bloomington, Indiana, as in Leeds, is not the only field where I deliberately limited my attendance at scholarly meetings that were designed to promote specialized fields of knowledge'.<sup>56</sup> He read a submission here and there, he reviewed regularly through the 1960s, he conscientiously responded to requests for suggestions for reviewers for the journal, and he occasionally sought out or recommended contributors.<sup>57</sup> Friendly relations with Michael Wolff, one of the founding editors, gave the relationship a certain intimacy, and facilitated Briggs' participation in the London meeting of editorial advisors that Wolff held in the spring of 1965, as well as a successful visit by Briggs to Bloomington in 1966.<sup>58</sup> Briggs returned to Indiana in 1967 to take part

in the Victorian City symposium, where he gave a public lecture as part of the proceedings. This event prompted most of the handful of explicit references to Victorian Studies to be found in his writings, in his essay in *The Victorian City*, the conference volume eventually published in 1973.<sup>59</sup>

Although from the later 1950s Briggs was already involved in the monumental history of the BBC which would increasingly engross his attention, through the following decade he remained an active contributor to Victorian scholarship. *Victorian Cities* was published in 1963, and although there was no rapid progress towards the third of his planned Victorian volumes, which was delayed until 1988, despite the demands of the University of Sussex and the BBC, he kept up a steady flow of shorter and more impressionistic contributions. There were introductions to volumes on William Lovett and William Morris, keynote lectures on *Victorians and Victorianism* (University of Saskatchewan, 1965), and further essays such as the three he contributed to his edited volume entitled *The Nineteenth Century. The Contradictions of Progress* (1970).<sup>60</sup> While these broke no new interpretative ground, they did reinforce Briggs' ability to invoke the complexities and contradictions of the Victorian period, and his sense of the extent to which 'Victorianism' was defined as much by a repudiation of dominant values as by ascription to them, through a broad and eclectic mix of unfamiliar quotation. His three essays in *The Nineteenth Century*, in particular, drew on an admirable mix of familiar and obscure commentaries to place Victorian Britain effectively in continual transatlantic contexts, while also showing off his unwillingness to try to construct patterns at its most debilitating.

In many respects Briggs was ideally placed to make a decisive contribution to the shaping of Victorian Studies as a field. The impulses of its pioneers chimed perfectly with Briggs' frustrations with 'the well-docketed cages of university "subjects"'.<sup>61</sup> The lines of potential influence were numerous. They emerged from a commitment to drawing on the widest possible range of sources, visual, textual and material (of the sort that later brought Briggs' enthusiasm for the History Workshop movement), and from his view that effective knowledge required a marriage of measurement and insight, of institutional practices and ways of feeling, of science and art, and of the need to 'cultivate the art of seeing'.<sup>62</sup> For Briggs it was impossible to understand ideas without seeing the institutions and processes in which they were embedded, nor institutions without studying them within their operating contexts, and he aimed at what he saw in Bagehot, a 'recognition of the significance

of the social shell, of habits, institutions, ways of thinking, feeling and behaving'.<sup>63</sup>

Indebted to G. M. Young,<sup>64</sup> this methodology also drew on the insights of the work of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams and the emerging field of cultural studies. The relationship of Briggs' work of the 1950s and 1960s, and indeed of Victorian Studies more generally, to this scholarship was a complex one. Briggs had been aware of Williams throughout the 1950s, not least through his contributions to *The Highway*, the WEA journal, and Raphael Samuel goes as far as to suggest that Briggs was one of the few historians touched by him.<sup>65</sup> Briggs was sympathetic to Williams' attempts to comprehend Victorian culture as a totality, praising *Culture and Society* as 'a seminal book [...] full of meat'.<sup>66</sup> But he came to be frustrated with the extent to which literary and cultural studies had embraced too fully Williams' notions of ways of feeling, and were inclined to privilege thought over and above the institutions and activities which animated it and gave it meaning.<sup>67</sup> Hesitant about some of the narrowness (geographical, economic and even chronological) of Williams' approach, Briggs remained reluctant to deploy the concept of 'culture', except as an entity which sat alongside and was distinct from economy and society.<sup>68</sup> Not least for this reason, he was always more comfortable with the culturalist Marxism of E. P. Thompson and his *Making of the English Working Class* (1963), commenting that it 'illuminates more facets of the relationship between history and sociology' than many more theoretical discussions.<sup>69</sup> But he was able to find support in both approaches for the primacy he gave to the 'lived experience', a concept which was a source of both strength and weakness for early Victorian Studies. Strength as an integrative category which could bridge the gap between material circumstances and collective consciousness; weakness in that it sidestepped critical epistemological questions about the constitution of ways of seeing and feeling.<sup>70</sup>

Nevertheless, Briggs' desire to reconstitute experience, and a fascination with cultural interconnections, both encouraged him to attempt, as he put it in *Victorian People*, 'to discover the unity of society'.<sup>71</sup> So too, by the time of his arrival in Leeds, he had become convinced that historians should not simply study 'people in society', but also societies themselves, individually and comparatively.<sup>72</sup> Here again, the echoes of his childhood inflected the ideas of early cultural studies in productive ways. Richard Hoggart suggests that it was the scale of Keighley and its surrounding settlements, the 'very tight townships with their life based on wool or some ancillaries of wool' with 'a sort of unity [...] a kind

of organic quality, closer and more varied relations between the social groups' than he had experienced in nearby Leeds, which underpinned Briggs' totalising view.<sup>73</sup>

During the 1960s in particular, Briggs' significance was magnified both by the centrality of the concept of experience, and of Urban Studies as a mode of integrative social and cultural history for Victorian Studies. For a while *Victorian Cities* provided a model for the use of the city as a structuring site of experience and as a microcosm of a broader cultural unity. Significantly, as Victorian Studies at Leicester established its British primacy, the presence of H. J. Dyos, the leading figure in British urban history in the period, as convenor of the Victorian Studies group and later member of the *Victorian Studies* editorial board, was crucial.

For a while Briggs was certainly the most visible embodiment of the interdisciplinary 19th-century historian. John Vincent once said that Briggs' work has been treated by many literary scholars as if almost a Mosaic primary source.<sup>74</sup> This did not last: by the 1980s (and certainly by the 1990s), although his books continue to appear in bibliographies and lists of recommended reading, it is doubtful that many Victorianists would have conceived of Briggs' work as foundational for their own.<sup>75</sup> Certainly Victorian Studies in its various historiographical reflections has taken its intellectual motive forces to be the politically informed cultural criticism of Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart rather than the holistic social history of Briggs.<sup>76</sup>

Why should this be? Probably because Briggs was never terribly interested in Victorian Studies as a specific enterprise. One of his fellow 19th-century historians during his time at Leeds recalled that 'curiously, we did not talk much about Victorian studies in general: mainly about the matter in hand'.<sup>77</sup> Noticeably, it is one of the few fields in which he was actively involved for which he did not help set up an association. When the possibility of a Victorian Studies centre attached to an English university was raised in the spring of 1964 Briggs was 'fascinated', and despite Brighton's strong Regency associations, asked for Sussex to be 'seriously considered as such a place', but this seems to have been prompted more by institutional ambition than scholarly concern.<sup>78</sup> (In the end, the only tangible upshot of this appears to have been encouragement to Philip Collins and the Leicester Victorianists to turn the Victorian Studies Group there into a centre.<sup>79</sup>)

In part, of course, this was because Victorian Britain was only briefly anything more than a single fletch to Briggs' scholarly arrow. Having come relatively late to the period after the war, within three years of the publication of *Victorian People* Briggs had taken on the task of writing

the history of the BBC. Even at the moment of publication of *Age of Improvement* and *Chartist Studies* in 1959, Briggs notes that he had written very little about Victorianism.<sup>80</sup> In 1962–1963 while completing *Victorian Cities* he was also ‘in the middle of vol[ume] II of the BBC and trying to do too much else at the same time’, as he confessed to Richard Hoggart.<sup>81</sup> Thereafter Victorian history slid even further down the pecking order, and his work on the Victorians had to be inserted around larger projects.

But more than this, it was because Briggs was less interested in a distinct interdisciplinary field, than in modes of exchange between fields, in conversations and borrowings, ‘the kind of common understanding which alone makes specialization tolerable’, rather than joint enterprise or the merging of disciplinary approaches.<sup>82</sup> Briggs’ relationship to the discipline of literature, as opposed to literary texts as raw materials, had always been rather uneasy.<sup>83</sup> For Briggs, interdisciplinarity was about avoiding the segmentation of history in the Oxford history style, which left ‘thought’ or the arts to a separate chapter. It was more about broadening notions of acceptable source material than about methodological exchange. And in particular it was about finding common grounds of interest: ‘[t]he different specialists can help each most when they concentrate their attention on the fields – or the forests – where their interests meet’.<sup>84</sup> Notwithstanding a couple of early forays into literary analysis, his interest in literature did not extend to the methods and preoccupations of textual analysis and its cultural applications. His interdisciplinary inclinations were methodologically much more inclined towards the social sciences of economics and sociology (geography and even biology) than literary studies.<sup>85</sup> Even while advocating openness to the ideas and concepts of neighbouring disciplines, Briggs was anxious at the dangers: the temptation to use them to explain too much, and their tendency to ‘pull the study of history apart’.<sup>86</sup> This was part of a general suspicion of theory. For Briggs, history was a discipline which should ‘neither frighten the layman nor confront him with a difficult conceptual framework’.<sup>87</sup> He was always more at ease with those who concerned themselves rather with what was going on in practice than in evolving new theories.<sup>88</sup>

Part of the irony was that Briggs was never entirely comfortable with Victorian Studies scholarship which bypassed the novelists for the social critics. His literary connections, unlike Raymond Williams, were not through Ruskin or Arnold, but via the Brontës and Eliot. He declined George Levine’s invitation to contribute an essay on social criticism to Madden and Levine, *The Art of Victorian Prose* (1968).<sup>89</sup> His conscientious

suggestions of reviewers for *Victorian Studies* had almost always been for the non-literary texts, and almost always of historians (with exceptions for Sussex colleagues such as David Daiches and Lawrence Lerner). Although he was happy to review in science, sociology, politics, religion and political thought, Briggs was surprisingly reticent about tackling literary scholarship, and his frequent reviews for *Victorian Studies* did not encroach on the province of the literary critic. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the dominant themes of his work offered a problematic platform even for sympathetic literary scholars: 'the influence of Asa Briggs particularly kept deflecting attention to Leeds or Sheffield or Birmingham or Liverpool', Patrick Scott has recalled, 'and how seriously could even a post-Arnoldian critic take scholarship on Birmingham?'<sup>90</sup>

### Later Victorianisms

Briggs continued his occasional contributions to *Victorian Studies* into the 1970s, although after Michael Wolff moved to the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and Leicester was instituted formally as the British office of the journal, he seems to have dealt more with Collins and Dyos there than with the editors in Bloomington. His role was increasingly to recommend British (and occasionally Commonwealth) scholars as book reviewers. In 1970 he welcomed suggestions that he and the rest of the 'board at large' might have a more active involvement, and was installed on the newly constituted editorial board. In 1972 he responded enthusiastically to the routine enquiry from the journal as to whether he wished to remain as a member: '[m]y enthusiasm for *Victorian Studies* remains unabated'.<sup>91</sup> In fact, he did not retain his place on the editorial board of *Victorian Studies* when its membership was refreshed for volume 17 (1973–1974), and his direct contact with the journal seems to have ceased at this point. Likewise his more direct engagements with Victorian history. With the exception of keeping up with the history of communications, his reviewing becomes more scattered, less substantial, leaning towards popular interpretations rather than scholarly monographs.<sup>92</sup> In journals such as *New Society* he was superseded as reviewer of the serious 19th-century history by younger historians, including Brian Harrison, who along with Briggs' Sussex colleague J. F. C. Harrison, was one of the new members of the *Victorian Studies* board.

Not that his Victorian engagements dried up. Since 1983 he has served as President of the Victorian Society, although he has been frustrated at times by the Victorian Society's preoccupation with buildings rather

than with promoting the study of the Victorian period more generally;<sup>93</sup> he has served as President of the Brontë Society (1989–1996), and of the William Morris Society (1979–1991). His single-volume *Social History of England* almost inevitably included a trenchant summary of 'Victorianism'. He intervened in the debates of the mid-1980s prompted by Margaret Thatcher's attempted appropriation of 'Victorian values',<sup>94</sup> and provided the opening essay in Boris Ford's *Cambridge Guide to the Arts in Britain. VII The Later Victorian Age* (1989). The flow of summaries and interpretations for a general readership continued, along with numerous other introductions, lectures, studies, and a continued stream of popularising articles.<sup>95</sup> Almost inevitably, he was chosen to contribute the entry on Victorian England for Encarta 97, the UK version of the Microsoft multimedia encyclopedia, while also serving on its editorial board.

Although much of this scholarship has an exaggerated feel of the breathlessness and sense of hastiness which often characterised Briggs' work, it shares many of the qualities of his more substantial writings, including a real sense for the feel of the era, the intensity of the emotional stimulus that its changes provided, and the impossibility of offering simple judgements. For example, his 1974 essay on 'The Nature of Victorianism' emphasised the complexity, contradictions and discontinuities of the period, offering observations about general attitudes and beliefs only to exemplify the extent to which these were themselves the object of constant debate and discussion.<sup>96</sup> But it does also reveal some of the weaknesses, the absence of engagement in more recent scholarship; a sense of sketchiness, self-referentiality and fragmentation. His introduction to Ford's *Later Victorian Age* was especially striking in its continued use as reference points of Houghton, G. M. Young, Williams, Richard Altick and Kitson Clark, and the tenuity of the unities and continuities identified.

It was not so much that contemporary interpretations were beginning to supersede Briggs' judgements, but rather that shifts in preoccupation and methodology were helping to make his approach seem increasingly dated.<sup>97</sup> Looking back from even as early as the 1970s, Briggs' once daring selection for *Victorian People* seemed narrow and conventional.<sup>98</sup> As the 1960s proceeded, his ventriloquial method was challenged both by the championing by 'history from below' of the recovery of the history of the inarticulate, and also by the more ascetic traditions of quantitative social history associated with Peter Laslett and the Cambridge Population Group. Briggs' contribution to the *Victorian City* volume responded implicitly to Laslett's dissatisfaction with a social

history 'which played genially with literary evidence or was thought of simply as a less precise and less intellectually rewarding extension of economic history', although Briggs remained unconvinced that the shift from literary evidence to quantitative would 'satisfy the desire to explain as well as to describe'. In the face of the more overtly economic and statistical bent of urban history Briggs remained convinced that "[l]iterary guidance and unsystematic data" are still necessary to illuminate the human experience which is at the heart of all history, including economic history'.<sup>99</sup>

Concurrently, Briggs' version of literary interdisciplinarity came under a more direct challenge from a revitalised literary scholarship for which early Victorian Studies lacked theoretical sophistication. Briggs' fundamental framework – the need to explore the roots of politics and culture in social and economic underpinnings – was increasingly challenged by scholars who recognised instead the relative autonomy of the political and the cultural.<sup>100</sup> It is possible to see the responses to the *Victorian City* volume as marking the turning of the tide. Assessing the two volumes, 'like ten quarterly numbers of *Victorian Studies* laid end to end', E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and others offered a trenchant criticism of the early Victorian Studies mode that the volume represented.<sup>101</sup> The editors' frank admission that in editing the book it had become apparent not only that 'a great synthesis of disciplines was undesirable as it was unattainable' but also that they could offer 'no golden interdisciplinary nuggets' was widely taken as a confession of the failure and futility of the field's modes of interdisciplinarity. Even enthusiasts recognised the volume's lack of integration or disciplinary cross-fertilisation.<sup>102</sup> Critics argued that a combination of narrow urban focus and a perspective confined almost entirely to middle-class observers, created large exclusions of gender, empire, science and technology, partial perceptions of agency and victimhood, and an attenuated capacity to deal with issues of process and dynamic.<sup>103</sup> The contributors were accused of conservatism of theoretical and methodological approach, and in particular of offering only the crudest of attentions to the image/reality tension that the volume's title identified. Williams in particular was strongly critical of what he saw as the attempt to reconstruct the Victorian period through an accumulation of quotation and citation (a particular characteristic of Briggs), which he dismissed as 'a kind of editing'.<sup>104</sup>

In part, these reactions reflected shifts in scholarship between the original 1967 conference and publication six years later. In the years after 1973 these shifts became more marked and the early Victorian Studies



mode to which Briggs' work had contributed was effectively superseded. Under the editorship of Martha Vicinus, *Victorian Studies* moved away from urban history and towards a history of popular culture which gave greater prominence to literature, music and intellectual life, and in particular to the place of Victorian women.<sup>105</sup> Vicinus' edited volumes, *Suffer and Be Still* (1972) and *A Widening Sphere. Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (1977), marked an important point in the challenge to the dominance of class as foundational category and dominant form of Victorian self-definition which became systematic in the 1980s.<sup>106</sup> By the end of the decade the appearance of Edward Said's *Orientalism* also signified a shift to imperial preoccupations which also had little resonance in Briggs' work, his chapter on Melbourne in *Victorian Cities* notwithstanding.

Literary scholarship experienced an eclectic turn to theory, of which J. Hillis Miller's post-structuralist *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (1968) was just one exemplar, a turn within which Briggs' determinedly empirical approaches had little purchase. There was a tendency towards 'disengaging texts from historical situations', an attention to intertextualities and discursive relations which looked to the effacing of generic boundaries rather than disciplinary ones.<sup>107</sup> Significantly, the study of periodicals, which under the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals became one of the most vibrant components of Victorian Studies, was described by its pioneering champions as 'the verbal equivalent of urbanism'.<sup>108</sup> At the same time in the face of the 'linguistic turn' which was also coming to shape historical scholarship by the 1980s under the influence of Gareth Stedman Jones and others, experience ceased to be an integrative site to be reconstructed and became instead a discursive effect to be deconstructed. While Briggs' imperative had been primarily to open out historical study, there was a tendency for Victorian Studies scholarship to read non-fiction prose as literature, rather than to read imaginative literature as document. As historicism 'became infected by textualism',<sup>109</sup> as modes of representation became more important than that which was represented, the links between historians and literary scholars which the early promoters had done so much to build began to fray.

The trajectories of scholarship were antithetical to the continuance of Briggs' influence in other ways. Part of the strength of Briggs' work on the Victorian period had always been its recognition of complexity and diversity, but within the assumption of coherence which had marked the field in the 1950s and 1960s. Into the 1970s and 1980s incoherence became the touchstone: tensions were now irreducible,

the very notion of a Victorian 'period' was scorned. The new historicism shifted attention from the objective records of civic society, and towards the subjectivities of the production and consumption of meaning. Briggs had always been happier in the public sphere rather than private, conjuring the general mood rather than the individual psyche. His strengths did not lie in the biographical. Michael Young commented of *Seeborn Rowntree* that although Briggs had presented the facts of his life, he finished the book feeling that he did not really know the man.<sup>110</sup> Briggs' distaste of jargon<sup>111</sup> and suspicion of theory, and the fear into which it too readily translated that they intervened unhelpfully between the reader and 'actual human experience', left him ill equipped to take up the new questions that were being posed.<sup>112</sup> They did not prevent insight, and brought him a sustained following from others, partly defined on generational lines, who shared his antipathies, but they certainly deprived him of purchase in the debate.<sup>113</sup> Briggs' occasional published assessments of the scholarship of Victorian cultural studies of the following decades reveal his lack of empathy and engagement.<sup>114</sup> He was left increasingly vulnerable to accusations of conceptual naivety, even from other members of the scholarly old guard. There was only so far this 'facts embedded in common sense' approach, as J. H. Plumb put it, in a review of Briggs' *Social History of England* (1983), could go.<sup>115</sup>

The extent to which the driving forces of Victorian Studies had bypassed Briggs is apparent in the writing and reception of *Victorian Things* (1988). Although long in gestation, the timing of its appearance was promising, coinciding with the beginnings of a 'material turn' in cultural history.<sup>116</sup> Looking back in 2012, Briggs considered it the 'most innovative' of his Victorian trilogy because of the seriousness with which it treated the everyday materials of Victorian life.<sup>117</sup> It was certainly an ambitious baggy monster of a study, without footnotes but crammed with example, illustration and anecdotes, and objects from the collections of the Great Exhibition to the matchstick. Its reception in some quarters was enthusiastic. R. K. Webb described it as 'a richer book' than *Victorian People* or *Victorian Cities*, while Roy Porter was exhilarated by the way Briggs 'regales us with the stories of the making and marketing of these inventions'.<sup>118</sup> The response of a younger generation of cultural historians and literary scholars was more critical. For some, the fundamental flaw was the lack of structure and discrimination; that quality of accumulated jottings or card index files, in which the detail overwhelmed the pattern.<sup>119</sup> Others lamented Briggs' rejection of any assistance from semiology in analysing 'the relation between objects and their meanings', and the excess description of what changed

and the inadequate attempt to explain why and why in this particular way.<sup>120</sup> In effect, Catherine Hall suggested, Briggs was *too* material, and assumed that the Victorian home, say, was constructed by its objects, rather than out of a set of ideas and ideologies which exploited (and encouraged) specific objects.<sup>121</sup>

In many respects *Victorian Things* was Briggs' Victorian swansong. The publication of the three volumes of his *Collected Essays* (1985–1991) brought new readers to much of his early Victorian scholarship as well as hitherto unpublished contributions on the history of Keighley, and assessments of Trevelyan and Young. He continued in semi-retirement to produce further essays, on Victorian education, the Victorian response to the railway and even the 19th-century history of the Bethlem hospital.<sup>122</sup> On the launch of the *Journal of Victorian Culture* in 1994 he was named one of the editorial consultants. This period has a feel of tying up loose ends which it would undoubtedly not have retained but for the fate of Briggs' Ford Lectures on 'Culture and Communications in Victorian England', delivered in Oxford in 1991. Inevitably, over time, the significance of structures and systems of communication across the 19th as well as the 20th century had come to preoccupy Briggs. He considered himself uniquely 'in a position to link the two fields that I had concentrated on in my academic work'. His six lectures promised a pioneering conspectus of Victorian cultures of communication. But despite a long-standing tradition that the lectures would be subsequently published by the University Press, and despite his efforts to meet the demands of the press's readers, OUP ultimately declined to publish, a decision which perhaps reflected a belief that Briggs could no longer command scholarly credibility across the fields in which he was intervening.<sup>123</sup>

## Appraisal

In the absence of the published Ford Lectures we are left without any over-arching Briggsian (re)interpretation of the Victorians, no new master portrait of the period. Perhaps this was the most fitting outcome. The role of builder of grand interpretative schemes did not come easily to Briggs.<sup>124</sup> His work is marked by a particularly powerful suspicion of the generalising proposition, a function of his belief that the highest purpose of history was to open not to close minds.<sup>125</sup> This reluctance is indicated in the approving quotation in the *Collected Essays* of William Blake's aphorism '[t]o generalize is to be an idiot; to particularize is the lone distinction', and in the alacrity with which his reviews, always

on the lookout for a dogma, old or newly coined, seized on any over-engineered phrase, dubious epigram or ill-defined 'ism'.<sup>126</sup> There was a tendency to be satisfied 'to have the complexities identified and the perspectives established'.<sup>127</sup> This is reflected in his suspicion of 'isms' and his preference for work which goes beneath the surface, and explains what they might mean in practice.<sup>128</sup> None of his major Victorian volumes offered anything substantial by way of summative conclusions, and the general essays and later volumes seemed ever more reluctant to establish strong lines of argument. John Kenyon's dismissal of *The Social History of England* as 'a babble of loosely connected episodes, incidents and trends, with no attempt to impose a general pattern', leaving readers 'fobbed off with a few cursory generalisations masquerading as profundity', was extreme, but it reflected a widespread frustration.<sup>129</sup>

For Briggs, as Alexander Welsh once argued, 'the main implication of his learning is that there is much more to be learned'.<sup>130</sup> It was Peter Hall's sly verdict on *Victorian Cities* that it was 'a rich postgraduate quarrying ground; it is interesting to speculate on the number of PhD theses which may result'.<sup>131</sup> And indeed, Briggs supervised many subsequently influential postgraduate students, including Richard Price, Philippa Levine, Christopher Kent, S. J. D. Green, Pat Hudson and Martin Bulmer, as well my own research on Victorian Manchester. He did not fit the model of the modern supervisor, and one of his students recalls irregular meetings and incomplete annotation of drafts, but the reassurance of Briggs' secretary that 'he was always very blunt if he felt that things were not going well'.<sup>132</sup> What might have been lacking in steady regularity, though, he made up for in enthusiasm, insight and encouragement. Philippa Levine has recalled that '[w]orking with Asa was a real treat; he was funny, he was generous, he was a brilliant critic'.<sup>133</sup> He was an influence on others whom he did not supervise, but who came across him at formative points in their careers, including T. C. Barker, Alan Fox and Donald Read. His guidance shaped much of the 19th-century history of the 1950s and 1960s, for example K. S. Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (1963), Brian Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians* (1971), Peter Marsh, *The Victorian Church in Decline* (1969), to mention but three. For all this, though, there was nothing like the cadre of research students that grew up around Kitson Clark and the Cambridge 19th-century studies group that he founded in 1956, or the sort of collective presence that was created by the emerging American doctoral programmes.

Ultimately, there was no Briggs school. He did not want one, and shied away from anything that might have tied him too closely to a

Victorian Studies project, convinced that in the British tradition individual scholarship was 'more interesting than the work of groups, however well organised, or of "schools", however inspired'.<sup>134</sup> Aware of the dangers of the intrusion of a school of thought between writer and their readers, having contributed to the institutionalisation of urban, labour history and Victorian Studies, Briggs has noted that 'I did not want to become imprisoned in the new institutional frames I had helped to construct. I still wanted to be a historian *tout court*'.<sup>135</sup> Even in the sectionalised field of British history in the 1950s, he occupied an idiosyncratic position. A forthright Northern grammar school boy with left-of-centre politics, he had little contact with the historical establishment. But despite his closeness to G. D. H. Cole, and his collaborations with John Saville for *Essays in Labour History*, and despite his commitment to the WEA tradition in which much of its scholarship was formed, he was also almost entirely detached from the 'new left' of the later 1950s.<sup>136</sup> A Fabian socialist, rather than a Marxist, he never came to terms with what he saw as the schematic and at times dogmatic tendencies of the Marxist theoretical apparatus.<sup>137</sup>

Even if we accept that it is difficult to tease out interpretation, in part because Briggs' views themselves became the orthodoxy, when re-reading his works one is nonetheless struck by their conventionality of argument alongside their novelty of reference and quotation. Despite his desire to be 'challenging old-fashioned views of Victorian England [...] of the Victorians as limited, hypocritical, rigid and better at producing material things than culture',<sup>138</sup> Briggs often came close to stereotypical reinforcement, as in *The Age of Improvement*, where he talks of the Victorians' 'inability to do justice to the opinions of individuals and groups with whom they disagreed, their tendency to run to cant and hypocrisy, their frequently cramped social life, and their emphasis on the moral side of life at the expense of the intellectual and cultural'.<sup>139</sup> Perhaps the best to be said is that Briggs balanced the negatives with a greater recognition of the vigour and brash vitality which went with ugliness,<sup>140</sup> and offered a fresh sense of the contradictory difficulties but also achievements of 'a society sometimes restless, sometimes complacent [...] impressive in scale but limited in vision, creating new opportunities but also providing massive new problems'.<sup>141</sup>

Ironically, Briggs' most significant contribution was probably to the continued willingness to accept the viability of the Victorian as period, even if only as a heuristic device. There is a counter-intuitive element to any such judgement: Briggs was a determined splitter.<sup>142</sup> He had no more intention to be defined by periods as he had to be constrained by

disciplinary boundaries;<sup>143</sup> they were all 'arbitrary and unconvincing' and constrained 'historical curiosity [...] complacently within rickety frontiers', he pronounced, as he neatly sliced the Victorian period in two in *The Age of Improvement*.<sup>144</sup> The presence of the three 'Victorian' volumes is not itself incontrovertible evidence that Briggs was ever entirely convinced with the Victorian as period. In structure and scope they have only a loose relationship, not least of all chronologically, where the shift from the relatively narrow confines of *Victorian People* to the open-ended Victorianness of *Victorian Things* is considerable. He was just as likely to invoke the less precise but also more specific 'age of Bagehot or Palmerston'.<sup>145</sup> This looseness notwithstanding, Briggs gave due weight to the Victorians' own sense of their period, and over time he became progressively more reconciled to the Victorian as period, not least because in his strong comparative impulse operated chronologically and not just geographically, and because he understood not only the 'enormous amount of change in Victorian England, but also of continuity'.<sup>146</sup> He recognised the importance of period to the 'synthetising social historian'.<sup>147</sup> He remained alert to tendencies in the scholarship to collapse the distinctions between sub-periods, but also to attempts to limit 'Victorian' to the high or mid-Victorian period. The *Social History of England* accepts that what was 'most remarkable' about Victoria's reign was 'a shared continuity of experience, finally to be broken in 1914'.<sup>148</sup>

Briggs was always cautious in constituting period limits; he ends *Age of Improvement* 'with a question mark about the shape of the future, a far more realistic ending than a full stop to a study of any historical period', and his most extended discussion of the end of the period effectively sidestepped the critical questions of termination and transformation by sketching instead four late-century predictions of the post-Victorian world.<sup>149</sup> But this must be balanced against his enforcement of the transition from pre-Victorian to Victorian to post-Victorian;<sup>150</sup> and his constant emphasis of the need to understand the elements of the Victorian through their relationship to the other periods. Hence *Victorian Cities* adopts and makes work the rough time frame of the period between the emergence of the railway and the car, and seeks to illuminate 'essential elements in Victorian society'.<sup>151</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, a large part of this reconciliation derives from the tripartite division of early/mid-/late Victorian, just beginning in the late 1940s and 1950s to challenge earlier binary divisions, that Briggs seized upon from the outset as essential to conceptualising the 19th century,<sup>152</sup> and which, perhaps paradoxically, provides a sense of coherence to the whole period by positing a mid-Victorian fulcrum flanked by growth

and decay (filling in and then emptying out).<sup>153</sup> The sense that the mid-Victorian balance broke down after 1870 was a constant theme.<sup>154</sup> But while recognising the late Victorian shifts and challenges, Briggs remained convinced of the continued dominance of the Victorian pattern: if the 1890s was a moment of transition, not least the 'beginnings of a revolution in mass communication', any sense of late Victorian revolt was 'crushed' before 1900.<sup>155</sup>

So where do we place Victorian Studies in the context of Briggs' work and career overall? Perhaps, as Derek Fraser has put it, 'pride of place must go to his contribution towards the emergence of a broadly conceived social history, a British version of *histoire totale*', breaking out of the straitjacket of political and constitutional history, and contributing to that pursuit of wholeness that Harold Perkin had defined as central to the field in 1953.<sup>156</sup> Briggs played his part in the rescue of the Victorians from the condescension of Bloomsbury and its fellow travellers, and helped to encourage the development of the sorts of interdisciplinary social and cultural history which characterised Victorian Studies in the 20 years after 1957. As an explorer and guide he helped to open up new aspects of the Victorian period and new ways of considering them. As academic patron, politician and host, and as popular champion and interpreter of the Victorians, he had an influence on understandings of the period that it will never be possible to pin down. In the end, though, he was unable to reshape the disciplinary divides at the heart of the field, or to overcome his preference for opening out rather than tying off historical questions so as to be able to offer a new interpretative frame for the Victorians.

## Notes

1. Daniel Snowman, 'Asa Briggs', *History Today*, 49 (October 1999), p. 3.
2. Briggs, 'Plus Ça Change: Back to Keighley: The Largely Forgotten Story of Sir Swire Smith', in *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs, vol. 3: Serious Pursuits: Communications and Education* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp. 417, 430–31; Alan Hamilton, 'Asa Briggs at Full Steam', *Times*, 23 January 1982, p. 6.
3. Briggs, *Victorians and Victorianism* (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 1966), p. 6. Elsewhere in the same lecture, he noted that 'Victorianism was related to the texture [of social life]. What was active in society and what was passive depended not only on the response to immediate twentieth century challenges but to the legacy of the nineteenth century', *ibid.*, p. 7.
4. Godfrey Smith, 'Asa Briggs: A Personal Profile', in Derek Fraser (ed.), *Cities, Class and Communication. Essays in Honour of Asa Briggs* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 13.

5. *Victorian Cities* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990 edn.), p. 10. His time in Leeds was 'not an interlude' but life 'in a Victorian city while it still was a Victorian city', Briggs, *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs, vol. II: Images, Problems, Standpoints, Forecasts* (Brighton, 1985), p. xviii.
6. 'Asa Briggs', in Juliet Gardiner (ed.), *The History Debate* (London: Collins, 1990), pp. 61–7, 64; *Victorian Cities*, pp. 13, 18.
7. Briggs, *Victorians and Victorianism*, p. 6.
8. H. Perkin, review of Briggs, *Victorian Things*, *Economic History Review*, 42 (1989), p. 604.
9. '[A] faulty political system and an obsolete society. The shabbiness of that society and its blindness to its economic ills [...] So much effort was wasted, so much stupidity was displayed, so much "leadership" was inept, or, even worse, vapid and pompous': Briggs, 'Showdown', review of Julian Symons, *The General Strike*, *New Statesman*, 23 November 1957, p. 699.
10. See, for example, the paper written by Briggs, *Education in a Changing Society: The Role of the WEA* (London: WEA, 1958).
11. Visible, for example, in his belief that the post-1945 welfare state did not obviate the need for self-help, but provided only a floor 'to liberate men to realize their own full gifts, not to pamper them or make them dependent': Briggs, "'Introduction" to Samuel Smiles', *Self-Help* (London: John Murray, 1958), p. 31.
12. Herman Ausubel, review of Sidney Checkland's *Rise of Industrial Society*, *American Historical Review*, 71 (1965), p. 184; Maria Lucia Pallares-Burke, *The New History: Confessions and Conversations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), p. 31.
13. David Cannadine, 'The Macaulay of the Welfare State', *London Review of Books*, 6 June 1985, p. 3.
14. Briggs has always presented these three books as part of a coherent design, but the quarter of a century span of their publication and marked differences of scope and approach make the characterisation of them as a trilogy uncomfortable.
15. Briggs, *Serious Pursuits*, p. 8.
16. David McKie, 'Elsewhere: Cnut Is Hard to Crack', *Guardian*, 19 August 1999, p. 15.
17. 'Table Talk by Pendennis', *Observer*, 30 September 1956, p. 6.
18. *Yorkshire Post* file, Briggs Papers, University of Sussex. He also wrote occasionally for *Encounter*, *The Nineteenth Century* and *The Twentieth Century* (on whose editorial board he served for a while in the 1960s).
19. Reyner Banham, 'Heroic Age', review of L. T. C. Rolt, *Victorian Engineering*, *New Society*, 26 March 1970, p. 531.
20. See review of *Victorian Cities* by W. G. Leask, *Irish Times*, 4 March 1964, p. 10.
21. Harold Nicolson, 'The Victorians', *Guardian*, 5 December 1954, p. 9.
22. In its editorial, 'Ink in the Blood', the *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 January 1954, noted 'the climate of the present decade – Lytton Strachey is out of fashion, and the great Victorians are being extensively reappraised', p. 73.
23. Briggs, *Collected Essays, vol. 2*, p. xv.
24. Briggs, 'G. M. Young: the Age of a Portrait', in *ibid.*, pp. 256–7. Young remained an enduring influence, see Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 90, where he is described as 'the single biggest influence on me as an historian'.



25. Briggs, 'G. M. Young, Age of a Portrait', p. 257.
26. Briggs, *Serious Pursuits*, p. 119. Creighton (1843–1901) was the first editor of the *English Historical Review* and Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History at the University of Cambridge: he is quoted in Briggs, *Special Relationships* (2012), p. 156.
27. For example, see the account of Richard Hoggart lecturing at Rutgers University in 1963 'pausing repeatedly to remind us of the Victorian elements still identifiable in the complex pattern of life in the "self-conscious" sixties': R. Adams and Henry R. Winkler, 'An Interdepartmental Course on Victorian England'. *Victorian Studies*, 7 (1963), p. 101.
28. Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 134.
29. For this sense of his living in the 1950s still with the surviving 'vocal Victorians', see Briggs' review of Algernon Cecil's 'Queen Victoria and her Prime Ministers', *History Today*, 3 (1955), p. 212.
30. Roy Hattersley, 'Nothing new under the Millennium Dome: Endpiece', *Guardian*, 5 January 1998, p. 14.
31. Tristram Hunt, 'The Ten Best History Books', *Independent*, 25 June 2004, p. 26.
32. See David Miliband, Local Government minister, quoted in Peter Hetherington, 'On the Neighbourhood Watch', *Guardian*, 1 June 2005, p. 2.
33. See Geoffrey Moorhouse, 'Saviours of St Pancras', *Guardian*, 23 November 1968, p. 7; V. S. Pritchett, 'Exuberant Victorians', *New York Review of Books*, 30 September 1965, p. 14.
34. Brian Connell, 'Elizabeth Longford. History with a Charming Human Face', *Times*, 6 December 1976, p. 16.
35. Stuart Jefferies, 'On Your Marx', *Guardian*, 4 February 2006, p. 31. This particular insight seems to have seeped into the local patriotic consciousness of Mancunians, see also Alex Berlyne, 'Underneath the Arches', *Jerusalem Post*, 16 February 1996, p. 31; Dave Haslam, in *New Statesman*, 25 June 2007, pp. 40–2.
36. Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 7.
37. Briggs review of Giles St. Aubyn's *A Victorian Eminence*, *Yorkshire Post*, 27 February 1958, p. 4.
38. Briggs, 'History as Communication. Describers and Debaters', *Encounter*, 64 (January 1985), 51–2.
39. As John Clive put it, '[h]allowed by long usage and canonised by the Oxford History of England': 'British History, 1870–1914, Reconsidered: Recent Trends in the Historiography of the Period', *American Historical Review*, 68 (1963), pp. 987–1009.
40. Boyd Hilton, 'Colin Matthew (1941–1999)', in P. Ghosh and L. Goldman (eds.), *Politics and Culture in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 14.
41. Eric Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain, 1783–1870* (London: Routledge, 1983), p. 433.
42. Norman Gash's *Politics in the Age of Peel* (1953), for example, as Briggs pointed out, gave more attention to Ipswich and Calne than to Manchester or Birmingham: *English Historical Review*, 69 (1954), pp. 457–60.
43. See the appreciation offered by Lynn Hollen Lees and Andrew Lees, in their 'Foreword' to the reissue of *Victorian Cities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. i–xiv.

44. Eric Hobsbawm in Jim Obelkevich, 'Witness Seminar: New Developments in History in the 1950s and 1960s', *Contemporary British History*, 14 (2000), p. 158.
45. Peter Furtado, 'Wise Counsellor', *History Today*, 56 (July 2006), p. 2.
46. Pallares-Burke, *New History*, pp. 34–5. Briggs saw himself as 'challenging old-fashioned views of Victorian England [...] of the Victorians as limited, hypocritical, rigid and better at producing material things than culture', *ibid.*, p. 35; see also John Sutherland, 'A Thatcherite with Damp Patches', *Sunday Times*, 16 March 1997.
47. In his 1966 lecture *Victorians and Victorianism*, Briggs noted that the mid-Victorian period could easily be called the 'age of Bagehot'. His soft spot for Bagehot is illuminated in numerous reviews of Bagehot, and of Norman St John Stevas' edition of his *Collected Works: Economic Journal*, 77 (1967), p. 643.
48. Kitson Clark, *Economic History Review*, 8 (1955), p.108. Briggs retained a strong provincial sensibility. He had a house in London and was very involved in meetings there, but never belonged to any London literary or historical circle and 'I have never felt myself to be a Londoner [...] I have always been a "provincial"', Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 55.
49. Briggs, 'Victorianism', review of Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England*, *New Statesman*, 6 July 1962, p. 18.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 18; and see similar comments in a lecture to the Clayton Literary and Philosophical Society, *Guardian*, 29 January 1963, p. 16.
51. See Briggs, review of 1859. *Entering an Age of Crisis*, *English Historical Review*, 77 (1962), p. 577.
52. See Briggs, review of Walter Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870*, *English Historical Review*, 74 (1959), pp. 135–37.
53. Including ten times in K. T. Hoppen's *The Mid-Victorian Generation, 1846–1886* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), (including three for *The Age of Improvement* and three for *Victorian Things*). In contrast W. L. Burn is cited nine times.
54. G. M. Young only gets three references, Kitson Clark five, Geoffrey Best two. Perhaps not surprisingly, Briggs gets 17, plus his own essay, but only a handful of these references are to *Victorian Cities*, the rest are scattered around his other output.
55. For McWilliam in 1998, Briggs' chapter on 'Victorianism' 'remains another good starting point': review of David Newsome, *Victorian World Picture*, *Victorian Review*, 24 (1998), p. 96. One 2008 graduate of the Indiana PhD programme, described *Victorian Cities* as 'the foil that I defined myself against', while acknowledging its depth of insight and freshness: Personal communication, March 2011.
56. Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 219.
57. See the correspondence about obtaining a contribution from Valerie Cromwell in the Victorian Studies File, Briggs Papers, University of Sussex.
58. 'It is difficult to recall the visit of a foreign colleague that made such a "smash hit" here in so short a time', wrote Henry H. H. Remak (Chair West European Studies, Indiana University); Briggs' lecture was 'well-received', and the informal contacts 'most valuable': Letter to Briggs, 18 August 1966, Victorian Studies File, Briggs Papers, University of Sussex.

59. Briggs, 'The Human Aggregate', *Victorian City. Images and Reality*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 83–104, where he noted that the gulf between quantitative and qualitative history, between 'the literary historians and the architects' and 'the historical demographers and the economists' 'prevent us from understanding many problems which are key problems in Victorian Studies' (p. 83). In his 'The Nature of Victorianism', in George Perry and Nicholas Mason (eds.), *Rule Britannia: The Victorian World* (London: Times Books, 1974), p. 15, he does comment on the 'burgeoning of Victorian studies' since 1948, and there is a similar reference in the frontispiece to the revised Pelican edition of *Victorian Cities*.
60. Briggs (ed.), *The Nineteenth Century. The Contradictions of Progress* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970).
61. He saw the first half of the 20th century as marked by 'growth of large number of specialized social studies': Briggs, 'The New Learning', *The Highway*, 47 (February 1956), pp. 101–5. In the same article he noted that dividing lines were 'cumbrous and artificial' and that 'abstractions seem a little rarefied'.
62. Briggs observed that the real insight of Bagehot's writings came in 'the more general speculations on ideas and habits and the revelation of Bagehot's own writing and communication': review of St John Stevas (ed.), *Collected Works of Walter Bagehot*, *Economic Journal*, 77 (1967), p. 643. Cf. Briggs, review of W. G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape*, *Highway*, 47 (March 1956), pp. 157–8. Hence Briggs' lack of enthusiasm for the established mode of labour history which charted the politics of organised labour, rather than seeking to understand the conditions of work and ways of life out of which the unions grew and operated (see this in review of Pollard's *History of Labour in Sheffield*, *Economic Journal*, 71 (1961), p. 160. For Briggs there was a genealogy of style which flowed from Bagehot through G. M. Young to contemporary historians such as Alastair Buchan (and in part to him as well): see his review of St John Stevas, *Walter Bagehot. A Study of his Life and Thought*, and Alastair Buchan, *The Spare Chancellor*, *Victorian Studies*, 4 (1960–1961), 76.
63. For one example, see Briggs, 'Taylor's Own Times', review of A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914–1945*, *Encounter*, 26 (February 1966), 65–6. See also Briggs' praise of Buchan's study of Bagehot, *Economic Journal*, 70 (September 1960), 607. He later remarked that he has become 'more interested in society in culture, than in society and economics. I am interested in the cultural expression of the society, and in getting at the variety of local experience': Hamilton, 'Asa Briggs at full steam'.
64. Substitute listening for seeing and Briggs' verdict on Young would apply to himself: '[i]nsight for Young was very much a matter of *seeing*': Briggs, 'G. M. Young: the Age of a Portrait', p. 253. What Briggs found in Young was 'a recovery of the variety of Victorian voices, the point counter point' of Victorian debate. Ironically, he also notes that despite Young's knowledge of Freud, 'there is little in the *Portrait* which points to the unconscious or its exploration', p. 256.
65. See Terry Lovell, 'Knowable Pasts, Imaginable Futures', *History Workshop Journal*, 27 (1989), p. 139. Briggs participated in Hertford College

- WEA tutors' course on 'Literature in Relation to History' in 1950, for which Williams was Director of Studies. See: Raymond Williams, 'Literature in Relation to History', in John McLroy and Sallie Westwood (eds.), *Border Country: Raymond Williams in Adult Education* (London: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 1998), pp. 166–73. Briggs cited Williams' 'Class and Classes', *The Highway* (January 1956), in his 'Middle-Class Consciousness in English Politics, 1780–1846', *Past and Present*, 9 (1956), 65–74.
66. Briggs, 'The "White Paper" in Perspective', *The Highway*, 50 (April 1959), pp. 165–9.
  67. See Briggs' review of Fried and Elman (eds.), *Charles Booth's London, New Society*, 20 February 1969, 294. See also, for example, his brief notice of Kitson Clark's *An Expanding Society*, *New Society*, 7 March 1968, p. 355: 'Faced with the task of addressing an Australian audience on Victorian Britain, Kitson Clark abandoned his Cambridge lecture notes, tamed his inhibitions, and concentrated on what he thought really mattered'.
  68. Briggs was concerned at Williams' unwillingness (at least in *Culture and Society*) to root his discussion in economic forces, and his cursory treatment of elements of the late Victorian revolt. See: 'Creative Definitions', review of Williams, *The Long Revolution*, *New Statesman*, 10 March 1961, pp. 386–90. Hence the concept of culture remains deployed only in quotation marks throughout *Victorian Cities*. See also Briggs, *Collected Essays*, vol. 2, p. xv and *Serious Pursuits*, p. 119, where Briggs talks about wanting in his new work on the BBC 'from the start to relate "culture" to both social and economic history'.
  69. Briggs, review of Cahnman and Boskoff's *Sociology and History*, *New Society*, 11 March 1965, pp. 26–7.
  70. For the critique of Thompson's notion, see, for example: W. H. Sewell, 'How Classes are Made: Critical Reflections on E. P. Thompson's Theory of Working-Class Formation', in Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland (eds.), *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), pp. 50–77. Briggs was convinced of the importance of imaginative reaction for an understanding of the significance of economic and social change. See, for example, his criticism of David Landes, *Unbound Prometheus*: 'Second Beginning', *Encounter*, 33 (1969), pp. 70–2.
  71. Characteristically, in his contribution on 'Modern Britain' to Norman F. Cantor, *Perspectives on the European Past. Conversations with Historians* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 165–84, he opts to start with society, rather than culture, and when he turns to culture he offers something close to the Arnoldian notion of culture as criticism.
  72. 'History and its Neighbours', inaugural lecture at the University of Leeds, quoted Briggs, *Special Relationships* (2012), p. 80. Recently, he has recalled that as early as his *History of Birmingham*, 'I wanted to write what I then thought of as "total history"': Briggs, *Serious Pursuits*, p. 119.
  73. Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, 'Working Class Attitudes', *New Left Review*, 11 (January–February, 1960), p. 26.
  74. John Vincent, 'Topical Trollope', *Observer*, 24 July 1977, p. 29. 'No collection of essays on the Victorian period' remarked Robert O. Preyer in

- 1967, 'would be adequate without a contribution from Asa Briggs': *Victorian Literature. Selected Essays* (New York: Harper, 1967), p. 37.
75. In this respect it is telling that a review of his *Collected Essays* by a Victorian scholar such as Theodore Koditschek could almost entirely pass over this aspect of his career and focus instead on his work on broadcasting: see *History of Education Quarterly*, 34 (1994), 93–6.
  76. For a summary of the evolution of Victorian Studies which offers little or no space to Briggs or to the traditions of social history he represents, see: G. Levine, 'Victorian Studies', in Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (eds.), *Redrawing the Boundaries. The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1982) pp. 130–53. Others have written him out of historical scholarship more generally: Richard Altick, 'Victorians on the Move; Or, 'Tis Forty Years Since', in his *Writers, Readers, Occasions. Selected Essays on Victorian Literature and Life* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989) pp. 309–28; Lyn Pyket, 'Victorian Beginnings', *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, 12 (2007), pp. 1–9.
  77. Personal communication, May 2011.
  78. [Briggs] to 'My dear Michael' [Wolff], 12 May 1964, Victorian Studies File, Briggs Papers, University of Sussex.
  79. Philip Collins to Briggs, 16 August 1965, *ibid.*, Collins (1923–2007) was another Victorianist who had begun as an adult education tutor, only joining the English Department in 1962; see Simon Hoggart, obituary, *Guardian*, 15 May 2007, p. 31. The Leicester Centre for Victorian Studies was established in 1966–1967 with a grant of £30,450 from the Leverhulme Trust, *Victorian Studies*, 9 (1965–1966), p. 488.
  80. Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 150. This was not entirely true, though many articles had been ephemeral or published in less well-known journals, including 'Crimean Centenary', *Virginia Quarterly Review* 30 (Autumn, 1954), pp. 542–55.
  81. Briggs to Richard Hoggart, 2 June 1962, 5/9/80, Hoggart Papers, University of Sheffield.
  82. Briggs, review of Michael Banton (ed.), *Darwinism and the Study of Society*, *New Scientist*, 27 July 1961, p. 237.
  83. For example, see his questioning of the notion that historical studies must 'assimilate' 'a theoretical and applied sociology': review of Rich and Wilson (eds.), *Cambridge New Economic History of Europe IV*, *New Society*, 25 May 1967, p. 774.
  84. 'Family Forests', review of A. R. Wagner, *English Genealogy*, *New Statesman*, 23 April 1960, pp. 598–9.
  85. Briggs, 'David Daiches and the Idea of a New University', in William Baker and Michael Lister (eds.), *David Daiches. A Celebration of His Life and Works* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2007), pp. 24–5. In this Briggs was greatly influenced by his visits to the USA (including Chicago) in the early 1950s. See: Obelkevich 'Witness Seminar', p. 152.
  86. Briggs, 'History and its Neighbours', *Occidente*, 11 (1956), pp. 314–15.
  87. *Ibid.*, p. 309.
  88. See Briggs, 'G. D. H. Cole', *Listener*, 20 October 1960, pp. 671–72. See also his 'Introduction' to *Fabian Essays* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1962),

- pp. 11–29. There Briggs argues that he was drawn to the Fabians at least in part because of their sceptical approach to theory, and that '[t]heir ideas of what was "fair" and "honest" were grounded not in theory but in the facts of working-class life and organization', p. 27.
89. See Levine to Briggs, [n.d. c. 1966?], Victorian Studies File, Briggs Papers, University of Sussex: 'The focus of the book' Levine wrote, 'will be on Victorian non-fiction, and it promises to develop critical approaches to non-fiction prose which ordinarily is treated, in literature courses, as background material rather than as the intrinsically interesting work it often is'. Levine chased Briggs by telephone. It is not clear whether he ultimately elicited a verbal decline, or some prospect was offered that Briggs might contribute. The 'Introduction' of the subsequent book merely notes that the commissioned essay on social criticism was 'not forthcoming': George Levine and William Madden (eds.), *The Art of Victorian Prose* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. viii.
  90. Patrick Scott, message to VICTORIA listserv, 2 July 2004, <https://iulist.indiana.edu/sympa/arc/victoria/2004-07/msg00036.html>, accessed 20 April 2014.
  91. [Briggs] to Vicinus, 31 August 1972, Victorian Studies File, Briggs Papers, University of Sussex.
  92. Briggs, review of *The Pearl of Days*, *Times*, 26 October 1972, p. 10.
  93. Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 74.
  94. Briggs, 'Victorian Values', in Eric M. Sigsworth (ed.), *In Search of Victorian Values* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 10–26.
  95. Including Asa and Susan Briggs (eds.), *Cap and Bell. Punch's Chronicle of History in the Making, 1841–1861* (London: Macdonald and Co., 1972); Briggs and A. Miles, *A Victorian Portrait. Victorian Life and Values as Seen through the Work of Studio Photographers* (London: Cassell, 1989). For a few examples of the articles, see: '1874: The Social and Political Scene', *Connoisseur*, 185 (1974), pp. 2–16, and 'Pictures at an Exhibition' (on the 1851 Exhibition), *New Scientist*, 7 May 1981, pp. 367–68.
  96. Briggs, 'The Nature of Victorianism'.
  97. Walter Arnstein, review of Briggs (ed.), *The Nineteenth Century, Victorian Studies*, 15 (1971–1972), p. 92.
  98. Joseph C. D'Oronzio, review of the University of Chicago 'Classics' edition, *The History Teacher*, 8 (1974), pp. 143–44.
  99. Briggs, review of Laslett, *The World We Have Lost*, *New Society*, 27 January 1966, p. 31; Cf. Briggs, 'Second Beginning'; Briggs, 'On Approval', *New Statesman*, 24 November 1978, pp. 709–10, review of George Rudé's *Protest and Punishment*. In an earlier review of John Vincent's *Pollbooks: How the Victorians Voted*, Briggs noted that effective use of quantitative data relies on 'the sociological awareness and imagination of the historian, on his powers of interpretation and on his capacity to relate quantitative to qualitative evidence': *New Society*, 13 April 1967, p. 546.
  100. David Feldman, review of *Cities, Class and Culture*, *Victorian Studies*, 36 (1993), p. 390. Briggs' own position is very visible in his comments in his contribution to Cantor, *Perspectives on the European Past*.

101. E. P. Thompson, 'Responses to Reality', *New Society*, 4 October 1973; Williams, review, *New York Times*, 5 November 1973, p. 442; Cf. Valentine Cunningham, *Essays in Criticism*, 24 (1974), p. 301.
102. F. M. Leventhal, review, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 6 (1976), p. 486.
103. Anne Humpherys, 'Knowing the Victorian City: Writing and Representation', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 30 (2002), p. 603.
104. Williams, review, *New York Times*, 5 November 1973, p. 442. Earlier, Williams was equally critical of Briggs' 'The Political Scene', in S. Nowell-Smith (ed.), *Edwardian England, 1901–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), regretting the 'curious modern style of the absentee memoir, sometimes called a political diary, in which the writer knows he was not present when the great men were making up their minds, but feels that he might have been and meanwhile can talk very well from the corridor': *Guardian*, 9 October 1964, p. 9.
105. See M. Vicinus, 'The Study of Victorian Popular Culture', *Victorian Studies*, 18 (1975), pp. 473–83, *idem*, 'Retrospectives', *ibid.*, 20, supplement, (1977), pp. 9–12.
106. Along with, of course, Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977); S. Gilbert and S. Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979). At the 1984 *Victorian Studies* Alumni conference at Bloomington, Vicinus noted that up to 1970 *Victorian Studies* had published only two articles on women: *Victorian Studies*, 28 (1985), p. 306.
107. John Kucich, 'Narrative Theory as History: A Review of Problems in Victorian Fiction Studies', *Victorian Studies*, 28 (Summer 1985), p. 658. 'Before Miller', George Levine has remarked, 'even the best of Victorian criticism went untheorised': Levine, 'Victorian Studies', p. 139.
108. J. Shattock and M. Wolff (eds.), *The Victorian Periodical Press. Samplings and Soundings* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982), p. xiv.
109. Levine, 'Victorian Studies', p. 132.
110. *New Statesman*, 8 September 1961, pp. 313–14.
111. In part driven by his championing of democratisation of knowledge. See, for example, Briggs' discussion in 'The New Learning', pp. 102–3.
112. Briggs, review of R. M. Hartwell, *The Industrial Revolution and Economic Growth*, *New Society*, 25 November 1971, p. 1052.
113. For example, compare R. K. Webb's review of Briggs' *Social History of England*, *New York Times*, 1 April 1984, p. 9, with Bryan Palmer, *Descent into Discourse. The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990), ch. 2.
114. See his somewhat plaintive review of Knoepfelmacher and Tennyson, *Nature and the Victorian Imagination, Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 34 (1979), 104–7, and his rather insipid assessment of Patrick Brantlinger (ed.), *Energy and Entropy*, *Economic History Review*, 43 (1990), pp. 497–98.
115. *Times*, 15 September 1983, p. 9.
116. *Victorian Things* appeared as the material turn was gathering pace, that is to say two years after Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), but before much of the scholarship associated with the turn. See: Erika



- Rappaport, 'Imperial Possessions, Cultural Histories, and the Material Turn: Response', *Victorian Studies*, 50 (2008), pp. 289–96.
117. Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 154.
  118. Webb, *Albion*, 22 (1990), p. 327. Roy Porter, 'Victoriana – a Passion to Consume', *Sunday Times*, 27 November 1988, noting that it was 'the history of things with the people left in'. For Perkin it was 'the best introduction one could find' to the Victorian age, *Economic History Review*, 42 (1989), p. 606.
  119. Ann Robson, *Journal of Modern History*, 62 (1990), pp. 857–58; Michael Mason, 'Victorian Consumers', *London Review of Books*, 16 February 1989, pp. 14–15; David Cannadine, 'Never-Never Land', *New York Review of Books*, 15 February 1990, pp. 25–30; Gillian Darley, *Financial Times*, 21 January 1989.
  120. Catherine Hall, *New Statesman and Society*, 9 December 1988; Cannadine, 'Never-Never Land', p. 26.
  121. Hall, *New Statesman and Society*, 9 December 1988. As Bruce Kinzer wrote of Briggs' essay on Gladstone, 'A search for objects is one thing, a searching inquiry into their significance another', review of P. Jagger (ed.), *Gladstone*, *Victorian Studies*, 42 (1999/2000), pp. 520–23.
  122. For example, Briggs, 'The 1890s: Past, Present and Future in Headlines', in Briggs and Snowman (eds.), *Fins de Siècle. How Centuries End* (London: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 157–96, and his 'The Imaginative Response of the Victorians to New Technology: The Case of the Railway', in Christopher Wrigley and John Shepherd (eds.), *On the Move. Essays in Labour and Transport History Presented to Philip Bagwell* (London: Hambledon Press, 1991), pp. 58–75. See also 'Victorian Images of Gladstone', in Jagger (ed.), *Gladstone*; 'Politics and Reform: The British Universities', in Franz Bosbach, William Filmer-Sankey and Hermann Hiery (eds.), *Prince Albert and the Development of Education in England and Germany in the 19th Century* (Munich: K. G. Saur, 2000), pp. 119–28.
  123. Distracted by pressing responsibilities and illness, they were not prepared for publication until much later, and then OUP treated them as a new book, sending them to referees who required significant changes. Even after the changes were made and footnotes added, publication was refused: Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 89.
  124. David Roberts suggested that he was 'disappointing as a master builder' and that he 'lacks an architectural skill for grand unifying themes', review of *Collected Essays*, *Journal of Modern History*, 58 (1986), p. 919.
  125. Briggs, criticism of Vincent, *New Society*, 13 April 1967, p. 546; Briggs, review of Maurice Bruce's *The Shaping of the Modern World*, *The Highway*, 49 (April 1958), p. 186.
  126. Briggs, *Collected Essays*, vol. 1, p. 102; Briggs noted that John Vincent's *Formation of the Liberal Party*, for all its strengths, forged new dogmas: *Guardian*, 22 April 1966, p. 9. For the motto for the Book Club edition of *A Social History of England* Briggs chose a quotation from a 1951 essay of the American historian, Henry Steele Commager, that English character was 'various and heterogeneous; it is at once obvious and elusive, and every generalization must be not so much qualified as confounded', Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 156.



127. Briggs, quoted in *Economist*, 1 December 1979, p. 111. For this style, see also Briggs, 'Open Questions of Labour History', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 1 (1960), pp. 2–3.
128. See his review of the *New Cambridge Modern History*, vol. XII, *Historical Journal*, 5 (1962), p. 213; cf. his review of Élie Halévy's *Imperialism and the Rise of Labour*, *Economic History Review*, 5 (1952), pp. 281–82.
129. John Kenyon, 'Short Shrift', *Observer*, 9 October 1983, p. 32. The anonymous reviewer in the *Economist* noted that '[a]ll through the book he scatters points for argument and discussion, instead of laying down set doctrine', *Economist*, 24 September 1983, p. 99. Similar responses to *Victorian Things* were common; for example, Albion Urdank remarked that 'Briggs does not establish the proper balance between the presentation of specific details [...] and conceptual generalisation', review, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 21 (1991), p. 518.
130. Alexander Welsh, 'The Victorian City', *Victorian Studies*, 17 (1974), p. 420.
131. Peter Hall, review of *Victorian Cities*, *New Society*, 19 September 1963, pp. 24–5.
132. Private communication, April 2011.
133. See <http://britishscholar.org/publications/2008/10/01/october-2008-philip-palevine/>, accessed 18 December 2013.
134. Briggs, 'International cultural network exists but is not fully effective', *Times*, 2 January 1973, p. 8. A characteristic tribute to Briggs' time as Provost of Worcester College, Oxford was that he fostered conviviality and argument. See: Jose Harris (ed.), *Civil Society in British History. Ideas Identities and Institutions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. i.
135. Briggs, *Collected Essays*, vol. 2, p. xiv.
136. M. Kenny, *The First New Left. British Intellectuals after Stalin* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995).
137. Briggs, 'Marxists', *Guardian*, 22 February 1955, p. 4; review of Hobsbawm's *Age of Revolution*, *Listener*, 11 January 1963, p. 22. Briggs retained a suspicion of middle-class intellectuals unreliably 'moved by frustration or rebellion', rather than those amongst the working classes 'moved by necessity': 'Bevin and the Movement', *New Statesman*, 19 March 1960, pp. 419–20.
138. Pallares-Burke, *New History*, p. 35.
139. *Age of Improvement*, p. 468.
140. Reviewing *Victorian Cities*, R. Furneaux Jordan concluded '[i]f the nineteenth century was ugly, it was an ugliness born of self-confidence and of a brash vitality': 'The Age of Self-Confidence', *Observer*, 15 September 1963, p. 25.
141. *Victorian Cities*, p. 16.
142. Cantor, *Perspectives on the European Past*, where in Briggs' contribution periods are presented as a necessary convenience for historians, but not a great deal more.
143. Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 149.
144. Briggs, *Age of Improvement*, p. 1. Periodisation is considered by Briggs in *Victorians and Victorianism* and also in Pallares-Burke, *New History*, p. 35 where he equates it with the schematic phases of Marxist history. Briggs' criticism of periodisation was on occasion endorsed by readers, including Hugh Peck who, while reading the *Age of Improvement*, confessed he 'cannot

- acclaim too heartily the disposition (which he supports) to be done with the nonsense of arbitrary “periods”’: Letter, *History Today*, 9 (May 1959), p. 367.
145. Briggs, *Victorian People*, pp. 87–8.
  146. ‘Over the whole reign’, Briggs told a reporter in 1997, ‘there is a unity which lies in the Victorians’ recognition of the importance of change’: Alan Hamilton, ‘The Reign That Changed the World’, *Times*, 4 August 1997.
  147. Briggs, review of H. P. R. Finberg, *Approaches to History* (1962), *New Society*, 20 May 1965, pp. 29–30, commenting in particular on Harold Perkin’s chapter.
  148. *Social History of England*, p. 277. In *Victorian People* Briggs talks about ‘the continuities hidden behind the story’, p. 306.
  149. *Age of Improvement*, p. 3; Briggs, ‘Retrospect and Forecast. The nineteenth century faces the future’ in Briggs (ed.), *The Nineteenth Century*, pp. 328–44. His essay on Edwardian politics in Nowell-Smith (ed.), *Edwardian England* cautiously suggested shifts brought upon by the tariff reform campaigns, and the emergence of Labour in 1906. This despite the fact that at Sussex he was teaching a joint undergraduate seminar with David Daiches on ‘The Late Victorian Revolt’: Briggs, ‘David Daiches and the Idea of a New University’, in Baker and Lister (eds.), *David Daiches*, p. 25.
  150. See his criticism of Vicinus for not observing this in her *The Industrial Muse*, review, *Economic History Review*, 29 (1976), p. 163.
  151. *Victorian Cities*, p. 11.
  152. See his comment on Strachey in Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 66.
  153. This idea became a convention of Briggs’ writing: see, for example, ‘Victorian Values’ in Sigsworth (ed.), *In Search of Victorian Values*; ‘Modern Britain’ in Cantor, *Perspectives on the European Past*. This was a paradox: having dismissed Victorian periodisation, Briggs then falls easily into the assertion that, for example, the years 1837–1851 were ‘in a highly distinctive period’: Briggs, ‘Trollope, Bagehot and the Constitution’ (originally published 1952), in Robert O. Preyer (ed.), *Victorian Literature. Selected Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 52.
  154. Briggs, ‘Samuel Smiles: the Gospel of Self-Help’, *History Today*, 37 (1987), pp. 37–43.
  155. Review of Alison Adburgham, *A Punch History of Manners and Modes, 1841–1940: “Cultchaw” and Society*, *New Statesman*, 31 March 1961, pp. 513–14. It was clear, Briggs argued, that ‘the automobile age separates our own urban experience from the Victorian urban experience just as the coming of the railway separated the Victorian age from earlier ages’: *Victorian Cities*, p. 14.
  156. Fraser, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, *Cities, Class and Communication*, p. 4. Fraser notes: ‘some have argued, that the real Briggs forté lies in his historical imagination and his powers of synthesis, rather than in the depths of his scholarly research’. Cf. Perkin, ‘What Is Social History’ (originally published 1953), republished in *The Structured Crowd. Essays in Social History* (Brighton: Harvester, 1981), pp. 1–27. It is clear that part of what appeals about social history to Briggs is that ‘everything is grist’: see his review of Trevor Lloyd, *Explanation in Social History, History and Theory* 29 (1990), p. 97.

# 3

## Victorian Capitalists and Middle-Class Formation: Reflections on Asa Briggs' Birmingham

*Francesca Carnevali and Jennifer Aston*

I came across Asa Briggs' work as an undergraduate in Italy, when I picked up an already dog-eared, second-hand copy of *Victorian Cities* – published, I noted, in the year I was born.<sup>1</sup> The book moved to London with me when I came here to do a Masters and then a PhD. The book followed me from student hall to bedsit, in cardboard boxes; then it came with me to Swansea, where I had my first job, and then made its way with me back to Birmingham, the city that I had researched for my PhD. *Victorian Cities* and the other Victorian books, *Victorian Things* and *Victorian People*, are the books that I turn to in order to understand how to write about the city, people and things – never more so than now that I am writing a book on Birmingham and another Victorian city, Providence, in the United States. Asa Briggs' books have not only accompanied my personal journey but have been teaching me things over and over again.

### I

Asa Briggs' contribution to Victorian Studies was made available to the general public through the Pelican paperbacks series published by Penguin Books in 1968, and is part of a Victorian trilogy, as we all know,

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Francesca Carnevali died in May 2013. This chapter has been revised and extended from her conference paper by Jennifer Aston, her former PhD student, and with the permission of her husband, Paolo di Martino.

together with *Victorian Things* and *Victorian People*.<sup>2</sup> With *Victorian Cities* Briggs' aim was to 'concentrate on particular facets of their histories', to reveal and explain essential elements of Victorian society. Briggs saw Victorian society as 'sometimes restless, sometimes complacent, moving, often fumblingly and falteringly, towards greater democracy'.<sup>3</sup> You have to admire, if not the sentiment, the words, the beautiful words. In *Victorian Cities* Briggs provides us with memorable accounts of Manchester, the symbol of a new age, Leeds, the study in civic pride, Birmingham and the making of the civil gospel, Middlesbrough, the new community, Melbourne, a Victorian community overseas, and finally London, the world city.

For all of these cities Briggs traces the ways in which its inhabitants tried to grapple with the urban space and mould it, while contending with the opposing forces of economic development and social and cultural reform. But the belief in an ever-onward progress was something that the Victorians had to negotiate, when applied to their cities' development, as economic individualism and common civic purpose were difficult to reconcile, especially in the face of very rapid demographic change. In telling the stories of these cities Briggs looked for similarities but also, if not especially, for differences, as each set of inhabitants responded differently to the urban problems which they shared. He used the city to give Victorians their voice, and '[t]he facts of the city forced people to become articulate about their values and their aspirations, to speculate about riches and poverty, success and failure, "improvement" and "waste", private property and public interest, fate and social control'.<sup>4</sup> Again the words roll.

The structuring of the urban environment was not the only aspect addressed by Briggs. At the forefront of his endeavour was to understand the changes in the cities' social structures and progress towards greater democracy as more of its inhabitants became involved in local government. In so doing, in his endeavour in *Victorian Cities*, Briggs opened the way to a new type of urban history, one where the city became a lens through which to observe the social, cultural, political and economic elements that make a society distinctive. He used microhistory to present us with an overarching metanarrative for the Victorian period.<sup>5</sup> The chapter on Birmingham in *Victorian Cities* was also the cornerstone of the *Victoria County History*, the seventh volume of the history of Warwickshire, and the separate volume on Birmingham published in 1964, and was based on the second volume of the history of Birmingham covering the period 1865–1939 published by Birmingham City Council in 1952.<sup>6</sup>

Birmingham's history illustrates some of the main features of city growth in the 19th century, such as the problem of urban development, slum clearances, the rise of suburbs, parks and other public amenities, the impact of changes in transport and technology. In analysing these features of the city, Briggs provides us with insight into how the Victorians thought about their city, what they feared and what they aspired to. But if this is all there was to the story, Birmingham would just be a variation on a theme alongside Manchester, Leeds and the other cities.

More importantly, in my view, Briggs tells us the story about Joseph Chamberlain's Birmingham, a city closely bound up with the history of England as a whole – the invention in the sense of the caucus, the rise of the Liberal Party.<sup>7</sup> And Briggs uses Birmingham to provide us with a lens through which to see, to experience, the political excitement, the turmoil that gripped the country in the second half of the 19th century, as it moved towards the third Reform Act in 1884 and it grappled with home rule and tariff reform.

But Birmingham was also unique, and Briggs focused on three aspects: the strength of religious nonconformity in shaping the aims of the municipal government and its civil society with its focus on education and sanitary reform; and, secondly, on Birmingham as the workshop of the world and the incredible range of goods it made. It was a city – and Briggs describes it so beautifully – where in one narrow alley one could find an astonishing range of trades, paper box makers, gas fitting manufacturers, press tool makers, brass founders, coal merchants, jewellery and glass cutters, crate makers. Connected to this, to Birmingham's variety of trades, was the third element that made Birmingham unique (although I do not think it is so unique, in retrospect), its workshops, in contrast with Manchester and Leeds' large factories. Its workshops gave Briggs the opportunity to explore the close social and economic relations between masters and men. He opined that in Birmingham businessmen and working men were not divided by tall walls of privilege as they were in Manchester. It was what he called 'the small man's system', which allowed workers to become owners and sometimes fall back – Briggs, quoting George Eliot, 'some slipped a little downwards, some got higher footing'.<sup>8</sup> The mechanism created a political alliance between working classes and middle classes – most notable in the creation of the political union of middle and working classes founded by Thomas Attwood in Birmingham in 1830 – and it allowed various forms of social and cultural cooperation, thus, Briggs claimed, achieving a higher degree of social peace than in other cities.

Since the publication of *Victorian Cities*, and the *History of Birmingham*, Briggs' picture of a city blessed by class harmony has been challenged, most notably by Clive Behagg's work on politics, production and labour, where he attempts to show how small masters were in reality in conflict with labour. Behagg also took issue with Briggs' assertion that Birmingham businessmen came to their wealth from below, from the ranks, and he used some examples of men who inherited their business to show how privilege, in fact, divided masters from men.<sup>9</sup> This is a very partial assessment. Others, not least Professor Cannadine, have shown how the Marxist notion of British society made by two blocks – the owners of capital and the workers, divided by an ever-deepening conflict – misrepresents economic and social relations in Victorian and early Edwardian Britain.<sup>10</sup> Not just in Birmingham, but throughout the country, the workshop, not the factory, was the predominant organisational form, a place where conflict and coercion were not efficient ways of fostering production. The workshop was a joint enterprise between masters and men, where they had a shared interest in getting their goods made, without which there could be no profit and no wages.

## II

In *Victorian Cities*, Briggs focused on exploring class relations in the context of production. In *Victorian Things*, he looked, instead, at consumption. During the second half of the 19th century, British consumers were able to turn their homes into Aladdin caves filled with a stupefying range of goods. And you only have to glance through *Victorian Things* to get a sense of the thickness of the Victorian home: furniture made of wood and papier mâché, carpets, rugs, linoleum, drapes, beds and pianos, toys, toilets and baths, tiles, brass ornaments such as fire irons, cutlery, glasses for drinking and stained glass for windows, china and pottery, wallpaper, oilcloth, light fittings, stuffed animals – all things that, by the way, were made in Birmingham, or nearby.

The sixty-year period from the 1850s onwards saw higher incomes per capita, lower prices and growth in the economy, resulting in more employment and more disposable income for the middle and working classes. Real wages also increased significantly. During this period, with the rise in real incomes and changes in production methods, consumers had far more purchasing choices than ever before. A range of household goods became affordable, and with them so did the expression of aspiration and status that came with these goods.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, the consumer boom meant that industry offered an unprecedented chance for social mobility; as Briggs noted, employees

could become small masters and improve their status with relative ease. Very little is known about these men (because they were mostly men), despite the fact that they represented the bulk of Britain's industrial class; they married women of similar or lower origins than their own, they were rarely educated beyond the age of 17 and most underwent a period of apprenticeship. Their importance was local, and worldly success for most of them could be achieved only through business success – they were never quite gentlemen. These businessmen formed local urban elites, controlling literary and political clubs, town councils, charities and churches, adorning the redeveloped centres of their cities where they had made their fortunes with town halls, art galleries and libraries. They formed self-contained circles, intermarried and were separate from the country gentry and the London-based aristocracy; and in many cases, such as in Birmingham, these local industrial elites managed the city.

More than the other cities studied by Briggs, Birmingham is the perfect microcosm to analyse the dynamics of the changes that took place in British society in the long 19th century. Birmingham's social history demonstrates the absence of clearly defined classes – the fallacy of the three stages model, let alone a two stages one. Its society was layered, shaped more by hierarchy than conflict; there was not one middle class and there was not one working class, and the boundary between the two was, at least up until the 1890s, very fluid.

Here is where *Victorian Cities* and *Victorian Things* connect. More goods, more affluent workers, more small masters who could become better off and could move into the ranks of the middle class, meant more political involvement, more city improvement, larger suburbs. From my point of view, Briggs' remarkable intuition was to show us how in the second half of the 19th century, industry, more than just an engine of economic growth, had become the engine of social mobility, as working men became masters. This is one of the themes that pervades Briggs' work on Birmingham, and it mattered to him because social mobility, the opening up of opportunities, meant much more than increasing affluence – it meant an increasing democracy and what Habermas would have defined as a broadening of the public sphere.

### III

However, if there is one fault with Briggs' work on Birmingham, it is that this theme was not taken further – too many other things to write about – that he did not give us a detailed study of social mobility in Victorian Britain. His intuition should be taken further if we want to

deepen our understanding of late Victorian Britain; we should look more closely at the fluidity between masters and men, at how these men became masters, how the process of social mobility took place, what forms social mobility took and how affluence was turned into status.

A microstudy of one group of Birmingham manufacturers, the jewellers of St Paul's (who consistently supported Joseph Chamberlain's political career), shows some interesting patterns. Although the origins of the jewellery trade can be found in the 18th century, it was in the second half of the 19th that this industry boomed, and on the eve of the First World War it employed more than 20,000 people – the largest employer in the region alongside the brass and copper trades. By the way, jewellery is still being made in Birmingham and it is the Midlands' longest surviving manufacturing industry.

Despite its size and longevity this industry has not been studied – although Briggs does mention it in his *History of Birmingham*.<sup>12</sup> Birmingham's jewellery trade provides us with the perfect case study to test Briggs' observation about masters and men, and social mobility. As all jewellery production took place in small workshops, only very rarely employing more than 30 people, pieces of metal were moved across the city by errand boys to be stamped, pierced, engraved, assembled and stones mounted, all in different workshops. This was a trade with very few barriers to entry, and Birmingham's unincorporated political status meant that the absence of guilds and its reputation for religious tolerance attracted artisans from other towns and other countries as they could set up easily on their own as small masters.

The jewellers of Birmingham were a mix of nonconformists (mostly Unitarians), Swedenborgians, Anglicans and Jews. Some were born in Birmingham, but most were not, or at least their fathers had come from elsewhere, including from the Continent. By 1880 we have a solid population of 400 firms, all small, plus hundreds of workers, entrepreneurs and a legion of outworkers, mostly women and children.

The industry was organised by a very active trade association, the Birmingham Jewellers and Silversmiths Association, established in the Jewellery Quarter in 1887, and by reconstructing the biographies of its members we find that with few exceptions the firm owners, the masters, had all been waged men, had been apprentices, and had learned the trade on the bench and then set up on their own, often with the financial help of an established relative. Their fathers had not all been jewellers – one had been a dancing master. Census and probate records allow us to reconstruct family trees: family networks were very dense



and there was a high degree of intermarriage; businesses were set up with kin or very close friends.

Local business ownership might have provided the opportunity for the social interactions and economic advancements described so eloquently by Briggs, but the businesses only achieved such success because of the carefully, and deliberately, interwoven familial relationships that underpinned them. If we look to the Birmingham Jewellers and Silversmiths Association, there are several names which appear repeatedly, serving as chairs, vice-chairs, secretaries and treasurers, as well as in the general membership. Among these names, the Faraday, Johnstone, Best, Haseler, Bragg and Rabone families are especially prominent. Census returns reveal the remarkable breadth and depth of the relationships between these six families.

The complexity of these relationships is exemplified in the family tree of William Rabone Haseler, who served as honorary secretary of the BJSa from 1896 to 1899, and chairman from 1902 to 1903. His father William Hair Haseler, recorded in the 1861 census as a jeweller employing seven men, six boys and two girls, (and former apprentice of Thomas Perry Bragg), married Elizabeth Rabone, the daughter of John Rabone, a rule maker living in the Jewellery Quarter. However, theirs was not the first Haseler-Rabone marriage: William's paternal aunt Amanda married Samuel C. Rabone in March 1854. William's uncles George Carter Haseler and John Bush Haseler married sisters Juliana Emma Johnstone and Sarah Maria Johnstone, the daughters of japanner Francis Johnstone and Emma Faraday, the daughter of a jeweller. Another of William's uncles, Edward Madeley Haseler, married Jane Adelaide Best, the sister of surgical instrument maker Isaac Arrowsmith Best, who had married Edward's sister Elizabeth Jeanette Haseler some 13 years earlier.

The unions above are just a few of the marriages that connected six of the most important families in the Birmingham small metal trades. Moreover, members of the Faraday, Johnstone, Best, Haseler, Bragg and Rabone families married into other, more minor, jewellery and metal manufacturing families, which spread the branches of this very complex family tree even further. The high degree of intermarriage between the families who lived in and around St Paul's, Birmingham, represents a highly successful survival strategy; the elder generation provided opportunities for apprenticeships to sons, sons-in-law and nephews, while a wife would not only bring capital through marriage (and importantly, as they were already related, the capital remained within the family), but would also produce the next generation of workers.

What is especially interesting in the case of the Faraday, Johnstone, Best, Haseler, Bragg and Rabone families, however, is that the multiple unions were not simply an unconscious product of convenience, for example the brothers of one family marrying the sisters of another because they happened to live nearby and were of a similar age, but a deliberate tactic to strengthen their business prospects and ensure their survival. In 1859 the Faraday, Johnstone, Best, Haseler, Bragg and Rabone families commissioned a family knot chart.<sup>13</sup> The chart documents each of the marriages between members of the families, revealing that the relationships continued beyond William Rabone Haseler's generation; for example, cousins married cousins, continuing the knot and the interdependence of the families. The emphasis placed on marriage networks by the jewellers of Birmingham themselves strongly supports the argument, made by Briggs, that the burgeoning middle classes were self-conscious, that they planned their social and economic advancement, and that the extended family network was absolutely key to this upward trajectory.

With no exception, these families all moved from living above their workshop premises in Hockley and St Paul's to Birmingham's affluent suburbs: Edgbaston, Handsworth and Moseley. Industry and affluence brought the trappings of middle-class respectability; however, this could not be equated with status. These men acquired status by using their social networks to enter the public sphere, their business careers were paralleled by public ones – what Briggs observed in *Victorian Cities* confirmed by Birmingham jewellers. These Victorians sought to improve their town, not through organising their own industry, but also by actively seeking public office and influencing the wider community. Manufacturing jeweller Charles Green, was one of the original founders of the Birmingham Jewellers and Silversmiths Association, and served as its first chairman in 1887 before being re-elected the following year. He was instrumental in the establishment of the Jewellers Art and Technical School and the Birmingham School of Art, both of which played an important role in raising the standards of the jewellery-making industry of the town. Charles also served as chief examiner of the Haseler Prizes, a competition established by the prominent Haseler family mentioned above.

Yet Charles' civic involvement stretched far beyond his interests as a leading manufacturing jeweller. In 1884, he was elected to the town council as a Liberal candidate by the electors of the St Paul's Ward, a position that he held until two months before his death in 1906. During his time as a councillor, Charles sat on the Industrial School, Gas,

Market and Fairs, Free Libraries, and Museum and Art Gallery committees. In 1896 Charles was appointed as a magistrate for Birmingham, and in 1897 as a Commissioner of the Peace. A copy of the *Birmingham and Midland Institute Magazine* of 1898 describes Charles Green's municipal activities as 'a matter of duty rather than preference [...] with nothing to tempt his ambition', epitomising Briggs' ideas of the emergent middle class building both their social position, and the civic identity of their town, through a series of voluntary public works.

This is not to say that all public voluntary activities were so serious, or consciously public-serving as those described above. Charles Green also participated in the Birmingham Literary and Dramatic Society, and he was far from unusual in this activity. As well as using intermarriage to create a solid foundation for the family firms, the Faraday, Johnstone, Best, Haseler, Bragg and Rabone families also worshipped together and played together. The members of these six families, together with their extended network of in-laws and cousins, created an impressively large group, and almost the entire membership of the Handsworth Dramatic Society, where they regularly produced high quality plays and musicals. This love of music and the arts was also carried through to their worship in the Swedenborgian New Church on Wrentham Street in Handsworth. With a local paper declaring that 'a more beautiful building is not to be found in a wide circuit of Handsworth', George Hope Johnstone ensured that the New Church (established by his brother-in-law in 1877) enjoyed a musical programme to match the building's grandeur. For many years George had 'control of the music services, which he raised to a high standard', and he donated a 'beautifully carved reredos and an oak screen in memory of relatives' to the church.<sup>14</sup>

Yet George Hope Johnstone's contribution to the musical tradition of Birmingham was not limited to the confines of his immediate family and Church. Together with relation Charles B. Bragg, George was a long-standing member, and later president, of the committee of the Birmingham Triennial Music Festival at a time when it was the premier music festival in Britain, attracting members of high, and local, society. George Hope Johnstone contacted composer Edward Elgar in early 1903 to discuss the possibility of him composing a piece for the upcoming festival, and the two rapidly became firm friends; this show of support from George greatly boosted Elgar's confidence after the disastrous first performance of *The Dream of Gerontius* at the Triennial Music Festival of 1900. George's ability to liaise and befriend renowned composers such as Elgar was, of course, largely based upon his own social and economic status. Family photographs reveal that by the early 20th century,

George Hope Johnstone along with his wife and children lived in an imposing Victorian Gothic villa in the desirable Birmingham suburb of Handsworth; far removed from the small home on Hockley Hill of his childhood. The house was complete with a large music room, described as one of the finest in the city, giving George an appropriate space to entertain some of 'the finest composers of the day'.<sup>15</sup>

The concept of space is central to the active part of the movement that transformed Birmingham from small borough into vibrant city, all within one generation. The men, and women, of the middle classes, including the jewellers of Birmingham, became city councillors, education and sanitary reformers, and designers of urban renewal. They created trade organisations, built churches, and organised music festivals, art schools, dramatic societies and literary classes. Significantly, however, the vast majority did not seek to exploit their local status and build upon it by running for higher national office. Rather, like Charles Green, they saw their activities as a duty owed to their city, and by creating attractive and virtuous spaces for the people of Birmingham to work, worship and play, they created an environment fitting of a modern city. Studying the biographies of these men teaches us that the middle class was not hatched from a metaphorical egg, perfectly formed, but nor was it the result of a slow process that started back in the mists of time from an obscure middling sort. Briggs' masters had been working men; workers did become capitalists, and as such they forcefully took their place in the public sphere and shaped their city.

## Notes

1. Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (London: Odhams Press, 1963; Pelican pbk. edn., Harmondsworth, 1968). The first two works in Briggs' Victorian trilogy were published in Italian as *L'Inghilterra vittoriana: i personaggi e le città* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1978).
2. Briggs, *Victorian People: A Reassessment of Persons and Themes, 1851–1867* (London: Odhams Press, 1954; Pelican pbk. edn., 1968); Briggs, *Victorian Things* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1988; pbk. edn., Harmondsworth, 1990).
3. Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, pp. 11, 16.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
5. Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, Introduction, ch. 1, and Epilogue. See also Briggs, *Historians and the Study of Cities*, George Judah Cohen Memorial Lecture (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1960).
6. Briggs contributed sections on 'Social History since 1815', 'Political History from 1832', and the 'Introduction' to the section on Public Education: W. B. Stephens (ed.), *A History of the County of Warwick, vol. VII: The City of Birmingham* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 223–45, 298–317,

- 486–500; Briggs, *History of Birmingham, vol. II: Borough and City, 1865–1938* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952).
7. Briggs' four principal other articles on Birmingham, published 1948–1950, are included in *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs, vol. I: Words, Numbers, Places, People* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1985).
  8. Briggs, 'Thomas Attwood and the Economic Background of the Birmingham Political Union', in *Collected Essays, vol. I*, p. 149. Eliot has proved a favourite source for Briggs. His most extended treatment of her work is 'Middlemarch and the Doctors' [1948], *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs, vol. II: Images, Problems, Standpoints, Forecasts* (Brighton: Harvester, 1985).
  9. Clive Behagg, 'Myths of Cohesion: Capital and Compromise in the Historiography of Nineteenth-Century Birmingham', *Social History*, 11 (1986), pp. 375–84; *idem*, *Politics and Production in the Early 19th Century* (London: Routledge, 1990).
  10. David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (London: Yale University Press, 1998); cf. Dennis Smith, *Conflict and Compromise: Class Formation in English Society, 1830–1914: A Comparative Study of Birmingham and Sheffield* (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1982).
  11. Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (London: Yale University Press, 2006). Cf. Francesca Carnevali and Lucy Newton, 'Pianos for the People: From Producer to Consumer in Britain, 1851–1914', *Enterprise and Society*, 14 (2013), pp. 37–70.
  12. Briggs, *History of Birmingham, passim*; cf. Francesca Carnevali, 'Golden Opportunities: Jewellery Making in Birmingham between Mass Production and Speciality', *Enterprise and Society*, 4 (2003), pp. 272–98.
  13. 'Union is Strength! Family Knot Chart 1859', chart showing the origins and intermarriages of the Faraday, Johnstone, Best, Haseler, Bragg and Rabone families. Held in the private collection of John Bragg, a descendant.
  14. Obituary of George Hope Johnstone, *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 13 February 1909.
  15. L. Jenkins, 'The Birth Pangs of an Oratorio', *Warwickshire and Worcestershire Life*, 33 (1986).

# 4

## Asa Briggs and the Remaking of Australian Historiography

*Frank Bongiorno*

In November 1950 a young Oxford undergraduate, and Australian and a Worcester man – a student of Asa Briggs, in fact – wrote a letter to the federal leader of the Australian Labor Party, Ben Chifley. After serving as prime minister for four critical years following the war, Chifley had been defeated a year before by the leader of a conservative coalition, Robert Menzies, in a general election. The young scholar took time out from his ‘groping in the depths of Keynes’ to offer Chifley some polite advice.

In dismissing revaluation as not being the answer to the present inflation in Australia you don’t give any alternative policy . . . Greatly increased taxation, admittedly unpopular, with a large budgetary surplus is surely not the whole answer. But excuse all this please! – it seems terribly insolent of a young undergraduate bothering you with such trite stuff!

In the same letter, the undergraduate condemned ‘Tory quackery’ and ‘hypocrisy’, while praising Nye Bevan ‘as the most prominent, brilliant and able of the Left wing’ of the Labour Party and Richard Crossman for his brilliance of mind and total belief in the rightness of socialism. The correspondence continued over several months, with the student expressing his admiration for socialism; his contempt for those – such as Menzies – who would curtail civil liberties by seeking to ban the Communist Party; and his hope that Chifley and Labor would win the 1951 election and so prevent Menzies from doing any further damage to the country.<sup>1</sup>

To those outside the historical profession at least, that Asa Briggs was the Oxford tutor of this young Antipodean radical, Rupert Murdoch (for that is who it was), is perhaps the best-known link between Briggs

and Australia. Murdoch is supposed to have referred to him as 'Isa', which also happens to be the name of a rugged mining town in western Queensland. There might well have been other Antipodean jokes of this kind circulating in Murdoch's activities. William Shawcross reports that when he breached the rules of the Oxford University Labour Club by canvassing for support in his quest to become its secretary, Murdoch's slogan was 'Rooting for Rupert'. In Australia, then as now, 'rooting' meant sexual intercourse. In any case, young Rupert was banned from standing again for Labour Club office. Briggs remained supportive nonetheless. When Rupert's father, the newspaper baron Sir Keith Murdoch, died, it was Briggs who delivered the news to his student.<sup>2</sup>

What I want to suggest in this chapter is that there are a number of other important connections between Asa Briggs and Australia. I have little to say about Briggs' influence on media history. Yet it would surely be a remarkable coincidence if one of the Australian historians whom Briggs influenced most directly, Ken Inglis, just happened to stumble into becoming the historian of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, as Briggs was the BBC's. According to Inglis, Briggs was his 'clandestine supervisor' at Oxford in the 1950s, while Briggs has described Inglis as 'one of the most able postgraduates I have ever supervised'.<sup>3</sup> Inglis had been formally allocated G. D. H. Cole but the Australian student was working on the Victorian churches and the working class, and Briggs' *Victorian People* (1954) had recently appeared. Inglis felt he needed help beyond what Cole was willing or able to provide. Briggs, having also examined the thesis, then engineered its publication in a series edited by Harold Perkin.<sup>4</sup> Inglis, along with Jim Main, who had researched a thesis on 19th-century Manchester at Oxford while Briggs was there, and Allan Martin, the political historian and biographer of Henry Parkes and Robert Menzies, were also both Antipodean 'conduits' for many of Briggs' ideas about urban and social history.<sup>5</sup> Martin, who was married to the pioneering Australian sociologist Jean Martin, was especially interested in the potential for dialogue between history and sociology, a project also at the heart of Briggs' career.<sup>6</sup>

This chapter will also have little to say – explicitly at least – about the influence on Australia's new suburban universities of the University of Sussex model of interdisciplinary schools, active learning and flexible structures, an experiment in which Briggs played such a formative role. That influence would be clear enough even if it had not already been noticed by historians of these universities, such as John Salmond on La

Trobe University in Melbourne.<sup>7</sup> Briggs has also engaged with Australian history in ways that I cannot consider fully here, notably in his study of the brilliant colonial and later Westminster politician, Robert Lowe. Briggs did not overlook in his essay that Lowe's experience of democratic Australia – or at least his later selective memory of 'mob rule' in the colonies – was critical in shaping his later suspicion of democracy, articulated during the battle over the Second Reform Bill in 1866–1867.<sup>8</sup>

Here, my focus is on Briggs' influence on social, urban and labour history in Australia. The critical moment – or rather six months – was the time Briggs spent in Australia in the second half of 1960, while he was Professor of Modern History at Leeds. Briggs visited Australia many times subsequently, and made and maintained many friendships and acquaintances with Australians, but it was this exquisitely timed encounter that would have the most lasting repercussions for Antipodean academic and intellectual life.<sup>9</sup>

Briggs, who would later describe his 1960 visit as 'a formative experience in my life',<sup>10</sup> was based in Canberra as a Visiting Fellow in the Research School of Social Sciences (RSSH) at the Australian National University (ANU). The university had been founded in 1946 by Chifley's Labor government as a research institution without undergraduates. During Briggs' visit, this situation would end because there was an amalgamation with Canberra University College, an institution founded in the 1930s largely to provide tuition to public servants.<sup>11</sup> Its Professor of History was Manning Clark, whom Briggs would get to know during the visit, and who was already making a powerful mark on the profession in Australia. Keith Hancock, who became director of the Research School of Social Sciences at the ANU in 1957 and had invited Briggs to Australia, was on leave in Britain during Briggs' visit, and submitted his resignation as director (while continuing as head of history) in September 1960.<sup>12</sup> Briggs had met Hancock when the latter was Professor of History at Birmingham (1934–1945). Their paths would cross more frequently after Briggs was appointed a fellow at Worcester College, Oxford, in 1945, for Hancock was by then Chichele Professor of Economic History. They continued to see each other even after Hancock departed in 1949 to take up the directorship of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies at the University of London.<sup>13</sup> Hancock hoped to recruit Briggs to the ANU but the latter had already accepted the deputy's position at the new University of Sussex before he went out to Australia. Much to Hancock's annoyance, Briggs instead tried to recruit to Sussex Anthony Low, a former *Times* correspondent with expertise in African and Indian history, now working at the ANU. Low would initially resist but went to



Sussex as Dean of the School of African and Asian Studies in 1964 before returning to the ANU and eventually becoming its vice-chancellor.<sup>14</sup>

While in Canberra, Asa and Susan Briggs lived in the Hancocks' 'no way attractive house'. Noel Butlin, the economic historian, provided the family with large electric heaters to warm a house that seemed to Asa hopelessly unsuited to the Australian climate. For her part, Susan found the local practice of building houses without a front fence rather unsuitable for families with small children intent on exploration. Although it was just a short walk to the Nissen huts which housed the National Library before it moved to its permanent building on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin, or to University House where he did much of his work, Asa found it necessary to arm himself with a stick to defend himself from swooping magpies.<sup>15</sup> Canberra itself, at the time of Briggs' visit, was a growing country town doing its very best to look like a national capital. Denis Healey would describe it a few years later as 'a sort of Milton Keynes with wallabies'.<sup>16</sup> By the time of Healey's visit in 1966, Lake Burley Griffin had been filled with water, but when Briggs arrived in Canberra, the excavators would barely have been in place, and much of what is now under water would have been paddocks – with wallabies possibly taking advantage of the greenery.

Briggs wrote much about cities in this period but he did not discuss Canberra – perhaps it was, as yet, still hard to conceive of it as a real city rather than a collection of sheep paddocks in which somebody had mistakenly placed the houses of parliament and a few government buildings. But he had plenty to say about other Australian cities; and Briggs saw several of them during his stay in Australia.

It was a busy visit. At the ANU, he delivered a course of lectures on 19th-century British social history. He also led a seminar on 'The Culture of Cities', in which he advanced forceful criticism of Lewis Mumford's 1938 book of that title. Where Mumford saw cities as all alike, said Briggs, he saw them as 'basically different'. And although the speaker conceded that cities did resemble one another in certain respects, he then proceeded to explain to his audience both the character of, and reasons for, the significant divergences that could be discerned between them.<sup>17</sup> It was an approach he had used to notably good effect in an article published in the *Cambridge Historical Journal* in 1952, a comparative study of the parliamentary reform movements of Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds in which Briggs tied local political alignments in each city to its distinctive economic and social structure.<sup>18</sup> For Briggs, economic activity, social structure and class relations provided the essential materials for connecting urban and labour history.

Consequently, he had hardly changed gears when the morning after his 'Culture of Cities' talk, he assisted in the foundation of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History with a seminar on 'The Study of Labour History'. The society is now more than 50 years old and its highly successful journal has appeared on over 100 occasions.

During his time in Australia, Briggs also 'read papers to a number of university groups in addition to visiting and lecturing' in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Hobart, Armidale (which was the site of the University of New England) and Christchurch in New Zealand.<sup>19</sup> Many of the concerns that would animate Briggs' career as historian, public intellectual and university administrator were in evidence in Australia. He delivered the 29th Joseph Fisher Lecture in Commerce at the University of Adelaide on 'Mass Entertainment: The Origins of a Modern Industry'.<sup>20</sup> At the ANU, he spoke on 'The Map of Learning' to the First Research Students' Annual Lecture, responding to the group's brief to discuss 'the present state and future prospects of investigation and education in their own and related disciplines'. In some respects a manifesto for the kind of university Sussex would quickly become, this lecture advanced the case for an interdisciplinary and socially engaged approach to learning. Briggs himself has recently recalled it as 'the most important lecture that I have given in my life'.<sup>21</sup> At the University of Sydney, he gave the George Judah Cohen Memorial Lecture on 'Historians and the Study of Cities'; it was published as a booklet.<sup>22</sup> Briggs also wrote on 'The Sociology of Australian Cities' in the socialist magazine *Outlook*, and he gave an address on ABC radio advocating Australian history.<sup>23</sup>

When he was not carrying out this heavy programme of activities, Briggs was apparently getting on with his research. One result was the famous chapter on Melbourne in his 1963 publication, *Victorian Cities*. Yet while he was in Hobart he also found time to visit the local state archives where he chased up information on Chartist convicts, later reporting his findings in the *Bulletin of the British Society for the Study of Labour History*.<sup>24</sup>

What was the impact of all this activity? The Department of History at the ANU's annual report concluded that Briggs' 'emphasis on the importance of urban studies is likely to have a significant effect on the direction of research in Australian social history'.<sup>25</sup> And just in case, in these times when university departments are scrambling to demonstrate the 'impact' of their research activities, one might be tempted to treat this suggestion with scepticism, there is plenty of other testimony that emphasises Briggs' influence. Graeme Davison, who would

later write *The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne*<sup>26</sup> and so stake his claim as the doyen of Australian urban historians, recalls as an undergraduate in Melbourne having heard Briggs deliver lectures on Chartism to his British history class, 'and I can recall the broad lines of his argument so it must have been a good one'. When Davison began to consider studying overseas later in the 1960s, he decided on Briggs and Sussex, a plan only derailed when he won a Rhodes scholarship. It is perhaps testament to Briggs' standing in Australia by the mid-1960s that Davison went to see his professor to discuss the possibility of pulling out and trying for another award that would get him to Sussex. John La Nauze, whom Briggs had come 'to know well' in 1960,<sup>27</sup> nonetheless gave that idea short shrift and Davison was packed off to Oxford. But he would return to the ANU in the late 1960s to research the doctorate on which his *Marvellous Melbourne* book was based, and Briggs was the external examiner.<sup>28</sup>

John Merritt was another young scholar who encountered Briggs on the 1960s visit. He would subsequently become one of Australia's leading labour historians, a brilliant and influential supervisor of graduate students, and a successful and innovative editor of the journal *Labour History* for a critical decade from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. Briggs did not lecture in Perth but this young visitor to Canberra from the University of Western Australia, where he was writing a Master's thesis on an early leader of the labour movement there (George Pearce, later Australia's Minister for Defence), was deeply impressed. Merritt attended the seminar on 'The Culture of Cities'. He thought it the best lecture he had heard up to that time, went back to his room at University House and wrote it up from memory. By his own account, recalled half a century later, he kept these notes for years, showing them around from time to time.<sup>29</sup>

Merritt also attended the meeting at which Briggs advocated the formation of a Society for the Study of Labour History. Such a society had, of course, only recently been established in Britain, and Briggs was its chairman.<sup>30</sup> The only surviving record of Briggs' talk, 'The Study of Labour History', at the ANU on 3 November 1960 and the response it evoked from those present, has to be reconstructed from the notes of one of the participants, the ANU archivist Bruce Shields.

Briggs apparently suggested four lines of approach. In the first place, he advocated a social history that would 'relate to ways of life'. Secondly, he called for an approach that would 'relate labour to other elements in life', including the middle class. He warned against a labour history that was 'too narrow', adding that 'class relations' were vitally 'important'.

Thirdly, labour historians should fill gaps in knowledge such as the nature, outlook and attitude of labour, as well as the history of industrial relations. They should concern themselves with the 'background of [the] lives of [the] men concerned'. Finally, they should investigate and revise theories concerning the labour movement, such as those advanced by the Webbs, which remained 'dominant still'. In sum, Briggs advocated a pluralistic approach to labour history in terms of its subject matter, with due regard to class structure and social history in a manner that recalled the method of his 1952 article on the reform movement in three British cities as well as his inaugural address to the British Labour History Society at Birkbeck College six months before (which would be quoted in the first issue of the Australian Labour History Society's *Bulletin*: see below).

Briggs's audience of Australian historians was a diverse group. It comprised not only labour historians but scholars who were already making their reputations in other subfields. From economic history there were Geoffrey Blainey, who at 30 was already the author of several mining and banking histories, and Helen Hughes, who would later work for the World Bank. Alan Barcan, the historian of education, was present, as was Douglas Pike, the general editor of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, who had recently published his monumental history of early South Australia. Ken Inglis had diverse interests that included the history of a hospital and, as already mentioned, a doctoral thesis on the Victorian working classes and religion. Geoffrey Bolton, similarly versatile, and like Inglis an Oxford DPhil, was pioneering Australian regional history with his research on North Queensland; while the labour historians in attendance included Bob Gollan of the ANU, who had organised the meeting. The presence of the archivists Bruce Shields (ANU) and Frank Strahan from the University of Melbourne, and the historian and union leader Lloyd Ross, ensured that the matter of preserving labour history records also figured in the discussion, as it would figure in the objects of the society when it was founded in the following year.

Most of those present seem to have responded enthusiastically to Briggs' call for a broad labour history, including his supplementary remarks in discussion concerning the value of sociology. On the other hand, and perhaps unsurprisingly in view of the diverse preoccupations of the audience, there were some differences of opinion over whether a labour history society was the best way to achieve such a goal. Don Rawson, a political scientist who worked on the Australian Labor Party, pointed out that it was rather 'curious' to be discussing the formation of a labour history society when there was not yet a general society of

historians in Australia (there would in fact be none until the foundation of the Australian Historical Association in 1973). As an alternative, Rawson suggested a 'Social History Society' or even just a 'History Society'. He felt that labour history was being developed disproportionately in Australia, and thought they should 'avoid premature solidification'. Ian Turner, an ex-Communist then writing a doctoral thesis at the ANU, responded that labour history was not 'overweighted' in Australia, or certainly not in published work at least. There remained 'enormous gaps' and, agreeing with Briggs, he suggested that the formation of the working class was one of them. 'Most major questions [had] not [been] answered', Turner remarked. Other participants in the discussion, such as Inglis, thought it might be prudent to involve the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, which included an historical section. Inglis, however, endorsed the idea of a society which 'would stimulate others & also ANZAAS'.

In the end Gollan was able to steer the discussion in his desired direction, with some timely support from Briggs, who judged that the society was more likely to stimulate than impede other organisations of historians. Gollan had argued that ANZAAS was inadequate because only four or five historians in any audience of 40 or 50 were likely to know much about a subject under discussion. The proposed society, by way of contrast, would be 'private, and should be cohesive'. Briggs endorsed Gollan's views, arguing 'against amorphous gatherings of general "historians"'. Briggs might have supported a broad labour history but he favoured a 'narrow Society' and also counselled those present on the best way to proceed in forming it, advice that would, in due course, be followed to the letter. Briggs thereby effectively presented the matter as a *fait accompli*. While there is no reason to believe that a labour history society would not have been founded without his influence on this particular occasion, he was nonetheless helpful to those labour historians who did not want to wait for the historical profession as a whole to organise before making their own move.<sup>31</sup>

The early records of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, as well as the reminiscences of founders such as Eric Fry and John Merritt, make the direct influence of Asa Briggs abundantly clear.<sup>32</sup> 'The British Society was the spiritual father of our own Society', recalled the first issue of its *Bulletin*, published in January 1962. 'It was the advice and warm encouragement of Professor Asa Briggs... that led directly to the formation of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History in Brisbane in May 1961'.<sup>33</sup> In the same issue, Briggs' influence was equally apparent in a brief statement by Gollan, who quoted directly

from Briggs' inaugural address to the British Society for the Study of Labour History – it had appeared in the British Society's *Bulletin* – to the effect that labour historians should concern themselves with

a study of the working class 'situation' taken in terms of health, leisure, etc. social history in the fullest sense, including politics, but not tied exclusively to politics; studies which focus attention on class relations, the impact of other classes and class organisations on the workers; and a strictly economic history of labour

Gollan thought that, in an Australian context, where such matters had 'received less attention than in Britain ... histories of major unions, the history of ideas and opinion, and the history of popular culture' should be prominent.<sup>34</sup>

I have argued elsewhere that Briggs' vision of a social history of labour had relatively limited impact on the kind of history actually carried out in the 1960s, which predominantly remained institutional.<sup>35</sup> There are good reasons for this rather conservative emphasis at this time, as well as for these pioneering academic labour historians' stress on 'a scrupulous regard for evidence' that, at times, seemed to border on the obsessive.<sup>36</sup> Australian labour history had a low reputation among the leading scholars in Australian history departments in the early 1960s. It was associated with partisanship and antiquarianism. There had been no Webbs in Australasia, and the closest equivalents, such as Timothy Coghlan and William Pember Reeves (himself an early director of the London School of Economics), were not associated with the kind of scholarship being passed off as 'labour history' at the beginning of the 1960s. At the time of Briggs' visit, labour history had barely established a presence in Australian universities; these men had something to prove.<sup>37</sup> Gollan himself, who did his doctorate at the LSE under Harold Laski in the late 1940s and had come into contact with the Communist Party of Great Britain Historians' Group, owed his tenure at the ANU in a decidedly chilly Cold War environment to protection from Hancock, who as Director of the Research School of Social Sciences (RSSS) had been instrumental in creating opportunities for dissenting academics.<sup>38</sup> Yet from even before Hancock's arrival, former Communists and an assortment of Marxists and other radicals received scholarships for doctoral study in history in the RSSS at the ANU. Several would be among labour history's leading practitioners from the 1960s through to the 1990s.

In the context of a still small historical profession concentrated in just nine universities at the beginning of the 1960s, the arrival in Australia

of an advocate of labour history such as the young and brilliant Professor of Modern History at the University of Leeds was a most fortunate turn of events. Those who heard him speak in 1960 recall a persuasive advocate, whatever his subject. British Australia was in its twilight in 1960, but academic networks were still in many ways imperial; for instance, running between the history department at Melbourne under Max Crawford and Oxford, especially Balliol, much as they had when the likes of Crawford himself, Hancock and Manning Clark had made this journey between the wars. Australian academics, including labour historians, would for many years yet continue to look to Britain as a source of ideas and models for the writing of history, to take their sabbaticals there, to send many of their best students to British universities, and to look in Britain for external examiners of Australian theses and so help launch the careers of their students. Indeed, these habits might have strengthened in the 1960s, even as they were redirected somewhat away from the traditional centres of Oxbridge and London, and towards the newer universities and the social history associated with Briggs, Rodney Hilton, Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, Edward Thompson, J. F. C. Harrison and George Rudé (then based in Adelaide). Greater ease of travel between Britain and Australia fostered such relationships.<sup>39</sup>

None of this is intended to imply a neocolonial relationship; Australian labour historians were mainly proud nationalists, and they were quite prepared to make their own precedents, such as in the rapid transformation of their *Bulletin* into a fully fledged academic journal. As John McLroy has recently shown, the British society refrained from establishing an academic journal for many decades.<sup>40</sup> The early decision for a journal in Australia was connected with the paucity of opportunities for the publication of labour history research in the 1960s; there was no Australian *Past and Present*, nor would there ever be anything like *History Workshop Journal* or *Social History*. Particularly under Merritt's stewardship in the late 1970s and early 1980s, *Labour History* came to take on the role of publishing many of the kinds of social history that, in Britain, would have appeared in a very different kind of journal. The Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, more than its British counterpart, also had vigorous local branches, and a case might be made that it laid greater emphasis than its 'spiritual father' on reaching out to labour activists themselves; or, at the very least, that it has been more successful in doing so.

The stimulus Briggs gave to urban history is harder to gauge because it did not have immediate direct institutional expression, but there is every reason to believe it was significant.<sup>41</sup> In the mid-1940s, while he

was the Director-General of Post-War Reconstruction, H. C. 'Nugget' Coombs had tried to create a Commonwealth Town Planning Bureau to provide postgraduate training and carry out research informed by 'the social, economic, political, administrative, demographic, distributional, locational and spatial aspects of urban and regional life', work that would assist the formulation of evidence-based policy by state and federal governments. As the result of an apparent lack of commitment at the political level, however, the attempt to create such a body failed.<sup>42</sup> As a result, in 1960 there was nothing in Australia that would pass for Urban Studies, and very little worthy of the name urban history.

By the mid-1950s, however, Australian historians were turning their gaze to the history of their cities. Perhaps the most distinguished publication in this line was George Nadel's *Australia's Colonial Culture*, published in 1957, but two postgraduates who would go on to make their mark on other fields – Robin Moore on India and F. B. Smith on Victorian Britain and the history of medicine – also produced postgraduate theses on Melbourne during its glory years.<sup>43</sup> And one of the first three doctoral candidates at the ANU in the 1950s, Eric Fry, produced a much admired but unpublished Marxist account of the urban working class of the 1880s.<sup>44</sup> There had also been a document collection called *The Melbourne Scene*, one of whose editors, Geoffrey Serle, would go on to produce a major study of Victoria during the gold rushes in 1963. The latter contained long sections on the effects of the rushes on Melbourne.<sup>45</sup> In the same year, Briggs famously included 'marvellous Melbourne' in his 1963 classic *Victorian Cities*, where he treated the phenomenal development of the city between the mid-1830s and the early 1890s within a comparative and what might now be called a transnational framework. Briggs emphasised the Britishness of Melbourne while also being attuned to the nuances of local distinctiveness. Most impressively, he deployed his case study not only to talk about the Victorian city, but also in a manner that intervened in Australian historiography itself.<sup>46</sup>

Here, Briggs had two important reference points, and it is a testament to the intellectual force and even-handedness of his engagement with the scholarship that he so skilfully navigated some waters that were already becoming treacherous, influenced as they were by the cultural battles of the Cold War. On the one hand, there was Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend*, published in 1958; Ward was another of that (reputedly) largest of all Australian political parties, the ex-Communists. He was also one of the first batch of ANU doctoral candidates. *Legend* was a landmark history which argued that an Australian national mystique



had been created on the pastoral frontier, through the culture forged by the white bushman. Ward was influenced by Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, but his study had begun as an exploration of bush ballads, and only gradually evolved into a model social history which drew heavily on oral folk culture for evidence.<sup>47</sup>

Just over 50 years later, it must be the most debated of all Australian history books, and among the critics have been urban historians. Graeme Davison, for instance, argued that the 'legend' was not so much a product of the frontier as an escapist fantasy constructed by young writers and artists living in the boarding-house district of inner Sydney.<sup>48</sup> Briggs, writing in *Victorian Cities*, suggested that the book had 'greatly enriched Australian historiography while . . . raising as many questions as it answers'.<sup>49</sup> Ward thought he was tracing the origins of a national legend; but Briggs wondered whether the Australian bush tradition was just 'an Australian version of the British preference for country over town'. Very gently, Briggs seemed to be suggesting that the values identified by Ward might have been rather more British than he had assumed. Would Australian attitudes to the city have been different if the colonies had been colonised by Italians with their 'ancient urban traditions' rather than the British?<sup>50</sup> Briggs also wondered aloud what the larger consequences might have been for the diversion of Australian attention away from the city in the late 19th century, the era following the collapse of 'marvellous' Melbourne into the depression of the 1890s, the very moment when urban life was attracting ever greater attention in the United States. We know now that Australians did not really avert their eyes from the cities at this time; that there was, in fact, an Australian progressivism concerned with the consequences of urban and industrial life.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, in the context of Australian historiography in the early 1960s, Briggs raised some pertinent matters that would later be taken up by urban historians from the late 1960s when the field really began to flourish.

Ward believed he was contributing to a radical legend: he drew attention to the agency of the bush workers in Australian history. But there were alternative understandings of Australian history being offered in the same era. Manning Clark, in an influential lecture in 1954 (noticed by Briggs), had called for more historical attention to the second half of the 19th century, 'the great period of bourgeois civilization in our cities, the period in which cathedrals, town halls, universities, schools, banks, and pastoral company buildings were put up as symbols of its faith'. Clark believed that the radicals, in their emphasis on the bush, the working class and the radical tradition, had distorted and warped Australians'

understanding of their history.<sup>52</sup> Later, some enterprising Australian conservatives would seek to use Clark's rejection of the radical tradition as a weapon in the cultural politics of the Cold War.<sup>53</sup> But Briggs, coming from both Britain and the left, was able to approach these issues free of such baggage. Rather more gently than Clark, he puzzled over why as urbanised a nation as Australia should have given so little attention to the history of its cities. In the circumstances, Australia 'should be a world centre of urban studies'.<sup>54</sup> He pointed to the paradox that this highly urbanised nation should have given 'more attention . . . to rural legends than to urban facts, to the values of the outback rather than the problems and opportunities of the city'.<sup>55</sup>

In particular, Briggs noticed that Australian cities themselves were being radically transformed, or seemed on the verge of rapid change.<sup>56</sup> In Melbourne, for instance – the city that had hosted the 1956 Olympics – concrete and glass skyscrapers were beginning to make their appearance on city skylines. High-rise public housing would be erected in the 1960s, while the lives and mores of more traditional suburban dwellers were being affectionately satirised in the early performances of Barry Humphries.<sup>57</sup> The writings of the architect Robin Boyd drew attention to *The Australian Ugliness* – the name of his most celebrated work, published in the very year of Briggs' visit.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, recent work on debates about Australian national identity in the 1960s have shown that commentators rejected the idea that bush values could form the basis of a post-imperial outlook. These were now widely seen as outmoded by intellectuals seeking a more cosmopolitan image, which they assumed they would find in the cities rather than the backblocks.<sup>59</sup>

In these circumstances, Briggs' message about the importance of studying cities fell on fertile Australian soil. And it was a message not merely about the past, but the present and future. Briggs's ideal urban historians would not turn their attention to the history of cities out of mere antiquarian curiosity. They would engage in contemporary debate and policy formulation, in close cooperation with specialists trained in other disciplines. Urban historians would be interested in issues of heritage and preservation, and they would place Australian cities within an international comparative framework. Briggs even advocated a 'Centre or Institute of Urban Studies' to carry out this interdisciplinary work.<sup>60</sup> Graeme Davison and Ruth Fincher have commented that 'If anyone can be said to have written a manifesto for Australian urban studies it was perhaps . . . Briggs'.<sup>61</sup>

A decade later, the situation in Australia had been transformed. An interdisciplinary Urban Research Unit was established at the ANU in

1965 and five years later Hugh Stretton's landmark (and self-published) book *Ideas for Australian Cities* completely transformed the status of Urban Studies in Australia, greatly raising their profile within public debate, academia and government.<sup>62</sup> Stretton was a historian – another 1930s Melbourne University-educated Balliol man, in fact – but he advocated the very kind of publicly engaged, social science-inflected, interdisciplinary Urban Studies propounded by Briggs in 1960. Meanwhile, in the 1960s and 1970s urban history moved from the margins to the centre of Australian historiography, facilitated in part by the growing status of social history generally.<sup>63</sup> In economic history, the earlier stress of historians on rural industry gave way to the groundbreaking work of Noel Butlin, which stressed the contribution of urban industry to development.<sup>64</sup>

Briggs was not responsible for these changes but his work was a catalyst, a provocation and a reassurance. Quite apart from his sheer energy, there were Briggs' personal gifts as an advocate, speaker and intellectual, his achievements as an author and historian, and his status as an eminent English academic at a time when even nationalistic Australians were more inclined to look to Britain as a source of authority than they are today. As Australian academic history entered the period of its greatest expansion, Briggs was calling for a widening of horizons, inviting his Antipodean audiences to imagine a subject that was open to the influence of other disciplines, democratic and inclusive in its subject matter, and guided by the practical problems and concerns of the present day. In making this case, moreover, Briggs was working with the grain of some important changes in academic and civic culture, as well as in the physical circumstances of urban life.

Above all, there was Briggs' curiosity about, and respect for, Australian people, cities and things – to borrow from the titles of his own books. There is an intriguing line in a letter Briggs wrote to Margaret Cole towards the end of his Australian sojourn. 'This is an odd society,' he reported, 'in many ways dispiriting, but an interesting one to see for a time. I'll be back just after Christmas'.<sup>65</sup> Hancock clearly had little prospect of being able to keep Briggs at the ANU. And while Briggs might have found some oddities in Australian society, still he did not conform to the Australian image stereotype. He did not conform to the Australian image of the snooty Englishman come to the backblocks to give the colonials a lesson in metropolitan standards. Rather, Briggs unsettled the ways in which many Australians – and perhaps British people, too – were inclined to think about the relationship between the 'provincial' and the 'metropolitan'; and in a way that prefigures

some of the concerns of subaltern and post-colonial studies.<sup>66</sup> Briggs' description of Middlesbrough, with its ironstone mining industry, as the 'British Ballarat' was particularly mischievous in this respect!<sup>67</sup> And when he pointed out that Australian cities 'had much in common with British provincial experience', he was writing as a Yorkshireman, historian of Birmingham and Leeds professor; not glancing down from an Oxbridge high table, or peering from behind the *Financial Times* in a London club.

As Briggs put it in his recent memoir, 'in the whole of my life I have never felt myself to be a Londoner...I have always been a "provincial"'.<sup>68</sup> For Briggs, the study of the local and the provincial had value and importance in understanding the wider world to which they belonged, whether the subject happened to be the Midlands, his own Keighley or the bustling cities of Victorian Australia. Briggs paid the Australian historical profession the compliment of engaging with its own concerns, debates and materials. And at a time when many Australian historians were turning away from imperial and transnational contexts in their own historical practice, Briggs reminded them that writing about a particular place – indeed, their own place – need not imply being insular, parochial or even provincial, in the pejorative sense of that term.

## Notes

1. Clem Lloyd, 'Reporting Caucus: The Press and Labor Crises', in John Faulkner and Stuart Macintyre (eds.), *True Believers: The Story of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2001), pp. 200–1.
2. William Shawcross, *Rupert Murdoch: Ringmaster of the Information Circus*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), pp. 66, 71, 75.
3. Asa Briggs, *Special Relationships: People and Places* (London: Frontline Books, 2012), p. 67.
4. Conversation with Ken Inglis, 7 April 2011. The book was K. S. Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963).
5. Graeme Davison, emails to author, 10 August 2010 and 9 September 2012.
6. See, especially, A. W. Martin, 'The "Whig" View of Australian History: A Document', in John Nethercote (ed.), *The Whig View of Australian History and Other Essays* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007), p. 22.
7. John A. Salmond, 'The Academic Structure', in William J. Breen (ed.), *Building LaTrobe University: Reflections on the First 25 Years 1964–1989* (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 1989), p. 65. See also Graeme Davison and Kate Murphy, *University Unlimited: The Monash Story* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2012), pp. 66–7. Monash, in outer-suburban Melbourne, was established in the same year as Sussex. The Sussex model had its advocates there,

including its foundation vice-chancellor, Sir Louis Matheson, but the university ultimately decided to adhere to a more traditional model of disciplines and departments.

8. Asa Briggs, 'Robert Lowe and the Fear of Democracy', in *Victorian People: A Reassessment of Persons and Themes 1851–67* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970 edn.), pp. 232–63, esp. pp. 243–46.
9. Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 189.
10. Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 148. Asa Briggs spoke similarly of his 1960 visit at *Asa Briggs: A Celebration*, conference at the Institute of Historical Research, London, 19 May 2011.
11. S. G. Foster and Margaret M. Varghese, *The Making of the Australian National University: 1946–96* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996), p. 168.
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# 5

## Asa Briggs and the Emergence of Labour History in Post-War Britain

*John McIlroy*

Now in his 90s, Asa Briggs can look back on a life rich in labour and achievement. A practising historian for more than seven decades, he has made important contributions not only to the discipline and its popularisation but to intellectual life more generally, and the development of Britain's universities more particularly. He has not finished yet. Sixty-nine years after his first book appeared he is about to publish a third volume of memoirs.<sup>1</sup> Introducing the essays presented to Asa on his seventieth birthday, Derek Fraser emphasised four historiographical themes which categorised his achievement. Most scholars will recognise his significance in the evolution of the fields of social history, urban history and the study of broadcasting and communications from the 1940s.<sup>2</sup> Younger historians may be less familiar with his engagement with labour history, given that subject's marginality in both universities and popular discourse since the 1990s and the dominant role typically accorded to Marxist historians when it was in vogue between the late 1950s and the early 1980s. Yet it was a feature of his career from 1945 to the 1970s. The substantial and sometimes overlooked part he took in its take-off after 1960 was propelled by an enduring interest rooted in his background, his intellectual development, his times and the challenges that they presented to the expansion, modernisation and maturation of the discipline.<sup>3</sup>

### **Influences and outlook**

Asa's origins have been described as 'Yorkshire working-class'.<sup>4</sup> They were not stereotypically so – his grandfather was an engineering



foreman from Barrow-in-Furness and his father, William Walker Briggs, a skilled engineer, while his mother, Jane, came from farming stock. He grew up between the wars in Keighley, a small, tightly knit, woollen town in the West Riding of Yorkshire where a sense of commonality, centred on the realm of work and relatively shared experience in the community, bred reasonably close relations between the classes, although this should not be exaggerated. He possessed an acute consciousness of place<sup>5</sup> and was attuned from an early age to what went on in the world of Keighley. It imparted to him a sustained awareness of the importance of locality and labour, how people made their living, and a lifelong openness, candour and trust in democratic instincts. The impact of the international economic depression on the town profoundly affected his thinking.<sup>6</sup> He was 'a scholarship boy' of the pre-war vintage, the first of his family to enter the faraway territory of the university. This became possible not simply because of the precocious brilliance which led to an interview at Cambridge at 16 and admission in 1937 when he was 17; but because, consonant with the accidents of social mobility, he was taken in hand by Neville Hind, his headmaster from 1933 at Keighley Grammar School, who had himself studied history at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge.<sup>7</sup>

He came from outside and from below. The first boundaries he crossed were the frontiers of class: he was always interested in its creation and expression.<sup>8</sup> There were few signs that he experienced any significant sense of wrenching from his roots, the feelings of rupture and loss which marked some of his fellow travellers. He remained at one with his past and its people.<sup>9</sup> It was because his early life in a Yorkshire town in the 1920s and 1930s convinced him that economics, their direction and control, were the key to history – although he was never a Marxist<sup>10</sup> – that he commenced his first steps towards combining history and the social sciences. He took the unusual initiative of pursuing, and securing first-class honours in, the external University of London BSc (Econ) while gliding, if not effortlessly, with aplomb, to a double-starred first in the History Tripos at Cambridge in 1941. When the staff and students of the London School of Economics (LSE) were evacuated to Cambridge in the early years of the war, he met (and later acknowledged their influence on how he thought about the past) two pioneers of social and labour history, Lance Beales and R. H. Tawney.<sup>11</sup>

He played no part in the student Communism at Cambridge recently evoked by Eric Hobsbawm; indeed around this time he joined the Church of England.<sup>12</sup> His contemporary, the radical educationalist Brian Simon, recorded: 'Between 1936 and 1939 there was a growing

determination among Cambridge students to reform and transform both curricula and teaching methods... Historians were among those taking the lead in this movement...<sup>13</sup> Asa was active in this campaign. It sparked an enduring interest in education and engendered a lifelong mission to change how history was conceived and taught. Fellow students and teachers were struck by the assurance with which he settled into academic life and the confidence he displayed in challenging ideas. His intellectual influences were diverse. They included Sir Ernest Barker, a Liberal then absorbed in thinking about communitarianism and voluntary association who was Professor of Political Science at Cambridge when the 17 year old arrived, and who actively supported the students' demands for reform of the curriculum; and a controversial historian who had left Keighley Grammar School to pursue an academic career at Cambridge some 20 years before Asa, and whose versatility he emulated – Sir Herbert Butterfield.<sup>14</sup>

More obviously in relation to social and labour history, he cited Michael Postan and Eileen Power. A medievalist whose work united the economic, social and political, a scholar who possessed an interest in contemporary economics and social theory, Postan was Professor of Economic History at Cambridge when Asa was an undergraduate. The Russian was a charismatic figure for the students, radical historians and Marxists alike, who thronged his lectures. Postan imparted to them a feeling for breadth and taste for integration.<sup>15</sup> From the pioneering social historian Eileen Power – Postan's guide and wife until her untimely death in 1940 – Asa took the sense of an audience beyond the academic and the importance of the mass media. Power considered it axiomatic that scholars should write – and broadcast – not only for the benefit of professional colleagues but for the enlightenment of students in the colleges and schools, as well as the general public, or at least its interested, earnest minority.<sup>16</sup> Inspired by the publication of *The Common People* in 1938 and strengthened by the appearance of *Chartist Portraits* in 1941, the work of G. D. H. Cole also exercised an enduring influence on Asa's post-war preoccupations.<sup>17</sup>

He grew to maturity during the war against fascism, in which as an intelligence officer at Bletchley Park he was intimately involved, and the restricted radicalisation among intellectuals that the conflict fostered. He established himself as a historian during the post-war high tide of Labourism and the Keynesian, social-democratic consensus of the 1950s and 1960s which in many ways he personified. From his eschewal of fashionable politics at Cambridge to his decision in 1976 to sit in the Lords as a cross-bencher, he was never explicitly party political. He was

an active citizen of that world of the welfare state, collectivism, egalitarianism and faith in education that ran into the buffers in the 1980s, one of a talented generation of intellectual social engineers, 'a man of the left' with a 'broad commitment to the cause of labour'.<sup>18</sup> It is to indulge in only a little imaginative licence to see him after the war sharing the ideal he attributed to a cautious, gradualist trade unionist of his beloved Victorian era, of workers as 'full, responsible citizens, exercising an active influence on national affairs and building with care and vision a cooperative commonwealth'.<sup>19</sup>

Briggs reflected his times in his optimism about social progress, sympathy for the labour movement and belief that, in partnership with the state, organised labour could play a constructive part not only in managing the economy but in enriching and extending culture and democracy. He wanted to democratise history without diluting scholarship and transform its focus on ruling circles and high politics. He wanted to bring on stage ordinary workers and working-class leaders. Their views, their concerns, their culture, their politics, the contribution that labour had made to history were necessary to rigorous reconstruction of the past. That, as Noel Annan pointed out in *Our Age*, entailed history from below and beyond, transcending centres and elites, 'challenging the metropolitan account of politics and culture and revealing the richness of urban and regional England'.<sup>20</sup> Historians of labour should start from the local, from provincial and informal as well as national and official sources, in putting together a broader picture which surpassed but incorporated the parochial. They should insist that not only the labour movement but workers more generally, in the workplace, the home and the community, become part of a renovated social history which integrated the economic, social and political aspects of human existence and took full account of other disciplines, particularly the social sciences, but also philosophy, literature and art. What misguided historians had neglected or taken apart needed to be put together. He coined G. M. Trevelyan's aphorism: he envisaged social history not with the politics left out but with the economics put in.

If the content of the discipline required democratisation, so did its dissemination. This was exemplified in the accessibility and popularity of Asa's own writings. It was embodied in, and reinforced by, his teaching in extramural classes at Oxford and later Leeds and his activity in the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), a forcing house of early labour history which aspired to be the educational wing of the labour movement. In those years engagement in adult education helped fashion the teaching methods and in some cases the scholarship and concerns of

many young academics. Success demanded imaginative and vivid presentation in order to inspire and retain the interest of evening students, many of whom had left school at 12, and a day's work a few hours earlier, as well as an extended repertoire – many students were as concerned with social and labour issues as much as with what remained the political grist of academic history. The task was to employ popularising pedagogy without sacrificing rigorous exposition and analysis or detracting from an emphasis on complexity, competing interpretations and the tentative nature of conclusions. In the early 1950s he concurred with Cole about the WEA's future. It should not, as it would, evolve into a provider of leisure courses for a middle-class, reasonably educated public; it should target its original intended audience: workers, particularly manual workers, particularly trade unionists. When he became WEA president, exactly 50 years after Tawney's pioneering history classes in the Potteries, he attacked educational underprivilege and attempted to convey the values and standards of university education to part-time students who would remain workers all their lives; while encouraging working-class students to enter the academy in greater numbers. He wrote in 1953: 'The notion of group advancement as well as self-development should be as fundamental to the WEA as it is to the trade unions'.<sup>21</sup>

We are offered a fascinating glimpse into Asa Briggs' thinking – and future action – when we find him arguing in 1957 that it was dangerous to 'imprison' workers' education in the 'cages of university "subjects" ... to reproduce without question the specialisms of university departments'.<sup>22</sup> As Edward Thompson and Raymond Williams among others demonstrated in their contemporary extramural lives, education should be about synthesis and the dissolution of artificial boundaries. When what Briggs remembered as 'the optimistic excitement of the 1960s', new opportunities and new universities arrived on the scene, his work with the WEA melded seamlessly into his modernisation of the curriculum as dean, pro vice-chancellor and vice-chancellor at Sussex between 1961 and 1976 and later as Chancellor of the Open University, endeavours which also involved advancing labour history.<sup>23</sup>

## **Oxford and labour studies**

In the post-war years a small number of academic historians shared many of these concerns and a smaller minority championed labour history. It had developed outside the universities in adult education classes earlier in the 20th century. It was identified with the

Webbs, the Hammonds, Raymond Postgate and other 'amateur' historians, and with the WEA, although it had its academic advocates in G. D. H. Cole at Oxford and Beales, vestigial in the literature but emblematic as a teacher for post-war labour historians, at the LSE. Nonetheless, labour history found a foothold in the post-war years in universities, largely in the provinces. It figured at Aberystwyth, Birkbeck College, London, LSE, Edinburgh, Hull, Keele (then the University College of North Staffordshire), Manchester and Southampton, through the efforts of, among others, David Williams, Eric Hobsbawm, Ben Roberts, W. H. Marwick, John Saville, Frank Bealey, Bill Challoner, A. E. Musson and F. C. Mather. It found favour among a network of scholars in Oxford in which, after his appointment as a fellow of Worcester College in 1945, Asa came to play a significant role. By the end of the 1950s, an appreciable literature had emerged.<sup>24</sup>

Oxford remained dominated by ancient, medieval and early modern history cast in a political, diplomatic and constitutional mould. A. J. P. Taylor and Alan Bullock, then at New College, who were, along with Asa and the right-of-centre Hugh Trevor-Roper at Christ Church, among the most prominent younger dons, had started a Recent History Group in an attempt to push coverage forward from the mid-19th century. For the most part their concerns lay with conventional history.<sup>25</sup> Advocates of labour history were scattered across the colleges and the university's adult education arm, the Delegacy for Extra-Mural Studies. They had experienced the 1930s and the war. They embodied a reformist '1945' strand of opinion which believed Oxford should contribute to a better society through a refurbished university adult education, particularly courses for trade unionists, and a more relevant internal curriculum which provided some recognition for labour studies.<sup>26</sup>

Cole, appointed Chichele Professor of Social and Economic Theory in 1944, was in the last phase of his career. If less active in the public and political spheres, he was at the peak of his influence inside the university and in adult education and was believed, with some exaggeration, to have the ear of the Attlee government. Asa may not have been 'a disciple of Cole',<sup>27</sup> but as one of his colleagues at Oxford at the time remarked, 'there was an inspiration in Cole which was greater than his conscious ideas'.<sup>28</sup> Briggs was drawn to Cole as a critic of blinkered specialism and advocate of the synoptic view, as a populariser and the doyen of the old labour history: 'I knew how much the subject meant to Cole and the people with whom I worked in the WEA'.<sup>29</sup> Briggs grasped early that academic change did not come automatically or easily. He realised: 'Cole had power, and one thing I have really learned about the

change from individual activities in history to institutional change, is that it is essential to have some people with power who can make the changes'.<sup>30</sup>

Cole presided over a heterogeneous group of scholars which included Henry Pelling, a fellow of the Queen's College from 1949 to 1965, a pioneer of research into the early Labour Party and, subsequently, a best-selling historian of trade unionism; A. F. 'Pat' Thompson, a tutor at Wadham College, appointed in 1947, who also worked on trade unionism; Hugh Clegg, a former pupil of Cole, who was appointed to a Nuffield Fellowship in 1949; Allan Flanders, a former far left activist and TUC functionary, who became the university lecturer in industrial relations the same year – without, in the spirit of the subject and times, possessing a degree; and Henry Collins, a historian of the First International, who also published on contemporary trade unionism and worked at the Extra-Mural Delegacy. Cole was influential in the last three appointments and instrumental in securing Asa a Readership in Recent Social and Economic History in 1950. There were also a number of talented graduate students in the late 1940s and early 1950s. They included John Child, working on the history of the printing industry; Richard Clements, studying trade unions and emigration 1840–1880; Alan Fox, researching 19th-century Birmingham and the Black Country; and Donald Read excavating Peterloo. Fox, Stephen Coltham, whose thesis was on George Potter and the *Beehive*, and Royden Harrison, who completed a doctorate on the English Positivists and, like Coltham, went into university adult education, would subsequently play a part in the Society for the Study of Labour History (SSLH).<sup>31</sup>

Given the interest some of these academics shared in adult education as well as internal teaching, the present as well as the past of labour, it seemed at one point as if an integrated labour studies addressing both the history and the contemporary problems of work and the predicament of workers might emerge, both inside and outside the walls. There were, ephemerally, political conflicts about the position of Communists in the Delegacy. Most of the difficulties arose in relation to Wedgwood Memorial College, Oxford's outpost in the Potteries, although as a regular contributor to adult education programmes Asa was a speaker at the scene of one of the flashpoints, the trade union school at Queen's in 1948.<sup>32</sup> Differences in interests as well as in the perspectives that this group possessed on history were more pertinent. As a synthesiser who insisted on blending the economic and social with the political and institutional, Asa argued that Clegg – whose maxim was that an ounce of

fact was worth a pound of theory – and Pelling were inclined too much towards the institutional and political respectively, at the expense of the economic and the social dynamics of change in their historical work on the unions and the Labour Party. Clegg, Briggs later argued, took institutionalism and particularity too far in his emphasis on collective bargaining and his questioning of the reality of a labour movement for much of modern labour's history. The history of trade unionism should broaden out to include personalities, attitudes, culture, the grassroots and international comparison.<sup>33</sup>

The differences which developed and the contours of future separation can be discerned in Flanders and Clegg's *System of Industrial Relations*, for which Asa wrote a chapter in 1952–1953. His social history, which discussed growth and change in the factory system and the labour force, developments in technology, education, politics and how industry was perceived, contrasted sharply with the institutional treatment in the remaining five chapters, dealing with the law, trade unions, employers, collective bargaining and joint consultation.<sup>34</sup> For the next decade, labour history and industrial relations interacted and some scholars pursued both. In 1964, Hobsbawm could congratulate 'the growing band of experts on "industrial relations" who sometimes overlap with the historians' for their contribution to 'the serious study of the process, the theory and practice, strategy and tactics of union activity'.<sup>35</sup> Thereafter, in an early example of fragmentation, the mainstream of industrial relations became encased in a debilitating institutionalism, presentism and, by the late 1960s, imbrication with the imperatives of public policy.<sup>36</sup>

During Asa's years in Oxford the labour history group found it possible to collaborate loosely.<sup>37</sup> As early as 1946 no less an authority on the art of exposition than A. J. P. Taylor regarded Asa as an outstanding lecturer, worth recommending to the BBC.<sup>38</sup> He took classes in economics and politics as well as history. Having followed Cole into the WEA, he became deputy president in 1954 and president in 1958, although changing trends defeated all efforts to revive labour history – local history which flourished was a different matter – in the WEA's classes. His abiding interest in public history was affirmed by his involvement with *History Today*, which commenced in 1951, and, of course, broadcasting and more broadcasting. As well as attempting to bring Oxford history into the Victorian age, he tutored Rupert Murdoch, then a mainstay of the University Labour Club. With Clegg and Pelling he contributed to teaching 'Labour Movements since 1815', an optional paper on the Philosophy, Politics and Economics degree. Labour history also encroached

on the compulsory PPE paper, 'Political and Constitutional History'. It featured more strongly on the optional paper in the History School, 'British Social and Economic History since 1760', and the University Diploma of Economic and Political Science, which was taken primarily by Ruskin College students.<sup>39</sup>

He believed some progress had been made in the modernisation necessary to respond to the challenges of the 1950s. In history teaching at least, it was insufficient, certainly for the radical generation of the 1960s. When she went up to Oxford in 1961, the young Sheila Rowbotham found the relative lack of economic and social history 'bewildering'.<sup>40</sup> Later in that decade, the social historian, Geoff Eley, remembered, 'the Oxford history curriculum ... remained a chipped and crumbling monument to a dusty and cloistered lack of imagination'.<sup>41</sup> As Asa discovered, the time-consuming, cumbersome mechanisms of reform and the attachment to tradition of much of the academic body were frustratingly hard to penetrate. It was a factor in his move to Leeds.<sup>42</sup>

Labour history per se constituted only one of his concerns and a relatively small part of his output, although it pervaded much of the rest. The two books he published in the early 1950s, the second volume of the commissioned history of Birmingham (1952) and *Victorian People* (1954), were small but significant stabs at total history.<sup>43</sup> Labour history was embedded in the story, not, as so often had been the case, Hobsbawm pointed out, dismissed as the province of the partisan chronicling of 'the ups and downs of obscure organisations'.<sup>44</sup> The portrait of Robert Applegarth in *Victorian People* amply demonstrated that labour people could be both interesting and significant.<sup>45</sup> Asa's history of Lewis's, *Friends of the People*, affirmed his long-term interest in business history, which he always insisted should be considered alongside labour history.<sup>46</sup> Despite his commitment to breadth and his insistence on integration in the writing of history, he never subscribed to any school, whether the ascendant *Annales* or the then embattled Communists, although trips to France and the USA broadened his horizons. He was an eclectic. Miles Taylor has noted the influence on some of his work in the late 1940s – particularly 'Middlemarch and the Doctors' and 'Samuel Smiles and the Gospel of Work' in the *Cambridge Journal* – of Michael Oakshott's antirationalism and anticollectivism.<sup>47</sup> But, in what were still the conditions of the Cold War, he was an open and tolerant eclectic. In an atmosphere which made it difficult to secure articles for *Past and Present* from non-Marxists, even historians with left leanings, he contributed a paper on middle-class consciousness.<sup>48</sup>



## Leeds and the new labour history

Leeds, still, as Briggs remembered, a Victorian city, was very different from Oxford. There were, nonetheless, important similarities between Yorkshire fustian and red brick and the glitter and glamour of the dreaming spires: although some members of the small Leeds history department were interested in new approaches, as at Oxford, the hand of conservatism lay heavily on the content of courses.<sup>49</sup> In that context, 'Asa Briggs' move as professor to Leeds', one young social historian recalled, 'was regarded by all of us as a very significant moment'.<sup>50</sup> Asa recollected the background: 'Society and culture were on the eve of the great breakthrough which was to transform attitudes between 1956 and 1960'.<sup>51</sup> He referred to Suez, Hungary, the emergence of the New Left, commercial television and the stirrings of university expansion. Cultural change produced 'the angry young men', John Osborne and Alan Sillitoe, Jimmy Porter, Arthur Seaton and Yorkshire's Joe Lampton, rock and roll and kitchen-sink, Aldermaston and CND. It brought with it a new prominence for the provinces and the working class in the novel, drama, film and in history.

The more mundane business of the discipline went on. With John Le Patourel, the medievalist from the Channel Islands, heading the history department, Maurice Hutt, a historian of the French Revolution and Napoleon, handling much of the administration, and abetted by colleagues like Austin Woolrych, who became a distinguished historian of the English Civil War and subsequently guided the fortunes of the new University of Lancaster, Asa was able to push a measure of innovation. He encouraged postgraduate research and began to chart change in the curriculum towards the Victorian era, international, particularly Asian, history, social and economic as well as political ideas. He attempted, with limited success, to create collaboration in courses and research with other departments.<sup>52</sup>

His sustained interest in the organisation of higher education led, in 1959, to membership of the Universities Grants Committee where he garnered invaluable experience which would yield rich dividends at Sussex. Long labour bore literary fruit with the appearance that year of *The Age of Improvement 1783–1867*. With its iconoclastic shift in periodisation and extended canvas, it was a *succès d'estime* which went further than its predecessors towards realising the promise of a unified economic, economic, social, political and labour history.<sup>53</sup> The American title, *The Making of Modern England*, was superior in conveying the scope and message of the text. If it appears to us now more of an exemplar

and stimulation to other historians to take integration further, it was an important book and its value was immediately recognised. It was termed at the time 'the standard history of the 19th century'<sup>54</sup> by labour historians who saw in it ways in which labour could be inserted into broader narratives; by 2000 it had gone through 84 editions around the world. At the turn of the century, balanced assessments noted that even with revisions it had been unable to keep abreast of the explosion of research in econometrics, demography, electoral behaviour, political parties and archival revelation. It remained a work of enduring power and relevance and a classic of 20th-century historiography.<sup>55</sup>

In the Leeds history department Donald Read was an assiduous student of early radicalism and Chartism. His pioneering study of Peterloo came out in 1958, and at the turn of the decade he would publish books on Feargus O'Connor and *Press and People 1790–1850*. Arthur J. Taylor who arrived later was then predominantly an economic historian who pioneered analysis of early trade unionism in mining.<sup>56</sup> There was also a group in the economics department who were interested in labour history: Jim Williams, another historian of the miners, the industrial relations scholars, Vic Allen and, a little later, Bert Turner, as well as Eric Sigsworth.<sup>57</sup> By 1962, a special paper for several honours schools was launched with rotating subjects. The initial theme 'Industrial Relations in the British Coal Industry 1919–1939' illustrated the slow but persistent forward march of modern history.<sup>58</sup> It was, however, the staff in the extramural department at Leeds who provided the major impetus for labour history's growth nationally. Interest was fanned by the atmosphere of the late 1950s, in some cases the suborning of Stalinist certainties, provoked by Khrushchev's secret speech and the smoke of Budapest, Suez and the New Left; but the subject was in decline in adult education where it had first flourished. It was kept going in Yorkshire largely through the dedicated efforts of the proselytising extramural director Sidney Raybould, and the talented team of tutors he had assembled.<sup>59</sup>

Asa's role in the WEA, where Fred Sedgwick was the energetic and principled North Yorkshire district secretary, as well as his apprenticeship in adult teaching at Oxford, provided the links with this work outside the walls. So did a new friendship and close collaboration with his contemporary at Cambridge J. F. C. Harrison, another scholarship boy who became Raybould's deputy director in 1958.<sup>60</sup> Together with Harrison's colleagues, Tom Caldwell, a student of French history, Des Crowley, a researcher into the early days of the Labour Party, who later emigrated to Australia and became prominent in adult education there,

Pat Duffy, subsequently a Labour MP, and Edward Thompson, who taught as much literature as history, they formed the core of a Leeds Labour History Group. It was based on a desire to stimulate history from below and restore the common people to elite narratives through scholarly research rather than inspirational tracts. Matters did not stop at Leeds, and connections were forged elsewhere.<sup>61</sup>

In the second half of the 1950s academic interest in labour history burgeoned. Despite electoral reverses in 1951 and 1955 and sluggish growth in relatively strong trade union membership, the labour movement was enjoying a prolonged period of political and social acceptance. It was a respected aspect of the landscape and a pillar of the Keynesian settlement.<sup>62</sup> Its trajectory and history attracted attention from a small, but in comparison with the past sizeable, and talented group of university teachers who had largely graduated between the late 1930s and 1940s. Labour history was brought to the attention of a wider public by reviews of the growing flow of publications in the national press – a not inconsiderable factor in its popularisation. Asa took a prominent part in this, although pride of place might be accorded to A. J. P. Taylor, who unlike most political – or for that matter labour – historians had been brought up in the labour movement or at least its unorthodox left wing.<sup>63</sup> The growing ranks of labour historians constituted a disparate, sometimes antagonistic, undeniably disputatious congregation. Asa had been critical of the work on labour history of the Communist Party Historians Group exemplified in the 1954 collection, *Democracy and the Labour Movement*, put together by John Saville, then a lecturer in economic history at Hull. The essays, he concluded, acknowledging the strengths as well as weaknesses of Marxist scholarship, sometimes displayed too much simplification, dogmatism and occasional blindness to reality. There was too little interrogation of central questions, such as why Marxism had exercised peripheral influence on British labour.<sup>64</sup>

Some in the group, notably Hobsbawm, were beginning to appreciate this sort of point and Asa came to admire his work in the later 1950s.<sup>65</sup> He had no problem with commitment, so long as it provoked rather than arrested critical inquiry and work of quality. He disdained hagiography in labour history, believed antiquarianism should, if anything, constitute a subordinate strand, and he had little time for doctrinal squabbles between historians of conflicting political philosophies.<sup>66</sup> Briggs did not espouse Hobsbawm's dismissal – albeit temporary – of what Communists and former Communists sometimes characterised as an emerging Labour Party school of historians spearheaded by Clegg, Pelling and the pugnacious LSE scholar of industrial relations Ben

Roberts, but he was critical of their work.<sup>67</sup> Briggs' own preference, one he shared with many in the Leeds group, was for social history, for the exploration of working-class culture, widely defined, rather than institutional and political histories of labour. But he took a pragmatic view. And his breadth of vision, tolerance and ability to get on with all kinds of people and rub along with different perspectives enabled him to act as a focus for a plural approach to the subject. After 1956 and the crisis in the Communist Party (CP) there was enhanced appetite for cooperation together with growing acceptance of the need for a multifaceted labour history and a big-tent organisation to help it along.

The process was taken further through the preparation and publication, in 1959 and 1960 respectively, of the two collections *Chartist Studies* and *Essays in Labour History*. The first was edited by Asa, the second by Asa and Saville. Both texts are a tribute to Asa's ability to cultivate contacts, develop networks of historians, sometimes with strong and conflicting views, and, as he put it, 'pull things together', not to speak of an unusual ability to deliver the goods. He was not always successful: he claimed Thompson's contribution to *Essays* was handed to him 'at the last possible moment' at Leeds railway station, while his projected contribution to *Chartist Studies* never materialised.<sup>68</sup> These books are of their time. They remind us of just how relatively untilled by scholars the field of labour history still remained at the end of the 1950s. In accordance with its editor's historiographical instincts and the developing ethos, *Chartist Studies* centred on the periphery and research into the provinces – arguably London and the South-East were relatively neglected – supplemented by Asa's reflections on the movement's national impact. In the context of existing work it demonstrated difference and diversity and provided readers with a series of small epiphanies.<sup>69</sup> In the *Observer*, A. J. P. Taylor, lamenting the impact on Chartism of middle-class ideas and hesitations rarely beneficial to a working-class movement, found it 'an excellent volume'.<sup>70</sup> Writing in the *New Statesman*, Hobsbawm described it as, 'The most important contribution to the study of this remarkable movement made in the past forty years'.<sup>71</sup> It popularised an approach which would dominate the study of Chartism until the 1980s.

*Essays in Labour History*, conceived as a festschrift but eventually published in commemoration of Cole, who died in 1959, was likewise applauded by Taylor. In comparison with the 'rambling, disconnected miscellany' which all too often served to honour respected scholars, this was an integrated offering. Taylor characterised it as 'a good solid volume...well written essays on useful subjects are brought together to

make a worthy memorial'.<sup>72</sup> The collection bridged the past and present of labour history and pointed towards possible futures. It was a present in which labour historians were beginning to concentrate on the excavation of the 19th century and assumed that they would attract a broad audience of professional and lay readers who were likely to be interested in diverse aspects of labour's past. Writing and reading serious history were not yet an esoteric specialism: the two books were reviewed extensively – in the quality and labour movement press as well as in academic journals. Both confirmed the importance of adult education in the emergence of labour history. Three of the contributors to *Chartist Studies* and four of the essayists came from extramural departments, with Yorkshire well represented but Scotland and Wales less so. The breaking down of barriers was evident from the preponderance of Marxists in the second text: former CP members constituted the single largest category among the contributors to *Essays in Labour History*.<sup>73</sup> These collections marked the first stage in the advance of labour history in the 1960s and 1970s. Much remained to be done. At least one favourable reviewer saw many of the essays as overly attached to traditional approaches; but singled out Asa's contribution on the language of class for the originality of its theme and method.<sup>74</sup>

By 1959, the idea of an organisation of labour historians was in the air. Jim Obelkevich has remarked in relation to the Communist Party Historians' Group: 'The Labour History Society, though founded in 1958 largely by former CP members, brought together people of very diverse political outlooks'.<sup>75</sup> The point about diversity is correct; the rest of the statement is mistaken. Discussion of the possibility of creating a society and the form it might take proceeded among the contributors to *Essays* through 1958. It was given corporeality by the initiative of the Leeds group, rather than former CP members. Communists such as Hobsbawm, and former party members such as Royden Harrison, who worked in the extramural department at Sheffield University, and Saville actively supported the project. On the margins academically and politically, they shared Hobsbawm's estimation of Asa as a force in the profession and a historian who was on the side of the radical angels.<sup>76</sup> A professor at 34, he was arguably, with Lewis Namier's decease, the best-known historian in Britain after A. J. P. Taylor and Trevor-Roper. For their part, the people at Leeds had no doubt that, in a situation where there were differences and quarrels about historiography and politics, he was a unifying figure. A bridge between Marxists and non-Marxists, the extramural fringe and the internal academy, social history and institutional approaches, he proved indispensable to the society's success: 'He

was a great inspiration for us. His work was new for us. The history of working people was not respectable academically: that is why Asa was so important – he was respectable'.<sup>77</sup>

Asa's own recollected emphasis was perhaps unsurprisingly different. He saw the venture as anchored in the need to deepen the scope and scholarship of the field. The extent to which labour historians in 1960 clung to an institutional approach and focused on the study of labour movements had, he believed, been exaggerated. They were a heterogeneous group representing a variety of approaches:

Before the foundation of the Society for the Study of Labour History in 1960 the problem confronting labour historians was not lack of respectability – Tawney and Cole if paradoxically provided that – but under-development of detailed scholarship, especially at the local level. Too many things were taken for granted: too few things were explored. It is a mistake, too, to think that the founders of the Labour History Society were exclusively concerned with labour movements; from the start they insisted – and they were a very mixed group – on the need to study working class ways of life at work and at play.<sup>78</sup>

At his instigation – he was ably supported by J. F. C. Harrison, unlike Asa an accomplished organiser, who did much of the legwork, and the Leeds group – Royden Harrison and then Hobsbawm at Birkbeck, Bealey at Keele, Saville at Hull and Pelling in Oxford were brought into the planning process. The initiative attracted an immediate and extended response. The SSLH was launched at a conference in London in May 1960 with Asa as its first chair. It would be unusual today for a similar event to be noticed in the national press. In 1960 the *Guardian* reported the society's establishment under the headline 'Prof. Briggs Chairman of Labour Society'.<sup>79</sup> It was an ecumenical moment and a catholic movement. At and near its inception the society embraced professional and amateur historians and a minority of industrial relations scholars, political scientists, sociologists and trade union activists – of most political and historiographical denominations.<sup>80</sup> Its primary purpose was to develop labour history in the universities. In a powerful opening address of enduring value, Asa provided a terse but compelling *tour d'horizon*. After assessing the past of labour history he considered contemporary opportunities and challenges. He paid tribute to Cole and Beales: 'They established the basis in their universities for much of the recent academic work in this field; work which has come to reinforce the earlier popular tradition'.<sup>81</sup> He scrutinised the state of the subject and

imagined its future. He expounded an exciting conspectus. It catered for different approaches and groups, emphasising the necessity for social histories of labour, including politics but not tied exclusively to it, the need to study the working class in the context of other classes, as well as the imperative of an international dimension and comparative labour history.

### **A new university: Sussex and beyond**

Royden Harrison, whose own energy and dedication was a vital factor in the SSLH's early success, reflected 20 years later: 'At the time it was evident that he had supplied us with a masterly set of minutes and a valuable agenda. What was still to emerge was that in Briggs we had one of the best philosopher-engineers of the expansion of higher education'.<sup>82</sup> In one sense higher education's gain was labour history's loss. Asa's translation to Sussex in 1961 and his subsequent immersion in the challenges of making a new university work meant that after the early years he played a decreasing role in the society.<sup>83</sup> The seven new institutions approved by 1960 emerged as sites of educational experimentation and curricular innovation – none more than the new university at Falmer near Brighton. For Asa and many of his peers, 'Extramural teaching in Mr Attlee's new Britain was an exciting enterprise'.<sup>84</sup> A decade later some of the free-ranging liberalism, sweep and interdisciplinarity of adult education breached the walls of the academy and enveloped internal pedagogy. This was the era of the Robbins Report and a hitherto unprecedented expansion of higher education. For those qualified, a university education was a right to be exercised regardless of class or income, if necessary through state support. Universities were a means of providing skilled manpower and stimulating economic growth. They were also a means of furthering individual growth and comprehension and control of the world as well as careers.

The long 1960s, which ran from the cultural revolution of 1963 until their educational *quietus* was announced in Jim Callaghan's declaration of the new austerity in his Ruskin College speech of 1976, witnessed enactment of the belief that a university education should be a vehicle for self-discovery, a stimulus to intellectual enlargement and an instrument of social change – in the context of academic freedom and relative autonomy. The pedagogical text, certainly at Sussex during Asa's tenure there from 1961 to 1976, read educational liberation. It sought the removal of fences between scholars and students, fields and disciplines and the reunification and recomposition of unfruitfully

fragmented knowledge.<sup>85</sup> Asa mobilised his past. He saw his mission as making scholars who combined depth and expertise in particular areas with wider knowledge and understanding; not crabbed, confined specialists who knew more and more about less and less. A percipient labour historian reflecting on Asa's years in Oxford and Leeds observed: 'Out of his experience came many of the critical and innovatory ideas which went into the making of the new Universities'.<sup>86</sup> Diversity was an important theme. Sussex valued 'differences of social origins, of educational background, and of vocational motive ... appropriate proportions of men and women, overseas students of different races and so on'.<sup>87</sup> Discipline-bound departments dissolved into interdisciplinary schools as centres of linked studies. History could be studied in a number of schools with different contextual frames and different combinations of subjects.

It was by no means all peace, love and flower power. In an age of student rebellion there were clashes over grants from the Ministry of Defence, over Vietnam and the alleged vetting of overseas students, and, by the early 1970s, some disenchantment.<sup>88</sup> In terms of history and education progress was real. What was involved, he wrote as Dean of the School of Social Studies in the early 1960s, was 'Drawing A New Map of Learning'. The cartographer's keywords were learning rather than teaching; exploring, surveying, criss-crossing boundaries; discovering, rather than travelling established routes to pre-planned itineraries; social rather than political; Europe and internationalism rather than 'this sceptred isle'; flexibility and freedom; breadth and unity.<sup>89</sup> There were still lectures; they were regarded as ancillary to tutorials and seminars which better encouraged active engagement, thinking, argument and writing.<sup>90</sup> There was an attempt to bridge the gap between students and teachers: social relations were seen as relevant to collective educational endeavour. There was significant success and it is still remembered. I recently came across this exchange between two characters in Ian McEwan's 2012 novel *Sweet Tooth*:

You've complained to me about your time at Cambridge, you've told me it was intellectually stultifying. I reckon my place was more ambitious, more serious, more enjoyable than yours. I speak as a product, an explorer of Asa Briggs' new map of learning. Sussex would never have allowed you to struggle the way you did.<sup>91</sup>

Asa's ideal was quoted approvingly by a Sussex undergraduate of the early 1960s: 'an independent student helped to discover not only new



knowledge but himself, becoming increasingly self-reliant (and self-critical) as he becomes more knowledgeable'.<sup>92</sup> There was little new in much of this. Sensible academics have always appreciated the virtues of studying history in conjunction with literature, philosophy or the social sciences. Sensitive historians never conceived that the discipline should be circumscribed by the nation state. What was novel was the implementation of this prospectus. Sussex in the 1960s remains one of those rare occasions where a leading scholar of energy and imagination was given the opportunity to bring to bear insights accumulated during a long apprenticeship in Oxbridge and the provinces on the teaching and organisation of university history. For the first time Asa possessed the power to engineer change. A *tabula rasa* meant that he was unimpeded by the past: 'Social History in general and Labour History in particular acquired quite a new prominence'.<sup>93</sup>

John Belchem, who became a distinguished labour historian and chair of the SSLH, recalled an unflinching regime in which undergraduates had to deliver two essays a week, for some a Herculean task that student lore attributed to Asa having completed two degrees at the same time. For students who found the going heavy, speed-reading courses were laid on. Belchem recalled: 'When I stayed on to do my D.Phil under his supervision no matter how busy he was he would always see me, provided I sent him something in writing, an excellent discipline'.<sup>94</sup> Richard Price, like Belchem an important and prolific labour historian after he left Sussex, recalled Asa from the vantage-point of 'listening to him from the perch of an undergraduate'. Price was particularly impressed by

the example he set as an integrative historian... how he was interested in the connections between the various spheres of historical experience... his willingness to move from political history through labour history to cultural history, often with reference backwards and forwards, and the example he set for cross-disciplinary work. It was this, of course, that lay at the foundations of the original Sussex curriculum and made his contribution to History so important. This is not to say that he did deeply interdisciplinary work... but it is to say that he presented History as an interdisciplinary and integrative exercise.<sup>95</sup>

The demands made on his time as dean and pro vice-chancellor ensured that his activity in the SSLH declined. He stepped down as its chair in 1964 but was installed as the organisation's first president 'to mark the Society's appreciation of his work in the founding and establishment of

the Society and to preserve his connexion with it'.<sup>96</sup> After he became vice-chancellor at Sussex in 1967 his time shrank further. By the end of the decade his involvement had significantly diminished and he was succeeded as president by Sidney Pollard. But we should not underestimate his influence in integrating labour history into an exciting, modern curriculum at Sussex, to which he was followed by J. F. C. Harrison, as well as the latter's former research assistant, Eileen Yeo and, in an extramural capacity, Henry Collins<sup>97</sup>; or his influence on its progress in other new universities. A line of Sussex graduates – it includes Belchem, Price, Malcolm Chase, Merfyn Jones and Rohan McWilliam – rendered significant service to labour history.<sup>98</sup>

Labour history was a preoccupation which was crowded out by new duties and competing enthusiasms, but one which never entirely ceased. A brilliant mind always has many, sometimes too many, possibilities. His six months in Australia in 1960 where he taught at the Australian National University and collected material for *Victorian Cities* in Melbourne and Sydney was symptomatic of his predicament. He met friends in the Australian WEA, influenced the creation of the Australian Labour History Society, very much on the British model, and began archival research on Chartism among the convicts in Tasmania, a project he was never able to take further.<sup>99</sup> He was one of many whom labour history could not hold. His impact on its development in the 1950s and 1960s remains unquestionable and formative works attest to it.

A number of significant scholars, Pelling, J. F. C. Harrison, Thompson (as well as Richard Hoggart), recorded their gratitude for his industry and insight in reading and improving their manuscripts.<sup>100</sup> Hobsbawm, at that time the most formally Marxist of historians and an exacting scholar not easily provoked to praise, remarked in 1962: 'Professor Briggs who has done a great deal to improve and advance the study of British working-class history as writer, editor and chairman of the new Society for the Study of Labour History belongs firmly in the radical tradition of British history-writing'.<sup>101</sup> In his examination of the turn from institutional and economic approaches to cultural relations and practices which inflected the study of labour after 1956, Richard Johnson, perhaps too sweepingly, bracketed Asa's work, particularly *Chartist Studies*, with that of Christopher Hill, Hobsbawm, Hoggart, Saville, Thompson and Raymond Williams as exemplifying the new structure of feeling.<sup>102</sup>

Briggs pulled in his horns: he declined Margaret Cole's invitation to collaborate with Saville in editing the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*.<sup>103</sup> He continued to publish short pieces on labour history and he

contributed to the society's *Bulletin* into the 1970s, as well as co-editing two further volumes of *Essays in Labour History*.<sup>104</sup> It is intriguing to consider whether the development of the SSLH might have been different had he remained at the helm. One neglected avenue was greater engagement with the labour movement which he possessed the prestige to progress: in 1963 as chair of the society he delivered the Arthur Henderson Memorial Lecture at a gathering presided over by Labour's leader, Harold Wilson.<sup>105</sup> Another road the SSLH rarely followed entered the territory of the curriculum of higher education and the schools: for example, the society discussed the abolition of the A level paper 'History of Working Class Movements', without doing very much about it.<sup>106</sup> The elements necessary to realise a counterfactual did not exist. These issues interested Asa and many of his colleagues in the organisation. But their face – and time – was now firmly turned towards the internal academy, and the society followed suit.

If there is always an opportunity cost, a beneficial consequence was that the literature and small-scale colonisation of the university curriculum went from strength to strength from the early 1960s to the early 1980s. Four years after the society's launch Briggs concurred with the verdict that its supporters were living through 'a golden age of labour history' which had commenced in the early 1950s:<sup>107</sup>

Certainly many interesting monographs have been published during that period and more graduate theses have been devoted to the subject than at any previous time. More importantly there has been a shift of emphasis and direction, including a move away from narrowly defined political history to richer social history much of it synthetic in scope and ambitious in scale. Labour history has come to mean the history of workers' ways of thinking, feeling and living as well as the history of organisations. It has begun to provoke questions rather than to sustain myths. The historiographical revolution is incomplete but the Society for the Study of Labour History regularly produces a lively bulletin which charts progress and promises exciting new work in the future.<sup>108</sup>

Briggs was equally generous about labour history's protagonists. Hobsbawm's essays collected in *Labouring Men* in 1964, he reflected, distilled the qualities of a scholar who together with Thompson represented the best of the golden age:

a searching analytical mind never afraid of theory; a desire to 'place' and to order every historical phenomenon; a remarkable

ability to introduce data from most countries of Europe and many countries outside; and not least a crisp and economical style with a suggestion of immense reserve power behind the most elegant phraseology.<sup>109</sup>

In the early 1950s he had questioned the contribution that Communists were making to the field. He revised that view in the light of work published a decade later. He acknowledged that it offered:

Striking testimony to the vitality of Marxism as an influence on the writing of British history including labour history... it is the ability of agile Marxists like Mr Hobsbawm to use Marxist concepts and theories intelligently and with imagination, rather than the concepts and theories themselves, which is the most striking aspect of the achievement.<sup>110</sup>

Marxists put something important in. Inevitably, he believed, they left something out. Something of the experience and contribution of the Fabians, ethical socialism, the Labour Party and trade union right wing, 'the pluralism of society is somehow missing... the sense of freedom and the complexities of individuals which defy categorisation'.<sup>111</sup> Briggs' appraisal was a fair one: it remains a reproach to those determined to identify labour history with a reductionist and dogmatic Marxism rather than Marxism as a fallible, creative method co-existing with other approaches.<sup>112</sup> The pluralist conspectus of 1960 was being realised. The publication, perhaps more specifically the reception, particularly of the paperback edition, of Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, with its new ways of seeing the relationships between economics, culture, the creation of class and the making of history, a reception at least partly rooted in the over-optimistic disdain for structural constraint and the voluntarist mentalities of 1960s youth culture, was another milestone.

During his years at Sussex Asa kept a critical eye on the field of labour history. Research on trade unionism, he judged, remained more informative and inspirational than analytical and interpretative. Commitment and attempts to relate past to present could be creative. There were dangers to guard against. 'Labour history', he argued, 'can actually restrict or distort understanding of what is happening now if it encourages the drawing of false analogies or superficial lessons'.<sup>113</sup> Historians had to be sensitive to differences between yesterday and today: to take one relevant example, trade unions, he stressed, were stronger

and different organisations than they had been at any time in the past.<sup>114</sup> In terms of his earlier work he perceived problems with emphasising the political aspects of Chartism rather than its nature as a social movement.<sup>115</sup> Ten years after the SSLH's foundation, he referred to 'an international boom in the study of labour history',<sup>116</sup> and observed the progress of the subject in the universities as well as the growth of the SSLH and its activities. By the end of that decade the society had 1,000 members and there was a vigorous turn to cultural histories of workers. The literature was marked by the social history paradigm he had pioneered and his methodological credo: approach the big through the small, deal with real people not categories, combine discipline with imagination.<sup>117</sup>

Some historians of labour advanced the idea that liquidating traditional demarcations, absorbing economic, labour and political history, social history could transmute into the history of society.<sup>118</sup> The dynamic in the 1970s was in the opposite direction. The literature disclosed tendencies to fragmentation, decontextualisation and deflation of the economic and political aspects of past experience – indispensable to analysis and understanding. Far from constituting total history, actually existing social history was in danger of segmenting and producing, in the words of the major inspiration of the cultural turn:

a series of prints, snapshots, stasis upon stasis. As a gain is registered, in the new dimension of social history, at the same time whole territories of established economic and political history are evacuated. The central concern of history as a relevant humane study – to generalise and integrate and to attain a comprehension of the full social and cultural process – becomes lost.<sup>119</sup>

Nonetheless Asa remained buoyant as the 1980s began. He spoke confidently of:

A continuing boom in the study of labour history which has outlasted international economic depression and political moves to the right... the less secure the fate of labour, however defined, may be, the more students of labour will be likely to turn back to the past rather than plan for the future... Part of the appeal of the subject which accounts for the continuing boom has been the invitation to students to explore not only what working men were doing but what they were thinking, feeling and hoping.<sup>120</sup>

Briggs was encouraged not only by the attention labour history received in the academy but the wider interest in it reflected by the History Workshop movement and the increasing adoption of an approach which drew on all types of evidence: documentary, oral, visual, national, local, formal and ephemeral.<sup>121</sup> He wrote on the cusp of the end of the post-war era: events demonstrated that like so many of us he did not see what was coming. His prognostications, despite their rationality, proved over-optimistic. Thereafter, in a less-friendly world, increasingly less tolerant of the labour movement and increasingly less influenced by its diminution as a social force, in times which saw major innovations in work, trade unionism, culture, class and higher education, few of them favourable to labour history, retrenchment and subsequently decline set in. Consideration of labour had become part of the concerns and teaching of many historians in ways it had not been before the 1960s. Labour history faltered as a distinctive field. New fashions in politics and post-modernist-inflected historiography arrived from Austria, Chicago and Paris; changes within the academy and the discipline produced further specialisation and fragmentation.<sup>122</sup> The fortunes of labour history constitute an intriguing cameo of the rise and fall of historiographical genres in modern Britain.<sup>123</sup>

## Reflections

The conceptual, terminological and territorial disputes and quarrels about approach which exercised many of the historiographers of social and labour history in the 1970s and 1980s rarely bothered Asa. He was a pragmatist in writing and in organisation. An aspirant to total history, he involved himself in projects such as the SSLH and later the Social History Society (SHS), which some saw as at best maintaining, if not fostering, separation and specialism.<sup>124</sup> Where some historians recalled holding aloof from the Harold Perkin-inspired SHS in the mid-1970s, on the grounds that social history should be conceived as a unifying approach not a niche subject, Asa agreed to become its president.<sup>125</sup> Social history continued to be a niche subject, albeit a declining one. As early as 1964 before the multiplication of departments of economic and social history Briggs had perceived potential problems:

when a new subject, like economic history, comes into prominence, it often seeks to command departmental status, thereby shedding its influence with both historians and economists. Intellectual

development is far too often associated with the multiplication of frontiers and the division of people.<sup>126</sup>

Ruminating in the new century, he voiced doubts about the long-term, historiographical benefits of organisations he had influenced or been involved with, such as the Urban History Society, the Society for the Social History of Medicine, the SSLH, the SHS, as well as the specialist journals and new departments and centres which flourished in British universities from the 1970s. He feared that 'over-institutionalisation of sub-groups' might have helped to create narrow specialisms and discourage integration with other branches of history and other disciplines.<sup>127</sup>

In face of the contemporary sundering of the study of different aspects of labour history, not to speak of other fields of the discipline, and the sometimes limited traffic and cross-fertilisation between scholars researching different areas, the point possesses some force. Pluralism and letting a thousand flowers bloom have generally stood history in good stead. Only connect: we have not always done that, in our pedagogy and in our learned societies. Nonetheless, the positive part these bodies played in fostering their chosen subjects and integrating their study into more total histories, extending the university curriculum as well as enriching the literature, needs to be weighed in the scales. The struggle between aspirations to total history and tendencies to compartmentalisation, emphasis on macro- or microhistory and debates about the content of the historiography and the curriculum will endure. They will continue to reflect a dialectic between a changing world and what different historians make of it. Like the present, the past is always changing. Yet in the face of complexities and complications unforeseen in the 1950s and 1960s, Asa has remained enduringly proud of his role in developing and popularising labour history.<sup>128</sup>

The wheel of time turns: in 2010, with the social democratic age a memory and neoliberalism in crisis, little distinctive labour history was taught at Sussex while the university faced cuts in social history courses.<sup>129</sup> In a world enraptured by revisionism, relevance, theory and often rhetorical transnationalism, Asa's work sometimes smacks of the 1940s and 1950s to an academy permeated by post-modern sensibilities and the itch for novelty; in some quarters it is considered empiricist, unstructured and insular. Range and sweep can constrain focus and depth. A 'steam-engine scholar' – by the early 1980s he had published 26 books – may neglect to adequately provide for the quality time and slower pace pondering complex demands. As a protagonist of interdisciplinarity he was more a John the Baptist than a messiah whose *oeuvre*

incarnated desired change. For some, he never produced a magnum opus; his best volumes are sometimes designated 'textbooks', characterised as bland, lacking analytical bite or privileging experience over explanation.<sup>130</sup> A protean historian of energy and fluency, whose repertoire ranged from articles in *Tribune* to the history of Longman and then the book, the vineyards of Haut-Brion and the fortunes of Victoria Wine, could attract suspicion in a profession which increasingly prioritised specialisation and depth.<sup>131</sup> Prodigious output and academic entrepreneurship came at a price, with colleagues complaining 'he was never there'.<sup>132</sup> As early as the 1950s the apparent facility of his spectacular career attracted criticism from Raymond Williams.<sup>133</sup> Today his impact factor would be high.

What stands out in surveying Briggs' approach to history and education from the 1940s to the 1970s is continuity. His role at Sussex and then as Chancellor of the Open University from 1978 represented the culmination of concerns with reforming higher education and improving access as well as the scope and the teaching of history which had germinated as long ago as the 1930s.<sup>134</sup> What is equally striking is that his vision was rooted in a humanity undepleted by eminence and sustained by lifelong optimism about human potential. In a moving tribute to Tawney, Asa reflected: 'it was people who mattered most to him in his books as in life'.<sup>135</sup> Asa too is an existential pedagogue. He enjoys people, and he fulfilled himself in fostering their growth. Eileen Yeo, his first doctoral student at Sussex, and later the first woman to chair the SSLH, recalled half a century later his generosity and warmth towards all comers, 'reflecting his endless curiosity and extraordinary range of interests and insights... his general interest in what every person had to say'.<sup>136</sup> The role he played in bringing people's history to the people should not be underestimated. The progress we have made in areas such as Chartism or understanding the Labour Party or more broadly the study of the Victorian era is indisputable; it should not lead us to gloss over the different situation, constraints and (in that context) the achievements of earlier generations.

Asa Briggs thought holistically: he dealt in history, not fragments of it. There is an element of artificiality, of fracturing an attempt at totality, of prising apart what he sought to put together, in singling out the contribution to one field of a scholar who was essentially a disciplinarian and interdisciplinarian. Encapsulated, his contribution to labour history was fivefold. He wrote rigorously but accessibly about labour; he integrated histories of labour into multifaceted narratives of social history; he reached out to relatively large audiences beyond the universities; an



animator rather than an organiser or executor, he was key to the creation of a significant organisation which facilitated the growth and enhanced the resonance of the subject; and he contributed personally as a university leader to the progress of labour history in higher education. His scholarly work should not be underestimated. In this particular field he may be remembered best as an ideas man, an exemplar and architect, a catalyst for innovation, an organiser and promoter of scholarship.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

1. Asa Briggs, David Thomson and Eric Meyer, *Patterns of Peacemaking* (London, 1945); Asa Briggs, *Secret Days: Codebreaking at Bletchley Park* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2011); *Special Relationships* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2012).
2. Derek Fraser, 'Editor's Introduction', in Fraser (ed.), *Cities, Class and Communications: Essays in Honour of Asa Briggs* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), pp. 4–8.
3. There is useful biographical material in Geoffrey Smith, 'Asa Briggs: A personal profile', in Fraser (ed.), *Cities, Class and Communications*, pp. 10–21; Daniel Snowman, 'Interview with Asa Briggs', *History Today*, 49 (October 1999), pp. 22–4; Paul Lay, 'A Very Open Intelligence', *History Today*, 61 (January 2011), pp. 10–11; Martin Hewitt, 'Briggs, Asa 1921–', in Kelly Boyd (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing, vol. 1* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1999), pp. 125–26.
4. Smith, 'Profile', p. 3.
5. This informed his writing. One small example which sticks in my memory must suffice: 'If Engels had lived not in Manchester but in Birmingham his conception of "class" and his theories of the role of class in history might have been very different ... Marx might not have been a communist but a currency reformer'. Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (London: Odhams Press, 1963), p. 113.
6. Partly from personal experience, partly from conversations with Asa, Richard Hoggart contrasted the Yorkshire woollen towns with his own city, Leeds: 'They had a sort of unity ... a kind of organic quality ... the men have an air of self-respect. The trade turned out experts'. He recollected that the Briggs family kept a corner shop which failed in the 1930s – Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, 'Working class attitudes', *New Left Review*, 1 (1960), pp. 26–30.
7. Briggs, letter to author, 25 November 2009.
8. Asa Briggs, 'The New Society', *The Highway*, 48 (1957), pp. 164–66.

9. Hoggart compared his own background and journey with Asa's. His essay 'The Scholarship Boy' may have some relevance here: Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), pp. 353–54, 291–304.
10. For his critical views on the contribution of Communist Party (CP) members to labour history in Britain in the early post-war years, see: Asa Briggs, 'Marxists', *Manchester Guardian*, 22 February 1955. For a positive estimation of the influence of Marxism on labour history a decade on, see: Briggs, 'Mapping the World of Labour', *Listener*, 3 December 1964, pp. 893–94. For a wider take see, 'Asa Briggs defends his television series on the Karl Marx legacy', *Guardian*, 21 April 1983.
11. Jim Obelkevich (ed.), 'Witness Seminar: New Developments in History in the 1950s and 1960s', *Contemporary British History*, 14 (Winter 2000), p. 145; Asa Briggs, 'R. H. Tawney', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History (BSSLH)*, 4 (1962), p. 3.
12. Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), pp. 114–26; H. S. Ferns, *Reading from Left to Right: One Man's Political History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), pp. 112–20.
13. Brian Simon, *A Life in Education* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1998), pp. 10–12; Pat Sloan, 'Notes on the Teaching of History at Cambridge', in Sloan (ed.), *John Cornford, A Memoir* (Dunfermline: Borderline Press, 1978 edn.), pp. 151–58.
14. [www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/historians/briggs\\_asa.html](http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/historians/briggs_asa.html), accessed 29 April 2014; Julia Stapleton, *Englishness and the Study of Politics: The Social and Political Thought of Ernest Barker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Michael Bentley, *The Life and Thought of Herbert Butterfield* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
15. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, pp. 282–86; Briggs, letter to author, 8 November 2009. Virginia R. Bainbridge, 'Postan M. M., 1899–1981' in Boyd, *Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, pp. 150–51.
16. Briggs, letter to author, 8 November 2009; Maxine Berg, *A Woman in History: Eileen Power 1880–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
17. See Asa Briggs, *Victorian People: Some Reassessments of People, Institutions and Events* (London: Odhams Press, 1954). The fact Asa cited these influences does not mean we should underestimate others, from Beales and Tawney, he specified both elsewhere, to G. M. Young and Trevelyan himself – see David Cannadine, 'The Macaulay of the Welfare State', *London Review of Books*, 6 June 1985, pp. 3–6.
18. Fraser, 'Editor's Introduction', p. 6.
19. Briggs, 'Robert Applegarth', in *Victorian People*, p. 196.
20. Noel Annan, *Our Age: The Generation That Made Post-War Britain* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), pp. 368, 506.
21. Asa Briggs, 'Sixty-four Years of the WEA', *Workers' Education*, 1 (1987), p. 10, quoting his 1953 annual conference address.
22. Quoted in John A. Blyth, *English University Adult Education 1908–1958: A Unique Tradition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), p. 341.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
24. John McIlroy, 'The Society for the Study of Labour History, 1956–1985: Its Origins and Its Heyday', in John McIlroy, Alan Campbell, John Halstead and David Martin (eds.), *Making History: Organisations of Labour Historians*

- in *Britain since 1960, Labour History Review* 50th Anniversary Supplement, 75 (2010), pp. 25–6, 30–5.
25. Adam Sisman, *A. J. P. Taylor: A Biography* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994), p. 161. Bullock and Trevor-Roper, both born in 1914, were a little older than Asa. Despite his forays into these areas in his critiques of Lawrence Stone and Tawney and his interest in witchcraft, Trevor-Roper could not be usefully classified as an economic or social historian.
  26. See Roger Fieldhouse, *Adult Education and the Cold War: Liberal Values under Siege* (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1985), pp. 1–4; Lawrence Goldman, *Dons and Workers: Oxford and Adult Education since 1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 259–62.
  27. Fraser, 'Editor's Introduction', p. 6. For a personal account of Cole in the post-war years see, G. D. N. Worswick, 'Cole and Oxford, 1938–1958' in Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History: In Memory of G. D. H. Cole* (London: Macmillan, 1960), pp. 25–40.
  28. A. J. P. Taylor, 'Socialist Labour of Love', *Guardian*, 12 February 1960, p. 8.
  29. Briggs, letter to author, 28 July 2008.
  30. Asa Briggs in Obelkevich, 'Witness Seminar', p. 145.
  31. McIlroy, 'Society', pp. 42–5; Alan Fox, *A Very Late Development: An Autobiography* (Coventry: University of Warwick, 1990), pp. 183–225. 'The Cole group' based on students reading PPE and History across the colleges as well as graduate students continued until 1957: Worswick, 'Cole', pp. 26–7. It is infiltrated by Magnus Pym in John Le Carré's *A Perfect Spy* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986), pp. 352–53.
  32. Fieldhouse, *Cold War*, pp. 29–64; Goldman, *Dons and Workers*, pp. 268–78. Like Raymond Williams, then working at the Delegacy for Extra-Mural Studies, Asa seems to have kept out of the controversy. Clegg quit the CP in 1947 and became by the early 1950s, together with his friend Tony Crosland, a tutor at Trinity College in the post-war years, a Labour Party revisionist. Harrison quit the CP and Coltham ceased to be a fellow traveller in 1956. Collins, whom Asa would meet again at Sussex, left shortly afterwards.
  33. See the comments in Asa Briggs, 'Trade-Union History and Labour History', *Business History*, 8 (1966), pp. 39–47.
  34. Asa Briggs, 'The Social Background', in Allan Flanders and Hugh Clegg (eds.), *The System of Industrial Relations in Great Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954), pp. 1–41.
  35. Eric Hobsbawm, 'Trade Union Historiography', *BSSLH*, 8 (1964), p. 33; John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, 'Still Setting the Pace?: Labour History, Industrial Relations and the History of Postwar Trade Unionism', *Labour History Review*, 64 (1999), 179–99.
  36. Fox, *A Very Late Development*, pp. 228–39. For a recent discussion of the evolution of industrial relations see, John Kelly, *Ethical Socialism and the Trade Unions: Allan Flanders and British Industrial Relations Reform* (London: Routledge, 2010). Industrial relations scholars largely turned their back on the past. There were exceptions but Clegg's sustained interest was largely separate from his work on contemporary issues. See also Alan Fox, *History and Heritage: The Social Origins of the British Industrial Relations System* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985) which uses Asa's work in discussing the

- 19th century. However labour history gradually ceased to be a significant concern of younger scholars who had contributed to the field, such as Richard Hyman and Richard Croucher.
37. Asa did not get along particularly easily with Clegg. But as Faculty Fellow at Nuffield, 1953–1955, he supported the latter's successful attempt to secure a major Leverhulme grant for research into trade unions which eventually helped produce the monumental, three-volume *History of British Trade Unions*.
  38. Chris Wrigley, *A. J. P. Taylor: Radical Historian of Europe* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), p. 227. Asa admired Taylor and his rare incursions into social history but noted, 'he thought of it as inferior... he believed in the history of events': Briggs in Obelkevich, 'Witness Seminar', pp. 149–50. In the celebrated competition for the Regius Professorship in 1956–1957, Asa favoured Trevor-Roper over Taylor: Adam Sisman, *Hugh Trevor-Roper: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2010), p. 280.
  39. 'The Teaching of Labour History, I: Special Papers', *BSSLH*, 4 (1962), pp. 33, 40; Briggs, 'Sixty-four Years of the WEA', p. 8.
  40. Sheila Rowbotham, *Threads through Time: Writings on History and Autobiography* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 15.
  41. Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 206.
  42. Fraser, 'Editor's Introduction', p. 2.
  43. Asa Briggs, *History of Birmingham, vol. 2: Borough and City, 1865–1938* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952); *idem*, *Victorian People*.
  44. Eric Hobsbawm, 'Commitment and Working-Class History: A Review of Recent Labour Movement History', *Universities and Left Review*, 6 (1959), p. 71.
  45. Briggs, *Victorian People*, pp. 168–96.
  46. Asa Briggs, *Friends of the People: The Centenary History of Lewis's* (London: Batsford, 1956).
  47. Miles Taylor, 'The Beginnings of Modern British Social History', *History Workshop Journal*, 43 (1997), pp. 159–60.
  48. Asa Briggs, 'Middle-Class Consciousness in English Politics, 1780–1846', *Past and Present*, 9 (1956), pp. 65–74.
  49. See A. J. Taylor, 'History at Leeds, 1877–1974: The Evolution of a Discipline', *Northern History*, 10 (1975), pp. 141–64; Fraser, 'Editor's Introduction', pp. 2–3.
  50. Brian Harrison in Obelkevich, 'Witness Seminar', p. 163.
  51. Briggs, 'Sixty-four Years of the WEA', p. 11.
  52. Harold Perkin, *The Making of a Social Historian* (London: Athena Press, 2002), p. 139; Notes of a conversation between Malcolm Chase and J. F. C. Harrison, 28 November 2008. I am grateful to Malcolm for providing a copy. For more on Leeds, see Malcolm Chase's chapter in this volume.
  53. Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement, 1783–1867* (London: Longman, Green, 1959); Fraser, 'Editor's Introduction', p. 5.
  54. Hobsbawm, 'Commitment and Working-Class History', p. 71. In conversations with the author the late Royden Harrison attested to its influence on his own work. A. J. P. Taylor, *Observer*, 8 February 1959, lauded the economic and social history but noted the absence of Ireland and India from

- analysis. He felt that the subject-by-subject treatment of politics disrupted the narrative of great events and bemoaned the limited attention to great men. Some of these comments may have been welcome to social historians.
55. For a scrupulous estimation of 'the silver edition' of the book see Miles Taylor, review, H-Albion, H-Net Reviews, October 2000, [www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4622](http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4622), accessed 29 April 2014.
  56. Donald Read, *Peterloo: The 'Massacre' and Its Background* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958). See 'Bibliography of British Labour History 1955–June 1960', *BSSLH*, 1 (1960), pp. 6–26; Royden Harrison, review of *Press and People*, *BSSLH*, 2 (1961), pp. 19–20; Sidney Pollard, review of Donald Read and Eric Glasgow, *Feargus O'Connor: Irishman and Chartist*, *BSSLH*, 3 (1961), pp. 64–5.
  57. See the membership lists in various issues of the *BSSLH* (1960–1962). Ernst Wangermann, a slightly later recruit to the Leeds history department, was also a Society member. Turner, while at Manchester University, had supported the establishment of a broad 'Labour Movement Studies Association': McIlroy, 'Society', p. 39.
  58. 'The Teaching of Labour History in British Universities II' (editorial), *BSSLH*, 5 (1962), p. 4.
  59. For Raybould's views see Raybould, *The WEA: The Next Phase* (London: WEA, 1949); J. F. C. Harrison, *Learning and Living 1790–1960: A Study in the History of the English Adult Education Movement* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), pp. 342–63. Where Asa emphasised infusing the freedom of adult education into the internal curriculum, Raybould tended to stress replication of the approach and standards operative inside the walls in extramural work.
  60. J. F. C. Harrison, *Scholarship Boy: A Personal Record of the Mid-Twentieth Century* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1993).
  61. McIlroy, 'Society', pp. 38–9. After the formation of the SSLH and Asa's departure the Leeds group was relaunched in 1962. There were 15 members from the history, economics and extramural departments and the WEA: *BSSLH*, 6 (1963), p. 51.
  62. Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman and John McIlroy (eds.), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The Post-War Compromise, 1945–1964* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999). It is, of course, reductionist to attribute changes in historiography, the organisation of history and learned societies of historians simply to political and social change. As a significant factor it is mediated in varying ways through the actions of scholars. For brief comment see: John McIlroy, Alan Campbell and Joan Allen, 'Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives', in Joan Allen, Alan Campbell and John McIlroy (eds.), *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives* (Monmouth: Merlin Press, 2010), pp. 12–14. The influence of scholarship on organised labour, the state and civil society likewise requires more critical address.
  63. In the 1950s and early 1960s Asa reviewed books by Clegg, Henry Phelps Brown, J. F. C. Harrison, Hobsbawm, Pelling, Roberts, George Rudé and Saville, among others, in the *Guardian*, *Observer* and *Listener*. Taylor, who had critically but affirmatively reviewed Cole and Postgate's *Common People* in the *Manchester Guardian* as long ago as 1938, reviewed a range of

- contributions to labour history from A. R. Schoyen, Pelling, Read, Norman McCord and E. P. Thompson to Hobsbawm, Royden Harrison, Clegg, Fox and Thompson and Walter Kendall – as well as Asa Briggs – in the *Guardian* and *Observer*. See: Chris Wrigley, *A. J. P. Taylor: A Complete Annotated Bibliography* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980).
64. Briggs, 'Marxists', p. 4.
  65. See n. 108.
  66. Briggs, letter to author, 28 July 2008.
  67. Hobsbawm, 'Commitment and Working-Class History', pp. 71–2; Asa Briggs, 'Time and the TUC', *Manchester Guardian*, 13 May 1958; *idem*, 'A 1960 View of Labour History', *Guardian*, 16 June 1961.
  68. Asa Briggs, letter to author, 12 August 2008; Thompson's chapter was too long for *Chartist Studies*, a not unusual occurrence: Notes of a conversation between Chase and Harrison; Joan Allen and Malcolm Chase, 'Britain: 1750–1900' in Allen et al. (eds.), *Histories of Labour*, p. 65.
  69. Asa Briggs (ed.), *Chartist Studies* (London; Macmillan, 1959); Briggs and Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History*; John McIlroy, 'The Road from Malet Street: The Society for the Study of Labour History, from 1960 to the New Millennium', *Labour History Review*, 75 (2010), pp. 3–4; Joan Allen and Malcolm Chase, 'Britain, 1750–1900', in Allen et al. (eds.), *Histories of Labour*, pp. 65–6.
  70. A. J. P. Taylor, 'The British Revolution', *Observer*, 22 November 1959.
  71. Eric Hobsbawm, review of *Chartist Studies*, *New Statesman*, 31 October 1959, pp. 594–95.
  72. Taylor, 'Socialist Labour of Love'.
  73. Compared with their successors in recent times, these books enjoyed large sales. *Chartist Studies* went into 12 editions between 1954 and 1973.
  74. J. F. C. Harrison, review, *New Left Review*, 3 (1960), pp. 69–70.
  75. Jim Obelkevich, 'New Developments in History in the 1950s and 1960s', p. 129.
  76. Eric Hobsbawm, 'Progress in History', *Marxism Today* (February 1962), p. 47.
  77. Notes of conversation between Chase and Harrison; J. F. C. Harrison, letter to author, 19 January 2009.
  78. Asa Briggs, 'Past Imperfect', *Guardian*, 5 February 1981.
  79. *Guardian*, 28 May 1960.
  80. McIlroy, 'Society', pp. 39–42; Eric Hobsbawm, 'Looking Back Half a Century', in Allen et al. (eds.), *Histories of Labour*, pp. 1–5.
  81. Asa Briggs, 'Open Questions of Labour History', *BSSLH*, 1 (1960), pp. 2–3.
  82. Royden Harrison, 'Twenty Years On', *BSSLH*, 41 (1980), p. 2.
  83. Asa Briggs, letter to author, 28 July 2008.
  84. Peter Scott, *Knowledge and Nation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), p. 51.
  85. See David Daiches (ed.), *The Idea of a New University: An Experiment in Sussex* (London: Deutsch, 1964).
  86. Harrison, 'Twenty Years On', p. 2.
  87. Sir John Fulton, 'New Universities in Perspective', in Daiches (ed.), *Idea of a New University*, p. 20.
  88. *Guardian*, 6, 14 June 1968. Asa Briggs, 'Decade of Disenchantment', *Guardian*, 6 February 1973.

89. Asa Briggs, 'Drawing a New Map of Learning', in Daiches (ed.), *Idea*, 60–80. Cf. 'the social history of the future must take the world for its parish': Asa Briggs, 'Religion and the Rise of Capitalism', *Listener*, 27 February 1964, p. 341.
90. Briggs, 'Drawing a New Map of Learning', pp. 65–6.
91. Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012), p. 79.
92. Quoted in Granville Hawkins, 'From the Cage: An Undergraduate View', in Daiches (ed.), *Idea*, p. 200, from an article by Asa Briggs in *Bias*, a Sussex students' journal.
93. Harrison, 'Twenty Years On', p. 2.
94. John Belchem, e-mail to author, 24 September 2011.
95. Richard Price, e-mail to author, 22 September 2011. Geoff Eley spent his undergraduate days in the late 1960s experiencing the 'chronically unimaginative Oxford pedagogy which sought to dampen the intellectual ardour of youth ... Oxford's Modern History School seemed organised precisely for the purpose of restraining imaginative thought'. In 1970: 'I entered the Sussex graduate program whose interdisciplinary atmosphere seemed like a bracing gust of fresh air': Eley, *A Crooked Line*, pp. 1, 213, n. 31.
96. *BSSLH*, 9 (1964), p. 10.
97. He was also joined by his old Leeds colleague, Maurice Hutt (1928–2013).
98. The line continues today: one of the current editors of *Labour History Review* was a pupil of Eileen Yeo at Sussex, while another editor is presently a lecturer in history there.
99. Asa Briggs, 'Chartism in Tasmania: A Note', *BSSLH*, 3 (1961), pp. 4–8; Greg Patmore, 'Australia', in Allen et al. (eds.), *Histories of Labour*, p. 237. Frank Bongiorno, 'Australian Labour History: Contexts, Trends and Influences', *Labour History*, 100 (2011), pp. 1–15.
100. Henry Pelling, *Origins of the Labour Party 1880–1900* (London, 1954), p. vi; Harrison, *Learning and Living 1790–1960*, p. x; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), p. 14; Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy*, Acknowledgements [no pagination], pp. 22, 88, 108, 116. See also the comments in Hobsbawm, 'Commitment and Working-Class History', p. 71, and John Saville, *Memoirs from the Left* (London: Merlin, 2003), pp. 118, 129, 134–35, 161.
101. Hobsbawm, 'Progress in History', pp. 47–8.
102. Richard Johnson, Jon Clarke, Chas Critcher (eds.), *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics* (London: Hutchinson, 1982).
103. Saville, *Memoirs from the Left*, p. 135.
104. See, for example, Asa Briggs (ed.), *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962); 'Introduction' to Sidney Webb (ed.), *Fabian Essays* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1962); 'Introduction', to G. D. H. Cole, *Chartist Portraits* (London: Macmillan, 1965); *William Cobbett* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); 'Introduction' to J. L. and Barbara Hammond, *The Town Labourer, 1760–1832* (London: Longman, 1966 edn.); Asa Briggs and John Saville, 'Introduction', to Briggs and Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History, 1886–1923* (London: Macmillan, 1971); Briggs, 'H. M. Hyndman', in David Rubinstein (ed.), *People for the People: Radical Ideas and Personalities in British History* (London: Ithaca Press, 1973), pp. 113–21; 'Looking Backwards', *BSSLH*, 33 (1976), pp. 47–51;



- Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History, 1918–1939* (London: Croom Helm, 1977); Asa Briggs, 'The Language of "Mass" and "Masses"', in David Martin and David Rubinstein (eds.), *Ideology and the Labour Movement: Essays Presented to John Saville* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), pp. 62–83.
105. *Guardian*, 25 November 1963.
  106. *BSSLH*, 23 (1971), pp. 2–3.
  107. For 'the golden age' see: Eric Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), p. vii.
  108. Briggs, 'Mapping the World of Labour', p. 893.
  109. *Ibid.*, p. 893.
  110. *Ibid.*, pp. 894–95.
  111. *Ibid.*, pp. 894–95.
  112. Cf. Neville Kirk, 'The Continued Relevance and Engagements of Class', *Labour History Review*, 60 (1995), pp. 2–15; McIlroy, Campbell and Allen, 'Histories of Labour', pp. 8–10.
  113. Asa Briggs, 'The Weak and the Strong', *Guardian*, 26 September 1974.
  114. *Ibid.*
  115. Asa Briggs, 'Discontent Grown Fierce and Mad', *Guardian*, 23 February 1984.
  116. Briggs and Saville, 'Introduction', *Essays in Labour History, 1886–1923*, p. 1.
  117. Asa Briggs, 'The Big and the Small', *Observer*, 28 January 1982.
  118. Eric Hobsbawm, 'From Social History to the History of Society', *Daedalus*, 100 (1971), pp. 20–45.
  119. Edward Thompson, 'Responses to Reality', *New Society*, 4 October 1973, pp. 33–4.
  120. Briggs, 'Past Imperfect', p. 16.
  121. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
  122. John McIlroy, Alan Campbell, John Halstead and David Martin, 'Fifty Years On', in McIlroy et al. (eds.), *Making History*, pp. 1–14.
  123. For the current position see my 'Waving or Drowning?: British Labour History in Troubled Waters', *Labor History*, 53 (2012), pp. 91–119.
  124. See the comments by Hobsbawm, quoted in McIlroy, 'Society', p. 79 and Sir Keith Thomas, quoted in Paul Cartledge, 'What Is Social History Now?', in David Cannadine (ed.), *What Is History Now?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 21.
  125. He repeated the claim that social history could transform the relationship between existing specialisms: Asa Briggs, 'A Message from the President', *Social History Society Newsletter*, 1 (1976), p. 1.
  126. Briggs, 'New Map of Learning', p. 73.
  127. Obelkevich, 'Witness Seminar', p. 156.
  128. Asa Briggs, letter to author, 25 April 2009.
  129. Information from Hester Barron. Richard J. Evans, 'Sussex Cuts Threaten a Proud History', *Times Higher Education*, 10 June 2010.
  130. Cannadine, 'Macaulay of the Welfare State', pp. 3–6.
  131. Hewitt, 'Briggs', pp. 126–27.
  132. Fraser, 'Editor's Introduction', p. 3.
  133. Dai Smith, *Raymond Williams: A Warrior's Tale* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2008), p. 374.



134. For the contemporary background see Walter Perry, *Open University: A Personal Account* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1976); Alan Woodley and Naomi McIntosh, *The Door Stood Open* (Lewes: Falmer, 1980). Asa remained at the Open University until 1994.
135. *Guardian*, 17 January 1962.
136. 50th anniversary dinner for Asa Briggs, <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/news+developments/?id=8029>, accessed 29 September 2011.

**Part II**

**Broadcasting**

# 6

## From the *Daily Mail* to the BBC: Communications in Britain, c. 1896–1922

*James Thompson*

The history of communications has been central to the work of Asa Briggs. It is perhaps the multivolume *History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* commissioned in 1958 for which he is now best known, but his interest in broadcasting significantly predates this colossal enterprise.<sup>1</sup> He had published on press and public in early 19th-century Birmingham in 1949, and already begun his own career as a broadcaster on the Forces Education radio education in 1945.<sup>2</sup> The most recent edition of his widely used jointly authored textbook on media history appeared in 2009.<sup>3</sup> The title of a volume of essays in honour of Asa Briggs from 1990 – *Cities, Class and Communication* – rightly registered the importance of this theme in his *oeuvre*, though it might be suggested that placing it only third was a mistake.<sup>4</sup> Whilst Briggs is sometimes now seen chiefly as an historian of broadcasting in general, and the BBC in particular, this view underplays the breadth of his concerns as an historian of communications. The Ford lectures that Briggs gave in Oxford in 1991 took as their subject ‘Communications and Culture in Victorian England’, and adopted an inclusive approach to those two weighty themes that embraced the visual arts and music. This chapter traces and evaluates the contribution of Asa Briggs to the history of communications in late 19th- and early 20th-century Britain.

The chapter, in keeping with Briggs’ conception of the Victorian period, is in three parts. It starts by examining the character of Briggs’ work in communications history and by identifying its principal themes and arguments. It notes the attention paid by Briggs from his earliest to his most recent publications to the impact of technology on communications, and, as evidenced by the title of his Ford lectures, to

the complex relationship between communications and cultures. The second section focuses in depth upon Briggs' account of the role of technology in the history of communications, which has long been characterised both by a recognition of the importance of technological change and by a firm rejection of technological determinism. The third part, reflecting Briggs' insistence on the diverse ways in which societies adopt and understand technology, tackles the relationship between communications and culture. The period from the 1890s to the 1920s occupies an important place in what Briggs has called a 'communications revolution'.<sup>5</sup> In charting this 'long revolution', Briggs has been attentive to both its cultural legacy and its cultural production. This section assesses his persistent concern to capture the interpenetration of communications and culture in late 19th- and early 20th-century Britain. In doing so, it tackles themes that are integral to the work and legacy of a historian deeply committed to the communication of scholarly research to a broad audience.

## I

In a lecture given in 1960 in Australia on 'Mass Entertainment', Asa Briggs provided an early snapshot of the history of communications in 19th- and 20th-century Britain.<sup>6</sup> Unbeknownst to the audience in Adelaide, the themes and approach articulated that day were to be developed and deepened over the next half-century. First and foremost, the lecture offered a firmly historical account, one finely attuned to the challenges of precisely registering the appropriate balance between change and continuity. Ranging from the demise of Vauxhall pleasure gardens in 1850 and Bartholomew Fair in 1854 to the rise of the jukebox in 1930s America, Briggs portrayed a 'revolution in mass entertainment'. It was the plebeian Sunday papers of the 19th century that Briggs argued, as Harold Perkin had in 1957, were the 'real precursors' of the mass readership daily newspapers of the 20th century. Befitting his strong grounding in economics as well as history, Briggs suggested that the 'mass market' came before 'mass communications' and 'mass culture'.<sup>7</sup> Edison featured, as he would in subsequent accounts, as the inventor par excellence: the deviser of the telephone, the gramophone, electric lamps (the basis for the thermionic valve, crucial to pre-transistor radios) and kinoscope cameras. Briggs was quick to note, though, that the telephone was conceived originally as much as a medium of entertainment, down which music might be played, and that the first hopes for wireless were as an alternative to telegraphy for

person-to-person communication. The 'radio audience' was 'stumbled upon not deliberately planned'.<sup>8</sup> This emphasis upon different conceptions and uses of technology, and upon the role of contingency in its adoption, would recur.

Throughout his career, Asa Briggs has been interested in the history of ideas, and the history of words. This too was evident in the Joseph Fisher Lecture in Commerce at Adelaide, in his revealing reflection on the phrase 'mass communication'. Briggs observed that 'to see people as "masses" is not to know them or to think of them in terms of a market formula'. The terminology was doubtful in its implication of fidelity in reception: 'mass or multiple transmission' was the more accurate description.<sup>9</sup> It makes obvious sense for a historian of communication to be interested in language, but his greater attentiveness to linguistic issues compared with many of his fellow social and labour historians, famously illustrated by his 1960 essay on the language of class, was surely informed by his studies in the history of communication.<sup>10</sup> The doubts expressed in 1960 about the usefulness of 'mass communication' as a term were reiterated in the first volume of his *History of Broadcasting* the following year, along with a footnote to the passage from *Culture and Society* in which Raymond Williams distinguished communication and transmission in 1958.<sup>11</sup> Sharing Williams' sensitivity to language and literature, Briggs reflected further on the meanings of both 'mass' and 'communications'. The former was examined in passing in 1963's *Victorian Cities*, but received extended scrutiny in a much-cited essay on the language of mass and masses.<sup>12</sup>

Briggs' attention to ideas is an aspect of a broader concern with the perceptions of historical actors. This is apparent, for instance, in much of *Victorian Cities* – perhaps his best-known single book – with pages devoted to contemporary attitudes to town and country, and to literary representations of the urban, such as Gissing or Wells on late 19th-century London.<sup>13</sup> This attentiveness to contemporary understandings is central to how Briggs has constructed the history of communications. Readers of his jointly authored *A Social History of Media* may be perplexed by the extent of its coverage of developments in transportation technology. However, Briggs insists, 'If, in retrospect, railways followed by bicycles, automobiles and aeroplanes, seem to belong to the history of transportation, and telegraphs, followed by telephony, radio and television, seem to belong to the history of the media, any such separation is artificial'.<sup>14</sup> For Briggs, taking his cue from contemporaries, both transportation and media are elements of the larger story of the history of communication. Briggs likes to note that, shortly following

his account of *Self-Help* in 1859, Samuel Smiles published *The Lives of the Engineers*, with its congenial appreciation of the importance of technology.<sup>15</sup> Smiles assured his readers through his subtitle that not only would they receive an account of the principal works of the engineers, but this amounted also to 'a history of inland communication'.<sup>16</sup>

In his chapter in *The Cambridge Guide to the Arts in Britain*, Briggs commended Smiles for bringing 'technology into the picture', and argued that, along with religion, it was essential to understanding all aspects of Victorian life.<sup>17</sup> It was characteristic to bring religion and technology together as fundamental to the 19th century. His approval of James Carey's work *Communication as Culture* goes beyond the title, but the title does convey much of his own vantage point.<sup>18</sup> The essays of 1959 on 'Prediction and Control' and 'The Image and the Voice', the 1960 lecture on mass entertainment and *The Birth of Broadcasting* of 1961 were part of the first flowering of communication studies in Britain.<sup>19</sup> As Briggs himself noted in 1980, they 'grew out of the cultural concerns of the period from 1956 to 1962'.<sup>20</sup> They need to be placed alongside Raymond Williams' key early works *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961).<sup>21</sup> It was Briggs' friend Richard Hoggart's study of *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) which was to achieve the greatest renown, but the work of all three sought to trace the intermeshing of culture and communications.<sup>22</sup> If Hoggart was at times more exercised by post-war trends in general and 'Americanisation' in particular, Williams and Briggs were addressing longer timescales and developing distinctive accounts of a lengthy 'communications revolution' that was also, as Briggs put in 1961, 'a social and cultural revolution comparable in its consequences to the revolution in printing in the fifteenth century'. In 1960 Briggs argued that there had been since the late 19th century a revolution in mass entertainment. In *The Birth of Broadcasting* he argued radio and television constituted 'twin halves' of a communications revolution.<sup>23</sup> Briggs later contrasted the writing of the first and fifth volumes of his history of broadcasting, suggesting that the former was produced before the concept of a 'communications revolution' was fully formed, while by the time of the latter in 1995, it 'was taken for granted'.<sup>24</sup>

In 1966 Briggs gave a lecture elaborating his account of the communications revolution, noting its topical currency. He placed 'the control of information' at the heart of the revolution, noting the rapid pace of change in electronics, and emphasising how the idea of information embraced 'computer programmes or the light programme'. This transformation was recasting the economy, erasing 'old industrial dividing lines', and promised to do the same for management, whether public

or private sector.<sup>25</sup> More fundamentally, however, the changes had psychological implications, altering the ways of seeing, sensing and feeling. Briggs cited Colin Cherry on the emergence of new forms of power, and Raymond Williams on communication as a vital dimension of the collective life of society. As elsewhere, Briggs was concerned with the impact of changes in communications upon education. And, as he would stress repeatedly, while convinced of the significance of changes in communications, he was suspicious of broad generalisations about their implications for society. In particular, and importantly, he was sceptical of doom-laden prognoses of the communications revolution, reflecting that 'many of the effects of the media seem to me to involve the very opposite of enslavement'. As befitted a future chancellor of the Open University, there was a belief that greater exchanges between people would bring 'increased interdependence' and 'involvement'. The new capabilities brought new responsibilities, but it was possible to 'pull us closer together' by harnessing the potential of the unfolding revolution in communications, if the dehumanising treatment of individuals as 'masses' was rejected.<sup>26</sup>

In 1966, it was clear to Briggs that the communications revolution was unfinished. Like Colin Cherry, he felt that the really big action was yet to come; developments so far were 'no more than a transitional prelude'.<sup>27</sup> He wrote subsequently of media history being 'slotted' into communications history, and the latter entering a new epoch through computerisation.<sup>28</sup> Equally important, though, this was a very long revolution, dating back at least to the invention of steam printing in the early 19th century. Technological change was crucial, and the growth of railways a key early development. Here, Briggs was, as so often, attuned to contemporary views – he has been fond of quoting Thackeray on how 'we who lived before railways [...] are like Father Noah'. Railways and telegraphs were linked, as in turn were newspapers with both.<sup>29</sup> The story was one in which contingency played its part, and national differences mattered. It was also one in which prediction often proved inaccurate, often because of a lack of understanding of the social context in which technology was created, deployed and debated.

The social context was that of the 'critical decade' of the 1890s. 1896 was a rich year of firsts, bringing the first motor show, the arrival of Marconi in Britain, the first regular cinema showings, the Post Office assuming control of telephone trunk lines, and the creation of the *Daily Mail*.<sup>30</sup> The milieu mattered, though, as the innovation occurred in a context of an emerging mass market in which new consumer industries were benefiting from greater disposal income amongst the population.

The 1890s were, as Briggs put it in *Victorian Cities* in 1963, when ‘the pull of London tightened’.<sup>31</sup> It was London from where the communications revolution in its late 19th-century guise issued. The economic background was highly significant: Briggs observed in a radio talk published in 1959 that at first sight social history ‘seems to be best described as economic history with the politics put in’.<sup>32</sup> The interlinking of advertising, newspapers and the new consumer goods was the fulcrum in a process of ‘nationalisation’ in which different media reinforced each other, such that in interwar Britain radio licences and newspaper circulations rose together. Much of this was unpredictable in the 1890s, and the leading innovations of that decade only became part of everyday life for the many between the wars. The forms in which they became institutionalised and adopted in different countries varied, not least due to distinct political contexts, apparent in the history of broadcasting in Britain and the United States.

Recalling the recent centenary of the International Telecommunications Union, Briggs ended his 1966 lecture emphasising the unifying power of ‘an international revolution’.<sup>33</sup> Throughout his work on communications, Briggs has stressed the power of new technology to alter our sense of space by compressing distance. Perhaps more noteworthy, though, has been his enduring acknowledgment of the significance of the local as well as the global, apparent in his attention to how the development of media systems varies according to differences between nations. Recognition of the transnational flow of information allied to an awareness of divergences manifested in a long-standing appreciation of comparative methods, whether in the linked fields of urban or communications history.

In the 1960s, Briggs adumbrated a long, unfinished revolution in communications that began in the 19th century. The late 19th and early 20th century was central to this revolution, though there was always a sense that the real excitement was yet to come. The basic thesis remains through several decades of writing. There has always been a note of historicist scepticism about some of the wilder claims made about the revolution in communications, and an awareness of continuity as well as change. Whereas ‘the print revolution’ disappears from the chapter titles between the second and third edition of Briggs and Burke’s much-read *A Social History of the Media*, the ‘communications revolution’ has never featured. In assessing the consequences of changes in communications, Briggs has tended to be (rightly) cautious, emphasising the difficulties of disentangling contemporaneous trends, the challenges of gauging reception and the elusiveness of causation. More



simply, however, for Briggs, the history of communications in Britain was importantly conditioned by larger characteristics of British society. It was certainly central to the increasing nationalisation of British life, and ‘the great audience’ forged by radio and then television in the first half of the 20th century – while never homogeneous – was perhaps the closest Britain has come to a genuine common culture. Yet according to Briggs, Britain’s plural society has importantly shaped the implementation, reception and interpretation of the communications revolution. This is perhaps most evident in his account of the way in which the BBC established and preserved itself as a basic feature of British cultural life.<sup>34</sup> In stressing the importance of social context, Briggs has been alert to the dangers of technological determinism. In the next section, we turn in detail to his account of the relationship between technology and communication.

## II

Technology has always been at the heart of Asa Briggs’ work on communications. He has warned against a ‘determinism [that] attaches far too much importance to technology’, whilst seeking to pay due attention to the history of technology.<sup>35</sup> In the third edition of *A Social History of the Media* the chapter entitled ‘new processes and patterns’ tackles ‘one-by-one the story of the various new communications devices which prepared the way for what has been called, with only a touch of exaggeration, “the media revolution of the twentieth century”’.<sup>36</sup> Railways, ships, mail, telegraphs, telephones, wireless, gramophones, early television, bicycle and the car are duly treated in a sequence that demonstrates the ways in which Briggs locates media history within communications history. He has observed that he accepted the invitation to write his *History of Broadcasting* because he ‘was already interested in communications history’.<sup>37</sup> While there is a sense of a sequence of invention, Briggs has been careful to note that the advent of new technologies does not simply and invariably eliminate older ones. It is worth noting that the chapter called ‘From Steam to Electricity’ in earlier editions is rechristened ‘new processes and patterns’ in the most recent edition.<sup>38</sup> Whilst Briggs has always sought to embed the history of technology in the social context in which it is used, it can be argued that important recent work such as that of David Edgerton takes this significantly further. In his vigorous account of *The Shock of the Old*, Edgerton offers a revisionist history of technology, observing that in global terms, steam was ‘not only absolutely but relatively more important in 1900

than 1800' and that even in Britain steam grew in 'absolute importance after that'.<sup>39</sup> In accordance with the earlier work of F. M. L. Thompson, Edgerton notes that horse use peaks in Britain at the start of the 20th century.<sup>40</sup> In what follows, we examine more closely the role attributed to technology in the history of communications by Asa Briggs, and relate this to recent historiographical trends. It is argued that Edgerton's focus on the shock of the old exemplifies a larger tendency to qualify earlier emphases upon the impact of new inventions, one that both builds upon and modifies positions associated with Briggs.

The narrative of technological change is one in which electricity features prominently, as the earlier editions of *A Social History of the Media* especially make clear. This reflects in part Briggs' grounding and interest in economic history, within which electricity has long been integral to understandings of the second industrial revolution. Electricity links a host of inventions, notably telegraphs, telephones, wireless, gramophones, but also played a sometimes forgotten part in the early history of the automobile.<sup>41</sup> Its capacity to generate 'spin-offs' and to foster productivity growth have often been emphasised. The wonder provoked by electricity is well conveyed by Briggs recalling Henry Adams' vision of the 20th century in which 'what we used to call electricity is its god'.<sup>42</sup> It is electricity upon which the ICT developments of the 20th century depend, and which Briggs characterised in 1966 in terms of 'the control of information' – an approach pursued in Beniger's ambitious analysis of *The Control Revolution* upon which Briggs draws.<sup>43</sup> In Beniger's work, the communications revolution is fundamentally about the development of new forms of control that depend upon the processing of information. In Beniger's story, changes in communication are subsumed within a bigger story. The derangement at both the level of the individual and the collective wrought by industrialisation is overcome by the advent of new forms of control amongst which bureaucracy, whether public or private, was central in the late 19th century. In this combination of Durkheim, Weber and Alfred Chandler, novel communications technology, such as railways, demands new techniques of coordination and management that generate new kinds of organisations. The subsequent rise of ICT blurs the distinction between communication and processing, and reduces different forms to a common currency of binary information. The notion of programming is integral to the control revolution, as is the emergence of decision theory and in turn computer science.<sup>44</sup> It is not being claimed here that Beniger and Briggs offer identical accounts of the role and significance of technology within the history of communications. Beniger pays more systematic attention to

the emergence of new bureaucratic forms in the 19th century, though Briggs has made similar points in writing the history of specific businesses. There are, though, important commonalities in placing late 19th and early 20th century technological change within a larger and longer-term story about a communications revolution that is fundamentally about the control of information.

It is thus clear that technology occupies a crucial place in Briggs' general conception of and approach to the history of communications. We need now to trace in more detail the role attributed by Briggs to specific innovations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In doing so, we examine in greater depth his efforts to forge a middle way between crude technological determinism and history with the technology left out.

In a 1977 essay on 'the pleasure telephone', Briggs reconstructed the early history of a key invention in the history of communications.<sup>45</sup> The story was a complex one, which well exemplifies his general approach. As elsewhere in his work, Briggs emphasised the disparate reactions and inaccurate predictions that often greeted new inventions. Some thought the telephone would primarily provide an easy means of communication with the servants downstairs, or that it would be used overwhelmingly by businesses. More intriguingly, and hence his title, Briggs explored the early use of the telephone as a means to supply entertainment, whether spoken or sung, particularly in Hungary. The essay on 'the pleasure telephone' began life as a paper at MIT for the centenary of the phone in 1976, and conveys a real sense of the role of play in the history of technology. Early use of the telephone also included its use by *The Times* from 1880 in the reporting of parliamentary debates. Much early use, and early prediction, departed from the two-way, private use that was to become so prevalent. As with his handling of other innovations, Briggs stressed national differences, as well as diversity, in use. While there was 1 telephone per 35 people in Britain by 1928, the figure in the United States was already 1 to 7. The institutional framework, always important to Briggs, varied too, with public control in Britain from 1912. The order in which inventions enter use also varied between nations, with the telephone preceding telegraphy in late 19th-century Japan.<sup>46</sup>

Throughout his work, Briggs has always been interested in the boosterism, sometimes tinged with millenarianism, that often accompanies new inventions. In his assessment of the innovations of the late 19th century, including the telephone, he has emphasised the significant time lag between early adoption and widespread adoption. In assessing

the impact of steam upon shipping, he has noted the persistence of sails, and the frequent equipping of ships with both steam and sails.<sup>47</sup> The appearances of advances in sail ships after the arrival of steam has come to be known as 'the sailing ship effect'. Yet, as David Edgerton argues, innovation in established technologies does not require the emergence of a rival technology.<sup>48</sup> Edgerton is surely right to argue that the history of technology continues to be written too much in terms of invention and innovation, and too little in terms of use. As Edgerton shows in *The Shock of the Old*, a social history of technology focused upon the uses of things provides an importantly different narrative from one that takes its chronology and themes from a sequence of inventions.

It is worth examining how communications figure in Edgerton's history of technology. Edgerton has fun with the hoary persistence of talk of a 'global village', observing, in a quite Briggsian fashion, that the notion of new technology bringing the nation to an end goes back at least to steam power, and has recurred up to and including the Internet. He quotes Orwell's scepticism about claims that 'the aeroplane and the radio have abolished distance' and also his wartime assertion that 'actually the effect of modern inventions has been to increase nationalism, to make travel more difficult, to cut down the means of communication between one country and another'.<sup>49</sup> He finds conventional thinking about communications afflicted by a presentism in which past capacities are quickly forgotten, and in which the 'relay race' view of technology predominates, so that it is forgotten that the telegraph carried much long-distance traffic for years after the Second World War. In telling the story of television, Edgerton takes a global perspective, bringing out nicely the swiftness with which television spreads geographically, though with markedly different levels of take-up, largely reflecting divergences in income. The idea of 'creole technologies' is important in Edgerton's efforts to incorporate the global poor majority into the history of technology. Communications supplies his paradigmatic example, that of water transport in Bangkok where wooden boats are powered by car engines.<sup>50</sup>

It is through the story of the aeroplane in particular that Edgerton has sought to recast the history of England. He argues that the history of the aeroplane, like that of technology more broadly, is seen in civil rather than military terms. A body of work, ranging from Corelli Barnett and Martin Wiener to Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, portrays English culture as hostile to science, and the state as backward in its adoption of new technology. For Edgerton, the history of this important means of transport and communication is deeply shaped by military concerns,

and by a liberal nationalist state keen to employ new technology to wage economical and effective war.<sup>51</sup>

In Edgerton and Briggs, we find considerable evidence of British enthusiasm for technology. The state looms larger in Edgerton's approach to the history of communications. Both acknowledge the importance of the military in the history of radio, but there is a greater emphasis in Edgerton upon empire's role in long-distance radio and aviation.<sup>52</sup> The author of *Victorian Cities* cannot be grouped with those who regard an anti-urban, anti-modern sense of Englishness as culturally and politically dominant. He has, however, emphasised the relatively decentralised character of 19th-century Britain, and contrasted its technological history with countries, such as France, in which military and state endeavour is seen as playing a larger part.

The most challenging aspect of Edgerton's programme for the history of technology is the beguilingly simple objective of recovering the use of things. This apparently modest aim is highly radical in the way it brings the notion of technology itself into question. Briggs has been much interested in things, not least *Victorian Things*, and in the question of how technology is conceptualised.<sup>53</sup> The injunction to think in terms of things rather than technology has important implications for how we write the history of communications. It reminds us of the enduring relevance of established modes of communication, not least the letter and the spoken word. The raised pulpit is a simple device to aid communication, as well as assert status and significance, which was regularly used up and down Britain.<sup>54</sup> Throughout our period, this remained a culture in which religion, as Briggs notes, was important, and in which sermons could attract impressive audiences, both in person and through publication. Recent writing on political culture has been struck by the value attached to open meetings and the central place afforded to oratory.<sup>55</sup> If our focus is upon communication within society as a whole, everyday speech (along with gesture) becomes an obvious topic. The history of ordinary speech, not least the history of dialect, is a very 'Briggsian' subject.<sup>56</sup> It is, though, one that suggests the reorientation involved in recasting the history of technology as the history of things, or perhaps more simply, of writing the social history of communication.

It has been a central thesis of Briggs' work that communications became more 'nationalised', particularly in the 1890s, and that this process is centred on the metropole. As we have explored, technology, albeit with time lags in implementation, is at the heart of this process, hence the lists of novelties occurring in 1896, including Hollerith's establishment of the Tabulating Machine Company to manufacture punch cards.

Much work in urban history has assented to his evaluation of the prominence of late Victorian London, and its function as a global centre has received extensive attention.<sup>57</sup> However, historians of British politics have been increasingly sensitive to the limits of nationalisation, stressing the resilience of localism and the constraints upon party power.<sup>58</sup> Students of the regional press have argued that in significant parts of the country the demise of provincial newspapers has been overstated prior to 1914.<sup>59</sup> It is, though, important to acknowledge that for Briggs these were protracted processes extending right through the interwar period, and beyond.

In writing the history of communication the problem of reception remains very real. Far too little is known about who actually bought, let alone read, the *Daily Mail* in 1896. It is much easier to write media history in terms of representation rather than reception. In recent decades, the question of what is being transmitted – the message rather than the medium – has received growing consideration, as media historians have charted changing journalistic practices, and investigated the way in which the media represented particular events, groups or institutions. It is one of the aims of this chapter to locate Briggs' work in its intellectual context, and to argue that his fundamental interest lies in communications, rather than the media per se, and indeed, in communications itself as part of a larger story about the history of information. His understanding of communication is certainly not, however, confined to the impact of and response to technology. Rather, as he signalled in the title of his Ford lectures, he has also been interested in the culture of communication, and in the way in which the same set of technologies can give rise to different practices depending upon the culture within which they sit. It is to these themes that we look next.

### III

Asa Briggs has written a great deal about technology and communications. The relationship between culture and communication has always been in his sights, but it is necessary to range widely within his published writings to draw out his views. This is in part because he has tended to be distrustful of grand generalisations about the cultural impact of communications. In this section, the focus is primarily upon the argument offered by Briggs of how the British context shaped the response to and nature of changes in communications that were often international in both their origins and spread.

A useful starting point is provided by the chapter Briggs contributed to a volume of *The Cambridge Guide to the Arts in Britain*. In a wide-ranging survey, Briggs offered a condensed account of Victorian Britain as a whole. Adopting a tripartite periodisation of the Victorian age, he accorded religion and technology especial significance in understanding its character. Arguing that 1896 was a seminal year in 'the history of the emergence of a new media complex, national in scale', communications featured prominently. Referring to Williams' *The Long Revolution*, he identified the spread of literacy as one aspect of a communications revolution in which both religion and technology were implicated. He argued that Williams did not capture the full range of ways in which change in communication was conceived, or of responses to it. Intriguingly, he remarked on the absence of the 'nonsense' of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll from Williams' panorama, in part perhaps to counter a picture of the Victorian period as entirely earnest in both character and legacy. He also noted the relative lack of attention given by Williams to music and art.<sup>60</sup>

In seeking to identify some of the consequences of the communications revolution, Briggs drew upon Stephen Kern's 1983 work to argue that the proliferation of electricity and automobile, telephone, phonograph and wireless transformed the culture of space and time.<sup>61</sup> He emphasised the disinclination of the state to support the arts in contrast to some continental European countries, recounting Lord Palmerston's memorable assessment of the Soulages collection of medieval Italian majolica, '[w]hat is the use of such rubbish to our manufacturers?'. Briggs sketched out the growth of a public for art, distinguishing between this and the market for art, suggesting something of the cultural and political context within which changes in communications occurred, and to which they also contributed.<sup>62</sup>

Some of the themes set out in this essay would be explored more in the lecture hall than in print. It is, though, helpful once again to return to his earlier writing, not least his radio talks and journalism. Briggs has of course always been interested in the social sciences, and committed to the view that historians have to engage with theory. In an extended review in 1959 of George Rudé's *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, he compared the state of social history in Britain with that in France, where the embrace of 'new methods' and 'every kind of material and concept' was producing a genuine 'history of society' in contrast to the inchoate attempts of the British.<sup>63</sup> A wide-ranging familiarity with theory can be combined with wry reflection, evident in his reference to media theorists 'who prefer parallel play to engagement with each other'.<sup>64</sup> In his 1962

review of two Penguin Specials – John Vaizey's *Education for Tomorrow* and Raymond Williams' *Communications* – he complained of 'little sense of the immediate and concrete'.<sup>65</sup> His attachment to the particular, allied to an ecumenical approach to theory, discourages sweeping claims about the relationship between culture and communication. Whilst Briggs has made use of the notion of the 'media complex' or 'media systems', his acknowledgement of the complex range of different media present in modern societies militates against identifying any one media form as producing or reflecting a particular kind of culture. His work is, consequently, often cautious about making specific claims for the cultural consequences of changes in communication.

In two radio talks in 1962, Asa Briggs surveyed the relationship between broadcasting and society. In his first talk, he was struck by the distance between his present and the year of the BBC's birth. He suggested that broadcasting had 'measured all this out', ensuring that memories of events were often memories of radio programmes. He argued that generational differences had a profound impact on the way in which broadcasting was initially received. Importantly, he noted that broadcasting came to a society already well acquainted with mass media, and he claimed that it was assimilated with considerable speed in a 'country ready for it'. He pursued the generational angle to argue that radio differentiated far more on grounds of age in programming policy after 1945 compared to pre-1939. The interwar BBC, and particularly Reith, were hostile to such differentiation, because of their conviction that broadcasting was to produce a common radio public rather than serve an existing market. Reith situated this view in relation to 'not only a tradition of public service but a tradition of common culture, or at least access to it'. Briggs went on to assert that it was 'obvious that this particular conception of broadcasting (with the BBC itself as a social product) has been at least as influential [...] as the means of broadcasting themselves'. He argued that while British broadcasting did at times propagate Dwight MacDonal's 'midcult', it did so in accordance with trends in British society as a whole, and that it responded to the absence of a common culture in interwar Britain by embracing modernism more than other aspects of the communication system. Stressing the lack of sociological data, he argued that where broadcasting had an impact, such as in the integration of rural areas or the increased popularity of classical music, it was one of a number of factors. He concluded by suggesting that Britain escaped the more coercive kinds of broadcasting evident both in state- and business-controlled systems, arguing that 'wireless reflected British society, a plural society, both at its best and its



worse'. It was this that explained the speed with which the BBC became an established British institution.<sup>66</sup>

In his second talk, he analysed in greater detail programming and audiences. Noting the move from the small audience of amateur radio enthusiasts to a much larger one from 1922, he suggested that the emerging audience was a cross-class one. In looking at programming, he remarked upon the advent of a regular schedule that often structured listeners' leisure time. It was only, unfortunately, during the war that the audience for particular programmes came into sharper focus. The rise of the radio audience did not, however, destroy either newspapers or the cinema – rather they all grew at the same time. The media developments of the interwar era reinforced each other, and accelerated the 'nationalisation' of culture. Radio was consumed domestically, seeking intimacy with the listener, and aiming at an identification between audience and programme. The polished radio talk that was a stalwart of the interwar schedule was, Briggs suggested, the final instalment of a '*belles-lettres* tradition' that was under pressure. It was clear that the radio audience was actually segmented in terms of age, sex, education and class. The questions posed by radio, and even more by television, were ones of control. Briggs argued that the social impact was determined primarily by 'prior social circumstances'. In a plural society, the power to shape was less than that to confirm. The questions of value raised by the problem of control paralleled other debates; but, for Briggs, the idea of a public that could develop remained preferable to that of a market.<sup>67</sup>

These talks dealing with the interwar period merit revisiting because they make explicit what was elsewhere sometimes implicit, and because they were given towards the end of the highly creative period from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s in which Briggs produced many of his most celebrated works. They are also revealing, because the late 19th and early 20th century was part of a larger shift in communications in which radio and television were paramount. It is, though, notable that Briggs emphasised the extent to which the way was already prepared for radio, and the degree to which 19th-century notions of public service and common culture shaped the early BBC, and by consequence, the history of broadcasting in Britain. In these talks there is a strong sense of the distinctive and structuring cultural context in which changes in communications occurred in Britain. Here, Briggs was concerned with both the medium and the message, and was reflecting upon the cultural resources, such as the *belles-lettres* tradition, upon which early broadcasting drew. He was adroit in bringing out the variety of the audience, and careful in his assessment of how and to what the audience listened.

The most recent edition of *A Social History of the Media* concludes with chapters on media convergence and cyberspace. The growth of the media and mediation is one of its themes. In his work on the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Briggs has eschewed an overemphasis upon media power. The rise of the image in the era of early cinema, emerging photographic journalism and the pictorial poster has often been stressed as part of the advent of modernity. Recent work on British visual culture has instead foregrounded the relationship between word and image, and the formative role played by the pre-existing literary culture with its strong focus on narrative.<sup>68</sup> More broadly, considerable attention has been paid to the links and exchanges between different media, undercutting the kind of essentialist reading of particular media often associated with McLuhan. This has been reinforced by the rise of various kinds of content analysis, and more generally, a growing interest in the genre history of media, whether it be the scripting of political scandals or the conventions of period drama.<sup>69</sup> It might be suggested that there is a parallel here with the historiography of the printing revolution that notes the coexistence of manuscript and print, the persistence of orality and the flows between different media.

The culture of communications, and the cultural consequences of communication, remain, in some respects, both underdeveloped and highly controversial subjects. The way in which media genres evolve, and the cultural resources upon which they draw, has certainly received attention, but this has not always rigorously historical. The history of journalists and journalistic practices is still often trapped in either hagiography or demonology, and inclined towards internalism. Perhaps like the history of middle-class work more generally, we know surprisingly little about the everyday reality of office life in the communications industries, as opposed to the biographies of famous editors and journalists. The polarities of debate about the cultural impact of communications are familiar, and the problems identified by Briggs in assessing media effects largely remain. In his writing about communications, Briggs has repeatedly noted the persistence of technical change, and the difficulties of prediction. In an article for *The Times* in 1969 on 'Life in 1980' addressing 'the organisation of leisure', he sagely noted that play was more likely to become even more of a business than business become play, but ended with a familiar prediction that 'there will be a feeling that [...] the biggest changes lie ahead'.<sup>70</sup> This last point was something he had already identified as present in the 1890s, as a decade in which much was described as new, and in which disparate inventions and discoveries were linked as an aspect of the arrival of a new century.<sup>71</sup>

In reading Briggs on communications, it is perhaps his analysis of the contemporary response to new developments that is most rewarding.

#### IV

This chapter has examined the work of Asa Briggs on the history of communications in the late 19th and early 20th century. The monumental quality of his labours as a historian of the BBC and of broadcasting has drawn greater attention than his writing about this earlier period. It is perhaps his work in urban history that has become most canonical, and its legacy for the historiography of British cities is clear. His most-read work that deals with this period is now probably the relevant chapters of *A Social History of the Media*. The argument here, however, has been that his interest is fundamentally in the history of communications as a whole, rather than of the media more specifically, and that his writing about the late 19th and early 20th century provides a crucial component for understanding his general account of modern communications history. It has also been suggested that even the history of communications is too narrow a definition of his interests, in that from the 1950s and 1960s he was concerned with information and its history. His approach emerged from a rich period of creativity in which scholars opened up new areas of study. It pre-dated the formation of the relevant subdisciplines. It is hard writing in 2014 not to be struck by its ambition and sweep.

#### Notes

1. The five volumes are: Asa Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); *The Golden Age of Wireless 1927–1939* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); *The War of Words 1939–1945* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970); *Sound and Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); *Competition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
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3. Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009 edn.).
4. Derek Fraser (ed.), *Cities, Class and Communication: Essays in Honour of Asa Briggs* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).
5. Asa Briggs, 'The Communications Revolution', in *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs*, vol. 3: *Serious Pursuits. Communications and Education* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp. 62–77.
6. Asa Briggs, *Mass Entertainment: The Origins of a Modern Industry; The 29th Joseph Fisher Lecture in Commerce* (Adelaide: Griffin Press, 1960).
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 30, 8, 10.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13, 24.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
10. Asa Briggs, 'The Language of "Class" in Early Nineteenth Century England', in Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History In Memory of G. D. H. Cole* (London: Macmillan, 1960), pp. 43–73.
11. Briggs, *Birth of Broadcasting*, p. 5.
12. Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (London: Odhams Press, 1963), pp. 45–6; Asa Briggs, 'The Language of "Mass" and "Masses" in Nineteenth Century England', in D. E. Martin and D. Rubinstein (eds.), *Ideology and the Labour Movement: Essays Presented to John Saville* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), pp. 62–83.
13. Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, pp. 55–83.
14. Briggs and Burke, *Short History of the Media*, p. 133.
15. Asa Briggs, 'The Cultural and Social Setting', in Boris Ford (ed.), *The Cambridge Guide to the Arts, vol. 7: The Later Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 8.
16. Samuel Smiles, *Lives of the Engineers, with an Account of Their Principal Works, Comprising also a History of Inland Communication in Britain* (London: J. Murray, 1861).
17. Briggs, 'The Cultural and Social Setting', p. 8.
18. J. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).
19. Asa Briggs, 'Prediction and Control: Historical Reflections on Early Broadcasting Seen in Perspective', in Briggs (ed.), *Collected Essays, vol. 3*, pp. 98–114.
20. Asa Briggs, 'Problems and Possibilities in the Writing of Broadcasting History', in Briggs (ed.), *Collected Essays, vol. 3*, pp. 116–17.
21. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958); Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961).
22. Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life, with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainment* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957).
23. Briggs, *Birth of Broadcasting*, p. 16.
24. Asa Briggs, 'General Preface to Volumes I–V', *The Birth of Broadcasting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. xiv.
25. Briggs, 'The Communications Revolution', pp. 62–3.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 63–5, 76.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
28. Briggs and Burke, *A Short History of the Media*, p. 243.
29. Briggs, 'The Communications Revolution', p. 67.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
31. Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, p. 45.
32. Asa Briggs, 'Faces in the Crowd', *Listener*, 9 April 1959, pp. 636–38.
33. Briggs, 'The Communications Revolution', pp. 69–70, 76.
34. Asa Briggs, 'Broadcasting and Society', *Listener*, 22 November 1962, pp. 860–63; Briggs, 'BBC Programmes and their Audiences', *Listener*, 29 November 1962, pp. 903–4.
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36. Briggs and Burke, *A Social History of the Media*, p. 121.
37. Briggs, 'Problems and Possibilities'.

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43. J. Beniger, *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 6–51.
45. Asa Briggs, 'The Pleasure Telephone: A Chapter in the Pre-History of the Media', in *Collected Essays*, vol. 3, pp. 77–98.
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 80–2; Briggs and Burke, *A Social History of the Media*, p. 242.
47. Briggs and Burke, *A Social History of the Media*, p. 129.
48. Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old*, p. 190.
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50. *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 31–2, 47.
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62. Briggs, 'The Cultural and Social Setting', pp. 32, 36.
63. Briggs, 'Faces in the Crowd'.
64. Briggs and Burke, *A Short History of the Media*, p. 224.
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# 7

## Broadcasting Carries On! Asa Briggs and the History of the Wartime BBC

*Siân Nicholas*

### Introduction

In 1970 Asa Briggs published *The War of Words*, his history of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) during the Second World War and the third volume of his monumental history of broadcasting in the UK. Forty years later it remains the definitive account, not just of a broadcasting service at war, but of a key national institution at a defining historical moment.

To call Briggs' *History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* monumental is, for once, no exaggeration. Characterised by rigorous archival work and unrivalled personal access to key personnel, the five volumes of his history,<sup>1</sup> written over a period of nearly 40 years, cover the period 1922–1974 in some 4,000 pages of close text. The sheer volume of the research, and the mass of detail presented, have often daunted readers. But they are the first and best systematic telling of the history of the BBC, as well as a key contribution to the history of 20th-century Britain itself.

This chapter seeks to place *The War of Words* both in the context of Briggs' official history of the BBC and the wider historiography of the Second World War, to which it still, 40 years on, provides an essential contribution. It describes the scope and character of Briggs' work (including his characteristic take on its subject matter), and explores the range and depth of its presentation not simply of a working wartime institution, but of its personnel, output, audiences and impact. It considers how later scholars have built on Briggs' work, and what we can still learn from his approach to his subject. Throughout the discussion two themes emerge. First, how *The War of Words*, and the history of the

wartime BBC itself, exemplifies Briggs' own dictum that '[t]o try to write the history of broadcasting in the 20th century is in a sense to write the history of everything else'. Second, the debt that all historians working in the field of radio and television history owe Asa Briggs as the scholar who made the history of the modern mass media a reputable subject of scholarly historical research in Britain.

### ***The History of Broadcasting and the War of Words***

*The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* was commissioned by BBC Director-General Sir Ian Jacob in 1957,<sup>2</sup> 30 years after the granting of the BBC's first royal charter, and shortly after the BBC had lost its historic monopoly in broadcasting. At the time Asa Briggs was Professor of Modern History at Leeds University, a leading scholar of Victorian labour and urban history. A prolific writer, he was already the author of one institutional history (of the department store Lewis's, published in 1956), as well as an occasional broadcaster.<sup>3</sup> His move into 20th-century history, and the history of wireless, might have been considered a departure; but he was already known for his eclectic range of historical interests, including the history of the everyday.<sup>4</sup> As an historian of the Victorian period he would describe how keenly he felt the absence of an authoritative contemporaneous account of the history of the 19th-century British press, regretting the lost opportunity to talk to the media pioneers of the age, in order to gain a deeper understanding of both the press itself and the society within which it functioned.<sup>5</sup>

The BBC project was pioneering in another respect. For, just as Victorian social history had barely existed as a serious scholarly subject when Briggs first began to write,<sup>6</sup> in 1957 the history of broadcasting was genuinely a new field of academic study. Briggs embarked on it with virtually no historiographical precedents on which to draw, and only a handful of memoirs and commentaries in print.<sup>7</sup> The mass media was simply not recognised as an object of academic study by historians. Mass media theory was in its infancy, and the study of mass communications scarcely existed outside American journalism schools. The work of the Frankfurt School was barely known in Britain. The term 'mass media' was hardly in common use. Published in 1961, the first volume of Briggs' history of the BBC, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, would predate Raymond Williams' *Communications* (1962), Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964) and overlap with J. T. Klapper's *The Effects of Mass Communication* (1960). As for the study of popular culture, it was generally considered to be an academic guilty pleasure. Richard Hogart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) had only



just been published, while the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which would do so much to legitimise its academic study, would not be founded until 1964.<sup>8</sup>

Comparable institutional histories were likewise few and far between, though the four-volume *History of The Times*, edited by Stanley Morison, and completed (up to the year 1948) in 1952, was a precedent of sorts. However, probably the closest parallel to Briggs' undertaking was the recently published series of official civil histories of the Second World War under the editorship of Professor Keith Hancock. Briggs accepted the commission to write the BBC history at a time when, as he later noted, a debate was waging ('even raging') about these histories.<sup>9</sup> Commissioned in the early years of the war, the aim of the civil histories had been to provide a true and permanent record of wartime government policy and administration.<sup>10</sup> The finished works, published in the late 1940s and early 1950s and written by a group of rising young academics including Michael Postan, Betty Behrens, R. M. Titmuss and Margaret Gowing, as well as Hancock himself, had been widely criticised, not least by leading historians such as V. H. Galbraith and Herbert Butterfield, for their alleged capitulation to the official narrative. Briggs was thus rightly wary about the 'dangers' associated with official histories, and unlike the authors of the civil histories, would always retain editorial control of his narrative and conclusions. However, the research methodology he adopted had clear similarities to that of the civil histories, including exclusive access to internal records, and extended correspondence, including interviews, with key personnel. Likewise, the principles Hancock originally set out to bring to his project ('impartiality but not detachment', 'span without shallowness', and 'fairness' in combination with 'judgment and critique') accorded very much with Briggs' own.<sup>11</sup>

Briggs' original plan appears to have been to write a two-volume history. However, shortly after the first volume came out in 1961, this had stretched to 'three or four'.<sup>12</sup> Given the sheer scale of the task, this was clearly a pragmatic decision, but it also reflected the four distinct phases into which the BBC's own history appeared to fall. Thus Volume I, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, traced the story of wireless in Britain from 1896, but focused principally on the history of the first manifestation of the BBC, the British Broadcasting Company, from its establishment under the aegis of the General Post Office in 1922 to its translation into the new British Broadcasting Corporation on 1 January 1927. While substantially concerned with the competing interests and ongoing negotiations surrounding the creation of the BBC, the volume also covered technical advances, international agreements

over wavelengths, internal administration and programme output. The central character was John Reith, the company's first general manager (to whom Briggs gained extraordinary access, including permission to read Reith's private diaries), the underpinning narrative being Reith's vision of broadcasting as a public service of almost unlimited possibilities. Volume II, *The Golden Age of Wireless* (published in 1965), recounted how that vision was effectively realised, as broadcasting in Britain matured in the late 1920s and 1930s from a communications medium of still largely untapped range and potential into an indispensable source of national news, information and entertainment. Reith, now BBC Director-General, was again the dominant figure, presiding over the company's evolution into a national – and international – institution. Volume III, *The War of Words*, which took the BBC through the Second World War, was the volume that for the first time presented a BBC that was indisputably at the heart of national life.

If the first volumes of Briggs' *History* had few precedents on which to draw in terms of media history, *The War of Words* faced a similar problem in terms of histories of the war itself. In 1970 the BBC at war was not a fashionable topic among historians, who, as Briggs himself noted, 'have shared the view of some of the top civil servants during the war and [...] either left the BBC out of the reckoning or dismissed it perfunctorily'. The wartime histories of the Ministry of Economic Warfare and the Foreign Office had bypassed the issue of propaganda, and not even Winston Churchill, in his six-volume history of the war, made more than a handful of references either to broadcasting or the BBC – and none to his own wartime broadcasts.<sup>13</sup> One of the few histories of the British Home Front then in print to refer to the BBC was by one of Briggs' own former PhD students, Angus Calder. Another historian of eclectic and wide-ranging interests, and a pioneering historian of the Tom Harrison Mass-Observation Archive (which Briggs would be instrumental in bringing to Sussex in 1970), Calder's *The People's War*, published in 1969 just before *The War of Words* came out, used published memoirs to present a brief but evocative overview of the wartime BBC, though with so much else to cover in his account the BBC's role remained undeveloped and largely anecdotal.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, alongside its role as the third volume in the history of the BBC series, *The War of Words* might plausibly be regarded as an (independent) companion volume to the civil histories of the Second World War. Like them, it provided a detailed administrative history (by an author who, now Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sussex, was a seasoned administrator himself). Like them, it took a central theme (here, the wartime

role of wireless) and developed it through every level of administration and implementation. And with no place provided in the civil history series for a history of the Ministry of Information (MOI), *The War of Words* offered scholars of the war the first authoritative history of British wartime propaganda policy and practice, at home and abroad.

*The War of Words* thus stood, from the outset, not just as one instalment of the *History of Broadcasting*, but as something more. The BBC in the 1930s was significant, but the BBC during the war became mythic. The war was the validation of the BBC as a national institution in British public and private life. For the first time, as Briggs would show, the history of the nation and the history of broadcasting were fundamentally interconnected.

### The BBC and the Second World War

The war years were a defining period in the history of the BBC. Beginning the war with 4,889 employees, by April 1945 its staff had grown to 11,479. It began the war with two domestic services (the National and the Regional), an Empire Service and ten foreign language services; it ended it with a Home Service, a Forces Programme, an overseas English language service and 45 foreign language services that spanned the globe.<sup>15</sup> It began the war committed to a 'mixed' service of broadcasting on each service, to cater to the widest range of tastes and interests, but ended it with plans in train for three new services stratified by cultural taste. It began the war with a perfunctory, evening only, news service, and ended it with a fully developed News Department, its own news-gathering operation, and news bulletins throughout the day and night. During the war itself, the BBC carried on broadcasting – a feat of engineering as much as of programme-making. It kept enough of a distance from government, while being ultimately under government control. It broadcast enough that was good enough, and some things that were inspired: programmes that fulfilled a real practical need, which united disparate audiences in improbable ways, and which embedded themselves in wartime national culture. It broadcast things that never would have been predicted before the war: from eyewitness news to current affairs to genuinely popular mass entertainment. It institutionalised listener research. In 'carrying on', it gave its various audiences the means to carry on themselves.

In *The War of Words* Briggs demonstrates how all this came about. He relates broadcasting directly to the political and military history of the war, explaining the relationships between BBC management, BBC

departments and the various departments of government, including the Foreign Office, the MOI and Political Warfare Executive, and most ministries of state, as well as the three branches of the military. He details programme policy and practice across the home and overseas services, and describes listener opinion and response. And he presents the story not just of an institution but of a huge cast of individuals working and contributing at all levels within that institution.

The relationship between the BBC and the MOI is at the heart of the narrative. Some ten years before the publication of Ian McLaine's history of the ministry, *The War of Words* analyses the formal relations between the two organisations, and their workings in practice. It outlines the role of the BBC in carrying out the ministry's propaganda policy, with such initiatives as the 'Anger Campaign' of 1940, and the tensions between BBC and ministry personnel over propaganda output.<sup>16</sup> Briggs' assessment that "[m]orale", as always, depended more upon good news than upon the solicitude of the Ministry of Information' is in fact McLaine's principal thesis, and sums up all scholarship on wartime morale since.<sup>17</sup>

Also key to Briggs' approach is the integration throughout the narrative of the BBC's home and overseas services. This can make for disconcerting reading for the historian of the Home Front, not used to considering the wider world. But this approach – a tour de force that no other scholar has tried to replicate – underlines how the BBC during the war was something far more than just a domestic broadcasting medium. The 'war of words' was also a world war; the BBC was a global as well as a domestic institution, its resources were spread across all its services, its programmes often shared between them, its contributors increasingly used to broadcasting at all hours of the day and night to a range of audiences that might be in any corner not just of Britain but of the world.

A special place is reserved for news. *The War of Words* provides the first detailed account of the development of the BBC's wartime news service, from the controversial introduction of news bulletins throughout the day at the start of the war through to the launch of *War Report*, the nightly front-line news magazine, by which the British people followed the Allied advance from D-Day right through to VE Day, and taking in censorship policy and practice, advances in field recording technology, recruitment to the BBC War Reporting Unit, and even the introduction of the first regional-accented BBC newsreader, Wilfred Pickles.<sup>18</sup> Neither is entertainment neglected, with one chapter in particular providing a magisterial overview of the entire range of popular BBC wartime programming, from *Monday Night at Eight* to *Happidrome*.<sup>19</sup>

Above all, Briggs' account demonstrates his extraordinary ability to navigate the complex and shifting web of administrative structures and bureaucratic reorganisations within which the wartime BBC operated. Probably only a historian who understood from experience how complex organisations function, how committee structures evolve and how public institutions interact with government could both make sense of this and convey it to others. Alongside his confident handling of technological developments, his ability to sum up a particular programme so that it leaps off the page, and his eye for the telling quotation, it makes for a hugely rich and many-layered narrative.

Briggs' is an insider's view: his work tends to see the challenges of wartime from the point of view of the senior management, department heads and production staff within the BBC itself. But this does not make it an uncritical account, and the narrative is by no means one of unqualified achievement. We see how the 'phoney war' was a difficult time for the BBC, its inadequacy painfully evident in the face of a war whose muted early character no one had anticipated. We see how once the war began in earnest, the BBC faced difficulties in pitching the tone and content of its attempts to raise morale – and how morale within the BBC itself was often low.<sup>20</sup> We see how the BBC's much-vaunted independence was always qualified, with the government formally in control of the wartime Corporation, if reluctant to exert its full powers in practice. Tension between Broadcasting House and Senate House, the wartime home of the MOI, was endemic: the early wartime BBC, shorn of its usual complement of governors, was subject to successively inefficient, ineffectual and overbearing Ministers of Information (respectively, Lord Macmillan, Lord Reith – making a brief and largely unhappy return to the world of communications – and Duff Cooper). But it was lucky with its more immediate overseers, notably A. P. Ryan, its MOI-appointed Controller (Home), who before the war had been the BBC's deputy Director of Public Relations and who on his return championed the BBC's independence first in this role and then as its pioneering Controller (News). It was lucky, too, that Brendan Bracken, Minister of Information from 1941 to 1945, took a pragmatic approach to both propaganda policy and the BBC's role within it.<sup>21</sup> But what emerges through *The War of Words* is how fragile the BBC's wartime autonomy actually was, how hard won (and sometimes accidental) its achievements. The extraordinary growth and success of the BBC news service was perhaps the most dramatic of these unexpected achievements; meanwhile, who could have predicted the staggering popularity of a programme such as the *Brains Trust*?

The BBC could also be out of touch. BBC personnel had historically been regarded as representatives of a social and cultural elite, driven by an elevated notion of duty rather than by any knowledge or understanding of ordinary or working-class life. The wartime BBC was in many ways no less elitist than in the interwar years. Classical music, experimental drama, news and talks took up as much airtime as dance music and Variety.<sup>22</sup> Broadcast propaganda could be patronising and heavy handed (*ENSA Half-Hour* was a particular source of tension<sup>23</sup>). And, famously, the BBC governors even went so far as to suggest that Vera Lynn's sentimental – but hugely popular – record request programme *Sincerely Yours* – *Vera Lynn* be taken off the air, on the grounds that it was sapping the martial spirit of the fighting forces.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, as Briggs was always at pains to demonstrate, nothing was inevitable or preordained about the history of the BBC. Much was down to chance, to happenstance, to people, circumstances and personal relationships outside Reith's or others' control. This was especially so during the war years. The wartime BBC took a while to become the BBC that people would remember. It was slow to realise what people needed from a wartime broadcaster. Its reputation for truthfulness and candour relied in part on simple disillusionment with the newspaper alternative. It was perversely mistrustful even of its own wartime successes, as Briggs notes, taking off J. B. Priestley at the height of his popularity, and splitting up the original *Brains Trust* team.<sup>25</sup> It tended to follow rather than to lead public demand for more news, more entertainment, more dance music, more engagement with contemporary social and political debate. Yet its elitism was balanced by a new commitment to popular broadcasting, as it became more responsive to its audiences than ever before, with an enhanced role attached to listener research. It developed some of the most popular and successful programmes it had ever broadcast, notably (but by no means only) *It's That Man Again (ITMA)* with Tommy Handley.<sup>26</sup> And of course the Board of Governors lost the fight over Vera Lynn, who remained on air for the duration (Briggs presents the relevant board minute in a pithy footnote: '*Sincerely Yours* deplored, but popularity noted').<sup>27</sup>

Caution was likewise balanced by trust. The idea of propaganda had by the 1930s a black reputation, given the recent example of the First World War and the contemporary example of Nazi Germany. To be seen as the national broadcaster but not the government's broadcaster was a daunting challenge. There was no automatic foundation of public trust. But public scepticism was largely won over by the BBC's clear wish to do the right thing. This achievement rests on a paradox. The British public

knew that the wartime BBC was ultimately under government direction; it knew the government did not always tell them the truth, and that it often kept the truth from them; it knew that a lot of what the BBC broadcast was pure propaganda (and could recognise it – often with derision – when it heard it).<sup>28</sup> But it had faith that the people who brought them the programmes were always trying their best, were committed to performing a public service, to provide the truths where possible and lies never, and saw their first responsibility as being to them, the listeners.<sup>29</sup> This was achieved in ways that Reith likely deplored: listener research, the Forces Programme, *Music While You Work*, for example. Successful public service broadcasting was Reith's ultimate achievement nonetheless.

## Hindsight

Reviewers of every volume of the *History of Broadcasting* have noted Briggs' 'noticeable reluctance to make *a posteriori* judgments'.<sup>30</sup> This has typically been regarded as a shortcoming – although at least one reviewer noted approvingly the absence in Briggs' history of the 'tendentious moralising' typical of contemporary discussions of the social impact of broadcasting.<sup>31</sup> Briggs himself always asserted that he tried in his BBC histories to avoid moralising, hindsight or nostalgia, and that he used other writings to draw out longer-term trends and developments in the history of communication.<sup>32</sup> He defended his choice not to anticipate events by noting that had he done so 'the volumes would now be badly out of date in terms not just of information but of interpretation'.<sup>33</sup> Instead, he set out to 'recapture ways of thinking and feeling about broadcasting and other media as they were in the period' rather than reading back 'the preoccupations of the present into the past'.<sup>34</sup> His determination to tell the story of broadcasting as it unfolded, without superimposing contemporary or second-guessing future academic concerns, gives his BBC histories their distinct character, providing the narrative template, deploying original sources to capture the mood and tone of the time, but also allowing future scholars the space to draw different conclusions.<sup>35</sup>

This approach works particularly well in establishing the importance of contemporary themes and issues. It explains, for instance, the grouping together of politics, religion and society in one chapter: not all historians today might think to put those three themes together, but religion's role in wartime British public as well as private life was significant, and religious broadcasting a central part of the BBC's public

service.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, the curiously muted ending to the volume, with the BBC barely celebrating its wartime achievement in its preoccupation with planning its new peacetime service, reflects BBC senior management's embarrassment at the populism of its wartime output. Perhaps the greatest risk of such an approach is the danger of overestimating the lasting cultural significance of certain broadcasting figures. (Even in 1965 one reviewer questioned whether *Band Waggon's* Nausea Bagwash really had a 'permanent place in the mythology of show business'.<sup>37</sup>) However, the ephemerality of popular culture is one of the challenges Briggs consistently sets out to address. Lasting cultural significance is not the same thing as contemporary cultural importance, and while people today may barely know the names of Tommy Handley, Vera Lynn, Professor Joad or J. B. Priestley, they 'left their imprint on social history in a manner that people who never heard them at the time may well find difficult fully to understand'.<sup>38</sup>

Of course, telling the story as it unfolded, steering deliberately away from hindsight, seeking not to dwell on more recent concerns, means that a number of subsequently popular themes are not addressed directly. There is no discussion of gendered broadcasting in *The War of Words*, little about class, nothing about race. There is only limited discussion of the regions and little direct engagement with issues of national unity. There is very little of the history from below, particularly associated with Mass-Observation, that would come to characterise social histories of the war.<sup>39</sup> Likewise there is little about the day-to-day working life within the wartime BBC that, for instance, Penelope Fitzgerald's later fictionalised memoir, *Human Voices* (1980), would so vividly convey. Later historiographical debates, such as the 'leftward shift', or the 'myth of consensus', or the 'myth of the Blitz' are barely addressed.<sup>40</sup>

What this approach does do, however, is to leave room for future scholars. *The War of Words* was not intended to be the last word on the wartime BBC, and Briggs himself acknowledged that he had consulted 'only' around 2,000 of the 7,000 BBC files covering the war period.<sup>41</sup> (It may not always feel that way: everyone who has researched in the BBC archives will know the feeling of finding the most telling memorandum, or the perfect quotation, then seeing, handwritten on the inside cover of the file, a note of the very same memo, and the words 'quoted in Briggs, *History of Broadcasting*'.) A range of other sources remained to be explored more fully, both public (for instance the MOI Home Intelligence Reports) and private, while Briggs' prescient comment that '[t]here is likely to be no better source than Harrison's papers and those of Mass-Observation for the "folklore" of broadcasting during the war'<sup>42</sup>



would be borne out by later historians seeking to move beyond the institutional history to view the BBC from the outside as well as the inside.<sup>43</sup> But the official history is always our starting point, its very comprehensiveness enabling us to explore further and faster than we ever otherwise could. In that way, it is the model for all institutional histories.

## Wartime Britain and the Wartime BBC

In Briggs' own much-quoted words, 'to try to write the history of broadcasting [...] is to try to write the history of everything else'. The real achievement of his broadcasting histories is how they root the history of broadcasting within the social, political, cultural and technological context in which the broadcasters were operating. But implicit in Briggs' statement is also that, to write a history of almost anything in the modern era, you need to know the history of how it is communicated. As Raphael Samuel, another social historian fascinated by the ephemeral and the everyday, noted, to write a history of the BBC is to write 'a biography of twentieth-century Britain'.<sup>44</sup> The history of almost every aspect of ordinary British life from the 1920s onwards is also in some part the history of broadcasting, and during the war years perhaps above all. The history of the wartime BBC is the history of wartime Britain. If the Second World War was 'the people's war', the BBC was, if not the voice of the people, then certainly a voice for the people.<sup>45</sup>

In the wartime BBC you can see in microcosm every debate and dilemma facing wartime Britain. Why do people listen to 'Lord Haw-Haw'? How can we manage food rationing, or save fuel, or 'make do and mend'? How do we regard the Soviet Union? You see how these dilemmas are typically resolved: because people are bored – so give them more and better information; provide plain factual advice not annoying exhortation; say lots of nice things about Russia but try not to go overboard with the *Internationale*.<sup>46</sup> You see the classic trajectory of almost every wartime institution: from overcaution to overreaction, then inspiration, self-congratulation and finally routine. You see a new focus on ordinary people and popular culture. You do not as a rule see the wartime BBC leading or prompting public debate. However, more than ever before, the BBC becomes a barometer of public concerns and the public mood. When it recognises and gives airtime to a political issue, it is a confirmation that that debate has become mainstream. And, while much historiographical energy has been spent arguing about the nature and extent of wartime national unity,<sup>47</sup> the one place you can genuinely see the nation coming together is in that national community

of listeners tuning into the BBC. During the war more people shared more (and more of the same) information and entertainment than ever before. The figures bear repeating: 30 per cent of the adult population (some ten million listeners) for Priestley's *Postscripts*; 40 per cent for *ITMA*; and routinely half the entire adult population for the nine o'clock news. When at 9pm on 6 June 1944 a staggering 80 per cent of the British people listened to the King's announcement on the BBC that D-Day had arrived, Reith's vision of the BBC as bringing together 'the nation as one man' was at last realised.<sup>48</sup>

### **After *The War of Words***

When Briggs began his history of British broadcasting, there were few serious studies of either the history or sociology of broadcasting, and the concept of a 'communications revolution' had not yet been clearly formulated. The first three volumes of his history thus very much stood alone historiographically. Attempts to emulate them, notably Erik Barnouw's three-volume history of American broadcasting up to the 1960s, published between 1966 and 1970,<sup>49</sup> tended to suffer in comparison owing to the absence of a comparable archival record on which to draw.<sup>50</sup> Since the publication of *The War of Words*, the literature has moved on. There have been two further instalments of Briggs' history of the BBC. Volume IV, *Sound and Vision* (1979), takes the story to 1955, addressing the post-war challenges facing the BBC, including structural reorganisation, political and social change, the coming of television, and the challenge to and ending of the BBC's monopoly status. Volume V, *Competition*, published in 1995, took the story beyond Briggs' original contractual obligation ('my work has now caught up with history'),<sup>51</sup> charting the coming of competition in the form of independent television, and bringing the story up to the 1970s. They have not changed materially in approach to the earlier three (inviting the criticism that they are 'determinedly unfashionable'),<sup>52</sup> but in so doing they stand as a coherent whole with the earlier volumes, providing the groundwork for subsequent historians to explore.

Briggs' histories of the BBC have been described as a 'landmark of modern humane scholarship [that] withstand rereading long after more theoretically informed and politically engaged works have become museum pieces'.<sup>53</sup> As Samuel noted on the publication of *Competition*, alone among historians he 'had the wit to see that the history of broadcasting was a tremendous subject, worthy of the full resources of scholarly inquiry [...] He has given us an open text, one which positively invites the addition of new characters, the use of alternative

records, the pursuit of contemporary inspirations [...] a marvellous vindication of the possibilities of a truth-telling contemporary history'.<sup>54</sup> Briggs' achievement has been to integrate broadcasting into the wider context of British politics, society and world affairs, taking in technical developments, societal and cultural shifts, and governmental policies, yet never overstating his case and never substituting nostalgia for analysis.<sup>55</sup> Descriptions applied to Briggs' history include 'gold mine'<sup>56</sup> and 'Aladdin's Cave',<sup>57</sup> the metaphor of buried treasure perhaps reflecting the narrative density of each successive volume (the treasure map being, of course, each volume's magisterial index). Yet Anthony Smith's reference to a 'well-ploughed terrain' is probably most apposite: other historians have had the back-breaking work done for them; they only have to sow the seeds of their own research and reap the reward.<sup>58</sup>

Meanwhile, British broadcasting history has developed a momentum of its own. In the 1980s Bernard Sendall, for 20 years a leading executive of the ITA, produced a two-volume history of independent television that sought to repeat for ITV what Briggs had done for the BBC (if again with far less comprehensive or well-organised institutional sources); it now runs to six volumes, taking the story up to 1992.<sup>59</sup> Since the 1990s academic literature on the history of British broadcasting has flourished. There have been new histories of interwar and wartime broadcasting.<sup>60</sup> Specialist studies include histories of particular radio and television stations,<sup>61</sup> of radio and television programme genres,<sup>62</sup> and of regional broadcasting.<sup>63</sup> Thematic studies address gender, race and national identity.<sup>64</sup> The BBC's structure, administration and relations with government has come under forensic examination.<sup>65</sup> Media studies is now an established discipline in universities, and history departments are increasingly finding a place in both their curricula and their research agendas for the history of the mass media. The BBC Written Archives Centre, which owes its very existence to the history of the BBC project, is constantly busy with researchers and widely recognised as one of the richest and most rewarding written archives of our time. The history of the BBC project continues under Jean Seaton at the University of Westminster, still a hub of ongoing research into the history of broadcasting.

As for the historiography of the Second World War, the best of the civil histories confounded their critics and became essential texts for a new generation of post-war British historians, including Alan Bullock, A. J. P. Taylor and Henry Pelling.<sup>66</sup> R. M. Titmuss' *Problems of Social Policy* (1950), probably the most influential (and surely the most widely cited) of the series, shaped the historiography of wartime and post-war

social policy for a generation through its dominant analysis and its interpretive power. Briggs' *The War of Words* never shaped a historiography in the same way – partly because no comparable eager young cohort of historians of broadcasting emerged in the 1970s to do so – but neither has it dated. In fact, it would take a decade after the publication of *The War of Words* before the wartime role of the BBC itself received sustained academic attention. In the 1980s a group of young media historians including Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, working out of the Polytechnic of Central London (now University of Westminster) and through the Open University (another public institution led by Briggs, as its chancellor between 1979 and 1994), first turned their attention to the wartime BBC.<sup>67</sup> In the 1990s two books on the wartime BBC were published: an academic monograph – based on a doctorate supervised by Briggs himself – that focussed on the BBC's role in sustaining domestic morale, and a BBC-commissioned anniversary publication aimed at a more popular market.<sup>68</sup> Since then, a range of studies have further explored the BBC's wartime propaganda role; the development of war reportage; its music policy; its treatment of conscientious objectors; its overseas services and its role in fostering national and imperial identity; and the wartime broadcasts of both Lord Haw-Haw and, of course, Winston Churchill.<sup>69</sup> However, Briggs' still remains the authoritative record.

The BBC is now part of the embedded narrative of the Second World War both home and abroad. Research is ongoing into all aspects of its output, and drawing on an ever wider range of sources employed to supplement the BBC's own archival records. There is room for a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives, and for marginalised as well as mainstream discourses. Meanwhile no account of the British home front in the Second World War is complete without reference to Priestley's *Postscripts*, *ITMA*, *The Brains Trust* and *Music While You Work*.

Many of these works add to Briggs' *The War of Words*. They provide details it may not have included, archives it did not or could not consult, perspectives it may not have acknowledged, and theses with which it did not necessarily engage. But none of them offers a serious revisionist case. *The War of Words*, like all the other volumes of the official history, provides the framework on which all subsequent scholarship rests, without which no other developments in wartime broadcasting could possibly be understood. It remains as indispensable now as when it was first published over 40 years ago.

During the Second World War the BBC played the national role that Reith had always dreamed of and that every other broadcasting system

could only aspire to. The history of the BBC during the war is the history of the war itself. We tend today to take the story for granted. But this role was neither inevitable nor easily won. And it is Asa Briggs' official history above all that first and best demonstrated this and to which all subsequent scholarship will always be in debt.

## Notes

1. Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, vol. 1: The Birth of Broadcasting* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961, reprinted 1995); *vol. 2: The Golden Age of Wireless* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965, reprinted 1995); *vol. 3: The War of Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970, reprinted 1995); *vol. 4: Sound and Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, reprinted 1995); *vol. 5: Competition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
2. BBC Board of Governors Minutes, 20 June 1957, cited in Briggs, *Birth of Broadcasting* (1995 ed.), p. xiii, n. 2.
3. Asa Briggs, *Friends of the People: The Centenary History of Lewis's* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1956); Asa Briggs, *Where We Came In: The Industrial Revolution Reconsidered* (London: BBC, 1956).
4. See, for example, Asa Briggs, 'What Is the History of Popular Culture?' *History Today*, 35 (1985), pp. 39–40.
5. Had this been done 'we would have been in a far stronger position as historians to contemplate the present and future of "the media"'. Asa Briggs, 'Problems and Possibilities in the History of Broadcasting', *Media, Culture and Society*, 2 (1980), pp. 5–13, at p. 7.
6. David Cannadine, 'The Macaulay of the Welfare State', *London Review of Books*, 6 June 1985, pp. 3–6.
7. For instance, A. R. Burrows, *The Story of Broadcasting* (London: Cassell, 1924); J. C. W. Reith, *Into the Wind* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1949); Maurice Gorham, *Broadcasting and Television since 1900* (London: Dakers, 1950); R. H. Coase, *British Broadcasting: A Study in Monopoly* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1950).
8. Hans Fredrik Dahl, 'The Pursuit of Media History', *Media, Culture and Society*, 16 (1994), pp. 551–63; Tom O'Malley, 'Media History and Media Studies: Aspects of the Development of the Study of Media History in the UK 1945–2000', *Media History*, 8 (2002), pp. 155–73; Briggs, 'Problems and Possibilities', p. 6; D. L. LeMahieu, 'Review: The BBC and Its Competitors', *Journal of British Studies*, 37 (1998), pp. 222–27.
9. Briggs, *Birth of Broadcasting* (1995 ed.), p. xvi.
10. See Jose Harris, 'If Britain Had Been Defeated by the Nazis, How Would History Have Been Written?' in W. Roger Louis (ed.), *Still More Adventures with Britannia: Personalities, Politics and Culture in Britain* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003), pp. 211–27; Denys Hay, 'British Historians and the Beginnings of the Civil History of the Second World War', in M. R. D. Foot (ed.), *War and Society: Historical Essays in Honour and Memory of J. R. Western 1928–1971* (London: Paul Elek, 1973), pp. 39–56.

11. Harris, 'If Britain Had Been Defeated', pp. 212–13; Briggs, 'Problems and Possibilities', p. 8.
12. Briggs, *Birth of Broadcasting* (1995 ed.), p. xvi; cf. C. L. Mowat, review of *The Birth of Broadcasting*, *English Historical Review*, 78 (1963), pp. 750–51.
13. Briggs, *War of Words*, pp. 3–4. Briggs attributed some, at least, of historians' reluctance to address the wartime BBC to the difficulty in securing access to either the relevant people or the documentary record. (He of course had unique and unrivalled access to both.)
14. See Angus Calder, *The People's War* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), esp. pp. 357–66.
15. Briggs, *War of Words*, pp. 18, 733.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 205–21 and *passim*.
17. Ian McLaine, *Ministry of Morale: Home Front Propaganda and the Ministry of Information in World War II* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979); Briggs, *War of Words*, pp. 209, 602, and *passim*.
18. Briggs, *War of Words*, pp. 94–6, 657–70, 193–98, 59, and *passim*.
19. *Ibid.*, Part V, ch. 4, and *passim*.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 310–11.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 34–5.
22. For comparative figures of hours apportioned to particular programme types, see *ibid.*, pp. 567–68.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 312–14.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 578–89.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 320–22, 560–64.
26. For *ITMA* see *ibid.*, pp. 108–9, 315, 564–67.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 578, n. 5.
28. See David Cardiff and Paddy Scannell, "'Good Luck War Workers!' Class, Politics and Entertainment in Wartime Broadcasting", in Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer and Janet Woolacott (eds.), *Popular Culture and Social Relations* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), pp. 193–16, for some highly critical BBC Listener Research reports on its 'Factory Front' propaganda.
29. By mid-war Mass-Observation was noting that when the BBC got the news right, the public praised the Corporation; when the BBC got the news wrong, the public blamed the government or the Ministry of Information for making the BBC broadcast it: Siân Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC 1939–45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 206.
30. Stuart Hood, review of *Sound and Vision*, *American Historical Review*, 85 (1980), pp. 132–33.
31. John Goldthorpe, review of *The Birth of Broadcasting*, *Economic History Review*, 15 (1963), p. 566.
32. See for instance *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs, vol. 3: Serious Pursuits: Communications and Education* (London: Harvester, 1991); Asa Briggs, *The BBC: The First Fifty Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet* (London: Polity Press, 2005).
33. Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, vol. 1: The Birth of Broadcasting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995 edn.), p. xiii.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. xiii–xiv. See also his 'Problems and Possibilities'.

35. Briggs, 'Problems and Possibilities', p. 8.
36. Briggs, *War of Words*, Part V, ch. 5. In the 1930s there was more controversy over religion than any other aspect of BBC policy: see Briggs, *Golden Age of Wireless*, pp. 227–49; also Kenneth M. Wolfe, *The Churches and the British Broadcasting Corporation 1922–56* (London: SCM Press, 1984).
37. W. Ashworth, review of *The Golden Age of Wireless*, *Economic History Review*, 18 (1965), pp. 654–55.
38. Briggs, *War of Words*, p. 73.
39. See, for instance, James Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass-Observation and the Making of the Modern Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
40. See, for instance, Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975); Steven Fielding, 'What Did "The People" Want? The "Meaning" of the 1945 General Election', *Historical Journal*, 35 (1992), pp. 623–39; Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991).
41. Briggs, *War of Words*, p. 727.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
43. See for instance, Nicholas, *Echo of War*, *passim*.
44. Raphael Samuel, 'London Calling', *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 March 1996, pp. 14–15.
45. Siân Nicholas, 'The People's Radio?: The BBC and Its Audience 1939–45', in Nick Hayes and Jeff Hill (eds.), *Millions Like Us? British Culture in the Second World War* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), pp. 62–92.
46. Briggs, *War of Words*, pp. 140–55, 558–60, 385–94.
47. See especially, Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle: British Civilian Morale in Britain during the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); Sonya Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939–45* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
48. For relevant audience figures, see Nicholas, *Echo of War*, pp. 60, 131, 205, 212.
49. Erik Barnouw, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States, vol. I: A Tower in Babel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); *vol. II: The Golden Web* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); *vol. 3: The Image Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). See Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting 1922–1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) and *Network Nations: A Transnational History of British and American Broadcasting* (New York: Routledge, 2012) for more recent works strongly informed by Briggs' approach.
50. Philip T. Rosen, 'Review Essay: The Marvel of Radio', *American Quarterly*, 31 (1979), pp. 572–81.
51. Briggs, *Birth of Broadcasting* (1995 ed.), p. xiv.
52. Samuel, 'London Calling', p. 15.
53. LeMahieu, 'BBC and Its Competitors', p. 223.
54. Samuel, 'London Calling', p. 15.
55. Rosen, 'Marvel of Radio', p. 579.
56. J. A. Hutchesson, review of *The Birth of Broadcasting, Technology and Culture*, 4 (1963), pp. 103–4.
57. Jean Seaton, 'Writing the History of Broadcasting', in David Cannadine (ed.), *History and the Media* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 141–60.



58. Anthony Smith, 'The Cockpit of Culture', *New Statesman and Society*, 2 June 1995, pp. 39–40.
59. Bernard Sendall, *Independent Television in Britain, vol. 1: Origin and Foundation 1946–62* (London: Macmillan, 1982), *vol. 2: Expansion and Change 1958–68* (London: Macmillan, 1983); Jeremy Potter, *vol. 3: Politics and Control 1968–80* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989); Jeremy Potter, *vol. 4: Companies and Programmes 1968–80* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990); Paul Bonner and Lesley Aston, *vol. 5: ITV and IBA 1981–82: The Old Relationship Changes* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998); Paul Bonner and Lesley Aston, *vol. 6: New Developments in Independent Television 1982–92: Channel Four, TV-am, Cable and Satellite* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
60. Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting in Britain, vol. I: 1922–1939: Serving the Nation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991); Sean Street, *Crossing the Ether: British Public Service Radio and Commercial Competition 1922–1945* (New Barnet: John Libbey, 2006); Nicholas, *Echo of War*.
61. Humphrey Carpenter, *The Envy of the World: Fifty Years of the BBC Third Programme and Radio 3* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996); David Hendy, *Life on Air: A History of Radio 4* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
62. Lez Cooke, *British Television Drama: A History* (London: British Film Institute, 2003); Hugh Chignell, *Public Issues Radio: Talk, News and Current Affairs in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
63. John Davies, *Broadcasting and the BBC in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994); Jamie Medhurst, *A History of Independent Television in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010); W. H. McDowell, *The History of BBC Broadcasting in Scotland, 1923–83* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992); Martin McLoone (ed.), *Broadcasting in a Divided Community: Seventy Years of the BBC in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1996).
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# 8

## Asa and the Epochs: The BBC, the Historian, the Institution and the Archive

*Jean Seaton*

Asa Briggs has met every Director-General of the BBC (with one recent fleeting exception) and many of the Chairmen of the Governors since the British Broadcasting Corporation was founded in 1927.<sup>1</sup> Briggs may be the last person to bear this rich bloodline of personal understanding back into the foundations of an institution that has come to define Britishness. Many of the director-generals and chairmen he knew well. Briggs has also marked all of them out of ten for posterity: the criteria being strategic intelligence, the capacity to push BBC values out into new areas, 'grip' and creativity – an assessment that for the moment remains private. He has a reservation about director-generals whose dominating experience is of news and current affairs, '[t]heir perspectives are too short term. News colours how they see events'.<sup>2</sup> Yet most leaders of the Corporation come from this background as it is the boiler room of BBC interaction with political forces. Those at the top of the Corporation have to be able to enable imaginative programmes to be made, to lead the organisation and give it a 'face' – but they all need the ability to second guess and navigate whatever the politics of the moment are – Briggs has also worked with these BBC leaders in the pressurised back office of Corporation life where historical precedent is a resource for people making difficult decisions about an institution that has to evolve and yet remain true to itself.

Working on the history gave Briggs a unique position to understand the vulnerability of the Corporation's independence. The BBC has routinely, and at times alarmingly, been subject to intense political and commercial pressures – although in all of the periods he deals with in the histories this threat was ultimately seen off – and was never as

prolonged as it was later in the 1980s or now. Yet the BBC's persistence and the integrity of its guiding values – always challenging to deliver in changing circumstances – has more often been in question than the public perhaps understands – let alone the admiring world audience who see the BBC as a British achievement. Briggs' historical grasp of the sweep and detail of BBC precedent was frequently called on. Director-generals and chairmen took advantage of Briggs' role as an insider but one coming from outside. In a note written in 1996 about a successor, and consequently about himself, he said that anyone writing the history should be independent, with enough academic and political 'weight' to produce the authoritative account that could stand on its own, and would 'require patience and determination. These are character features'. He continued, 'I came to feel by 1986 that while I was not a member of the BBC's staff I "belonged" to the organisation. My own memory bank became increasingly important'.<sup>3</sup>

No one else has ever attempted public service broadcasting as ambitiously as the BBC. Yet the Corporation has only survived because of the net of understanding across government of its value combined with the role it has played in the public's everyday lives. The mighty CBS and NBC in America, both of which became during the 1960s and 1970s the giant public service news providers, have withered away, leaving a more partisan and less truthful public space. They were wrecked by Ronald Reagan's abolition of the 'Fairness Doctrine' (which had required that broadcasters produce fair and balanced reporting). It was done away with in the name of competition and freedom, but the policy was catastrophic for political neutrality, and for these big beasts of American broadcast news. Avoiding this fate was one challenge for the BBC. Meanwhile, while other countries have state broadcasters and while the BBC certainly has a relationship *to* the British state, it is defined by its editorial independence *from* the state. Indeed, the BBC lives in a complicated relationship to the state, at times seeking to amend and warn it – the BBC has been an interlocutor as well as a commentator. This interaction largely took place behind closed doors, yet the BBC historian had to be able to see and judge this material. Briggs once observed that 'the history of the BBC is the history of everything',<sup>4</sup> but the challenge did not daunt him; he found it invigorating.

So if Briggs wrote BBC history, he also played a part in it. His masterly book *Governing the BBC*<sup>5</sup> (an offshoot of the volumes of the history itself) is a testament to the value of history and a feeling for the structures that matter in the making and practical execution of policy. He was encouraged to write this volume by Sir Michael Swann, the Chairman

of the Governors, who in the 1970s helped steady the BBC, and who was in many ways a model chairman: firm, supportive, decisive, with a deep appreciation of public service and a clear vision of the life of organisations. Briggs the historian brought to the task something like an aesthetic judgement – the shape the BBC can be and the limits beyond which the values of the institution may be threatened. He understood well the interaction of personality, historical moment and structure. Patterns are clearer to outsiders sometimes, but also the ebb and flow of BBC internal jockeying can endanger clear communication. An outsider comes with no baggage and can talk, listen and carry messages across the Corporation more easily on occasions than an insider caught in the clutches of BBC hierarchy. Briggs has been part of a very significant and necessary retelling of the narrative of the BBC back to the people charged to carry it forward. The BBC needs to understand itself to reform itself (as it also must constantly do).

Briggs' great history of the BBC, from *The Birth of Broadcasting* (1961), through *The Golden Age of Wireless* (1965), *The War of Words* (1970), *Sound and Vision* (1979), and *Competition* (1995) established the nature of the institution and the importance of the key values which form the ecosystem for a strange, precious British fauna – impartial, public service broadcasting. Each book as he described should cover a period 'long enough to spotlight major issues, but far enough away from the present to allow the period to be seen in perspective. Ideally there should be an internal theme to each volume'.<sup>6</sup> This he triumphantly achieved. As he argues in *The Birth of Broadcasting*, 'the focus is on the BBC as an organisation which very quickly became an institution'.<sup>7</sup> He shows how a body that traded in something apparently as trivial as entertainment gained in authority and value – and this marked it out. But he also had an unerring eye for the great themes of the BBC as it grew.

In *The Golden Age of Wireless* he turns from the tiny core of founding battles and elemental characters to the audience. The BBC was redistributive – taking broadcasting (like the post) everywhere in the nation for the same cost. It was in this way a unifying force – but one based on public pleasure as well as public improvement. But during the 1930s British politics was hard for the BBC to represent, as the formation of a coalition 'National Government' and the virtual eradication of Labour in the 1931 election pushed the Corporation towards a centrist policy. The BBC's definition of the spectrum of opinion within the national was too narrow: it had to learn how to do broadcasting balance. Impartiality was a precept but implementing it was a hard task. The Corporation was felt to be biased in favour of appeasement and certainly anti-appeasers

from Winston Churchill on the right to Hugh Dalton on the left felt, with some justice, that they were excluded from the airwaves. It did not help that John Reith personally loathed Churchill – who reciprocated vigorously.<sup>8</sup> Yet, as a social and entertaining institution, something richer, broader and more representative of the nation in a hard decade did emerge in programmes.

In the *War of Words* volume Briggs paints a moving picture of the struggle to maintain what were already established BBC qualities in the extreme conditions of a total war for national survival: truth-telling, accuracy, redefined balance, driven by an overwhelming incentive to reach and serve all audiences. At the beginning of the war, with the threat of a complete takeover by the government imminent, there was, said Briggs, ‘much mutual exasperation’<sup>9</sup> between the government and the BBC. But it is the extension of the BBC into occupied Europe and the real battles that led to the triumph of its service there that carry the power of the volume. The BBC was not perfect. It played an ignoble part in pushing for the ‘V’ for Victory campaign (it was too early and merely got many brave men and women killed). It (inevitably) told the story of the bombing campaign over Germany from the British point of view. It failed to question the reporting of the conditions of the ghetto in Hungary, which might have altered the fate of the largest group of survivors in Europe in 1944.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the Corporation performed heroically in almost every other way, and was seen (as it was to be at the end of the Cold War) as a beacon of immensely comforting and invaluable accuracy. The standards which the Corporation set during the war remain a benchmark.

*Sound and Vision* looks at the social and institutional impact of television as it suddenly blossoms, and true to Briggs’ obligations, the BBC is set within the wider range of British broadcasting. There are some lacunae to the contemporary eye – news values and the making of news is as much a matter of editorial daily practice as principles at the top, well-made news is a product of shared values and ruthless focus, but Briggs is not much interested in that. Having been peculiarly alert to the prominent role of women in the early days of broadcasting, their major contribution during the Second World War, he barely seems to notice them sliding off stage in the 1950s. He is sceptical about Hugh Greene’s contribution to turning the Corporation from a follower to a leader of social mores in the 1960s.

As the histories progress (and the BBC gets larger) holding on to the direct line between decisions at the top and programme-making at the bottom gets more stretched. Indeed, later the BBC developed a culture

of hostility to the management 'suits on the 6th floor'<sup>11</sup> of Broadcasting House, and after Briggs' period as historian devoted considerable ingenuity to evading their scrutiny; yet the BBC has to be, in the end, seamless. Defending the studio floor of broadcasting from improper interference (but maintaining standards) is the key BBC task.

Briggs' history identifies the careful decencies and wild ambition that were needed to build a very great institution and grow it at a remarkable pace. One of the BBC's resources is a rich archive, and although many programmes were never preserved, or only broadcast live, the written archive also illuminates the broadcast world in scripts, programme decisions and interaction both with the public, the great and the good, and nearly every significant musician, writer, expert and government of the day.

Yet this institutional history was set like a jewel in the larger framework of social history. Briggs brought a deep appreciation of ordinary lives to the BBC. Briggs saw himself as and was respected as a social historian, and although much of what he wrote about was the high politics of BBC life, the work in meetings and the consequential decisions by mandarins, he brought to the research a real love of the way in which the BBC was also made out of, and fed into, popular culture. His books have a wicked eye, use cartoons and wit tellingly. Briggs himself always called it 'a' history rather than 'the' history and said that many other histories would be written.<sup>12</sup> He also consciously determined to use the published history as a way of getting as much of the paper record of the BBC out in public as possible. It was in a way a coherent version of the online open access archive long before its time.

Yet the history had other influences: perhaps Briggs the university builder learnt from the intimate tutorials on institution-building that the BBC provided. Sussex University in its most imaginative re-creation of knowledge and cross-disciplinary work as well as the Open University were beneficiaries of the institutional education Briggs acquired writing the BBC's history. The BBC after all has its own disciplines, news and current affairs, drama and light entertainment, sport, outside broadcasting and quizzes. Each programming strand has habits, expertise and philosophies. Yet at its best they have always cross-fertilised with each other. The conversation about the news is reflected in drama and children's programmes, the inventiveness of outside broadcast filming and emotional engagement translated into more vivid news stories. Briggs learned from the BBC the way in which, at its best, it fluidly interpreted knowledge for audiences across disciplinary boundaries. Briggs was also a great supporter of other people. He was good at setting things up. But

this public life was also informed by scholarly scrutiny. So how did the history happen?

## The proposal

In January 1957 BBC Director-General Sir Ian Jacob held a dinner party. Jacob was an ex-soldier who had worked closely with Churchill early in the Second World War, and who in 1947 became head of the BBC's External services – just in time to gather them up and redirect them for the different challenges of the Cold War. In 1956 as director-general he resolutely, properly – but traumatically – dealt with Anthony Eden's attempts to command the BBC during Suez. Ian Trethowan (later a BBC director-general) wrote at the time that Prime Minister Eden's nerves were 'as taut as a banjo string [...] he was ripe for a fiasco'.<sup>13</sup> The Suez crisis was a turning point, one which Briggs, intimate to many of the players, was later to deal with brilliantly: Sir Beresford Clark, Director of External Broadcasting, summed up the crisis from the BBC's position:

[a]t no time since broadcasting began had there been such a lack of agreement in Parliament and the country on a major matter of foreign policy. Never previously had the BBC's tradition of objective reporting, in its external as well as in its home programmes been required to show the world a large part of the nation deeply critical of the Government of the day on a matter of vital concern.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, Suez was the final impetus to getting the history written down and out in public. The Government came perilously close to mobilising the right it had, embodied in the BBC's licence and charter – to command the BBC to carry material during a conflict. This had not been revisited since the outbreak of the Second World War, and the prerogative had been written for the conditions of a total war. Yet Eden was thinking of using it, having concluded (as prime ministers sometimes do) that the BBC was a 'nest of communists',<sup>15</sup> when the nation and Parliament were deeply divided over the action. Jacob no doubt felt that it might be better if the terms of this specific and circumscribed right were better understood. Yet in 1957 the aftermath of the confrontation was still toxically affecting the Corporation's relationships with government.

Jacob invited the leading historians of the day (balanced for political views if not for geographical spread) to the dinner.<sup>16</sup> Herbert Butterfield (a Yorkshireman), the Master of Peterhouse and at the height of his fame, and the very different, large, robustly Yorkshire, Alan Bullock of

Oxford ('Bullock by name and Bullock by nature' as he said of himself).<sup>17</sup> Jacob wrote: 'I am very anxious to get a first-class history of the BBC written. I think the time has come for this after thirty-five years of broadcasting and before some of the early people die'.<sup>18</sup> Jacob wanted to land Bullock for the job. It was not simply that Bullock's reputation was immense, having published his best-selling *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* in 1952, or that Bullock was also a confident Whitehall insider; more to the point he was also a BBC insider. He had spent the war running first European Talks and then more broadly broadcasting (and propaganda) into Germany and the rest of occupied Europe for the BBC. Jacob had worked with him and indeed Hugh Greene (Jacob's successor as director-general) had also worked under Bullock. The BBC was to be dominated for 20 years by this generation of connected, strong-minded, big insiders to the BBC's war – all internationalists, all with the vital capacity to deal as equals with Whitehall.

Bullock had been changed by working for the BBC. He learnt a deep respect for journalism as a 'tool for rational and radical appraisal', and said he had 'the time of his life'; he had a sense of 'being a historian, living through history, in history'.<sup>19</sup> As the Cold War was roaring ahead in 1957 Jacob wanted an authoritative historian, but he also wanted someone who could reliably be a confidante and was privy to the BBC secrets, one who could travel through Whitehall when foreign affairs were still acutely sensitive and sympathetically negotiate the political minefield of the Corporation's relationship to government. The BBC wanted someone to whom (on the whole) all could be revealed.

Bullock declined. Jacob tried one more time to persuade him (saying they could wait until his biography of Ernest Bevin had progressed), but Bullock warmly recommended Asa Briggs, a young ex-Oxford historian with the right breadth and qualities.<sup>20</sup> As Butterfield had offered Briggs a job in Cambridge after the war he was a Briggs enthusiast too.<sup>21</sup> Briggs' work at Bletchley was still entirely secret in 1957, but Jacob and Bullock understood that he was a reliable pair of hands. Indeed, Briggs was in effect one of the last of these amphibians – the animals created by the Second World War, given a privileged role in delivering public service, who walked as easily within government as they did within the BBC.

They all fed into the BBC (and it into them), and they all shared a sense of something like progress. For the Corporation was a little like (but also quite different from) a commercial enterprise: it had to attract audiences and 'sell' them programmes. It was certainly a recognisable descendant of the ideas of 19th-century reformers, and it related to



the workers' education movement that Briggs was so interested and involved in: indeed, the BBC was turned into (and this was by no means inevitable) a response to the hunger for improvement. Yet the BBC delivered this by giving people what it thought they needed – not by following market pressures. But then the BBC was also a little like a city – a determinate space with mores, rules and ambitions. Work at Bletchley Park (where the young Asa celebrated his 21st birthday) also gave him a strong sense of the impulse to change and build; but also of the inner life of institutions that have on occasions to keep secrets, as did the BBC. Briggs was happy with science and technology, with engineers and numbers: broadcasting and its expansion were technological innovations and BBC engineers always in the frontline. Finally, Briggs brought a whiggish temperament with him: the BBC in the periods he dealt with became larger, improved, did what was right. It was the breadth of his interests that made the BBC the right topic for him.

Briggs was always sensitive to atmosphere and values and captured them brilliantly:

Manchester, solid, uniform, pacific, the native home of the great economic creed on which aristocratic England has always looked and educated England was beginning to look, with some aversion and some contempt: and Birmingham, experimental, adventurous, diverse, where old radicalism might flower into lavish socialism in one time and in another to pugnacious imperialism.<sup>22</sup>

At his best he took the temperature of the Corporation. Briggs also always claimed that he saw the BBC with the right kind of provincial eyes: he had never lived in London, and that gave him a sense of the local, the regional, the non-metropolitan that was a vital tension in the BBC's spread.

But Briggs' special contribution was that he brought a Dickensian ebullient delight in the 'wonder of common things',<sup>23</sup> the social character of everyday life to the task. It was the role of the social history – taking the BBC out to the lives it touched that gave his books such depth. He had a fond eye for fun as well – recording early ditties such as:

'You've set my valves a throbbing,  
My headpiece is a whirl,  
So turn your piece to me, love,  
My wondrous wireless girl'<sup>24</sup>

If the BBC was looking for an insider then Briggs was looking to become one.

### Needing a history

Why did the BBC want a history? One might rather ask why it had taken so long to get one. The Corporation needed to own its records, like any firm or civil service department. In 1922 the British Broadcasting Company (the organisation that pre-dated the Corporation established by royal charter) began to collect its papers (and employed a 'girl from Roneo' to help set up its systems).<sup>25</sup> At the same time the Record Library and Script Collections were set up as services for broadcasters.<sup>26</sup> As early as 1927 papers had begun to be assembled and '[h]istorical summaries of different departments, regions and activities were written by various officials [...] This collection was not listed or indexed – references were made from one summary to another'.<sup>27</sup> In May 1927 it was suggested that the principal events in the BBC's princely five years of history be written up.<sup>28</sup> The Sheet Music Library existed by 1928. News and Information Written Archives commenced in 1930.<sup>29</sup> In 1931 Miss Edwin was appointed secretary to the Head of Administration and was the first person to be charged with gathering material and 'writing' the archives.<sup>30</sup> At the outbreak of war the Information Unit was sent to Bristol with a duty to keep a record of the BBC's work during the conflict, including the BBC war diary and archives, and to preserve files to enable the history of any BBC matter to be written up.<sup>31</sup> Articles of 'value and historical interest' were to be kept in safety. By October 1941 the archive had been mislaid, and when it was eventually located a memo alarmingly reported that 'Miss Edwin's archives are in the cellar at Wood Norton and are very damp'.<sup>32</sup> In June 1944, the Head of Registry said that he had begun 'to think of ways of improving [the Registry] as a source of information for the future historian'.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the Registry was reorganised and a new cataloguing system was introduced, perhaps with this aim in mind, and on the formation of the Archives Section in 1957 these records became the nucleus of the collection.<sup>34</sup>

In 1944 a BBC journalist was commissioned to write a history of the Corporation during the war (but never delivered it), nor in a sense was the material available in a form to do so.<sup>35</sup> Yet, given the self-conscious manner in which the Corporation had always seen itself in a historical setting and had a sense of a mission, it was surprising that more had not been done earlier. The Corporation certainly had a clear expectation

of having a historical impact. For example, from 1927 it had collected samples of British dialects on the assumption that broadcasting would eradicate them. As a part of 'informing, educating and entertaining' the nation (the task it had set itself in 1926), it always felt that it had a duty to call on the best and most expert talents to advise it on any number of matters, from the literature that needed to be disseminated (the Literary Advisory Committee had been established in 1929), to the best advice for mothers left on their own bringing up children during the war (the Corporation consulted child experts including Donald Winnacott, the leading child analyst, about the problems mothers might face and the best tone with which to address them). It had put more historians on air than it let into its cupboards. Nevertheless, there was a gathering sense even in the 1930s that the history needed to be captured. The Second World War intervened. Briggs' *War of the Words* also captures the excitement and exhaustion that characterised the Corporation. It was doing too much to worry about its history.

However, by the early 1950s there was new urgency. Many of those who had founded the BBC were dying. In addition institutional histories were a new and powerful form: everyone was getting one. The 1950s saw a remarkable and influential flow of official histories, particularly of the Second World War. Richard Titmuss' *Problems of Social Policy*, published in 1950, had been history as reform. The first accounts of the secret services were being collected. The sense of the war as a peculiarly vivid part of national life when extraordinary feats were managed was also part of this movement.

## Carnivore

The BBC, however, was a big carnivorous institution with its own ends and needs. So the Corporation, as it always does, was also making other, more instrumental calculations. Putting the BBC's history into a proper context (Briggs was charged with writing the early history of broadcasting, not merely that of the BBC) was of political consequence in the run up to the introduction of commercial television and the breaking of the BBC monopoly.

In 1950 Ronald Coase, who later won the Nobel Prize for economics, published an influential book, *British Broadcasting: A Study in Monopoly*. This had argued that the BBC had used 'the brute force of monopoly [...] to exclude competitive cable stations' in the late 1930s, and that lazy civil servants had colluded with the BBC because they were

unadventurous and conservative.<sup>36</sup> The book was a robust argument for free markets; it was discussed in parliamentary debates and seen as an irrefutable economic analysis that pointed to the damaging role of the BBC. Coase may have been a great economist, but he was a bad historian. The entire argument was based on a fallacy. Although at that point the necessary papers had not been released, there were people who understood the greater complexity of what had occurred in the 1930s. Being an economist, Coase had never asked any of them. The reason for the ruthless closure of cable stations and the support for the Corporation's monopoly had little to do with commercial inertia nor the BBC's determination to retain its monopoly as an economic force, and far more to do with security concerns in the run-up to the Second World War, as British Union of Fascists leader Oswald Mosley owned two of the cable stations.<sup>37</sup> However, Coase's book was one reason that by the early 1950s the Corporation felt on the back foot of an intellectual as well as a public argument.

In an early memo written in 1952, arguing for a history of the Corporation, Michael Stephens, the Head of Administration, had stated that '[t]he exact nature of the past of the BBC is important in any discussion of its future' and that 'any questioning' of the BBC's role ought to be informed by 'the consideration of the service which this unique institution has so far rendered, and ought to be based not on faulty recollection or hearsay but accurate information'. He said that it was impossible to 'know' the BBC by its 'fruits'. Programmes were the final product of structures, decisions, choices and negotiations that were not apparent to the public. Then there was the consideration that BBC principles, the very basis of public service, needed explanation: 'the detailed account of what the BBC was making public (and what it was not) at such and such a moment' was, he wrote, vital evidence that needed context.<sup>38</sup> Because the charter and licence were being renewed, the BBC was much discussed in Parliament in 1952 and the 'dangers' of its monopoly questioned. Lord Simonds, the lord chancellor, asked: '[w]hat is the cogent necessity which is argued in favour of this monopoly to be perpetuated?'<sup>39</sup> A further memo argued that

the exact nature of the BBC is important in any discussion of its future, especially when changes in its organisation and control are being mooted – either externally or internally [...] Patient and painstaking research into our own archives, would result in an invaluable organisation of this information for the benefit of the Corporation itself and of the public at large.

It was felt that 'if [the BBC's history] were set down accurately between gold leaf board we'd have prevented half the irrelevancies of the House of Lords debate'.<sup>40</sup>

By the time Briggs' history was commissioned in 1958, commercial TV was not merely launched but also beating the BBC at televised, impartial, public service news that regulation required it to produce. The Corporation could foresee a long series of skirmishes ahead. There was much to be gained from painting a more accurate picture of how the Corporation had grown, and how the monopoly had worked: at least an authoritative source could correct the worst distortions. There was another anxiety that without proper history more partial memoirs might fill in the gap in a biased way. Indeed, there was a lively publishing trade in the late 1940s and 1950s of books by disgruntled (on occasions legitimately so) ex-BBC employees.<sup>41</sup> These helped create a mood that saw the BBC as a 'stuffy' part of the 'establishment'.<sup>42</sup>

So an official history might be a substitute for (or riposte to) the racier allegations, as well as a serious work to lay out the BBC's past. There was also a simple sense that unless it was ordered and gathered the past would be lost: 'typewriters, ink and paper have not the resilient qualities of the medieval iron ink and parchment!'<sup>43</sup> This was quite wrong: the paper record survives far more legibly than the microfilms that sometimes replaced it – let alone the digital graveyard. Paper has proved a very resilient record.

Intriguingly, in parallel to the idea of a history there was an idea that a record of BBC case law ought to be assembled. Partly, the BBC then (and now) thinks through its situation at any one time by unpicking what John Tusa has called 'the great set pieces'.<sup>44</sup> These are the iconic conflicts and the clashes with governments and commercial rivals that are pored over for decades. The idea was that exemplary cases that best represented the BBC's approach to and solution to problems – the underlying principles the BBC adhered to (that, for example, it would never broadcast one version of events at home that was fundamentally different from the story it broadcast abroad) ought to be codified for reference. This is perhaps the first hint of the idea that was later to mutate into the Corporation's magnificent gift to the world: BBC 'Producer Guidelines', introduced during the John Birt era. In the end, Briggs was charged with writing the history. The BBC concluded, 'we don't want the result to be too narrowly institutional. It should be the history of broadcasting in this country and [...] take in the social contribution of broadcasting' to both education and entertainment.<sup>45</sup>

## Reith

However, there was an obstacle: John Reith. By the 1950s Reith was deep into his long, sad, resentful, sulk against the Corporation and indeed the world. He felt that the BBC had not appreciated him and yet also that he had never been given sufficient scope elsewhere. He was particularly furious with Jacob, whom he had not wanted to be director-general. Yet Reith's story was inseparable from that of the founding of the Corporation. Briggs approached him diplomatically. There was a connection: helpfully, he had been Reith's son's tutor at Worcester College, Oxford. Writing to him on University of Leeds paper, Briggs asked Reith to lunch. At the end of lunch Reith said, 'before we met Professor Briggs I was not sure I would co-operate with you'. He added that his mind had been changed and he agreed to work with Briggs – adding, '[b]ut if you'd written to me on BBC notepaper I WOULD HAVE CONSIGNED IT TO THE FLAMES!'<sup>46</sup> Briggs brought Reith round (as he had to) and was eventually given unique access to Reith's extraordinary diary.

They developed a charming intimacy: Reith provided Briggs with postcards, addressed to Reith. They said 'I will arrive at X' (Reith left Briggs a space to fill in the time), 'I will work for X hours' (again Briggs would fill in the number), 'I will then have a glass of sherry and lunch'.<sup>47</sup> It led to the nuanced portrait of Reith – and the team he assembled – in the history. The first two volumes are in many ways an extended portrait of Reith in action: not the miserable, self-loathing Reith of his own diaries but the energetic, creative man who helped forge an institution with qualities: impartiality, balance, integrity. Briggs was always clear that the Corporation depended on many remarkable people, but equally that Reith provided it early on with a personality that in itself marked it out. Once it was clear that Reith would cooperate the project went ahead.

Yet their intimacy also led to a tragic human encounter. In the autumn of 1962 Reith phoned Briggs in anguish proposing to burn his diaries. Briggs later recalled, '[i]t was the longest most painful telephone discussion of my life. I felt I was struggling with a man about to commit a kind of suicide'. Briggs was successful and persuaded Reith to save his diaries. Yet poignantly, Lady Reith later told Briggs that 'if he had destroyed the diary it would have made a mockery of our whole married life', saying bleakly that whenever Reith came home from any event he rushed upstairs to write his diary – so that she never had the opportunity to talk over and discuss the day with him. Had the diary been destroyed, she said, it would have been her life that was rendered meaningless.<sup>48</sup>

As he prepared to begin, Briggs was also careful to negotiate his own independence and consequently authority. In this he was helped by John Brown, the head of Oxford University Press. Brown shaped the contract whereby OUP agreed to publish the books, whilst Briggs was employed separately by the BBC to write the volumes for a fee. The independent power of Oxford University Press' Syndics (the academics who guide the policy of the press) was also a protection for Briggs. It was agreed that although BBC lawyers and even officials could read the drafts, Briggs alone would be responsible for the final text. No BBC lawyers had any dealing with the books before they went straight to the director-general of the day. Briggs said, '[i]t was the first time I ever broke a bottle of champagne at the beginning of a project', because Brown had helped give the enterprise a separate identity. Then Briggs' appointment was sanctified by the Board of Governors. This also gave him both the permission to roam within the BBC but also was another prop of Briggs' rights. Later Briggs said he was given 'total independence',<sup>49</sup> that he was allowed to set the scope of the books. What started as a two-volume proposal expanded into a five-volume cavalcade.

Briggs depended on Reith's diary and his intimate working relationship with the great old man. Yet he was careful to put Reith's contribution into a context. Reith had depended on the teams of people he surrounded himself with. The emergence of public service broadcasting was also a collective ambition that had many tributaries. Critically, as Briggs put it, the government of the day had

a regulatory impulse which was partly based on fear of chaos in the ether (which was felt to be developing in America) but also because they didn't want a new controversial force in society to arise like the press at the time and they didn't want broadcasting to develop like cinema either.

Reith, he said, 'was the instrument for the convergence of these impulses'. Briggs also observes that it was in a way 'a matter of luck' that the press barons of the 1920s, Northcliffe and Beaverbrook, were not interested in broadcasting. Had they been so then the BBC would probably not have been allowed to grow as it did as a public service.<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, the first triumphant volume of Briggs' history of the BBC continually alerts readers to the consequence of decisions and the uncertainty of the outcome. Briggs argued that he wrote the history, 'never looking around corners',<sup>51</sup> never being influenced by hindsight. It is very carefully crafted to bring home the way in which each decision

especially during the General Strike of 1926 hung in the balance. Briggs brings out the delicacy of the BBC's position, and the cautious, difficult hand Reith played with great sensitivity in very testing circumstances.

## The archive

But Briggs needed more than a diary, and his history was a motor for the reorganisation of BBC papers into a publicly accessible archive. 'My own work as a historian', he said later, 'was only possible because of the development of the BBC document archive'.<sup>52</sup> Papers are the great foundations of official histories. But the BBC archive is especially vivid and rich. BBC memos were written by literate, witty, clever people (mostly), although occasionally numbingly littered with acronyms. The BBC dealt with great issues in the nation's life, wars, strikes, elections, the economy, and was not merely an observer of foreign affairs but in the empire and Overseas Service was an actor in the nation's relationship with the world. Yet simultaneously, it worried about the role of religion in daily life and pondered its obligations to a secular society. It also worried about whether trades unionists might be Communists, how to assist royalty to broadcast, how to inform newly enfranchised women voters about politics, and which members of which political parties should be allowed to broadcast about what.

However, with equal seriousness the Corporation fretted about what would amuse people on a Saturday evening, whether fairy stories frightened tiny listeners, what jokes were acceptable on the radio, and during the war how to sustain public interest in, for example, the Ministry of Food campaign *50 Things to Do with Potatoes*. BBC archives covered issues of state and *Children's Hour* – both of which it took equally seriously. They show the inner brain of the Corporation – of course much happened outside them (minutes carefully sorted for problems; minutes carefully written with an eye for the wit of meetings). But BBC arguments (before Freedom of Information legislation induced caution) really do get made in BBC papers, and can often be seen in asides and amendments.

In addition to the papers sorting the administration there was the great wealth of scripts – an Aladdin's cave of the work of almost every great writer in the country. Samuel Beckett, G. K. Chesterton, J. M. Keynes, Doris Lessing, Louis MacNeice, George Orwell, John Osborne, Harold Pinter, Dorothy Sayers, H. G. Wells, Virginia Woolf and many more all appear in the BBC archives. The papers that Briggs and his team would call on – what became the BBC Written Archives



Centre (housed in a wonderfully Enid Blytonesque house in the gardens of Caversham House, the home of BBC Monitoring) – were a representation of the nation's life across a huge sweep of its pleasures as well as its crises. It was as if the files of the Cabinet Office had cross-bred with literary magazines as well as comedians, taking in the nation's musical life on the way. Briggs also had his own dedicated office in the BBC in central London.

BBC paper-keeping even survived the Second World War when the Corporation quadrupled in size and was dispersed all over the country, when offices were bombed out and when a great new influx of staff with no idea of the BBC systems arrived, and when sometimes people thought papers were too sensitive to be filed.<sup>53</sup> So when Briggs came to write the history the papers were available and had been preserved despite vicissitudes.

However, this did not add up to an archive that Briggs could use. The papers were indexed as the working papers of an organisation. Mary Hodgson was appointed from the BBC Reference Library to prepare the papers for Briggs (and his team). She decided that Briggs needed what she called the 'essence' of the Corporation, which could be reduced to perhaps 2,000 files. The topics were scoped before the project began but were to be flexible as Briggs developed interests.

It became plain that some preliminary grouping of the existing archive papers was essential so that a systematic search, selection and arrangement [of the papers] could be made group by group. A broad classification scheme was drawn up, following as far as possible the outline of BBC organisation and the main heads of programme policy, and the files and papers were roughly arranged in these large groups. The early papers in the relative sections of Registry were examined and valuable documents transferred to Archives.<sup>54</sup>

The papers were given a Dewey index, and on top of all that poor Miss Hodgson barely had time to sort the papers for one volume of the history when another was begun. Hodgson was also exemplary in that other task of those keeping archives: mounting raids to save papers that matter before someone throws them away. In particular she managed to retrieve a great repository of personal files of individuals, many of which were to be an invaluable resource. Briggs was rightly highly appreciative of her work. The archive was created for Briggs, and he in turn played a huge role in getting it a proper place within the BBC and in the wider world. In 1970 the Written Archives Centre was set up at Caversham,

helpfully pushed by Briggs' work and personal engagement. He chaired an important committee on BBC archives in 1976, and in every way promoted the cataloguing, holding and use of BBC papers. The public right to access to the BBC's archives was written into the BBC Charter.

However, quite inadvertently, and entirely well meaningly, there was also a catastrophe. Hodgson was a librarian – not an archivist. Her mind worked down the Dewey sequence, and she and her team set about assembling files on topics that were thought to be relevant to Briggs by cannibalising collections of papers into files on subjects that might be of interest to him. These new files created especially for the history were then provided with a new classification scheme. The integrity of the original files was lost, file covers were thrown away, and no record was kept of where the assembled papers had come from. When Briggs moved on to the war volume the same process was repeated, creating two new sequences of papers (ripped out of their originating files): 'The War Schedule' and the 'Overseas Schedule'. As at that time many of the papers were highly sensitive and the 50 year rule was in operation, these files, understandably, were created for the history rather than for any general research.

When Jacquie Kavanagh (later Director of the Written Archives Centre) and Guinevere Jones arrived at the BBC as young women fresh from archive training, they found what seemed to them a devastated landscape. The first law of archiving – that context is all and that the integrity of the origins of papers needed to be maintained – had been broken, not maliciously but comprehensively. It was impossible to know where papers had come from, and their context in a sequence of the ongoing work of the BBC had been destroyed. Kavanagh and Jones set about – as best they could – to remedy the ruins.

Then there was the creation of the oral history archive. It was not just that Briggs' team interviewed BBC mandarins all over the Corporation, and Briggs became personally close to many of them; but the BBC also set up its own (and independent) oral history. These interviews, often with BBC executives just after they had left the Corporation, but with the director-generals and the chairmen of the Board of Governors during their tenure and whenever one of the periodic conflagrations that consume the place hit. For director-generals and chairmen they have the feeling of a useful analytic session: as great winds of political crisis whirl around their heads – wars, scandals, money problems – they ruminate over what has happened. Frank Gillard, who did most of the first interviews, was a BBC programme and administrative aristocrat: a man of great integrity and humanity. The interviews were subtle,

revealing, sometimes painful, often funny, but always acute interrogations. Intelligent responsible people who have done their best – even if inadequately – through the great storms of BBC crisis look back on their contribution. But the oral history archive (although a hugely fertile source for historians) has always been disconnected from the history. The interviews are in BBC terms too political for any mere outsider to control, and many remain closed.

Briggs acquired a small team. At first there was just a secretary and Miss Hodgson. Mary Jay managed his office for many years, and later Pat Spencer worked tirelessly for him, doing far more than deal with his correspondence and drafts: clearing his way, talking and dealing with the BBC more widely. Susan Briggs, Asa's lively and enabling wife, also collected material and wrote a marvellous book on the *Radio Times*.<sup>55</sup> In time the team evolved into the BBC history unit (which also served the wider needs of the BBC for its own history). The unit included John Cain, the warm architect of BBC helplines, and Leonard Miall, a BBC insider of wide experience. Miall had been special assistant to Hugh Greene and then run the BBC bureau in America, and helped to guide BBC2 to the screen. He had personally dealt with the prime minister and No. 10 throughout the Cuban missile crisis. Miall, claimed Briggs, 'wanted to write the history of the BBC himself',<sup>56</sup> but did extraordinary work with Briggs. The contacts and links of these BBC insiders within the unit made it a powerhouse of research.

## Interference

Briggs says that the BBC only once attempted to influence his work. Hugh Greene, who has in many other ways been seen as one of the most liberal of the director-generals, tried to lean on Briggs over the Pilkington Committee (set up in 1960, and which eventually decided to award the BBC with a second TV channel rather than grant it to ITV). Greene, said Briggs, wanted to make the next volume more critical of independent television. The committee, says the prime minister's biographer, was 'a typical Macmillan playful creation full of opposed people'.<sup>57</sup> Richard Hoggart, the cultural critic, was combined with Harry Pilkington, the chairman of the family glass business. Pilkington, Briggs later wrote, 'cycled to work in London and grew roses in Lancashire'.<sup>58</sup> Greene was vehemently 'anti commercial' and 'wanted to use any opportunity to combat it. Even biased ones'.<sup>59</sup> Briggs said there was perhaps a larger problem: 'Greene did not have a long term conception of history – he was a journalist – everything mattered in the present'.<sup>60</sup>

But if there was pressure (and Briggs' portrait of Greene in the history is chilly), it had no effect on the work.

However, if the BBC did not interfere with Briggs how full was his access? When Briggs started his work Mary Hodgson worked in the basement of the Langham Place building of the BBC and cleared BBC files for him. This was the other side of collating papers into topics: she was also doing the work behind the scenes to ensure that the papers he saw were approved. Briggs also knew that there were things kept 'in the Director-General's Office' that he was not to see.<sup>61</sup> However, when the story broke in 1984 that large numbers of BBC personnel were security vetted and this had been kept secret from him, he was 'very angry indeed'.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, as Briggs had been a Bletchley insider it was extraordinary that he had not been informed about the system. However, there were of course things that Briggs could not see and could not know about. Many BBC papers were on topics (such as the Cold War) which were at the time live and fissile and were not available. On occasions there were also tantalising hints of issues Briggs knew about but could not then publish. Yet it is always salutary and humbling to wonder about what is not thinkable because it has yet to be seen.

## Hostility

However, writing about the media, even when it was the BBC, broke some taboos. Historians at Worcester College, such as Harry Pitt, admittedly a deeply conservative figure (if much loved), told Briggs not to do it, that it would 'damage' his career. No one, said Briggs, at Oxford or Cambridge ever asked him to give a paper on the history of the BBC; few expressed any interest. The only exception was '[t]he young men at the new communications department at the Polytechnic of Central London', later the University of Westminster. Nicholas Garnham, David Cardiff, James Curran and Paddy Scannell interviewed Briggs for their new journal, *Media Culture and Society*.<sup>63</sup> Several of them – Cardiff, Curran and Scannell – were already, or about to become, major historians of the BBC and the press. They saw in Briggs' work a great new opportunity in thinking about the media. Yet it is worth further unpacking the hostility towards researching the media.

Partly hostility arose because broadcasting was seen as ephemeral, not essentially serious. It was partly that cultural benchmarks (despite the extraordinary achievements of broadcasting) were still seen as outside the media. But despite the significance of the Corporation in the nation's life, and its international significance and the way it has

fostered everything from drama to gardening, perhaps it was also tainted by being media. Briggs said that when he started he was aware of the American Paul Lazarsfeld's work on the media and political behaviour in *The People's Choice* (1944) and the American tradition of attempting to establish the effects of the media, but there was nevertheless very little social scientific or historical work on the media here.<sup>64</sup> News, let alone entertainment, let alone near-contemporary entertainment not hallowed by distance in the deep past, were only slowly becoming respectable. Briggs of course helped change that, although remained aware of the difficulties. For example, in 1996 in a note on the appointment of his successor (a notably generous and enthusiastic letter given how he had been treated when the history was discontinued) he mentioned 12 possible putative historians. He said that none of them were women, which the BBC might consider a problem (although five of them were at Oxford, which was not a problem). But he went on: 'there is now a flourishing "media industry" in the universities [...] there are problems of quality however, and bias, and there is no reason for assuming that the professional historian best equipped to write the next volume should come from this field'.<sup>65</sup>

By the very early 1990s, the Corporation had been through a peculiarly bruising decade, when its continuing existence was perhaps for the first time called into question. New Director-General John Birt and his team began rethinking the BBC. Birt brought a revolution in perceptions to the Corporation and set about vigorously reinventing its direction and practices. He argued that BBC finances were governed by conservative convention when he arrived: they were out of control, not because of corruption, but because they were managed blindly, by habit. He and his team also set about refocusing the Corporation's work on to its 'core purposes'.<sup>66</sup> By then the Corporation was, in effect, running a number of national archives disguised as BBC services. For example, it possessed and ran the second largest score library in the world. It had painstakingly assembled Bach scores for pieces that had been little known in the 1950s, and so made their playing possible. But this was, argued Birt and his team, a national purpose rather than a BBC necessity.

Birt introduced 'Producer Choice' at breakneck speed in 1993. This was a way of making all the money spent within the Corporation transparent. It did it by breaking down spending and making central costs clear through the creation of an internal market and making services charge for their use. It was meant to dispose of assets and people (it did); but it often worked in bizarre ways, and caused great anguish. *Private Eye* ran stories about its wilder consequences: of BBC journalists

buying CDs in Oxford Street stores rather than spending budgets on the BBC's gramophone library; of producers hiring make-up specialists from outside the Corporation, leaving the BBC department with no work (and so vulnerable to redundancy).<sup>67</sup> The BBC is always a very leaky organisation when it is unhappy. Birt subsequently argued that his reforms cut the cost of programmes by half. Certainly he hauled the BBC into a modern commercial mould that was defensible. As important, producer choice together with extending choice performed a vital political role, convincing a sceptical government that change of the kind it wanted was under way. Birt secured the biggest licence fee settlement for a generation, and the money saved was invested in innovative drama and children's programmes. In particular Birt recreated BBC news, both intellectually and financially reinvigorating it and turned it into one of the most powerful and valuable reporting organisations in the world.

However, 'Producer Choice' was peculiarly difficult for the archives to manage. Archives are inevitably part of central core funding, and cannot be supported by fluctuating fees paid for the items that are used. Archives are part of the long strategic sense of the organisation, not merely a service. In this new dispensation history was often seen as part of the past rather than intelligence for the future. Briggs' history was brought to an end. That many on the BBC were vocally unhappy about the changes Birt was introducing and that Briggs was a prominent lord appointed by Labour (although a cross-bencher) was, observed one policymaker of the period, also a consideration.<sup>68</sup> Briggs never talked of it. Yet, of course, the archive survived. Briggs' work has been extended and developed by new generations of scholars and programme-makers. There are now many BBC histories, just as Briggs had hoped.

## Impact

Indeed, Briggs' history is still vividly alive as a vital reference for the BBC itself, thumbed over, rifled through, plundered and put to work by programme-makers and policy-formers up and down the place every day. It is a treasure store of comprehensive detail combined with insight. *Woman's Hour*, women in administration, gardening programmes, the relationship with music hall, the duel in the Hungarian service during the war, *ITMA*, *TW3*, the changing shape of administering a growing organisation: the panoply is wide. In particular it offers an insight into the characters and sense of the BBC's bureaucrats: men and women who so far from being faceless or redundant mandarins or managers were a

creative force in building the BBC. Very few books of history can have had such a busy practical afterlife.

As it unfurled, Briggs' great BBC enterprise helped define the BBC in the world. But it also helped define the Corporation's identity for itself. This task of pinpointing the role and values of the BBC for BBC people is an ongoing one: indeed, as contracts become shorter term, some way of understanding the origins and problems, the values and the norms, is ever more important. Indeed, in a way the BBC's invaluable College of Journalism (est. 2005), like BBC 'Producer Guidelines', is a kind of descendant of the history – a day-to-day practical school in the proprieties of reporting the BBC in an impartial but robust way.

Briggs' BBC history made a stream of historical scholarship possible. In particular it opened the door to a more objective, less dogmatic and ideological way of looking at the impact of the media. Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff's great *A Social History of British Broadcasting: 1922–39*, David Hendy's passionate and imaginative *Life on Air*, and his more recent *Noise: A Human History of Sound and Listening*, Siân Nicholas' *The Echo of War*, Alban Webb's magnificent scholarly work on the BBC World Service and Joe Moran's *Armchair Britain* are all clear descendants of Briggs.<sup>69</sup> In America as well: Michelle Hilmes' *Radio Voices* and Michael Schudson's great arc of work from *The Origins of Objectivity in the Professions* to *The Good Citizen* all owe Briggs a debt.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, in comparison with much of the other work on the media – for example, Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* (1958) – Briggs' historical, empirical and humane work opened up new ways of approaching the press and broadcasting that were rich and not prejudged. At first, of course, Briggs' work looked dauntingly majestic: '[i]t seemed as if Briggs had done everything', said Jacque Kavanagh, the creative head of the Written Archives Centre, and herself a great encourager of scholarship.<sup>71</sup> But the BBC history has been a resource and a stimulant: soon journals and new thinking were flourishing in its wake.

Briggs brought to the task of writing BBC history a sensitive writing skill, particularly displayed in telling vignettes. For example, Reith, he said, stated that he had no 'sealed orders' when he took over the BBC – he was sailing into the unknown – but he led the BBC 'in the same way as a Captain commands'.<sup>72</sup> Or, in Briggs' own words, '[a] company was formed and grew', but 'with that formation and growth something happened both to British society and British government. Broadcasting became an institution: it affected people's ways of thinking and feeling and their relations with each other'.<sup>73</sup> Broadcasting to the early broadcasters, he observed, 'was an instrument of public good. Not a means

of pandering to wants'. He captures character, and moments in national and BBC history with an unerring eye.

Briggs brought to the task his trademark energy and generosity. Paul Thompson, the founder of National Life Stories at the British Library, said that Briggs was 'very enthusiastic because that was his nature, he's such an encouraging person, wonderful in that way'.<sup>74</sup> Briggs also always has a humane eye. In the preface to *The Golden Age of Wireless* he says with careful affection: '[t]his volume has a unity of its own. It was written when many of the participants were still alive. They still live in my mind'.<sup>75</sup>

## Notes

I am very grateful to Jacquie Kavanagh, Director of the BBC Written Archives Centre and to James Codd, her successor, for their staff's help with this chapter, as well as the support of Robert Seater, Head of BBC History.

1. It had begun as the British Broadcasting Company in 1922.
2. Author's interview with Asa Briggs, 15 May 2012.
3. Asa Briggs to Chris Graham, Deputy BBC Secretary, 4 January 1996, 'History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom', Written Archives Centre (hereafter WAC), R78/350/3.
4. Briggs, 'Problems and Possibilities in the Writing of Broadcasting History', *Media, Culture and Society*, 2 (1980), p. 181.
5. Briggs, *Governing the BBC* (London, BBC Books, 1979).
6. Briggs to Chris Graham, 4 January 1996, WAC, R78/350/3.
7. Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. Volume 1: The Birth of Broadcasting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. xxv.
8. Reith dismissed Churchill as 'an imposter' and 'a menace', 'whose egotism masked the eccentricity of his views', whilst Churchill was critical of Reith's ban on him broadcasting to warn of Germany's expansionary aims. Churchill later called the BBC 'an enemy within the gates, doing more harm than good': Ian McIntyre, *The Expense of Glory: A Life of John Reith* (London: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 267; entry for 5 May 1934, in Charles Stuart (ed.), *The Reith Diaries* (London: Collins, 1975), p. 143; Martin Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life* (London: Heinemann, 1991), p. 456; Paul Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front, 1900–1955* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), p. 341.
9. Briggs, interview with Frank Gillard, 4 December 1991, BBC Oral History, WAC. However, Briggs was taking as his own a comment by A. P. Ryan from July 1941, quoted in Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. Volume 3: The War of Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 212.
10. Jean Seaton, 'Atrocities: the BBC and the Holocaust', in Jean Seaton and Ben Pimlott (eds.), *The Media in British Politics* (London: Constable, 1988), pp. 123–56.
11. Will Wyatt, *The Fun Factory: A Life at the BBC* (London: Aurum, 2003), p. 26.
12. Briggs, *The BBC: The First Fifty Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 13.



13. *News Chronicle*, 12 March 1956.
14. Quoted in Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. Volume 4: Competition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 76.
15. Eden complained of the BBC, using these words, following the Suez broadcast of 3 November 1956: Author's interview with Alasdair Milne (Director-General 1982–1987), 10 May 2009.
16. Jacob to Bullock, 27 January 1957, 'History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom – General 1957–1966 (Management Register)', WAC R78/350/1.
17. Obituary, *Independent*, 5 July 2004.
18. Jacob to Bullock, 27 January 1957, WAC R78/350/1.
19. Briggs, *War of Words*, p. 21
20. Jacob to Bullock, 7 May 1957, WAC R78/350/1.
21. Briggs, *Secret Days: Code-Breaking in Bletchley Park* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2011), p. 56.
22. Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (London: Odhams Press, 1963), p. 28.
23. Briggs, *Victorian Things* (London: Batsford Books, 1988), p. 214.
24. *Radio Times*, 21 December 1923, quoted in Briggs, *Birth of Broadcasting*, p. 22.
25. 'Filing Section set up at Magnet House', 15 July 1922, WAC R13/396.
26. The Gramophone Library was established in May 1923: WAC 565.01; and the Script Library in June 1924: WAC R13/388/1.
27. Mary Hodgson, 'The BBC's Archives', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 3 (1962), pp. 18–22.
28. 'Keeping the Archives' (May 1927), WAC 565.01.
29. WAC 565.01.
30. 'Appointment of Miss Edwin', 7 February 1931, WAC R13/388/1.
31. 'Record-keeping during the War', 17 September 1939, WAC R13/388/4.
32. Director of Administration to Record Management, 4 July 1941, WAC R13/388/4.
33. Head of Secretariat to the Deputy Director-General, 15 June 1944, WAC R49/891/1.
34. 'Reorganisation of Records and Archives Report', 9 September 1944, WAC R13/388/4.
35. Igor Vinogradoff, son of the Russian historian and professor of Jurisprudence at Oxford, Sir Paul Vinogradoff, was commissioned to write a history of the Corporation during the war. He complained that the material was never presented in any form he could use, and that the BBC was unclear about what they wanted: Miranda Seymour, *Ottoline Morrell: Life on a Grand Scale* (London: Hodder, 1992), p. 143.
36. R. H. Coase, *British Broadcasting a Study in Monopoly* (London: Collins, 1950), p. 121.
37. See Jean Seaton, *'Traitors and Pinkoes': The BBC and the Nation, 1974–87* (London: Profile Books, 2015), p.125.
38. Memo from Michael Stephens to John Green, 20 May 1952, WAC R13/338/7.
39. Hansard House of Lords Debates, 176 (26 May 1952), col. 1443.
40. Michael Stephens to John Green, 28 May 1952, WAC R13/388/7.
41. For example, Joseph McLeod, *A Job at the BBC: Some Personal Reminiscences* (Glasgow: W. MacLellan, 1947); Roger Eckersley, *The BBC and All That* (London: Sampson Low, 1949); Arthur Reginald [Rex] Alston, *Taking the Air* (London: Stanley Paul, 1951); Frederick Grisewood, *The World Goes*

- By: The Autobiography of Frederick Grisewood* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1952); William Holt, *I Still Haven't Unpacked* (London: Harrap, 1953); Eric Maschwitz, *No Chip on My Shoulder* (London: H. Jenkins, 1957).
42. Henry Fairlie, 'The BBC', in H. Swinnerton-Thomas (ed.), *The Establishment: A Symposium* (London: New English Library, 1963), p. 75.
  43. Michael Stephens to John Green, 28 May 1952, WAC R13/388/7.
  44. Author's interview with John Tusa, 4 March 2012.
  45. 'Points for Briggs', 3 October 1957, WAC R78/350/1.
  46. Briggs, interview with Frank Gillard, BBC Oral History.
  47. *Ibid.*
  48. Author's interview with Asa Briggs, 2 June 2009.
  49. Briggs, interview with Frank Gillard, BBC Oral History.
  50. *Ibid.*
  51. Author's interview with Asa Briggs, 2 June 2009.
  52. Briggs, 'Problems and Possibilities in the Writing of Broadcasting History', p. 186.
  53. Author's interview with Jacqui Kavanagh, 17 May 2013.
  54. Hodgson, 'BBC Archives', p. 113.
  55. Susan Briggs, *Those Radio Times* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981).
  56. Author's interview with Asa Briggs, 15 May 2012.
  57. D. R. Thorpe, *Supermac: The Life of Harold Macmillan* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2010), p. 302.
  58. Briggs, *Competition*, p. 261.
  59. Author's interview with Asa Briggs, 15 May 2012.
  60. *Ibid.* Greene's son has said that his father 'never interfered with freedom of opinion: it was his most dearly held value. He may have disagreed with Briggs' interpretation of the material.' Author's interview with Graham C. Greene, 5 December 2013.
  61. Author's interview with Asa Briggs, 2 June 2009.
  62. *Ibid.*
  63. Briggs, interview with Frank Gillard, BBC Oral History.
  64. Author's interview with Asa Briggs, 15 May 2012.
  65. Briggs to Chris Graham, 4 January 1996, WAC, R78/350/3.
  66. Author's interview with John Birt, 5 May 2010.
  67. *Private Eye*, 7 August 1993, p. 2; 15 April 1994, p. 4.
  68. 'The BBC Secretariat' (Witness Seminar, University of Westminster, 4 June 2006).
  69. Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting. Volume 1, 1922–1939. Serving the Nation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); David Hendy, *Life on Air: A History of Radio 4* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); David Hendy, *Noise: A Human History of Sound and Listening* (London: Profile Books, 2013); Siân Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC, 1939–45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); Alban Webb, 'Auntie Goes to War Again: The BBC External Services, the Foreign Office and the Early Cold War', *Media History*, 12 (2006), pp. 117–32; Joe Moran, *Armchair Britain: An Intimate History of Britain in Front of the TV* (London: Profile Books, 2013).
  70. Michelle Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922–1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Michael Schudson, *Origins of the Ideal*

*of Objectivity in the Professions: Studies in the History of American Journalism and American Law, 1830–1940* (London: Garland, 1990); Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York: Martin Kessler Books, 1998).

71. Author's interview with Jacquie Kavanagh, 2 March 2013.
72. Briggs, *Birth of Broadcasting*, p. 22
73. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
74. National Life Stories Collection: Leaders of National Life, British Library, C408/022.
75. Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, vol. 2: *The Golden Age of Wireless* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. xxi.

**Part III**

**Universities**

# 9

## Back to Yorkshire: 'Asia' Briggs at Leeds, 1955–1961

*Malcolm Chase*

Asa Briggs' move to Leeds from Oxford in 1955 surprised many. The university was reputable and solid but distinctly lacking in glamour. It was no coincidence that its first professor of organic chemistry developed an extensive research programme into smoke and soot pollution.<sup>1</sup> Not without some acerbity, Eric Hobsbawm related how in 1959 he forsook London for Leeds and a meeting with Asa. He was wearing a yellow sheepskin coat, recently acquired, for the occasion. 'When I left', Hobsbawm recalled, 'the black flakes of soot in the West Riding city atmosphere had settled on the white wool of my sheepskin. It was never the same again'.<sup>2</sup>

The man from Keighley (who would also go on to write an illuminating essay, 'Carboniferous Capitalism'<sup>3</sup>) was less easily repelled by the soot. But the department he joined, though dating from the 1870s and somewhat inclined to stand on its dignity, had only ten staff crowded into one unprepossessing Victorian house. Of its previous five professorial heads, only Arthur Turberville (in post 1929–1945) registers on Michael Bentley's historiographical radar.<sup>4</sup> The university's first official historian tartly claimed that Turberville 'retracted visibly from any attempt to popularise academic studies'.<sup>5</sup> However, the departmental headship since 1945 of the distinguished medievalist John Le Patourel was of a different stamp, and under his leadership the Leeds School of History was changing.<sup>6</sup> Asa Briggs was recruited as the modern history chair on the basis that he would have a free hand in reforming the Leeds curriculum.<sup>7</sup>

Asa's move to Leeds was more than merely surprising. Sir Brian Harrison remembers that it 'was regarded...as a very significant moment' by the historical profession. An Oxbridge-LSE triangle had

hitherto dominated social history through the work of R. H. Tawney and G. D. H. Cole at Oxford, Lance Beales at the LSE and Kitson Clark at Cambridge. Harrison argues that 'the regional dimension ... particularly important in the growth of social history' was substantially consolidated by Leeds' success in luring Asa Briggs back to his native Yorkshire.<sup>8</sup> Once there, his prodigious energies found outlets both within and beyond the university, and their range offers an insight into his conception of the cultural and social role of the historian in wider society.

It was through extramural activities that Asa's first initiatives in curriculum development began. He bridled at the 'departmentalism' that in his view beset the university. 'I had to sign treaties with the heads of [other] departments; there was no notion of co-operation between them'. However, Sydney Raybould, head of the Department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies, was the exception to this pattern.<sup>9</sup> Between 1958 and 1960 alone, for example, Briggs devised and led a class on 'The development of Russia and the United States in Modern Times'. This was the first time that post-war history had been taught anywhere on a Leeds University syllabus. He also contributed to a further course, 'The Victorian Age', as a member of a stellar panel that also included J. F. C. Harrison, Donald Read, Roy Shaw and E. P. Thompson. In addition he lectured on residential courses for National Health Service administrators, and for the university's Services Education Committee, on industrial history and technical development at an Industrial Engineering residential course at Catterick Camp. Briggs was also an early supporter of the university's newly opened Adult Education Centre in Middlesbrough, where he reprised his inaugural lecture, 'History and its neighbours'.<sup>10</sup>

All this was in addition to many other public commitments, for example speaking to the Thoresby Society (the local historical society) on Leeds Town Hall, and the Brontë Society on 'Private and Social Themes in *Shirley*'; and leading a School of History public lecture series on the history of Leeds. Beyond Yorkshire, Asa Briggs became the national president of the Workers' Education Association and a member of the University Grants Committee, both in 1958.<sup>11</sup> Alongside broadcasting, he also reviewed for the *Economist*, *Manchester Guardian*, *Listener*, *New Statesman*, *Observer*, *Reynolds News* and *Yorkshire Post*.

Complementing these outward-facing activities were two others that, initially intramural, soon overflowed the boundaries of the university. In November 1956, Asa circulated staff from Adult Education, Agriculture, Economics and Geography as well as his own department: 'we are proposing to organise a small Northern History Group to study from

this university problems of North of England History'.<sup>12</sup> Membership was extended to local history activists, archivists and librarians. After his departure for Sussex, the Group (led by Gordon Forster, the first appointment to the school during the Briggs years) was the basis from which Leeds launched the first ever regional history journal, *Northern History*, in 1966. Asa himself contributed an agenda-setting first article.<sup>13</sup>

A second outward-facing activity, modelled on the Northern History Group, bore more-immediate fruit, though it soon floated free from Leeds. This was a Labour History Group, for which J. F. C. Harrison (then in the Leeds extramural department) took on the organisational responsibilities, as Forster would do for northern history.<sup>14</sup> Leeds thus acted 'as the instigator and midwife' of the [British] Society for the Study of Labour History, formed in January 1960, with Asa as chairman and John Harrison as secretary. This pairing was adroit in both drawing together, and then retaining the support of, a somewhat uncomradely cadre of historical specialists, 'a consortium of people' Asa recalls,

whom I knew did not agree with each other about labour history or current socialist politics. [John] Saville was not on the best terms with Henry Pelling or Edward Thompson who were certainly not on the best terms with each other... Eric Hobsbawm was very much on his own.<sup>15</sup>

In his inaugural address to the Society for the Study of Labour History, Asa Briggs made the percipient observation that 'Labour History as a whole has suffered from the neglect of its international dimension. There is a real need to break with insularity and to develop comparisons'.<sup>16</sup> This was a call largely unanswered within labour history until the 1990s. However, if any one thing distinguished the Briggs years at Leeds, it was a determination to break down insularity and develop comparison in every corner of the historical curriculum. This was apparent even in his 1958 adult education class, with lectures such as 'American and Russian History: contrasts and comparisons'.<sup>17</sup> It was yet more evident in the way Briggs powerfully and permanently shaped the undergraduate history syllabus.

When Asa Briggs arrived in 1955 the University of Leeds was still smarting from the departure of Norman Gash for St Andrews. Though brief, Gash's tenure of its chair of Modern History had been marked by extensive syllabus reform and to a considerable extent the School of History was suffering from innovation fatigue. The advert for the vacant chair was noticeably reticent about any scope for innovation, merely

making stock remarks about teaching undergraduates, supervising post-graduates and undertaking research. John Le Patourel later explained to the vice-chancellor, Sir Charles Morris, that:

When Briggs came in 1955 I asked him not to make any changes at once. We had made fairly far-reaching changes in the curriculum to suit Gash and I felt whether our compromise was good or bad it must at least run through a 'generation' of students. Briggs was very good about this.<sup>18</sup>

However, it is clear that Asa Briggs was convinced that a thorough-going reform was long overdue. His inaugural lecture, *History and Its Neighbours*, was influenced by current developments in the history of ideas, a discipline not much evident in British universities at this time but whose self-identity was being widely debated among its American exponents. Briggs made it plain that 'I want historians to devote more time not only to people in society (with proper concern for people) but to the study of societies both in themselves and comparatively'.<sup>19</sup> And after just one term in post, he made a case for new posts as 'a matter of urgency', telling the registrar:

None of the lecturers or assistant lecturers on the modern side are qualified to lecture or teach European history after 1848. Hitherto, most of the work in the History Department has stopped at about 1850 ... We are lamentably weak on this side.<sup>20</sup>

Asa found the university lukewarm to this argument. The School of History was permitted to make one temporary assistant lecturer appointment only and he had to deliver many of the 20th-century European lectures himself. The following year, he sent-in another case for new staff, but – learning fast – Asa now placed greatest emphasis upon the workload implications of growing undergraduate numbers, and their interest in modern history.<sup>21</sup> His argument about student numbers was not contrived: there had been 53 single-honours undergraduates in the 1953–1954 academic year but by 1957–1958 there were 90 (the year in which admissions to the first year exceeded 40 for the first time).<sup>22</sup>

Asa Briggs' intention, however, was not just to extend the chronological reach of the Leeds history curriculum into 20th-century Europe. He also 'emphasised the importance of introducing some non-European history if the department is to be alive to changes in the modern world



and to fulfil its proper responsibilities'. The case for a new appointment to facilitate this fell on deaf ears. So in 1958, as part of the broader revision of the history syllabus that he was only now encouraged to suggest, Asa proposed 'to introduce optional courses in *Asian History, 1815–1947* for second- and third-year students as soon as possible and to lecture [on them] myself'.<sup>23</sup> This was no light undertaking, and he was candid that his own reading was 'only a chapter or two ahead of his class'.<sup>24</sup> Such was his proselytising zeal for this project that he was universally renamed 'Asia Briggs' by his colleagues.<sup>25</sup> The Asia history course was one of three new options from which students chose in their final year, the others being *American History, 1783–1950* (Asa led from the front in teaching much of that too) and *Russian History, 1860–1945*. The popularity of the latter innovation made the school a powerful advocate in persuading the university to appoint the first historian to the department of Russian Studies a few years later.<sup>26</sup>

Nor did the Briggs reforms stop there. Alongside contemporary and non-European history, his new syllabus sought 'to devote special interest during the students' three-year course to what might be described as a "sub-history"'. Alongside a long-established and conventional course, the *History of Political Thought*, the revised syllabus offered alternatives in the 'history of... social thought, or economic thought or scientific thought'.<sup>27</sup> The latter was one of the focal points from which a formally constituted History and Philosophy of Science section later emerged in the School of Philosophy. The two other 'sub-histories' fared less well. *History of Economic Thought*, for which Asa had to provide all the teaching, had just one taker in its first year: she recalled 'that their tutorials were frequently interrupted by international telephone calls'. *History of Social Thought* was more warmly received and was also the springboard for two publications, a path-breaking essay on 'The Welfare State in Historical Perspective' and a book on Seebohm Rowntree. Both of these appeared, alongside the first volume of *The History of Broadcasting*, in 1961, a resounding climax to the publications of Asa Briggs' Leeds years, which also included *The Age of Improvement* and the seminal edited collection *Chartist Studies*, both published in 1959.<sup>28</sup>

His steadily expanding academic profile meant that Briggs also bore the brunt of developing postgraduate research in modern history, albeit with mixed results. One conspicuous success was Wolfgang Mommsen, who would become one of the most widely known German historians of the later 20th century. Mommsen came to regard his debt to Briggs and to Leeds generally as significant: he spent the 1958–1959 academic year

at the University of Leeds on a British Council postgraduate scholarship, an experience he described as both 'very fortunate' and preferable to his initial choice of the London School of Economics.<sup>29</sup> By 1960 Asa was supervising 14 postgraduates; some were inherited from the early 1950s, and their engagement with supervised research was hugely variable. Dorothy Thompson, for example, had registered to study 'The last phase of Chartism with special reference to Ernest Jones' as long ago as 1950. In view of her family, part-time extramural teaching and political commitments, it is unlikely she troubled Briggs overmuch.

In any case, a certain frostiness pervaded Briggs' relations with the Thompsons. He declined to include in *Chartist Studies* the chapter on Halifax Chartism that he had commissioned from Edward Thompson, the greater part of which seems to have been written by Dorothy.<sup>30</sup> And alone among the extramural department's full-time history lecturers, Edward Thompson was never offered an opportunity to teach in the School of History, in spite of Raybould's advocacy. The nearest he came to doing so was in 1960 when arrangements were being made to cover Asa's teaching ahead of the latter's visit to Australia; but Briggs stalled, explaining that 'he would like to be on hand' when Thompson began teaching.<sup>31</sup>

Relations with E. P. Thompson appear to have produced a rare discordant note in Asa's otherwise harmonious dealings with his extramural counterparts, as well as within the emerging field of labour history. It is worth emphasising in this context how much of Asa Briggs' energies during his Leeds years were directed at defining and nurturing the emerging field of labour history, an enterprise which involved him in considerable editorial work. 'He was a great inspiration to us', John Harrison recalls: 'the history of working people was not respectable academically: that is why Asa was so important – he was respectable'.<sup>32</sup> There was a significant Communist and ex-Communist presence among labour historians, but John McIlroy has concluded that Briggs had no aversion to left-wing commitment in historical scholarship, 'so long as it provoked rather than arrested critical enquiry and work of quality'.<sup>33</sup> Of Thompson's magisterial *Making of the English Working Class*, Briggs commented privately that it was not a book 'for those who like their history to be scrupulously fair and balanced'. Even that comment, though, was made in the context of a warm recommendation that Leeds should confer a readership on Thompson, in which he observed of the *Making*, 'there is a strong argument for thinking this is the best piece of social history since the Hammonds'.<sup>34</sup>

A further reform at Leeds for which Asa was responsible was pedagogic, albeit one that originated as a pragmatic response to the challenge

of intensive teaching in curriculum areas he did not feel he had mastered. He candidly told the president of the Students' Union that these new 'working seminars' made it 'possible to get the benefits of direct student participation and the division of labour at the same time'. The entire course on the history of Asia was conducted in this style.<sup>35</sup> Some smaller innovations are also telling: Briggs and Le Patourel astonished the university with a proposal they should jointly head the School of History when Le Patourel's initial term as its head expired in 1957.<sup>36</sup> Cutting-edge technology in the form of a photocopier was introduced into the school office. Asa totally rejected addressing colleagues by their surname alone (Dear Harrison, Dear Forster, etc.). He also quickly abandoned wearing an academic gown for lectures, then considered *de rigueur* at Leeds. Certain other sartorial choices were also ahead of their time. The lime-green casual shirt worn for his 1959 Middlesbrough adult education lecture made an impression almost as powerful as the lecture on the social historian Bob Morris, a teenage member of the audience at the time.<sup>37</sup>

Asa's colleagues seem to have taken dress reform in their stride; but some were uncomfortable with the syllabus developments. A few, even, were unforgiving of the energy which he brought to outward-facing activities. As far as the curriculum reforms were concerned, the problem was compounded by the void left behind when Briggs spent six months during 1960 at the Centre for the Advanced Study of the Humanities at Australia National University, Canberra. This provided an unnerving foretaste of the situation from the autumn of the following year when he left permanently for Sussex. 'The changes he has made here have scarcely established themselves', John Le Patourel told the vice-chancellor, adding somewhat plaintively that 'It [is] exceedingly difficult for anyone who is not Briggs to know how to carry on from the point at which he is leaving us'. The school had to lean heavily on staff from other departments to supply the gap Briggs had left behind.<sup>38</sup>

In considering its strategy for a replacement appointment, the university also pondered the distractions of media appearances and broadsheet newspaper book reviewing, both of which it thought were likely to be strewn in the path of Briggs' successor if they too were – as the school termed it – 'a modern modernist'. 'No doubt the University gains a very great deal from having a national figure among its professoriate', Le Patourel observed, but he added tellingly: 'in the department, a price has to be paid for this – a price that one might be very willing to pay for Briggs but not necessarily for anyone else'.<sup>39</sup> Beyond the history department were others who were conspicuously less charitable. Asa

had complained openly, even to comparative juniors amongst his colleagues, about the obstructiveness of those he described as ‘old guard’ professors.<sup>40</sup> However, the most stringent critic was not from this old guard but the recently elected Professor of Economic History (in the Department of Economics) Maurice Beresford. Exact contemporaries at Cambridge, the two men shared an intellectual debt to the innovative medievalist John Saltmarsh, with whom they went field-walking as undergraduates. While at Leeds, however, Briggs on his own admission was puzzled by Beresford’s insularity and reluctance to associate with the School of History. In a confidential letter to the vice-chancellor concerning the succession, Beresford described Briggs’ appointment as ‘a disaster for our School of History’, with little time for, or interest in, the university. Beresford was dismissive of the myriad of external activities in which his erstwhile ‘fellow trooper across the fields’ had engaged:

The Leeds History School now needs an Insider. The School can sacrifice itself once every generation to the service of the outside world, but I hope it will not be asked to do so twice... The world and the public must contain their appetite for the services of our Professor of Modern History for a while; they have not been stinted.<sup>41</sup>

Beresford was careful to stress that he had discussed no part of this letter with Le Patourel. In part his comments resonate with Briggs’ unvarnished irritation with much university bureaucracy. ‘While at Leeds’, he has written, ‘I became thoroughly dissatisfied with “departmentalism” ... often as much concerned with *amour propre* as with academic issues’.<sup>42</sup>

Le Patourel mused that it might be expedient to replace Asa with a 17th-century specialist. External distractions would be fewer, besides which, he thought, ‘we know where we are with a book on the 17th century: [but] the criteria of work on history that is almost contemporary have not yet been established’. The university was sufficiently persuaded by this argument to approach Christopher Hill with an invitation to consider its Chair of Modern History.<sup>43</sup> That appointment, had it been made, would doubtless have proved as bracing in its way as that of Briggs had been. Hill, however, declined even to visit Leeds. Eventually Arthur J. Taylor, a moderately ‘modern modernist’ historian of Britain, succeeded Asa.<sup>44</sup>

However, Asa Briggs had let the genie of modern history out of the bottle. Few really thought it either possible or desirable to try and force it

back. Although Taylor and Le Patourel confessed that they were unconvinced that 'an immediate appointment is desirable in the field of Asian history', they did argue the 'pressing need on the modern side' for a Europeanist.<sup>45</sup> The result was the appointment, cautious only in its periodicity, of Richard Cobb (and then when the latter left in 1963 of Ernst Wangermann). On receiving assurances that the school could proceed with this modern European appointment, Taylor then expedited a new post in Chinese history in January 1962. The appointment (of Jerome Ch'en, on the cusp of a distinguished career) was made in conjunction with the university's new Centre for Far-Eastern Studies. This had been established following a recent University Grants Committee initiative (the Hayter Report) to develop East European, Oriental and African Studies. However, the post to which Ch'en was appointed was 'over and above the earmarked' grant for this purpose. So this was a genuine and substantial commitment by a history department that clearly had been persuaded of the imperative to extend the geographical and chronological reach of the curriculum it offered.<sup>46</sup>

No less significantly, the hiatus that Asa Briggs' departure created was used to make forceful cases for an appointment in the 'history of international relations or British foreign policy' from 1870 to the present day, and for a second chair in modern history. John Le Patourel first floated this proposal in his initial thinking on how best to replace Asa (declaring a self-denying ordinance against expanding medieval history in so doing). In 1965 this vision was realised with the appointment of J. A. S. Grenville, unequivocally 'a modern modernist', to a newly established second chair.<sup>47</sup> The development of International History and Politics, which was to become (as it remains) one of the defining features of the discipline of History at the University of Leeds, stemmed directly from this aspect of Asa Briggs internationalisation and modernisation of the curriculum. Yet one senses that Briggs' legacy continued to be viewed ambiguously at Leeds and that he never received full credit for the work he did there. He is, for example, conspicuous by his absence from an otherwise detailed survey of the history of the department, written by his successor as Chair of Modern History.<sup>48</sup> While his commitments beyond Leeds were the stuff almost of legend, Asa had made his family home in the city and entered fully into the social and cultural life of the university and its environs. Furthermore his frequent absences were balanced by an unmatched capacity for work as well as a clear vision for innovation.

His six years in Leeds, Asa Briggs has written, were 'a very creative period of my life'. During his visit to Canberra in 1960, Briggs chose 'The

Map of Learning' as the title for a lecture at Australia National University. He was already looking ahead to the move he would make to the pro vice-chancellorship at Sussex University after his return to Britain. But it was at Leeds during the 1950s that Briggs embarked on the redrawing of the map of learning with which his subsequent career was to become so closely associated.<sup>49</sup>

## Notes

I am especially grateful to my friend and colleague Gordon Forster for his help; also to John (J. F. C.) Harrison, and Nick Brewster for guidance through the labyrinth of University of Leeds central administration filing.

1. H. S. Raper, 'Julius Berend Cohen (1859–1935)', *Obituary Notices of Fellows of the Royal Society*, 1 (1935), pp. 502–13.
2. Eric Hobsbawm, 'Preface: Looking Back Half a Century', in Joan Allen, Alan Campbell and John McIlroy (eds.), *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives* (Pontypool: Merlin, 2010), p. 1.
3. Asa Briggs, 'Carboniferous Capitalism: Coal, Iron and Paper', in *Victorian Things* (London: Batsford, 1988), ch. 8.
4. Michael Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism, 1870–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 203. A good case might be made for the significance of Arthur Grant and Hamilton Thompson.
5. Arnold N. Shimmin, *The University of Leeds: The First Half-Century* (Cambridge: University of Leeds Press, 1954), p. 126.
6. A. J. Taylor, 'History at Leeds, 1877–1974: The Evolution of a Discipline', *Northern History*, 10 (1975), pp. 141–64 (p. 160).
7. Derek Fraser, 'Editor's Introduction', in Derek Fraser (ed.), *Cities, Class and Communication: Essays in Honour of Asa Briggs* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 2.
8. Jim Obelkevich 'Witness Seminar: New Developments in History in the 1950s and 1960s', *Contemporary British History*, 14 (2000), pp. 143–67 (p. 163). See also pp. 145 and 151 for Briggs' emphasis at this seminar on Beales, Cole, Kitson Clark and Tawney.
9. Comments by Asa Briggs at the *Asa Briggs: A Celebration* conference, (Institute of Historical Research, London, 19 May 2011). For Raybould see the cumulative portrait in Richard Taylor (ed.), *Beyond the Walls: 50 Years of Adult and Continuing Education at the University of Leeds, 1946–1996* (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1996), esp. pp. 3–38.
10. University of Leeds Archives (hereafter ULA) Taylor Papers Box A1: lists of extension classes, 1958–1959 and 1959–1960; Percy Brookman to Briggs, 11 July 1959; *History and Its Neighbours* publicity leaflet, 20 March 1960; Oxford Regional Hospital Board course details, 26 July 1958.
11. Asa Briggs, 'The Building of Leeds Town Hall', *Thoresby Society Miscellany XIII*, *Transactions of the Thoresby Society*, 46 (1963), pp. 275–302; 'Private and Social Themes in *Shirley*' reprinted in *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs*, vol. 2: *Images, Problems, Standpoints and Forecasts* (Brighton: Harvester, 1985);

- University of Leeds Central Administration Files [hereafter ULCAF], Box 74: 'History of Leeds Lectures', 1958 and 1959.
12. ULA Taylor papers Box A1: Northern History Group (1959). ULA Le Patourel Papers Box 2: Northern History Group circular, 21 November 1956 and inaugural seminar notice, 22 January 1957.
  13. Personal information, G. C. F. Forster (29 March 2011); Asa Briggs, 'Themes in Northern History', *Northern History*, 1 (1966), pp. 1–6.
  14. ULA Taylor Papers Box A1: J. F. C. Harrison to Briggs, 19 December 1958.
  15. Briggs letter to John McIlroy, 28 July 2008, quoted in John McIlroy, 'Origins of the Society for the Study of Labour History', *Labour History Review* supplement, 75 (2010), pp. 19–112 (pp. 39 and 38).
  16. Briggs, 'Open Questions in Labour History', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 1 (1960), pp. 2–3.
  17. See the syllabus in ULA Taylor Papers Box A1.
  18. ULCAF Box 74, 'Dept. of History – Chairs – Modern History', Le Patourel to Charles Morris, 29 September 1960.
  19. Asa Briggs, *Special Relationships: People and Places* (Barnsley: Frontline, 2012), p. 80, and see John Higham, 'Intellectual History and Its Neighbours', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 15 (1954), 339–47.
  20. ULCAF Box 74, 'History/Staff 1949–74', Briggs to Loach, 12 January 1956.
  21. ULCAF Box 74, 'History/Staff 1949–74', Briggs to Loach, 4 April 1956.
  22. ULCAF Box 74, 'History/General 1949–74', report by Austin Woolrych on admissions for 1958/1959.
  23. ULCAF Box 74, 'History/Staff 1949–74', Briggs to Loach, 23 January 1958; ULA Le Patourel papers Box 2, 'Suggested Revisions of the History Syllabus', 21 January 1959.
  24. Fraser, 'Editor's Introduction', p. 2.
  25. Personal information, G. C. F. Forster.
  26. ULCAF Box 74, 'History/Staff 1949–74', Briggs and Le Patourel to Loach, 22 January and 10 November 1959.
  27. ULA Le Patourel papers Box 2, 'Suggested Revisions of the History Syllabus', 21 January 1959.
  28. Fraser, 'Editor's Introduction', p. 2; Asa Briggs, 'The Welfare State in Historical Perspective', *European Journal of Sociology*, 2 (1961), reprinted in Briggs, *Collected Essays*, vol. 2; Briggs, *Social Thought and Social Action: A Study of the Work of Seebohm Rowntree 1871–1954* (London: Longman, 1961); Briggs, *The Age of Improvement* (London: Longman, 1959); Briggs (ed.), *Chartist Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1959).
  29. *Independent*, 19 August 2004 ('I ended up in Leeds, in Yorkshire, with Asa Briggs, and this was very fortunate. During my time at Leeds University, I got to know English society very well; indeed in some ways Yorkshire is a much better place than London for doing so'); personal information, Wolfgang Mommsen (September 1999).
  30. 'Halifax Chartism', typescript in the Dorothy Thompson Collection, Staffordshire University Library. The chapter seems to have been excluded on the grounds of its excessive length, the authors having submitted it very late in the editorial process. However, it is now to be published in a collection of Dorothy Thompson's essays, *The Dignity of Chartism* (London: Verso, 2014), edited by Stephen Roberts.

31. ULA Taylor Papers Box A2: Raybould to Briggs, 12 January 1960; Raybould to E. P. Thompson, 18 March 1960.
32. Personal information, J. F. C. Harrison (19 January 2009); Briggs (ed.), *Chartist Studies*; Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History in Memory of G. D. H. Cole* (London: Macmillan, 1960).
33. John McIlroy, 'Asa Briggs and the Emergence of Labour History', *Labour History Review*, 77 (2012), pp. 211–42 (p. 227). Personal information, J. F. C. Harrison (19 January 2009).
34. ULA, Adult Education and Extramural Studies, Supplementary Papers: Briggs to the Vice-Chancellor, 30 June 1964. I am grateful to Roger Fieldhouse for drawing my attention to this letter.
35. ULA Taylor Papers Box A2: Briggs to Eric Schumacher, 27 April 1960; Derek Fraser, 'Editor's Introduction', p. 2.
36. ULCAF Box 74, 'History/General 1909–74'.
37. Personal information, G. C. F. Forster and Robert Morris, April 2011.
38. ULCAF Box 74, 'Chair of Modern History, 1960–69', Le Patourel to Morris, 29 September 1960.
39. *Ibid.*
40. Personal information, G. C. F. Forster.
41. ULCAF Box 74, 'Chair of Modern History, 1960–69', Beresford to Morris, 7 November 1960; Briggs, *Special Relationships*, pp. 62–3.
42. Briggs, *Special Relationships*, pp. 116–17.
43. ULCAF Box 74, 'Chair of Modern History, 1960–69', minutes of the Committee on the Chair of Modern History, 21 February 1961.
44. There is an oral tradition that an elderly member of the appointing committee, representing the University Council, left for home convinced that he had just shared in the appointment of A. J. P. Taylor, but this cannot be verified.
45. ULCAF Box 74, 'History/Staff, 1949–74', A. J. Taylor and Le Patourel, paper for the Senate Committee on Priorities, 21 November 1961.
46. ULCAF Box 74, 'History/Staff, 1949–74', papers relating to Lecturer/Assistant Lecturer in Asian history, 1962–3; C. H. Phillips, 'Modern Asian Studies in the Universities of the United Kingdom', *Modern Asian Studies*, 1 (1967), pp. 1–14 (pp. 7–8).
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48. Taylor, 'History at Leeds, 1877–1974'.
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# 10

## Asa Briggs and the University of Sussex, 1961–1976

*Matthew Cragoe*

In 1967, Asa Briggs became the second vice-chancellor of the University of Sussex to a chorus of approval. *The Times* in an article on the appointment summarised his career to date: his war record, the notable feat of taking firsts in two degrees from different institutions, Cambridge and LSE, and then his emergence as ‘one of the outstanding historians since the war’.<sup>1</sup> In his time at Oxford, it purred, he ‘could fill a lecture hall to overflowing’ and was now ‘familiar to television viewers’. External adulation was matched by internal enthusiasm. The outgoing VC, Sir John Fulton, considered the appointment ‘wholly admirable’.<sup>2</sup> In his final address to the annual meeting of the university’s court he highlighted his professional and personal qualifications for the role. Asa knew the higher education landscape intimately, he declared, having worked at five British universities, held fellowships at several international institutions, and been a long-term member of the University Grants Committee (UGC).<sup>3</sup> He was also

outward-looking, as befits the educational climate of our times: in age poised perfectly to bridge the generations; above all, a leader of the little team which believed strongly enough in the vision of the Sussex-to-be to choose to come here in preference to all the other opportunities and prospects which were then beckoning.

On all sides, Asa was regarded as the right man for the job and the times.

In this chapter the nature of the challenges presented by both the job and the times will be explored. The growing appetite for higher education in the years after the Second World War took planners by surprise, and the 1950s witnessed a series of debates that culminated in the Robbins Report of 1963, with its famous declaration that ‘courses of

higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them'.<sup>4</sup> It was not simply a question of accommodating larger numbers, however: the nature and purpose of this expansion was also debated. There was a recognition that Britain needed a more flexible, more technologically sophisticated workforce if it was to prosper and take its place at the top table of world affairs. There was a further, international dimension. In the context of the Cold War, so-called free countries had to mobilise all their resources as effectively as their totalitarian rivals in order to protect their way of life. It was in this context that Asa's bold intention to, as he put it, 'redraw the map of learning' at Sussex made sense: it was designed not simply to guide Britain's path into the future but to balance the redrawn map of geopolitics.

The fruit of the national debate around higher education was the establishment of seven new universities in the first half of the 1960s. While these were in no sense comparable to the great American 'Cold War universities' such as Stanford, which enjoyed Defense Department patronage and forged close links with private industrial concerns, many devoted to the development of war-related technologies,<sup>5</sup> there was a sense in which they were a British response to similar cultural tensions.

The chapter begins by exploring the landscape of higher education after the Second World War, and the context this afforded for rethinking higher education in Britain. It then moves on to consider the foundation of Sussex, and the euphoric early years when all parties seemed buoyed by an almost utopian vision of what was possible. The chapter ends by tracing the waning of optimism from the mid-1960s on, as the national economy faltered and developments in Vietnam ushered in a new era of radical student protest which called into question the simple contextualising binaries of the first Cold War – America: good; Russia: evil – that had contributed to the founding of the new universities in the first place.

## **The context**

In August 1961, the Royal Charter of Incorporation formally creating the University of Sussex took effect. The new vice-chancellor, John Fulton, took to the pages of *The Times* to celebrate the moment. 'Throughout the world', he declared, 'and especially underdeveloped countries – education is a new universal religion'.<sup>6</sup> Education, he continued, offered 'self-realization for the individual' and 'true independence of the nation or group'; above all, it held the key to 'the possibility of co-existence

in peace for a divided human race'. This ringing endorsement captured the spirit in which the expansion of higher education was carried out by British planners in the 1950s. It was a response to the growing aspirations of young people in post-war Britain, but it was also tied closely to an awareness of national and international realities.

That there would be a need for increased capacity in Britain's universities was clear from the early 1950s. Rising birth rates implied that more places would be required during the 1960s. Of particular concern was the 'bulge' in demand that would flow from the large number of babies born in 1947: the cohort of 18-year-olds from which university entrants would be drawn was predicted to leap from 533,000 in 1959 to 812,000 in 1965.<sup>7</sup> The UGC, which oversaw the strategic distribution of government funding to the university sector, modelled the demand and advised the Treasury that the system would have to grow to around 125,000 places, with a 10 per cent surplus to accommodate the additional 'bulge' from 1965–1968. However, at the end of the decade these calculations were upset by two new pieces of evidence. First, a new trend emerged in secondary education: more and more sixth formers were staying on into the sixth form and then seeking entry to higher education.<sup>8</sup> Sixth-form numbers boomed: in 1950, some 6.6 per cent of 17-year-olds stayed on in school; by 1954 the figure was 7.9 per cent; and by 1962 it was 12 per cent.<sup>9</sup> This represented a source of demand for university education that would need to be addressed long before the bulge hit the sector in the mid-1960s. Second, it was realised in the late 1950s that the birth rate had started to climb again, implying the need for sustained growth in the provision of university places beyond the bulge years. Combined with the trend already identified, it was clear that the demand for higher education would be considerably greater than had been forecast by the UGC. In 1959 the Education Department increased its estimate of the number of university places that would be required by the end of the 1960s to approximately 200,000, a figure confirmed by the Robbins Committee in 1963.<sup>10</sup>

The debate around higher education was, however, more than a question of numbers. It also involved the question of what ought to be taught – and to whom. In 1945 and 1946, two influential committees recommended that capacity in science and technology be expanded, the Percy Committee recommending a quadrupling of engineers, the Barlow Committee a doubling of scientists and the foundation of a new institution along the lines of MIT or CalTech.<sup>11</sup> Although the government rejected this last proposal, preferring to increase resources to Imperial College London and enhance technological education at

established universities, including Manchester and Glasgow, the general tenor of these recommendations fell on receptive ears.<sup>12</sup> Science had had a good war. As Michael Sanderson put it, '[t]he role of the university boffin in the development of radar, the atomic bomb, penicillin, operational research and many other matters had brought prestige to the tiny higher education sector'.<sup>13</sup> The number of schoolchildren taking science A levels rose throughout the 1950s: 'The glamour of "big science", the Comet, successive jet plane speed records, atomic bomb tests and the first nuclear power stations appealed to the schoolboy imagination'.<sup>14</sup>

The need to improve capacity in science and technology for post-A-level students formed a constant theme in discussions on higher education expansion during the 1950s. Not all of this was to take place in the context of universities. In 1956, a number of colleges of technology were raised to the status of Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs). However, the universities were expected to play their role. When the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Derick Heathcote-Amory, announced £60m of extra funding for the university sector in 1958, he hoped that two-thirds of the extra places would go to students in science and technology.<sup>15</sup> This proved optimistic, but over the course of the decade the number studying sciences did increase: by 1961–1962, two-fifths of students at British universities studied science, compared with only a quarter on the eve of the Second World War.<sup>16</sup>

The Robbins Report also made clear that the benefits of an expanded higher education system would be social as well as economic. The country's future was tied to the skills of the workforce, and the report argued that unless higher education was speedily reformed 'there is little hope of this densely populated island maintaining an adequate position in the fiercely competitive world'.<sup>17</sup> Expanding higher education would allow the country access to a large and hitherto untapped reservoir of talent. It demonstrated that social background rather than ability currently dictated who went on to higher education.<sup>18</sup> Whereas 45 per cent of those whose fathers were in the 'higher professional' group entered full-time higher education, the corresponding statistic for those from a skilled manual background was just 4 per cent. The disparity was 'even more marked for girls than for boys'.

The drive to enlist all available talent in the service of the nation's social and economic future offered a coherent domestic rationale for the investment in higher education; there was, however, another dimension which lent university expansion its distinctive contemporary resonance. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, the spectre of growing Soviet power provided a backdrop to British life. As with any other conflict,

the Cold War had its home front. Anxieties about the Russian threat permeated politics and culture, and naturally formed part of the discursive framework within which the expansion of higher education was imagined.<sup>19</sup> From the late 1940s onwards, the notion that the Soviet system was antithetical to 'the British way of life' and all that it stood for in terms of freedom and individuality, formed a central element in Conservative Party discourse, and educating the nation's youth in the principles of freedom was seen as essential.<sup>20</sup> As a pamphlet produced by the party's One Nation group put it as early as 1952: 'Education is more than a social service; it is part of Defence'.<sup>21</sup>

The association of higher education with ideas of British freedom and self-determination became a standard reference point throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s. John Fulton, for example, explicitly set the goals of his new institution against the values of those on the opposite side of the Cold War divide when addressing the first meeting of the university's court in 1961: 'We in the west are committed to faith in the worth of the individual', he declared. 'His freedom is not to be subordinated to the claims of the party line or even of long tradition'. Delivering on that vision was, he claimed, 'the challenge to western education'.<sup>22</sup> Eighteen months later, the fledgling university presented Harold Macmillan with an honorary degree, and the Conservative leader tied together the economic and cultural aspects of the discourse. Education, he maintained, was 'the key to unlock the storehouse of the future'. 'The strength of the nation depends upon its education', he continued: 'The most valuable national asset is the brain, the imagination, and creative power of our people'.<sup>23</sup> However, universities were also the key to developing 'the character of our people': 'It is something which only an individual teacher or tutor can do. It is to give to each young man and woman a sense of not just being a cog in a huge machine but of an individual living soul'. That individuality was the antithesis of Soviet standardisation. Similar concerns inflected the thinking of Labour politicians. Harold Wilson, in his famous 'White Heat' speech at the party's annual conference in Scarborough in 1963, set his demand for a 'scientific revolution' specifically against the threat posed by the USSR, saying

those who have studied the formidable Soviet challenge in the education of scientists and technologists, and above all, in the ruthless application of scientific techniques in Soviet industry, know that our future lies not in military strength alone but in the efforts, the sacrifices, and all the energies which a free people can mobilise for the future greatness of our country.<sup>24</sup>

It was in this context, and with these hopes riding on their shoulders, that the new universities of the early 1960s were born. How Sussex fared is the subject of the next section.

## Founding Sussex

When Sussex admitted its first 51 students in the autumn of 1961, it was difficult to imagine the impact the new institution would make. Yet, within six years, the university numbered in excess of 3,000 students and was expanding rapidly. Newspapers outdid each other to lavish epithets on the ‘infant legend’ taking shape on its purpose-built campus in the Downs. In February, 1965 Stuart Maclure published a now-famous article in the *Listener* in which he remarked that ‘Sussex has become the fashionable sixth formers’ first choice, the university that cabinet ministers’ daughters go to, the “with-it”, twenty-first century university’.<sup>25</sup> Two years later, Brian MacArthur, education correspondent of *The Times*, made very similar comments. ‘Six years after it opened’, he wrote, ‘[...] there are 20 applicants for each place in its arts departments. It has one of the lowest drop-out rates in British universities, many students in sixth forms would place it straight after Oxford and Cambridge’. ‘Sussex’, he concluded, ‘is an obvious success’.<sup>26</sup>

From the outset, it was recognised that the quality of the team attracted to Sussex made it something special. Asa was the first recruit, and to Mary Scott-James, writing in 1962, was one of a ‘flying circus of four famous young professors’ who would charm students away from Oxford and Cambridge.<sup>27</sup> Individual brilliance alone, however, was not what made Sussex stand out. Much more significant was the ethos of the new university and the determination of the founding team to ‘redraw the map of learning’. This phrase achieved its definitive usage in a lecture Asa gave to students during a sabbatical at Australian National University in Canberra in 1961.<sup>28</sup> He had agreed to join Fulton at Sussex literally as the boat to Australia was about to sail,<sup>29</sup> and so the ideas contained in the lecture, its identification of the ills that beset higher education in Britain and the means of their solution, were clearly influenced by the real-life challenges that he knew awaited him on his return at Sussex.

The thrust of the lecture was that universities needed to adopt fresh ways of teaching and researching to deal properly with the challenges of the contemporary world. Asa quoted Francis Bacon who, he said, was ‘writing at a time when it still seemed just possible for a single individual to understand the whole map of learning, arts and sciences. We live in

an age which has more or less abandoned the attempt'.<sup>30</sup> New subjects had been added gradually to the curricula of universities, but they had grown singly, and spawned a series of narrow, inward-looking departments, segregated even from adjacent disciplines. As a consequence, the academy was characterised by 'rivalry and occasional friction, boundary disputes and far from splendid isolation'.<sup>31</sup>

The gulfs in modern learning were not simply those between arts and sciences 'but between different branches of human studies, say between literature and the social studies, and between biological and physical sciences'. The project to 'redraw' the map of learning at Sussex was not simply about finding new ways to connect adjacent subjects, but also to draw back into dialogue the various strands of knowledge that had drifted apart with the passage of time.

Asa's solution was bold – 'to change departmental structure[s] altogether'.<sup>32</sup> In teaching and research alike, he maintained, '[a]cademic reasons should come first: institutional responses second'. The answer lay in creating structures that facilitated the easy crossing of the often artificial frontiers between different disciplines. Nor should academics forget the artificiality of the frontier that seemed to exist between themselves and the wider society of which they were part. If universities were to flourish, academics had to communicate with audiences both inside and outside the keep.<sup>33</sup>

The map of learning was, of course, an idea of its time: both the diagnosis of what ailed the academy and the panacea proposed at Sussex were heavily influenced by a range of contemporary thinking. Sir Eric Ashby's championship of technology in universities was one important influence, the famous exploration of *The Two Cultures* by C. P. Snow another.<sup>34</sup> The feeling that universities should provide an education that fitted people intellectually for the multifarious challenges of the modern world was widespread; indeed, it had been a cornerstone of NUS conferences in the immediate pre-war period.<sup>35</sup> The notion of Schools of Study, meanwhile, was enshrined in the original submission by Bill Stone, Director of Education at Brighton Council, which persuaded the UGC to proceed with the idea of a new university at Sussex in 1956.<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, the formulation of the problem in *The Map of Learning* was important in that it gave a unity to the radical plan that emerged at Sussex under Asa's direction.<sup>37</sup> Four new, multidisciplinary schools quickly emerged, in European Studies, English and American Studies, Social Studies and Physical Sciences. Two more followed in 1964: African and Asian Studies (AFRAS) and Educational Studies; and in 1965, three science schools were established: Molecular Sciences, Biological Sciences

and Applied Sciences. The last was a particular triumph, as the UGC had initially steered the fledgling institution away from applied sciences, and persuading them to reverse their decision occupied a good deal of Asa's time in the early years.<sup>38</sup>

A sense of how the new schools worked can be gauged from the approach adopted in the School of European Studies.<sup>39</sup> The aim was, as the founding dean, Martin Wight, put it, to create a European 'Greats' – a course in which European civilisation might be studied through the combined disciplines of history, philosophy and literature, in much the same way as Oxford Greats studied the civilisations of antiquity. However, an emphasis was placed throughout on the contemporary bearing of the subjects studied. Sussex students, as the prospectus declared, were 'to concern themselves with contemporary as well as inherited culture, with history in the making as well as history that is already made'.<sup>40</sup>

Accordingly, students in 'Euro' (as the school was known) began by taking two terms of Foundation Studies and offering three preliminary papers: one specialist, and two common to all studying the Arts and Social Sciences – 'Languages and Values' and 'An Introduction to History'. The first asked students to study the nature of, and justification for, the moral judgements used to underpin commentaries about contemporary society; the latter interrogated students' understanding of how historians worked, the questions they asked and why they disagreed. Students then moved on to take five papers in their major discipline and balanced these with four contextual papers from other disciplines within the school. In years two and three, tutorials and lectures were augmented with interdisciplinary seminars. As the three years went by, the student would become as independent as he or she was prepared to be.

The new formula proved attractive to academics and students alike. For lecturing staff, the Sussex system offered real freedom. In an interview with *The Daily Mail's* Nicholas Lloyd in 1964, Fulton confided that one reason so many 'household names' were attracted to Sussex was that '[t]hey can try out ideas here which they could never try in the older universities'.<sup>41</sup> The sociologist Norman Mackenzie echoed his point: 'If you want something changed or you want to teach a new course you go along and they say, "Good luck, I hope it works"'. Students were presented with similar intellectual opportunities. The university provided the outline of the map of learning but students could fill it as they saw fit. It was a point Asa addressed in the original map of learning lecture. Students, he argued, were not simply numbers to be taught, 'but



individuals who in their formative years in universities learn for themselves not only through their formal teaching but through their reading, their arguments, their broader experience, and above all through the choices which they themselves freely make'.<sup>42</sup> For students as well as staff, therefore, there was a sense in which education was a voyage of discovery. The virtue was not in arriving at some predetermined 'end point' on the map of learning, but in the nature of the journey one took towards that destination.<sup>43</sup>

There was certainly no shortage of 18-year-old students willing to embrace the new institution. Sussex benefited hugely from what Fulton described as the 'social changes brought about by the post-war loosening of the class-structure and by the new role of women in the professional and industrial life of the nation'.<sup>44</sup> In the 1963–1964 session, there were 20 applicants for each of the 350 places in Arts and Social Sciences and 10 for each place in the Sciences, a higher demand than at many established civic universities.<sup>45</sup> The rate of expansion, as Asa recalled, was 'extremely exciting' for all concerned.<sup>46</sup> Faculty, meanwhile, were recruited on an international basis, with many joining Sussex from the United States, which added to the cosmopolitan atmosphere.<sup>47</sup>

The university quickly developed a distinctive character, fostered by an interesting mix of students, the attentions of the press and its own educational internationalism. Sussex recruited students primarily from London and the south-east, and attracted a high proportion of female undergraduates.<sup>48</sup> As Carol Dyhouse records, women formed a very small proportion of the national undergraduate population at the time Sussex was founded: at the civic universities perhaps a quarter of all undergraduates were women, but at Oxford and Cambridge the rates were much lower – between 10 and 15 per cent.<sup>49</sup> Yet at Sussex, before the science schools opened, an astonishing 67 per cent of all undergraduates were women. The new, interdisciplinary structure of the degrees offered at Sussex – which, as Asa told a conference of headmistresses in 1961, gave 'new meaning to research and to undergraduation' – was an important element in this development.<sup>50</sup> From a very early stage, a stream of highly sophisticated undergraduates of both sexes began arriving at Sussex. The socialite Jay twins, daughters of Douglas Jay, the Labour front-bench politician, arrived and were famously depicted on the front cover of *Tatler* magazine, shot against the background of Sir Basil Spence's new buildings on the campus.<sup>51</sup> The sons of Robert Wagner, Mayor of New York, were other early arrivals. Commentators gushed. Sussex, said one, was 'a kind of glamorous Brighton finishing school full of pretty girls and avant-garde intellectuals';<sup>52</sup> for another,

Sussex 'might be plausibly called the rich-man's Oxford, or at least the rich girl's'.<sup>53</sup>

Publicity of this kind was a key element at Sussex in the first half of the 1960s. One of the first group of students later described the attention as 'relentless',<sup>54</sup> but for the press, Sussex had everything: 'The glitter that soon shone from Sussex', wrote Brian MacArthur, was created by the combination of 'distinguished staff', 'able students' and, crucially, 'its singularly blessed location – only an hour from London'.<sup>55</sup> Stuart Maclure concurred. The university's proximity to the capital meant that Sussex was convenient for Fleet Street and the television centre at a time when, quite simply, 'new universities are news'.<sup>56</sup> Even the university's first graduation ceremony in 1964 secured national media coverage.<sup>57</sup> It was small wonder that other universities grew tired of hearing about events at 'Balliol by the Sea'.<sup>58</sup>

The tag, which reflected both Fulton's early career as a philosophy don at Balliol and the central place of the tutorial system in Sussex's pedagogy, certainly lent the new institution an air of modernised Oxbridge glamour. However, another important element in the atmosphere at Sussex was its openness to international, and particularly American, influences. The School of Asian and African Studies, for example, was an important earnest of the university's desire to interact positively with the contemporary world. As Fulton put it: 'We of the western world belong to the smallest half of the human race, and it is of the greatest importance that more and more of our people should have a substantial acquaintance with the larger half'.<sup>59</sup> The university was determined that its engagement with sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian subcontinent should extend beyond language, literature and history to involve the whole gamut of modern social science disciplines. It quickly became embedded in Sussex's core value set, as the punchline to a newspaper story involving a former fashion model who was reading history at Sussex indicated. In July 1965, *The Times* reported that the girl, who had been a junior tennis champion, shocked the organisers of a university tennis tournament by blithely announcing that she did not expect to win as she had not left her nightclub 'until 3 o'clock this morning'. The reason, it transpired, was that she was working to earn money for a 'trek' to Africa. Sussex students had one foot in swinging London, but the other planted firmly in the problems of the modern world.<sup>60</sup>

America was also an important influence. While Sussex was never designed to be an 'American' university, and certainly not a liberal arts college,<sup>61</sup> Asa in particular welcomed transatlantic ideas. In a BBC

broadcast in 1961, for example, he emphasised that the university would use 'the new techniques of study which are being tried out in other parts of the world, notably in the United States', adding that a working undergraduate library 'on the lines of the Lamont library at Harvard' was another desideratum.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, he often drew comparisons between the different ideas prevailing in British and American universities, whether that focused on the funding available for new initiatives or the state of postgraduate education.<sup>63</sup> By the early 1970s, postgraduates represented 25 per cent of the student population, 'a figure which would raise no eyebrows in any American university of standing', he noted, 'but which raises many controversies, let alone eyebrows, in this country'.<sup>64</sup> The foundation of the School of English and American Studies and the funds given by the American government to bring Professor Marcus Cunliffe from Manchester to Sussex in 1965 to oversee postgraduate education in American Studies, underscored the connection.<sup>65</sup> America seemed a natural reference point for Sussex, just as Sussex did for many Americans.<sup>66</sup>

In 1966, Sussex was at the top of its game. Basking in favourable press coverage and wallowing in the plenty of abundant applications, the new institution had a sense of purpose, almost of mission. At the heart of the operation, as one recent historian of Sussex has emphasised, was the relationship between the vice-chancellor and his deputy – 'Fulton excelling as the great publicist for what was being done while Briggs, with wonderful imagination and intense determination, drove forward the making and development of Sussex'.<sup>67</sup> Asa himself was no slouch in publicising the great experiment at Sussex; moreover, the very fact of his presence played its part in convincing other brilliant men to throw in their lot with Sussex – a not insignificant gamble, as Asa himself once remarked.<sup>68</sup> Asa's contribution to the 'infant legend' of Sussex was thus vital; when Sir John Fulton retired in 1966, there can have been few who doubted that there was only one man to replace him.<sup>69</sup>

## Vice-Chancellor

Asa took over the vice-chancellorship of Sussex at a time when higher education in Britain was growing very quickly.<sup>70</sup> As noted above, the Robbins Committee recommended an expansion of the system to 200,000 places by 1970; in the event, this proved to be an underestimate of the provision required. Numbers attending university more than doubled: in 1962, 113,000 full-time students were registered at university; by 1967 the figure stood at 183,000, and by 1972 235,000.<sup>71</sup>

A higher proportion of 18-year-olds was entering higher education than ever: whereas some 7 per cent of the relevant age group attended university in 1961–1962, the figure had risen to 12 per cent in 1967, and peaked in 1972–1973 at 14 per cent.<sup>72</sup>

The environment in which universities operated in the later 1960s was increasingly challenging.<sup>73</sup> During the early 1960s, they enjoyed political support and public approval: it seemed that universities could change not simply Britain, but the world. In the late 1960s, the dream turned sour: as the prosperity promised by the original investment in higher education failed to materialise, and the students produced so expensively by the new system took their new-found radicalism on to the streets, public opinion moved sharply against the universities and funding became scarce. ‘Years of plenty’ they may have seemed in retrospect; contemporary commentaries were fraught with anxiety about the deteriorating position of higher education.<sup>74</sup>

Throughout the period of Asa’s vice-chancellorship, financial considerations certainly dominated discussions. ‘I have spent the whole year accounting, planning and organising’, he lamented to the university’s court in December 1968.<sup>75</sup> He took over as the 1967–1972 quinquennial settlement was coming into force. It was not wholly satisfactory from a Sussex perspective. While overall levels of government expenditure were planned to rise, strict limits on student recruitment severely limited room for manoeuvre, since funding followed student numbers. In Sussex’s case, they were to be allowed only 500 extra students over the planning period – a smaller expansion, as Asa noted, than Sussex had experienced each year to date.<sup>76</sup>

Towards the end of the 1967–1972 quinquennium, Asa voiced the hope that the next funding period would allow Sussex to resume progress towards a target of 5,000 students. The 1972–1977 settlement, however, was even stricter than that which preceded it. Not only were strict limits placed on numbers – Sussex was now expected to target a total of just 4,400 students by 1982<sup>77</sup> – but the unit of resource per student was cut by 2 per cent.<sup>78</sup> The 1972 settlement left the university 14 per cent short of the sum required to fund proposed developments.<sup>79</sup> However, worse was to follow in 1973 when the turmoil visited on the British economy by spiralling oil prices, the three-day week and massive industrial unrest caused the government to row back from the 1972 settlement and cut funding again.<sup>80</sup> ‘The 1973 settlement is very difficult to live with’, Asa admitted to the university’s court. The consequent financial straightjacket affected all aspects of the university’s life. Staff to student ratios began to deteriorate, imperilling the tutorial teaching

that had been Sussex's hallmark since 1961;<sup>81</sup> management became a matter of 'expedients as much as of plans'.<sup>82</sup> The background to Asa's vice-chancellorship was thus one of financial constraint and, towards its end, national crisis. As the Chair of UGC, Sir Frederick Dainton, remarked, 1974–1975 was the worst year endured by British universities since 1931.<sup>83</sup>

Asa's response to this sustained period of austerity was to oversee a programme of internal restructuring. Sussex had grown beyond the 3,000 student mark in 1967–1968. It had taken just six years for the university to become, as Asa remarked, 'a community bigger... than centuries-old Sussex villages'.<sup>84</sup> The expansion, however, presented the university with organisational challenges: it was not possible to run an institution of 3,000 students in the same 'simple direct and informal' way that had sufficed in 1961.<sup>85</sup> Accordingly, the university began 'to examine some of its initial assumptions in the light of experience and to extend its innovations in the same spirit'.<sup>86</sup> In the final year of Fulton's vice-chancellorship, a firm of consultants, McKinsey, was commissioned to produce an analysis of how the inner workings of the institution might be streamlined to allow good government in the new circumstances. Their report was waiting on Asa's desk when he took over the role, and during the next few years became a point of reference for institutional change.

In the years of Asa's vice-chancellorship, financial, administrative and executive power was decentralised. The schools were given more influence, but strategic coordination was provided by over-arching committees looking after Arts and Social Sciences, Sciences, and Education respectively. At the same time, 'subject groups' of people within the same discipline were given a formal place within the structure of the university for the first time – and schools charged with ensuring that the development of disciplines was attended to in the planning process.<sup>87</sup> This was not, Asa insisted, a retreat into 'departmentalism', merely a recognition that since a subject such as history was taught in at least four separate schools, there needed to be a place where a unified disciplinary perspective could be taken.<sup>88</sup> The devolution of power to the schools was balanced by a strengthening of the vice-chancellor's office. A new planning officer was employed to improve institutional decision-making, a development officer to oversee the implementation and coordination of new projects, and an information officer to deal with internal and external communications. More generally, administrative functions within the university were defined more closely and overlapping functions (especially within committees) cut back.

If the structures of the university changed, the central educational ethos remained the same. Again and again, Asa returned in his public pronouncements to a series of principles: the need to break down barriers between disciplines, the need for innovation, the importance of research and the connections between research and teaching. He was determined that Sussex should not simply be a university which pioneered during its early years – ‘an interesting historical case study of Britain in the 1960s’<sup>89</sup> – but that it should remain innovative and ambitious.

As the financial situation deteriorated in the 1970s, he argued passionately that there was a greater need than ever for investment in research. Sussex had already developed a strong research profile. Between 1968/1969 and 1972/1973, one-fifth of the university’s annual income came from research funding – a higher proportion than that of any other British university. Areas such as Education and Social Studies; Physical Sciences; Biological Sciences; Technology and Engineering performed particularly well.<sup>90</sup> He regarded the Conservatives’ slashing of university budgets in the early 1970s with dismay. In times of ‘conflict, uncertainty and doubt’ he told the university’s court in December 1974, when ‘the most fundamental issues concerning human values’ were in dispute, institutions such as Sussex were essential.<sup>91</sup> ‘We need new knowledge not only about science and technology but about human affairs’, he said. The role of a university, he maintained, was to provide guidance ‘in fields of that kind before and not after they have become matters of public concern’. But such a role required funding. ‘In the United States of America’, he concluded, not without a hint of frustration, ‘these resources are always forthcoming’.<sup>92</sup>

If finance formed one perpetual source of anxiety, student militancy provided another. In the institution’s early years, Sussex students were almost notable for their lack of interest in politics. This is not to say that there were no tensions between the student body and the institution. In 1963, for example, seven students, four of them women, were rusticated for a fortnight after staying out beyond midnight or having had other students in their rooms after 11pm.<sup>93</sup> The story appeared as an ‘unofficial’ leak in the student magazine, the *Wine Press*, and the university responded by seizing all copies of the publication. However, even faced with this provocation, the fledgling students’ union decided not to take any action. The prevailing tone of the university was one of educational radicalism, not student militancy. As a student interviewed by the *Guardian* remarked in 1964, ‘Here there are a damn sight better things

to do than play petty bolshies. Not with Fulton [then vice-chancellor], he's marvellous.<sup>94</sup>

One of the most important qualities Asa brought to the vice-chancellorship, as his predecessor noted, was his age: he was, said Fulton, 'poised perfectly to bridge the generations'.<sup>95</sup> In his first address to the university's court, Asa addressed the generational point directly:

Universities are central places in modern society, where the generations meet and must meet. We seek to make the meeting as meaningful as we can, allowing scope for dialogue between dissent and authority as well as for the acquisition of skills and specialist knowledge. Society, I would suggest, if it is to be an adventurous and exploratory society, is dependent on such a dialogue.<sup>96</sup>

At Sussex, academic faculty and students sought to 'work together as one community'.

It was not to be long, however, before student militancy presented a challenge to the cohesion of the community, and the replacement of 'dialogue' with something more aggressive. The new tone of student politics was closely bound up with hostility to the Vietnam War. In 1966, Prime Minister Harold Wilson faced a demonstration from Sussex students as he arrived in Brighton to collect an honorary doctorate; students chanted 'Hey, hey, L. B. J.; how many kids have you killed today' and, rather more wittily, bore aloft banners with the slogan 'Wilson – doctor of double-talk'.<sup>97</sup> A more serious incident took place the following year when a US Embassy official was spattered with red paint on a visit to the campus – an event for which two students, Michael Klein and Sean Linehan, were disciplined.<sup>98</sup> And in 1973, students prevented the Frank G. Thompson Professor of Government at Harvard University, Samuel P. Huntington, from speaking on campus.<sup>99</sup> It was believed – not least by Noam Chomsky – that an article that Huntington wrote for *Foreign Affairs* in 1968 had offered the rationale for much of America's strategy in Vietnam.

Between these headline-grabbing episodes there were other incidents where students prevented – or attempted to prevent – people speaking on campus, including, on one occasion, Asa himself.<sup>100</sup> In March 1970, he 'defied 500 stamping and screaming students' to give a lecture commemorating the 100th anniversary of the 1870 Education Act.<sup>101</sup> The cause of the protest was the students' suspicion regarding the nature of the information held about them in files maintained by the

university – an issue which swept through British universities in the Spring of 1970. Asa insisted on giving the lecture and then spent an hour answering students' questions, reassuring them that nothing of a political nature was contained in the files.

Incidents such as this were seized upon by the press, and from the late 1960s a steady stream of stories about Sussex students engaging in political action of one sort or another appeared in the pages of newspapers such as *The Times*. The controversy generated by the action of radical student minorities placed Asa in a delicate position, and the position he adopted in the first year of these disturbances is worth considering in detail as it summarised his analysis of the problem as a whole.

Reflecting on the events of the year at the university's court in December 1968, he said that universities were by their nature places that some groups in society would not understand; indeed, some of the things said and done in universities would inevitably 'affront people whose horizons are narrow'.<sup>102</sup> The universities' task of appealing to the public, however, was made harder by the nature of hard-core protestors, 'small groups of people who rely on slogans rather than ideas, who are keener to destroy than they are to create and who are fundamentally totalitarian in their approach to personalities and to issues'. With respect to the events of 1968, he felt that press coverage had focused on 'minority fringes and on the drama of university conflict', thereby exaggerating the 'turbulence'. The consequence was that though British universities were less disturbed than those of most other countries, 'the reactions against universities and students in this country – and, not least, locally – were sharper than they were in countries where there had been extremely serious and fundamental disorder'. He concluded with a statement that well encapsulates the view from the top:

As I frequently said in public during the course of the last year, the Vice-Chancellor of the University is not in the position where he can speak fully and immediately on behalf of all sections of a community of 4500 people. He is placed in a situation where he must seek at all times to guide and to lead the community, while allowing within it the free interplay of ideas and interests.

He expressed very similar statements after the damaging Huntington affair five years later.<sup>103</sup>

The radicalism of students at Sussex, or anywhere else in Britain come to that, can certainly be exaggerated.<sup>104</sup> The rest of the student body at Sussex was at pains to distance itself from the paint-throwing incident



in 1968, for example.<sup>105</sup> And as Nick Thomas notes, a Gallup poll of students at Sussex and Cambridge conducted in May 1968 revealed a sharp distinction between ‘domestic’ problems and those of a more political nature. The poll found that 60 per cent of students at Sussex were sympathetic to students who protested about domestic issues such as the lack of student representation in university affairs and that 67 per cent felt ‘student protests and demonstrations serve a useful purpose’.<sup>106</sup> However, far fewer had taken part in demonstrations against the Vietnam War or nuclear weapons – just 25 per cent and 14 per cent respectively. Altogether 40 per cent of the 273 Sussex students interviewed claimed to have been involved in some kind of protest in the 12 months prior to the survey.

Despite polls of this sort, the public reaction to increased student radicalism was, as Asa said, violent. Student radicals were denounced as ‘communists’ or ‘Maoists’.<sup>107</sup> The readiness with which people reached for these terms hints at the continuing salience of Cold War cultural tensions. The new universities in which people had invested not only money but also hope had been part of the antidote to British vulnerability in the new Cold War. Yet, far from working an economic miracle which returned the nation to prosperity and a place of leadership in the free world, they seemed only to produce students who took to the streets in protest, ‘playing bolshies’.

At all events, the public mood changed sharply in the later 1960s. As Harold Perkin wrote, ‘[L]ocal people were scandalized by the sight of well-heeled, middle class students demonstrating for rights which they themselves did not have in their factories and offices, at their expense as tax and rate payers’.<sup>108</sup> Newspapers abounded with angry letters suggesting that militant students were ‘not fit to study at the taxpayers’ expense’.<sup>109</sup> At Sussex, the Conservative MP for Arundel and Shoreham, Captain Henry Kerby, resigned his position as a member of the university’s court, concerned at the ‘sinister trend’ of ‘so-called “student power” manifesting itself in British universities’.<sup>110</sup> In his letter of resignation, he cited the Gallup Poll’s revelation that 40 per cent of Sussex students had taken part in demonstrations in the previous 12 months, and the ‘shocking figures’ that revealed the ‘absolute majorities’ opposed to the Smith regime in Rhodesia and American involvement in Vietnam. Such views, he continued, underscored the perspective adopted by Enoch Powell, who considered that too much money was being spent on British universities: in the interests of serious students ‘and of our nation at large’, he said, this radical behaviour must be reined in.

Asa's career at Sussex was thus full of challenges. In his final speech to the university's court in December 1975, he said:

those that were involved in Sussex from the beginning know that there is already an enormous gulf between 1961 and 1975 . . . . In 1961 there was enthusiasm about the possibilities and implications of higher education in this country . . . . Now there are doubts and uncertainties.<sup>111</sup>

Politically and socially, the nation's love affair with the universities cooled.

## Conclusion

In 1977, shortly after moving to Oxford, Asa was invited by the *Daily Mail* to share with readers ten 'truths' that life had taught him.<sup>112</sup> As well as revealing that he could do without time – 'I can take it up like a camel takes water', he said, allowing 'great bursts of work followed by complete relaxation' – he also laid bare his fundamental philosophy: 'Leap in the dark rather than stick in the mud'. It was an approach that summed up the project to 'redraw the map of learning' at Sussex.

In the late 1950s, the university sector became the focus of a series of post-war preoccupations and aspirations – the hope of prosperity, a desire for social mobility, perhaps a dash of Cold War anxiety. These elements all played their part in creating the Sussex that opened its doors in 1961, but all could arguably have been met simply by increasing the size of existing universities. At Sussex, there was an added ingredient, something new – an experiment not simply in educating a larger proportion of school leavers, but of educating them in a new, more holistic way. The map of learning was to be redrawn.

The university that opened its doors in October 1961 was thus fired by a range of highly innovative ideas and impulses. And it flourished. By 1975, Sussex enjoyed a first class academic reputation and attracted large numbers of very bright students. The schools were flourishing and the notion of interdisciplinary education had taken root. There was a thriving postgraduate community and the university's research culture was strong. Whilst Sussex was no longer quite the darling of the press it had been in the early 1960s when the higher educational experiment was still new, the university was still an object of intense interest to overseas visitors seeking guidance on how to found new universities of their own.<sup>113</sup> At the centre of the project sat Asa, at the height of his powers and influence.<sup>114</sup>

There were undoubtedly problems, too. Student radicalism reared its head in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and it was perhaps inevitable that the university should find itself in the headlines: as Asa reflected gloomily, 'What happens at Sussex always receives more attention than what happens in other places'.<sup>115</sup> For someone who tirelessly championed the image of Sussex as a community of learning, dealing with people who believed in 'slogans rather than ideas' and preferred direct action to dialogue was an unwelcome challenge. However, as he put it in his final address to the university's court before departing for Oxford: 'I have never romanticised undergraduates or postgraduates while I have been Vice-Chancellor nor have I ever generalised about them in the terminology of "youth" or "the young", and I have always tried to work closely with them as individuals and as groups whatever the difficulties'.<sup>116</sup> Sussex survived the headlines.

The foundation of Sussex was thus a matter of challenges as well as triumphs. But, as Asa remarked in another of the truths he shared with the readers of the *Daily Mail*, '[t]o succeed in life, you need physical vim, creative impulse, mental and physical staying power and above all you must be willing to take risks'.<sup>117</sup> Sussex was the beneficiary of his willingness to make the leap.

## Notes

1. 'New Vice-Chancellor of Sussex', *Times*, 30 May 1966.
2. *Address by the Vice-Chancellor at the meeting of the Court of the University on 16 December 1966*, p. 4 (hereafter *Court*).
3. Asa Briggs sat on the UGC 1958–1966: Briggs, 'A Founding Father Reflects', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 45 (1991), pp. 312–17.
4. Parliamentary Papers (1962–1963), Cd. 2154, Committee on Higher Education, p. 8, para. 31; Michael Shattock, 'Demography and Social Class: The Fluctuating Demand for Higher Education in Britain', *European Journal of Education*, 16 (1981), p.385. As this implies, the growth agenda for higher education long pre-dated Robbins: Harold Perkin, 'University Planning in Britain in the 1960s', *Higher Education*, 1 (1972), pp. 111–20.
5. Rebecca S. Lowen, *Creating the Cold War University: The Transformation of Stanford* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 6; Roger L. Geiger, *Research and Relevant Knowledge: American Research Universities Since World War II*, 2nd edn. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2008), p. xiii.
6. 'Balliol by the Sea Faces Its Future', *Times*, 16 August 1961.
7. Michael Sanderson, 'Higher Education in the Post War Years', *Contemporary Record*, 5 (1991), p. 418.
8. Perkin, 'University Planning in Britain in the 1960s', p. 116.
9. Sanderson, 'Higher Education in the Post War Years', p. 418.
10. H. Perkin, 'Higher Education in Britain', p. 116; *Parliamentary Papers*, Committee on Higher Education, pp. 4–5, para. 16.

11. Sanderson 'Higher Education in the Post War Years', p. 417; Jean Boccock, Lewis Baston, Peter Scott and David Smith, 'American Influence on British Higher Education: Science, Technology, and the Problem of University Expansion, 1945–1963', *Minerva*, 41 (2003), pp. 327–46.
12. Michael Shattock, 'Introduction', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 45 (1991), pp. 286–87.
13. Sanderson 'Higher Education in the Post War Years', p. 417.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 422. But see Gary McCulloch, 'A Technocratic Vision: The Ideology of School Science Reform in Britain in the 1950s', *Social Studies of Science*, 18 (1988), pp. 703–24, for an astute analysis of where this expansion was taking place – and why.
15. *Times*, 21 February 1958.
16. Sanderson 'Higher Education in the Post War Years', p. 418.
17. *Parliamentary Papers*, Committee on Higher Education, pp. 4–5 para. 16.
18. *Ibid.*, Committee on Higher Education, pp. 50–1, para. 139, Table 21.
19. Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War: The State, Propaganda and Consensus* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006); *idem*, 'The Politics of Cold War Culture', *Cold War Studies*, 3 (2001), pp. 59–76.
20. Matthew Cragoe, '"We Like Local Patriotism": The Conservative Party and the Discourse of Decentralisation, 1947–1951', *English Historical Review*, 122 (2007), pp. 965–85.
21. Hugh Bochel, 'One Nation Conservatism and Social Policy, 1951–1964', *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 18 (2010), pp. 123–34.
22. *Times*, 11 November 1961.
23. 'Education Key to Future, Says Mr Macmillan', *Times*, 12 June 1963.
24. David Edgerton, 'The "White Heat" Revisited: The British Government and Technology in the 1960s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 7 (1996), p. 56.
25. Stuart Maclure, 'The "With-It" University?', *The Listener*, 25 February 1965.
26. 'Fulton Brought Life to University', *Times*, 26 June 1967.
27. Anne Scott-James, 'Underway: The Great Experiment', *Daily Mail*, 24 May 1962. The other members of the quartet were J. P. Corbett (philosophy), David Daiches (English) and Martin Wight (international relations).
28. Asa Briggs, *The Map of Learning* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1961).
29. Briggs, 'A Founding Father Reflects', pp. 317–18.
30. He referred to Bacon in *The Map of Learning*, pp. 6–8. This formulation comes from a reworking of these ideas in 'A New Approach to University Degrees', *Times*, 24 May 1962.
31. Briggs, *The Map of Learning*, pp. 10–11.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 28–9.
34. Harold Silver, 'The Making of a Missionary: Eric Ashby and Technology', *History of Education*, 31 (2002), pp. 557–70.
35. Brian Simon, 'The Student Movement in England and Wales during the 1930s', *History of Education*, 16 (1987), pp. 200–3.
36. Briggs, 'A Founding Father Reflects', p. 321; W. G. Stone, 'University Commentary from Brighton', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 12 (1958), pp. 223–27.
37. *Court*, 1966, p. 4.

38. *Times*, 13 May 1957.
39. This account is based on Martin Wight, 'European Studies' in David Daiches (ed.), *The Idea of a New University* (London: Deutsch, 1964).
40. Quoted in Michael Beloff, *The Plateglass Universities* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), p. 89.
41. 'Top Marks for Brighton's Baby', *Daily Mail*, 1 June 1965.
42. Briggs, 'Map of Learning', p. 29.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
44. *Court*, 7 December 1964, p. 5.
45. *Court*, 7 December 1964, p. 5; *Daily Mail*, 24 May 1962. Some applicants were said to place Sussex above Oxford and Cambridge: *Times*, 11 June 1963.
46. Briggs, 'A Founding Father Reflects', p. 323.
47. *Court*, 8 December 1967, p. 9.
48. *Times*, 12 October 1962; *Court*, 15 December 1972.
49. Carol Dyhouse, 'Bringing on the Girls', in Gray (ed.), *Making the Future*, pp. 123–25.
50. 'Sussex to Adopt Tutorial System', *Times*, 10 June 1961.
51. *Tatler*, 15 July 1964. The following week, the union newspaper ran a front cover with two boys posing as the Jays: Amanda Wade, 'Very Heaven: Being at Sussex in the Sixties', in Fred Gray (ed.), *Making the Future: A History of the University of Sussex* (Brighton: University of Sussex, 2011), p. 114.
52. Anthony Sampson, quoted in Dyhouse, 'Bringing on the Girls', p. 123.
53. Beloff, *Plateglass Universities*, p. 80.
54. Anne Donnelly, 'University of Sussex at 40', *University of Sussex Bulletin*, 12 October 2001.
55. 'Fulton Brought Life to University', *Times*, 26 June 1967.
56. Maclure, 'The "With-It" University?'.
57. Donnelly, 'University of Sussex at 40'.
58. The hostility of other universities towards Sussex was a common theme: Beloff, *Plateglass Universities*, p. 81.
59. *Court*, 7 December 1964. Fulton had direct experience of university organisation in Hong Kong. See Grace Ai-Ling Chou, 'Confucian Cultural Education on the Chinese Periphery: Hong Kong's New Asia College, 1946–1976' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Hawaii, 1976).
60. *Times*, 14 July 1965.
61. Briggs, 'A Founding Father Reflects', p. 319.
62. Asa Briggs, 'A University for Today', *The Listener*, 7 September 1961.
63. *Court*, 14 December 1973.
64. *Ibid.*, 13 December 1974.
65. *Court*, 7 December 1964.
66. Martin Trow, 'The Idea of a New University', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 19 (1965), pp. 162–72.
67. Gray, 'Introduction', *Making the Future*, p. 7.
68. Maclure, 'The "With-It" University?'. Asa's own account of his decision to join can be found in Briggs, 'A Founding Father Reflects', pp. 317–18.
69. Maclure, 'The "With-It" University?'.
70. Peter Scott, 'British Universities, 1968–1978', *Paedagogica Europaea*, 13 (1978), pp. 32–5.

71. John Sizer, 'An Analysis of Trends Impacting Upon UGC and British Universities, 1961-May 1979', *Financial Accountability and Management*, 3 (1987), p. 9.
72. Michael Shattock, 'Demography and Social Class', p. 384.
73. Harold Perkin, 'Dream, Myth and Reality: New Universities in England, 1960-1990', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 45, 4 (1991), p. 294.
74. Steve Pavey, 'Managing the Money', in Gray (ed.), *Rethinking the Future*, p. 93; Scott, 'British Universities', pp. 29-39.
75. *Court*, 6 December 1968, p. 6.
76. *Court*, 8 December 1967, p. 4.
77. *Court*, 12 December 1975, p. 1.
78. Charles F. Carter, 'Logistic Developments in British Higher Education 1972-1973', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 28 (1974), p. 321. The actual rate of increase per student 1967-1972 was c. 5 per cent as universities took on additional students. Sussex, for example, had 3,400 students by 1969-1970, as against a target of 3,000: *Court*, 12 December 1969 (unpaginated).
79. *Court*, 13 December 1974, Treasurer's Report, p. 7.
80. Scott, 'British Universities, 1968-1978', pp. 36-8.
81. *Court*, 14 December 1973 (unpaginated).
82. *Ibid.*, 13 December 1974, p. 1.
83. *Ibid.*, 12 December 1975, p. 5.
84. *Ibid.*, 15 December 1972 (unpaginated).
85. *Ibid.*, 12 December 1969 (unpaginated).
86. *Ibid.*, 6 December 1968 (unpaginated).
87. *Ibid.*, 6 December 1968, p. 7.
88. *Ibid.*, 12 December 1969 (unpaginated).
89. *Ibid.*, 12 December 1969 (unpaginated).
90. *Ibid.*, 12 December 1975, p. 3.
91. *Ibid.*, 13 December 1974 (unpaginated).
92. *Ibid.*, 14 December 1973 (unpaginated).
93. *Times*, 8 June 1963.
94. Tom Wills, 'Student Radicalism', in Gray (ed.) *Making the Future*, p. 148.
95. *Court*, 16 December 1966, p. 4.
96. *Ibid.*, 8 December 1967, pp. 9-10.
97. *Daily Mail*, 16 July 1966.
98. Wills, 'Student Radicalism', pp. 151-52.
99. Rob Skinner, 'The Radical University', in Gray (ed.), *Making the Future*, pp. 146-48.
100. *Times*, 19 February 1970; letter of Dorothy Woodman, *The Times*, 11 March 1970; *Times*, 11 March 1971; *Times*, 1 November 1975.
101. *Times*, 6 March 1970.
102. This paragraph is based on *Court*, 6 December 1968, pp. 8-10.
103. 14 December 1973. By this time the Family Reform Act (1969), which lowered the age of majority to 18, had removed the university's role in *loco parentis*. *Court*, 14 December 1973. For the impact of this in British universities, Carol Dyhouse, 'Troubled Identities: Gender and Status in the History of the Mixed College in English Universities since 1945', *Women's History Review*, 12 (2003), pp. 179-82.
104. Scott, 'British Universities, 1968-1978', pp. 40-1.

105. Letter of Tom Macan, *Times*, 8 March 1968. Macan went on to be Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the British Virgin Islands 2002–2006.
106. This paragraph is based on Nick Thomas, 'Challenging the Myths of the 1960s: The Case of Student Protest in Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 13 (2002), pp. 282–23.
107. *Times*, 19 March 1969; letter of Dorothy Woodman, *ibid.*, 11 March 1970.
108. Perkin, 'Dream Myth and Reality', p. 303.
109. Letter of W. Blake, *Times*, 3 December 1968.
110. *Times*, 2 July 1968.
111. *Court*, 12 December 1975, p. 4.
112. 'Asa Briggs: Intelligence Is Never Easy to Live With', *Daily Mail*, 27 January 1977.
113. *Court*, 12 December 1969 (unpaginated).
114. Briggs, 'A Founding Father Reflects', p. 311.
115. *Court*, 14 December 1973 (unpaginated).
116. *Ibid.*, 12 December 1975, p. 4.
117. *Daily Mail*, 27 January 1977.

# 11

## Asa Briggs and the Opening Up of the Open University

*Daniel Weinbren*

Championed by individual supporters and small groups of enthusiasts, the survival of the Open University was heavily reliant on a handful of people in positions of power. In addition to advocates, to support thousands of students and be innovative in the nine different ways identified by Professor of Education William Campbell Stewart in his survey of post-war higher education in Britain, the Open University also required the construction and maintenance of sophisticated structures.<sup>1</sup> An important designer and enthusiast was Asa Briggs. He was a member of the Planning Committee of the Open University 1967–1969 and the chair of its working group on students and curriculum. He went on to become the Chancellor of the Open University between 1978 and 1994 and he also taught at the university. Lord Briggs was awarded a Fellowship of the Open University in 1999. His understanding of the Open University was informed by a clear historical framework and a vision of the future but also by personal engagement at the level of teaching and committee work, by his inventive ideas about learning, by his connections to well-established networks (which enabled him to help resolve disputes) and by his experience of work on the University Grants Committee and at the universities of Sussex and Leeds.

During the two decades following the Second World War, reports from committees chaired by Sir Samuel Gurney-Dixon in 1954, Sir Geoffrey Crowther in 1959 and John Newsom in 1963 suggested that poor educational structures resulted in many people, adults and children, failing to realise their potential.<sup>2</sup> Interest in post-compulsory education grew, and there was a wider acceptance of the idea that provision for those who might in other circumstances have attended university. There was also cross-party acceptance that democracy would benefit from expenditure on education. There was ‘a sustained attempt, at all levels of



education, to engineer greater educational and social equality' and the years 1954–1963, 'the high point of popular belief on the state system of education', witnessed considerable expansion of the higher education sector.<sup>3</sup> Some universities were created from university colleges. The University of Exeter received a royal charter in 1955, Manchester College of Science and Technology was awarded a royal charter in 1956 (becoming UMIST), and in 1957 University College Leicester became the University of Leicester. Seven new universities were planned, including Sussex, and there were proposals for the expansion of places in colleges of education. In addition, there was a swift acceptance by the government of the Robbins Report (1963), which recommended that the percentage of 18-year-olds attending university be raised from 8 per cent to 17 per cent.

Although it was influenced by these developments, the Open University was different from the other universities of the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Many were 'created entirely through local initiative by proud, entrepreneurial and dynamic local government executives'.<sup>5</sup> For example, in 1958, when Brighton Corporation's scheme for a university was approved, it had been discussed in the town for almost half a century.<sup>6</sup> There were plans for the University of East Anglia dating back to 1918 and the seeds of Warwick University were sown in the 1940s.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the Open University had roots in the traditions of part-time education for adults, which had developed from the 18th century: in the correspondence courses associated with the rapid industrialisation of the 19th century and in university extension initiatives which started in the 1870s. Its origins also lay in 20th-century precedents such as sandwich courses, summer schools, radio and television broadcasts and programmed learning. However, the Open University was not part of the national plan developed by the University Grants Committee in collaboration with the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, local authorities and academics.<sup>8</sup> Neither was it the subject of significant consultation or lobbying by educational or local authorities. The universities of Kent and Essex could draw on Colchester and Canterbury for support. However, Milton Keynes, where the Open University was to be based, was only formally designated as a town in 1967, and it could offer little except the site to the Open University. Instead, a handful of innovators in positions of power were crucial for the creation of the Open University.

On 8 September 1963, in an address to a Labour Party rally in Glasgow Concert Hall, the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition, Harold Wilson, proposed what he later admitted was an 'inchoate idea' for 'the creation of a new educational trust'.<sup>9</sup> Supported by broadcasting time and

government assistance this 'University of the Air' would 'cater for a wide variety of potential students [including] technologists who perhaps left school at sixteen'.<sup>10</sup> Wilson developed his idea in a speech made a few days later to the Labour Party conference. He did not consult colleagues and it was not party policy. Indeed, he later claimed that he had only written an outline in April of that year.<sup>11</sup> He sought 'to provide an opportunity for those, who, for one reason or another, have not been able to take advantage of higher education'.<sup>12</sup> A university built on the 'white heat of technological revolution' (to quote another part of this speech) would not be associated with the dreaming spires of the university where he was educated (Oxford) but with scientific modernity and the reversal of economic decline. According to the Conservative-leaning *Spectator* magazine, Wilson was directing Labour's policies away from ideas of a just society and a concern for the quality of life and towards economic laissez-faire, expansion and 'a society of technocratic privilege'.<sup>13</sup> Wilson linked the Open University to a group that Mike Savage has identified as emerging during this period: aspirant, technocratic, scientific intellectuals who had a 'nascent technical identity'.<sup>14</sup> In restating 'socialism in terms of the scientific revolution', as he put it, and linking automation to the case of socialism, Wilson presented service industries, such as universities, as being of economic importance. He drew parallels between the production of knowledge and the production of raw materials. This was not how universities had conventionally been considered. It reflected relatively a set of discursive practices which was developed in the 1960s.<sup>15</sup> Insofar as both men argued that social progress could be achieved by investment in research, particularly in science and technology, Wilson echoed a speech made a year earlier by President John F. Kennedy. Kennedy had committed the USA to putting a man on the moon during the 1960s.<sup>16</sup> Eventually opened only a few days after the first humans trod on the moon in 1969, the Open University would become, according to one commentator, 'a tacit hymn of praise to the generosity of space and its exploration'.<sup>17</sup> Harold Wilson's proposals for cost-effective, modern and flexible standardised training for adults linked Labour to higher education, economic regeneration, increasing productivity, the elimination of social inequalities and the promotion of social justice.

In 1964 Wilson became prime minister and appointed Jennie Lee as Minister of the Arts, charged with the responsibility of planting the roots of his notion of a 'university of the air' firmly in the ground. She created and, unusually for a minister, chaired an advisory committee. This contained five vice-chancellors, the leaders of two education

authorities, John Sculpham, Controller of Educational Broadcasting at the BBC, who was working on his own plans, Harold Wiltshire, from Nottingham University extramural department, Lord Fulton, former Vice-Chancellor, University of Sussex, and Norman MacKenzie, a lecturer at Sussex appointed by its Dean of the School of Social Studies, Asa Briggs.<sup>18</sup> Asa Briggs called this 'essentially a political committee'. He was not a member but he proposed to MacKenzie 'that he ought to serve on this committee'.<sup>19</sup> It has been argued that the 1966 University of the Air White Paper was 'influenced by MacKenzie's visionary ideas'.<sup>20</sup> These emphasised the value of technology and multimedia tools for education, expression and communication.<sup>21</sup> In attendance at the advisory committee were representatives from the Department of Education and Science, the University Grants Committee, officials and officers of the Ministry of Technology and of the Scottish Education Department. It had a brief remit: 'To consider the educational functions and content of a University of the Air as outlined in a speech made by Mr Harold Wilson in Glasgow on 8 September 1963'. Labour had a tiny Parliamentary majority and the committee was asked to report swiftly. Asa Briggs felt that the committee was 'of fundamental importance to the whole concept and the subsequent development'.<sup>22</sup> The White Paper based on its work was published in February 1966. This enabled Labour to enter the general election campaign of that year with a clear commitment to a 'university of the air'. Jennie Lee's role was later recognised by Asa Briggs, who called her:

the real heroine of the story, resolute, determined and able to confront Labour party leaders who were not committed as she was to creating a real university of quality... no one but Jennie, backed by [Lord Arnold] Goodman – and, just behind the scenes by Harold Wilson – could have done it.<sup>23</sup>

Others came to similar conclusions about Jennie Lee. Michael Young felt that she was the 'one person' who built the Open University, while Clive Ponting concluded that although Wilson was 'determined' he was also 'deferential towards Jennie Lee'.<sup>24</sup>

Lee had been an undergraduate at Edinburgh University in the 1920s and it was perhaps this experience, and her determination to beat the established order at its own game, to 'outsnob the snobs', as she put it, that led her to create an advisory committee which did not include representatives from the principal university providers of adult education. She looked to conventional approaches when she spoke of her idea of

an open university. Her late spouse, Aneurin Bevan, had become a miner on leaving elementary school and had received little formal education, though he noted in 1952 how he valued 'superior educational opportunities'. She, also from a mining background, mentioned him when she spoke of the origins of the Open University, recalling how they both knew 'that there were people in the mining villages who left school at 14 or 15 who had first-class intellects'.<sup>25</sup> Harold Wilson has been said to have conceptualised the Open University in terms of the 'mechanics institutes of the nineteenth century and the technical colleges of this, speckled all over by the marks of the new technology'.<sup>26</sup> However, the controller of the BBC television service, 1961–1963, Stuart Hood, called the concept of an open university a

historical fossil from the days of the Workers' Educational Association and the National Council of Labour Colleges [its supporters were] obsessed with the days when bright boys like Aneurin Bevan could not obtain an education commensurate with their gifts.<sup>27</sup>

Asa Briggs felt that the Open University's first vice-chancellor, Walter Perry, was also 'conservative [...] in his attitude towards the curriculum'. This meant that he was not only able 'to win Jennie's support but also, gradually and slowly, to get some people in other universities to support him'.<sup>28</sup> However, conventional thinking about pedagogy by these decision-makers may not have supported the novel designs for teaching, analytics, monitoring and assessment with which the Open University later became associated. It required others to create its modular academic structures, credit accumulation and transfer, its accreditation of prior learning, use of multimedia learning technologies and systems for student guidance and support.

Following the 1966 general election Jennie Lee was once more given the Open University brief by Wilson, and in September 1967 she appointed a planning committee for the university. Its remit was to work out a comprehensive plan for a university, as outlined in the White Paper, and to draft a charter and statutes. The planning committee, which first met on 23 October 1967, connected people from local government and adult education with those from universities. It included five vice-chancellors, the principal of a polytechnic, the leaders of two education authorities and Asa Briggs. Briggs focused on ensuring that the curriculum was accessible and interdisciplinary. His ideas for opening up the sector cut across the conventions of higher education and became important elements of the Open University's ethos

and structure. Harold Wilson's original idea was to connect existing extramural departments, the Workers' Educational Association, broadcasters, correspondence courses and night classes, to create a scheme for degrees to be awarded by an established university. Wilson did not initially envisage an institution with a charter and autonomy but a consortium of existing universities using television and the post, facilities for home study, nationally organised correspondence teaching and a structure open to a variety of people. Asa Briggs recalled:

I was very keen that there should be some kind of gateway element, an introductory element into the courses [...] there should be some inter-disciplinary element and that there should be no great gap in the university between one set of courses and another. That there should be very considerable freedom to move from one course to another [...] that people should take as long as they liked to get their degrees. And I found all this extremely exciting [...] not a great deal of resistance on the Committee, but an immense amount of scepticism outside.<sup>29</sup>

Briggs also 'believed very passionately and still do, in getting the access questions right'. All these elements were introduced to the Open University. Wilson's 'educational trust' and Lee's engagement with conventional wisdom were developed by Asa Briggs. As Ritchie Calder, a colleague of Asa Briggs on the planning committee, said, 'we stripped down the conventional university to its chassis and examined the essentials'.<sup>30</sup>

The planning committee sought to provide opportunities for 'all those who... have been or are being precluded from achieving their aims through an existing institution of higher education'.<sup>31</sup> In line with the advisory committee's notion of independence it rejected partnerships with the College of Preceptors (regarding teachers), with correspondence colleges and with the National Extension College (which offered to act as the correspondence arm of the Open University comparable in status to the BBC).<sup>32</sup> To ensure greater autonomy, it was decided to create a new publishing department rather than use the BBC's. Planning, production, presentation and the regional structure were to be controlled by the university. The report of the planning committee confirmed the credit system, the general degree, interdisciplinary foundation courses, an academic year starting in January, the use of residential schools, the administrative and academic staff structure, degree requirements and the system of teaching. The committee chose the central site at Walton

Hall, Milton Keynes and drew up the budget for the new institution. The Open University was to be firmly located within the British tradition of 'being liberal expansionist in tone, empirical and specific as to numbers and money'. The charter that it drafted emphasised the importance of the 'educational well-being of the community', while for the staff there was to be a non-executive general assembly, 'the organ through which the feeling of a corporate institution would be generated'.<sup>33</sup> On the same day that its report was published, 28 January 1969, the Secretary of State for Education and Science, Edward Short, announced in the House of Commons that the government fully accepted the plan.

In making his contribution to the plans for the Open University Asa Briggs could build on some relevant experience. 'The Fifty-One Society', broadcast between 1951 and 1962, had been a series of radio programmes which helped to forge links between academics and the BBC and to harness the power of broadcasting to the values of liberal education. Contributors included Harold Wilson, Raymond Williams, Asa Briggs and adult education tutors. In style and content the programmes had about them 'something of the early university class tutorial movement'.<sup>34</sup> Briggs also acknowledged the relevance of Sussex and of the University Grants Committee on the design for the Open University:

on the University Grants Committee we did learn a kind of way of trying to deal with science and arts side by side and at Sussex I believed very strongly in what we call our Arts-Science Scheme, that you had to do some science and some arts whatever you are doing as your major subject. Yes, science is very important.<sup>35</sup>

Sussex deployed closed-circuit television for classroom observation in teacher training, to record and play back lectures and to display teaching materials. The university also had audio-visual units, language laboratories and some programmed learning. Certainly Asa Briggs felt that 'the work carried out in the University [of Sussex] on a battery of learning methods influenced many other learning institutions, including the Open University'.<sup>36</sup> In regard to his work on the planning committee he felt that 'the things that I was most keen on were in a way a by-product of my Sussex experience'.<sup>37</sup>

One of the sources of Wilson's idea for a university of the air was William Benton. The owner of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and *Encyclopaedia Britannica Films*, this American had made millions through radio advertising and had worked in radio propaganda. He sought to enlighten citizens against Communism by connecting higher

education, commerce and high culture. In 1952 he started publishing the 'Great Books of the Western World' series, which presented the western canon in 54 volumes, and as a US senator, 1949–1952, he promoted a 'Marshall Plan for Peace'. Benton sponsored Harold Wilson on a number of trips around the USA in the early 1960s and was lavish in his praise and gifts to Wilson. On one occasion he held a dinner in London where he introduced Wilson to Geoffrey Crowther, then vice-chairman of the editorial board of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and a governor of the London School of Economics. Crowther later became the first Chancellor of the Open University. Later, Briggs himself became editor of a new edition of the *Encyclopaedia*, and the Open University's first vice-chancellor considered ordering 280 sets of the new volumes to equip the study centres where the students met their tutors.<sup>38</sup> The role envisaged for higher education during the Cold War may also help to explain why one of the few people to be a member of the 1964 parliamentary advisory committee, the 1967 planning committee and the first Council of the Open University formed in 1969 was Norman MacKenzie. He had worked in radio propaganda and, post-war, clandestinely, for MI6 in Eastern Europe. The version of the Open University which was created was not built along the lines Benton would have preferred but it reflected some of his ideas. For example, Benton argued that 'the cold war between the open and closed societies is likely to be won in the world's classrooms, libraries, and college and university laboratories' and that to allow bar entry to higher education on grounds of poverty 'stands athwart the American Dream'.<sup>39</sup> The Open University did not offer its courses for nothing, but there were no formal entry requirements for those who sought to study with it.

The Open University could also be seen as part of Labour's response to the Conservative-favoured pirate radio entrepreneurs who flouted (along with Voice of America, which was associated with Benton) the internationally agreed allocation of radio frequencies.<sup>40</sup> In this way, the Open University demonstrated the worthiness of the state. In his *History of Broadcasting*, Asa Briggs pointed out that within a few months of a newspaper interview with Edward Short, the Postmaster-General in the Wilson government, which was headlined '[W]hy I'm sinking the pirates', Short became, in 'what was doubtless a coincidence', Secretary of State for Education and Science. Briggs linked this development to the introduction of a Granada quiz programme, *University Challenge*, and a *Daily Mail* report on television and the universities headlined 'Top of the Profs'. The Open University appeared to be part of a transformation of society towards a more liberal democracy. It challenged the notion of

the traditional university. This can be seen as a parallel to the defiance of radio's formal conventions offered by pop's spontaneity or the spontaneity of pop and greater engagement with personal emotions and the everyday. Asa Briggs concluded that:

Questions of 'education' and of 'pop music' should not be treated, therefore as separate historical topics. Nor at the time were they kept in entirely separate files [...] The agenda and the chronologies of education and pop music criss-cross.<sup>41</sup>

Educational television was, argued Peter Smith in 1972, 'a symbol of a new type of government'. Certainly, as Open University students noted, there was 'very little' commercial educational broadcasting.<sup>42</sup> Asa Briggs noted that the 'appeal of the pirates depended on the triumphs of a new [...] technology that in a quite different context figured prominently in Wilson's campaign speeches of 1963'.<sup>43</sup> For the government the Open University was a way of indicating its values and the role that it envisaged for the media.

Royden Harrison called Briggs 'one of the best philosopher-engineers of the expansion of higher education'.<sup>44</sup> Part of Briggs' contribution was that he did not simply place the Open University within a consensus understanding of the welfare state. He had already argued in an influential article that welfare institutions owed much to a variety of precedents rather than being the inexorable result of the conscience of the Labour Party.<sup>45</sup> Briggs recalled that while on the Planning Committee of the Open University, 'I always emphasised the importance of going back to the beginnings [...] to understand what it was that we were trying to do'.<sup>46</sup> Others have noted his need to analyse the roots of an organisation and make historical accounts 'more inclusive'.<sup>47</sup> It was because Briggs was prepared to look beyond state provision that he disagreed with those on the Planning Committee who felt that the BBC should have a very powerful influence on the way the Open University developed. As he later recalled, he

thought it would be sad if students just had one course that they followed and they didn't have a choice between two ways of dealing with that course. And I would quite have welcomed the idea if ITV at that time had had one or two courses which it was doing also and providing alternative courses.<sup>48</sup>

He noted overseas precedents for the Open University, remembering that 'I found out that the phrase "University of the Air" was used in



the University of Southern California before anybody thought of using it in any British university'.<sup>49</sup> He also mentioned that 'there was a bit of a Scottish influence'.<sup>50</sup> Prior to becoming the first vice-chancellor, Walter Perry had been 'a key figure in the medical faculty' at Edinburgh, Jennie Lee was a graduate from there and Ritchie Calder, also a member of the Planning Committee, was Professor of International Relations at Edinburgh. Briggs pointed out that discussions in the Planning Committee about the boundaries between national and regional bodies led him to conclude that 'very clearly that there were quite significant differences between the attitude of people in Scotland and the attitude of people in the south of England'.<sup>51</sup> Briggs' analysis of the origins of the university illuminates why Labour's measure was maintained by Margaret Thatcher, the Secretary of State for Education and Science in the 1970 Heath government, who, in the face of the hostility of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Iain McLeod, opted to keep the Open University open.

Asa Briggs was also able to employ his skills and influence to forge strong networks. As he said of his time as chancellor, 'I found the Chancellorship very interesting [...] I got very much interested in personalities and how they operated in relation to each other. The human relations side of it did interest me'.<sup>52</sup> He recalled that he knew 'most of the people who were concerned with adult education', notably Harold Wiltshire. Wiltshire worked in the University of Nottingham extramural department and carried out experiments with teaching adults through television in the mid-1960s. Asa Briggs noted 'some lectures that Wiltshire had given in Australia about 1965, which are very much still in favour of a sort of Open University idea'.<sup>53</sup> Because of his membership of the University Grants Committee Briggs also knew Sir Lionel Russell and he was friendly with Edward Boyle.<sup>54</sup> Asa Briggs also noted that he knew Brynmor Jones (vice-chancellor at Hull) and that they both wanted to make more use of educational technologies. Norman MacKenzie felt that the Open University owed much to Department of Education and Science officials who drafted the 1965 Brynmor Jones report on audiovisual aids in higher scientific education.<sup>55</sup>

Asa Briggs has long recognised the importance of personal connections and relationships, noting that 'eye witness accounts are the most vivid of all historical sources. At their liveliest they not only present facts, they create atmosphere. At their dullest they provide records which historians cannot ignore'.<sup>56</sup> In this way his own memories illuminate the history of the Open University. In his biography of Michael Young, Briggs concluded that his subject played 'a unique role' in the conception of the Open University, and indeed 'created' it.<sup>57</sup> However,

he also later recalled that ‘it was perfectly clear that Jennie Lee did not want to have anything to do with Michael Young’, and he said of the Department of Education and Science that ‘the civil servants there were awful [...] almost intolerable and patronising’. Briggs also mentioned that the vice-chancellor of the Open University was only permitted to become a member of the influential Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals once the university had come into existence, after a ‘very hard’ battle.<sup>58</sup> He also acknowledged the ‘backstairs role’ of Department of Education and Science official Ralph Toomey, whose involvement ‘was in its own way as important as that of Wilson’.<sup>59</sup>

Once it was clear that the Open University would be opened in 1969 – the first students commenced their studies in 1971 – Asa Briggs felt that he ought to reduce his involvement. He recognised that:

the Planning Committee had taken up an immense amount of my time. Comparing the time that I spent when I was on the Planning Committee with the time that I spent as Chancellor, I was spending four or five times as much time and it also began to produce a certain amount of resistance in Sussex that I was spending so much time on the Open University. I found it absolutely fascinating but I decided that as soon as we really got the thing in hand [...] I’d better withdraw [...] that when it came into existence it should be left to Walter [Perry, the first vice-chancellor] and to the people who were involved with the university to do this themselves. I felt that there was a limit beyond which we shouldn’t go as a Planning Committee.<sup>60</sup>

The planning committee was dissolved a few days after the Open University became an autonomous and independent institution in May 1969. A council was convened which took responsibility for the government of the university. Briggs continued to show an interest in the Open University and in open learning.<sup>61</sup> His five-volume history of broadcasting in the UK, published between 1961 and 1995, assessed the role of the BBC in the dissemination of ideas, with the fifth volume (*Competition*) covering the Corporation’s relationship with the Open University.

During his time as its chancellor, 1978–1994, Asa Briggs made a number of pertinent and timely contributions to the development of the Open University, including becoming engaged in debates about the content of university courses.<sup>62</sup> While the lectures of staff at other universities were not easily accessible to interested outsiders, Open University teaching materials were available for scrutiny. Many of the teaching materials were posted to students and tutors who shared them with

others, and the radio and television broadcasts publicised course information. Some Open University content was reviewed in the press.<sup>63</sup> In at least six of the years during the period 1976–1985 there were allegations that Open University course materials were politically biased. Writing in an Open University newspaper, *Sesame*, in May 1976, Caroline Cox, the head of sociology at the Polytechnic of North London, suggested that an Open University social sciences module was ‘a platform for blatantly political views’.<sup>64</sup> Others took up her ideas. Having asked, ‘[i]s there a Marxist bias at the Open University?’, the *Times* concluded, after analysis of 10 of the 2,000 course units that the Open University produced that year, that there was. Moreover, Open University students were particularly vulnerable as they ‘saw it as their job to learn and reproduce what was in the course book [...] Working mostly on their own the students do not ask critical questions’.<sup>65</sup> Allegations of bias in the Open University’s modules *Schooling and Society* and *Modern Art and Modernism: Manet to Pollock* were reported in the press.<sup>66</sup> After the Department of Education and Science complained that in the Social Sciences foundation module monetarists ‘are made to appear rather sinister’, Sir Keith Joseph, the Secretary of State for Education and Science, read ‘all the relevant teaching materials’ and visited the Open University’s headquarters in Milton Keynes.<sup>67</sup> The vice-chancellor, John Horlock, ‘summoned to what proved to be a very difficult interview’ with Joseph, recalled the issue as ‘a major crisis’, adding, ‘I am sure that he [Joseph] would willingly have closed the Open University down if it had been politically possible to do so, particularly after the affair of academic bias’.<sup>68</sup> Anastasios Christodoulou (Open University Secretary, 1968–1980) later commented that the minister ‘didn’t like the Open University at all’.<sup>69</sup> Thrust into this debate Asa Briggs later recalled:

I did get quite a lot of letters from, sometimes from quote, members of the general public, unquote, and sometimes from other academics about Marxist bias and I had to argue quite passionately and I also found myself defending the idea that there should be a Marxist element in the English literature courses<sup>70</sup>

Asa Briggs was familiar with Keith Joseph. Joseph had been Secretary of State for Social Services in the Heath government. During that period he met Briggs, who chaired a committee of inquiry into the training of nurses. Its 1972 report was the basis for later legislation.<sup>71</sup> When the minister wanted advice about the best books on the history of his constituency in Leeds from the author of *Victorian Cities*, the Open

University chancellor used the opportunity to address 'his fears and doubts of bias in Open University courses'. Asa Briggs concluded that Joseph was 'not really a serious threat, but he produced a lot of alarm in the Open University'.<sup>72</sup>

Shortly prior to Asa Briggs' chancellorship there had also been a debate about Open University broadcasts. In 1977 the Controller of BBC2, Aubrey Singer, had Jarry's *Ubu Roi* and Büchner's *Woyzeck* (both plays produced for an Open University module called *Drama*) rescheduled to less popular times of day. In addition, when the Open University refused to have some scenes from Genet's *Le Balcon* reshot, the play was not broadcast. Press coverage of the row in the *Observer*, *Guardian* and *The Times* was sympathetic to the Open University. There was also support for the Open University from other academics.<sup>73</sup> The chancellor rebuked the BBC at a degree ceremony.<sup>74</sup> Asa Briggs enjoyed a close relationship with the BBC and as chancellor he gave 'specific advice both to [John] Horlock and to [Sir John] Daniel [two Open University vice-chancellors] about relations with the BBC'.<sup>75</sup>

Although Briggs saw his role as one of support but not involvement he showed considerable interest in the Open University:

I felt it was my duty as Chancellor to support the Vice-Chancellor. I thought of this as being almost a fundamental duty. At Sussex I had not been helped at all by my own Chancellor for much of the time [...] as Chancellor I didn't want to run the show [...] I wanted to do it in a way that probably involved me rather more in the academic side and rather more in trying to help out with the BBC argument at that time.<sup>76</sup>

Although Asa Briggs received a letter from the university secretary informing him of the convention that a chancellor was not expected to attend meetings 'to discuss university policy over the next year, or two years', Asa Briggs recalled that 'I did usually go to these, despite the fact that I wasn't particularly encouraged to go to them'.<sup>77</sup> His continued interest enabled him to contribute to discussions about funding arrangements. Although there was a lot of guesswork in 1968 about the needs of the Open University in 1971, Walter Perry noted that, 'our financial health has been maintained not so much because of lucky budgetary guesses in those early years but because of the extremely understanding and sympathetic way in which the DES [Department of Education and Science] has viewed our problems'.<sup>78</sup> A subsequent vice-chancellor, John Horlock, complained that 'the civil servants liked to have their fingers

in the Open University pie, whereas I hardly saw a civil servant in all my time at Salford' (where he had previously worked). He also noted that while the government determined student numbers, discouraged research and denied proposals for postgraduate funding, ventures close to its own policies received support.<sup>79</sup> Asa Briggs agreed that the university benefited immensely from the fact that it was not part of the system to begin with, that is to say not funded via the UGC. He added that '[w]hen I became Chancellor I did realise of course that the situation had changed totally'.<sup>80</sup>

Asa Briggs' engagement with the Open University also extended to teaching:

I did have a good deal to do with actually preparing courses and on the whole my own interests were primarily as they were on the Planning Committee in the curriculum of the university and, in a way, the modes of teaching.<sup>81</sup>

While the 1966 White Paper argued that Open University programmes should bring 'lecturers of distinction within easy reach of everyone', the planning committee concluded that television 'should not be wasted in the straightforward visualisation of lectures'. Asa Briggs took the opportunity to explore this idea. For the arts foundation course, he presented a television programme entitled *Leeds: A Study in Civic Pride*. Using film and music, it is far more than a dry lecture to camera or a travelogue. This is history which contextualises the level at which people lived their lives within broader regional, national and international perspectives, so that those new to studying and with only one opportunity to watch the programme (this is before video playback machines were commonplace) could get a sense of why history was important and relevant to them and how it could be created by ordinary learners everywhere. This was an opportunity to watch an expert enthusing about his subject, making support for learning central, and providing learners with opportunities to construct their own understandings, to be producers of knowledge as well as consumers of education. Briggs also worked in some of the course teams. These comprised of academics, BBC producers and editors and created the teaching materials. He recalled that 'sometimes I was on ones where I found myself in, to some extent, in disagreement with many other members of the same course team. But the idea of pulling together a group of people was important'.<sup>82</sup>

In 'Towards the Future: the Role of the Open University', his prescient 1985 Ritchie Calder Memorial Lecture, Asa Briggs returned to

the foundation of the Open University 'in an age of broadcasting' in order to provide a context for his argument that the Open University needed to ensure that new technologies were employed to enable collaborative learning. He predicted that 'more personal electronic communication, more scattered and two-way communications will become increasingly important and these will affect education'.<sup>83</sup> More recently, he has returned to arguing how education needed to be framed in terms of communication, adding a historical perspective, stating that 'the circulation of knowledge has gone through a kind of revolution since the 1960s' and that the Open University needed to continue to innovate and to adapt its focus, strategies and methods.<sup>84</sup> Asa Briggs has been an important figure in the creation and maintenance of the Open University because in addition to his experience, he has provided an understanding of the past, a clear view about values and ethos, and has also showed his ability to listen and engage with people from within his heterogeneous network. He has helped the Open University to thrive and, more than that, he has demonstrated a continuing engagement with the support of learning and learners.

## Notes

1. W. A. Campbell Stewart, *Higher Education in Post-War Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 116–17.
2. *Early Leaving. A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)* (London: HMSO, 1954); *15 to 18: A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)* (London: HMSO, 1959); *Half our Future. A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)* (London: HMSO, 1963).
3. Rodney Lowe, *The Welfare State in Britain since 1945* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), p. 207; Roy Lowe, *Education in the Post-War Years* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 200.
4. The new universities of the period included Sussex (1961), York and East Anglia (1963), Lancaster and Essex (1964) and Warwick and Kent (1965). Following a merger of institutions Strathclyde was granted a royal charter in 1964, other universities expanded, many polytechnics were formed, and in 1966 ten Colleges of Advanced Technology were given university status.
5. Simon Szreter, 'Britain's Social Welfare Provision in the Long Run: The Importance of Accountable, Well-Financed Local Government', in Armine Ishkanian and Simon Szreter (eds.), *The Big Society Debate: A New Agenda for Social Welfare?* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2012), p. 47.
6. Fred Gray, 'Introduction: The Idea of Sussex', in Fred Gray (ed.), *Making the Future. A History of the University of Sussex* (Falmer: University of Sussex, 2011), pp. 4–5.
7. Michael Sanderson, *The History of the University of East Anglia, Norwich* (London: Hambledon and London, 2001), pp. 5–6; Henry Rees, *A University Is Born: The Story of the Foundation of the University of Warwick* (Coventry: Avalon Books 1989).

8. Between 1919 and 1989 the University Grants Committee advised on the distribution of state funding amongst the British universities: Tom Owen, 'The University Grants Committee', *Oxford Review of Education*, 6 (1980), pp. 255–78.
9. The *Times*, 9 September 1963 reported the speech as did the *Guardian*, 9 September 1963, which also carried an editorial ('Higher education outside the walls') calling the idea 'good and welcome'. The front page report in the *Scotsman*, 9 September 1963, included a photograph of Wilson delivering the speech.
10. Wilson's 'inchoate' remark was made shortly after his speech in Glasgow on 8 September 1963. See Phoebe L. H. Hall, Hilary Land, Roy Parker and Adrian Webb, *Change, Choice and Conflict in Social Policy* (London: Heinemann 1975), p. 251.
11. The story was recounted to Open University students: [www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/historyofou/story/harold-wilson](http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/historyofou/story/harold-wilson), accessed 24 October 2012, and also in the foreword to Walter Perry, *Open University. A Personal Account by the First Vice-Chancellor* (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 1976), p. xi, and in Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government, 1964–70* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971).
12. The 'white heat' speech opening the debate on science at the Labour Party conference was later produced as a pamphlet: *Labour's Plan for Science. Reprint of a Speech by the Rt. Hon. Harold Wilson, MP, Leader of the Labour Party at the Annual Conference at Scarborough, Tuesday, 1 October 1963* (London: The Labour Party, 1963).
13. 'Shadow and substance', *Spectator*, 11 October 1963.
14. Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 133.
15. A. Touraine, *The Post-Industrial Society: Tomorrow's Social History, Classes, Conflict and Culture in the Programmed Society*, trans. L. Mayhew, (London: Wildwood House, 1974 edn.); D. Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974); Y. Masuda, *The Information Society as Post-Industrial Society* (Washington: Future Society, 1980).
16. The speech is available at <http://er.jsc.nasa.gov/seh/ricetalk.htm>, accessed 24 May 2012.
17. Thomas Docherty, *For the University: Democracy and the Future of the Institution*, <http://www.bloomsburyacademic.com/view/For-the-University/book-ba-9781849666336.xml>, accessed 24 May 2012.
18. MacKenzie was recruited to Sussex by Asa Briggs: *Guardian*, 24 June 2013; *Daily Telegraph*, 5 July 2013.
19. Interview with Asa Briggs by David Vincent, Martin Watkinson and David Grugeon (2008), 011X01XT0, the Open University Archive.
20. Obituary, *Herald*, 16 July 2013, <http://www.heraldsotland.com/comment/obituaries/norman-mackenzie.21440715>, accessed 30 July 2013.
21. At Sussex MacKenzie had formed a committee on new methods of teaching and learning and founded a Centre for Educational Technology. He gained an international reputation for curriculum planning and became an adviser to UNESCO. In 1977 the Open University awarded him an honorary doctorate, the citation for which credited him with 'the virtues of the 19th-century polymath and the visions fitted for the 21st century'.

22. Interview with Asa Briggs, Open University Archive.
23. Asa Briggs, *Special Relationships. People and Places* (Barnsley: Frontline, 2012), p. 232. In regard to the Open University, Goodman (Chairman of the Arts Council, 1965–1972 and advisor to Wilson), was, suggested Briggs, an ‘indispensable intermediary’ between Lee and the BBC. See Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, vol. 5: *Competition 1955–1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 499.
24. Michael Young, ‘The Story of the National Extension College’, typescript cited in Patricia Hollis (ed.), *Jennie Lee: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), p. 305; Clive Ponting, *Breach of Promise. Labour in Power 1964–1970* (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 133.
25. Aneurin Bevan, *In Place of Fear* (1952; new edn., Wakefield: EP Publishing, 1976), p. 86. Bevan’s formal education amounted to two years at the Central Labour College, London, funded by the South Wales Miners’ Federation: Les Holloway, ‘In the Beginning. The Founders of the University Trace Its Origins’, in Holloway (ed.), *The First Ten Years. A Special Edition of Sesame to Mark the Tenth Anniversary of the Open University, 1969–1979* (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 1979), p. 3. Later Jennie Lee connected her late spouse to the Open University by ceremonially hanging his cap and portrait in the Milton Keynes campus cellar bar, which was funded from a trust fund established in his name. See Hollis, *Jennie Lee*, p. 335.
26. Brian Jackson, ‘The Invisible College’, in Holloway (ed.), *The First Ten Years*, p. 24.
27. Stuart Hood, ‘Dangers of Educational Television’, *Times*, 22 September 1967. The article is an extract from his book: *A Survey of Television* (London: Heinemann, 1967).
28. Interview with Asa Briggs, Open University Archive.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Quoted in Asa Briggs, ‘Towards the Future: The Role of the Open University. The First Ritchie Calder Memorial Lecture’, in Asa Briggs (ed.), *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs*, vol. 3: *Serious Pursuits: Communications and Education* (Brighton: Harvester, 1991), p. 387.
31. Peter Venables, *The Open University: A Report of the Planning Committee to the Secretary of State* (London: HMSO, 1969).
32. Established in 1963 as a pilot for the university of the air the National Extension College offered courses, largely through correspondence, but with some use of television.
33. Jeremy Tunstall, ‘Introduction’, in Tunstall (ed.), *The Open University Opens* (London: Routledge, 1974), p. xi.
34. Janet Coles and David Smith, ‘The Fifty-One Society: A Case Study of BBC Radio and the Education of Adults’, *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 38 (2006), pp. 210–24.
35. Interview with Asa Briggs, Open University Archive.
36. Asa Briggs, ‘The Years of Plenty, 1961–1976’, in Roger Blin-Stoyle and Geoff Ivey (eds.), *The Sussex Opportunity: A New University and the Future* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), p. 11.
37. Interview with Asa Briggs, Open University Archive.
38. *Times*, 24 April 1974.



39. Benton, 'The cold war and the liberal arts', speech, 5 June 1960, William Benton papers, Box 522, File 17, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
40. Adrian Jones, *Death of a Pirate. British Radio and the Making of the Information Age* (London and New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), p. 238. See also Des Freedman, *Television Policies of the Labour Party, 1951–2001* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), p. 73.
41. Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting*, vol. 5: pp. 457–8, 460.
42. *Saturday Review*, 29 April 1972; *Times*, 13 July 1973.
43. Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting*, vol. 5: p. 507.
44. Royden Harrison, 'Twenty Years On', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 41 (1980), p. 2.
45. Asa Briggs, 'The Welfare State in Historical Perspective', *European Journal of Sociology*, 2 (1961), pp. 221–58.
46. Interview with Asa Briggs, Open University Archive.
47. John McIlroy, 'Asa Briggs and the Emergence of Labour History in Post-War Britain: A Note', *Labour History Review*, 77 (2012), pp. 211–42.
48. Interview with Asa Briggs, Open University Archive.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Ibid.*
54. Russell was formerly Chief Education Officer for Birmingham and he chaired the committee which produced the report, *Adult Education: A Plan for Development* (London: HMSO, 1973). The importance and influence of the Open University's credit system is referred to in the *Report*, p. 296. Boyle was a Conservative education minister (1962–1964) and later vice-chancellor at Leeds.
55. Norman MacKenzie, 'Genesis: The Brynmor Jones report', *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 36 (2005), p. 715.
56. Asa Briggs comp., 'Introduction', *They Saw It Happen. An Anthology of Eye-Witnesses' Accounts of Events in British History 1897–1940* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. xi.
57. Asa Briggs, *Michael Young: Social Entrepreneur* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. x, 3.
58. Interview with Asa Briggs, Open University Archive.
59. Briggs, *Michael Young*, p. 211. Cf. Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 126.
60. Interview with Asa Briggs, Open University Archive.
61. Interview with Asa Briggs, Open University Archive. For example, as the first chair of the Commonwealth of Learning (1988), a voluntary association of more than 50 states, Asa Briggs encouraged the development and sharing of open learning and distance education resources, knowledge and technologies.
62. See for example, 'Editorial', *History Workshop Journal*, 4 (1977), p. 2.
63. For example, by Philip Elliott, Marghanita Laski, Raymond Williams in *The Listener*, 6 May 1971, pp. 594–96.
64. *Sesame*, 94 (July/August 1984), p. 2; *Sesame*, 98 (January/February 1985), p. 2.
65. *Times*, 10 December 1976.

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68. John Horlock, *An Open Book. A Memoir* (Weardale: The Memoir Club, 2006), pp. 65–6.
69. Quoted in Tim Dalglish (ed.), *Lifting It Off the Page. An Oral Portrait of Open University People* (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 1995), pp. 43–4; Horlock, *An Open Book*, p. 64.
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73. *Times*, 14 May 1977; *The Times*, 23 May 1977; *Observer*, 15 May 1977; *Observer*, 1 May 1977; *Guardian*, 23 May 1977; *Guardian*, 24 May 1977.
74. Interview with Asa Briggs, Open University Archive.
75. *Ibid.*
76. *Ibid.*
77. *Ibid.*
78. Walter Perry, *Report of the Vice-Chancellor to the Council*, 1972 (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 1973), p. 73.
79. Horlock, *An Open Book*, pp. 59–60.
80. Interview with Asa Briggs, Open University Archive.
81. *Ibid.*
82. *Ibid.*
83. Briggs, 'Towards the Future'.
84. 'Why You Can't Learn Anything from History: An Interview with Asa Briggs', *Open Minds*, 19 June 2012, <http://edition.pagesuite-professional.co.uk/launch.aspx?referral=mypagesuite&pnum=&refresh=4Jy1S09ga8X0&EID=7b619614-c92e-48f3-8beb-f8082d3eacd7&skip>, accessed 2 July 2013.

# 12

## From Worcester to Longman: Devising the History of the Book

*James Raven*

In the early 1970s Asa Briggs was approached to write a history of Longman, then looking forward to celebrating the 250th anniversary of its foundation in 1724. Longman was perhaps the most successful independent publishing house of modern Britain. Unexpectedly, 1974 was overshadowed for Longman by the death of its last family chairman, Mark Longman, and, although he did not then know it, Asa Briggs had embarked on a 35-year project that inspired and drew its inspiration from a growing number of scholars interested in the broader social and economic history of books.

On his return to Oxford as Provost of Worcester College (and following the publication of the latest volume of his history of the BBC), Asa Briggs acted as a patron and impresario for the fast-developing study of communications and book history. The history of the book aspired to examine the history of the production, dissemination and reception of written and printed texts across all societies and in all ages. Briggs notably established a pioneering day-long seminar that met once or twice a year, bringing together historians, bibliographers, librarians, literary scholars, book collectors, book designers, printers and publishers. Many of the Worcester College participants have since contributed energetically to the debate about the origins and scope of the history of the book as understood by its various practitioners worldwide. They continue to question and probe its theoretical and practical underpinnings. Asa Briggs' *History of Longmans* appeared in 2008, a much larger undertaking than originally envisaged and a significant contribution to publishing history.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this essay is to recall the academic sociability fostered by the Worcester seminars of 1983–1993 and celebrate an enterprise fundamental to the advance of new bibliographical scholarship and the planning of collaborative

and interdisciplinary research. Such discussion broke down boundaries and brought together people from different disciplines and professions, who did not know each other, but who benefited hugely from focused argument. The seminar launched various national history of the book projects (including the seven-volume *Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*).<sup>2</sup> The success of these projects is evident, but so also are new challenges and certain obstacles created by the initial terms of reference. Following Briggs' example, historians continue to explore problematic examples of relevant historical investigation in bibliography, literature, communications and the media.

An anecdote to begin – and one that illustrates the convivial development of what, for better or worse, has become known as the history of the book. In September 1985 I had just begun as a young research fellow of Pembroke College, Cambridge. One evening, as I passed the college lodge, a porter rushed out and said he had an Asa Briggs on the phone for me. Astonished, I took the call to hear the Provost of Worcester describing a series of seminars in publishing history that he had just established at the college. Would I come and talk to the group and stay in the lodgings? On arrival, Asa interrupted a college dinner to greet me and then, very early in the morning, memorably brought in a breakfast tray to my bedroom. Hospitality, informality and the unexpected grounded proceedings. The seminar that followed, built round a sumptuous lunch, was an opportunity to meet a whole assembly of new scholars and to discuss the direction of new work in publishing and communications history.

Thirty years later, I am sceptical of the more inflated claims for the history of the book, but remain devoted to the proposition that the sort of academic sociability fostered by the Worcester seminars is fundamental to the advance of scholarship and the planning of collaborative and interdisciplinary research. Development of book history has helped to break down barriers and bring together people who did not previously know each other or understand or even know each other's work or approaches. The term 'history of the book' is now in general and common use and has transformed the range of and interest in historical bibliography and bibliographical history, productively improving communication and collaboration between historians, literary scholars, book conservationists, book collectors, book designers and librarians. The new endeavour has revealed new archival holdings, encouraged new types of archival interrogation, and shared as well as developed specialist interpretative techniques.

The innovative Worcester seminars offered generous space for discussion and questioning, of a type needed when those present, however distinguished and much published, proceeded from different scholarly objectives. People and the understanding and recovery of their past practices, behaviours and values remain the indispensable purpose of cultural history. By contrast, analytical and even historical bibliography operates with very different objectives, ranging from the pursuit of an ideal copy-text to the past circumstances of literary production and dissemination. Librarians and book conservators, so the tired joke runs, would be much happier if people, or rather readers, kept their distance.

First thought about in the early 1980s, the Worcester series opened with a planning forum in November 1983. There were to be 14 seminars in all in the ten years from 1983 to 1993. Each seminar featured a core group of some 15 contributors who were invited to each meeting. Most attended when they could. Asa Briggs opened each day with an introductory talk and then guided the discussion following each presentation. There were usually two sessions before lunch, and two afterwards. The core group demonstrated the range of interests concerned in the generation of a new type of publishing history, a history that went well beyond the then familiar in-house histories of publishing firms and families and broadened to consider production, circulation, readership and reception in their historical social, economic and political contexts.

At the time, it was also difficult to define the primary interests of many of the participants in the seminars exactly because many straddled or stood outside (some might say above) traditional academic disciplines. Conversation was often led, for example, by book conservators, bibliographers and librarians, who included Alan Bell (formerly National Library of Scotland and then Librarian of Rhodes House Library, Oxford), David Foxon (d. 2001, Oxford). Michael Turner (Bodleian) and Giles Barber (d. 2012, Taylor Institution, Oxford), Jim Edwards (archivist at Reading University), David McKitterick (Trinity College, Cambridge) and Robin Alston (d. 2011, University College London), founder of Scolar Press and pioneer of the *English Short Title Catalogue*. Also from London were Ian Willison (British Library) and John Sutherland (UCL), and these were joined by John Barnard (Leeds), Simon Eliot (University of Bath) and Don McKenzie (d. 1999, who arrived at Oxford in 1986 and was Professor of Bibliography and Textual Criticism at Oxford from 1989). Michael Twyman (Department of

Typography and Graphic Communication at the University of Reading), Michael B. Winship (then completing his DPhil at Oxford) and Robin Myers (Stationers' Company) further represented typographical and bibliographical study. From the publishing world came Graham C. Greene (Jonathan Cape), Simon Nowell-Smith (d. 1996, book collector and historian of Macmillan) and Sir Charles Chadwyck-Healey (founder of the Chadwyck-Healey Publishing Group). As a result of the seminar Chadwyck-Healey sent me on an undercover mission to collect microfiche of certain book collections from St Petersburg in 1991 (but that remains a somewhat murky footnote to the history of the Briggs colloquium).

Perhaps the most significant attendees were Tim Rix and Annabel Jones<sup>3</sup> from Longman. Tim Rix (d. 2012) was soon to take over as chairman of the firm. One of the most respected and successful publishers of his generation, he had become head of Longman English Language Teaching Division (ELT) in 1964, a director in 1968, joint managing director in 1972 and chief executive in 1976. Later, Tim Rix was to be chair of Book Aid International (1994–2007). His infectious giggling accompanied shrewd judgement and an unswerving determination to see projects through – he is very greatly missed. Susan Hard, Asa Briggs' research assistant, took notes of the seminars and prepared reports.

Subsequent seminars included 'Education and Publishing History' led by Max Goldstrom (Queen's University Belfast) and Gillian Sutherland (Cambridge); 'Publishers' Archives and Publishing History' led by Jim Edwards (University of Reading Archives); 'Publishing as a Business' led by Peter Mathias (Cambridge) and Tim Rix (Longman); 'The Provincial Book Trade' with Peter Isaac (Newcastle), Ian Maxted (Exeter) and Michael Turner (Bodleian); the role of printing in relation to the history of publishing led again by Michael Turner and Tim Rix; and 'Publishing Dynasties' led by Asa Briggs and Annabel Jones (on the Longman family), Robin Myers (on the Rivingtons) and Eiluned Rees (University of Aberystwyth, on Owen Rees). Two further seminars (in 1988) on bookselling were led by Michael Turner, Gerry Davies (former secretary, the Booksellers' Association), Sallie Brown (British Library) and Annabel Jones. Following seminars featured 'The International Trade in English Books in the 19th Century' and 'Overseas Trade since 1945' led by Michael Winship and Tim Rix; 'Paper in the Late 18th and 19th Centuries' led by Colin Cohen (English Branch of International Paper Historians) and Peter Bower (Practical Paper Collector at the Tate/Clore Gallery); 'Bookbinding' led by Michael Turner and Miriam Foot; 'Illustration' led by Michael Twyman and Ken Brooks (formerly

chief designer at Longman and an early specialist in computer-aided design); and finally 'Copyright in Perspective' with Clive Bradley (Chief Executive of the Publishers Association).

In retrospect, the themes identified by Asa Briggs (some emerging from discussion in the early seminars) are striking for their significance to the development of book history. Many topics remain central to current worldwide discussion listservs such as that hosted by the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP, founded in 1991). Interest in the history of copyright is especially current, an aspect of publishing history that illuminates debate about the challenge to public access in a new age of knowledge production and technological and digital advance. Many contributors to the seminars also expressed concern for the future of publishers' archives. Although more can still be done to preserve British and European publishers' and booksellers' records, the Worcester initiative directly supported the establishment of the Archive of British Publishing and Printing at the University of Reading. Today, that resource (accessible, curiously, through the Museum of English Rural Life and Special Collections) is the main and only centrally organised archive for the records of publishing firms that include George Allen and Unwin, A. and C. Black, Jonathan Cape, Ladybird Books, Routledge, Kegan and Paul, Macmillan, Virago Press, and, of course, the Longman Group.

The seminar returned regularly to the neglect of economic analysis in the history of publishing, an anxiety linked to the identification and availability of relevant archives. Study of the business history of book and print production was boosted by the seminar discussions, and resulted in Asa Briggs' 1992 Ellen McArthur Lectures at Cambridge entitled 'Commerce and Culture: The Publishing Business in Britain', which focused on Longman and the firm's commercial operations. More broadly, discussion introduced a welcome economic dimension to the coverage of the *Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* volumes. This was in distinction, for example, to the more social and cultural orientation of the earlier *Histoire de l'Édition Française*. Nevertheless, despite the urging of many of those at the seminars, including Peter Mathias, a certain reluctance to address the economic history of the press has persisted. We still need to attend to the agenda of many of the Worcester seminars and demonstrate how surviving archives (for all their difficulties and incompleteness) might recover past publishers' cost structures and pricing decisions.<sup>4</sup> The application of economic history has been an underdeveloped resource in most histories of the book. Economic concerns in the history of the book range from finance and labour history

to transport, and offer particular problems of comparison across periods and societies.

The history of collecting and of library history has also undergone notable revision in recent years and continues to expand (beyond what has often been a very limited conceptual base). New histories of libraries, with more broadly historically conceptualised approaches, have boosted the ambition of book history, pursuing studies of the history of taxonomy and historical perceptions of knowledge and the collection of information.<sup>5</sup> Similar revisionary attention has been given to the recovery of the history of bookshops and booksellers. The place of selling and borrowing has been related to ideas of space and cultural topography, and to the role of the shop in the world of the polite and the public.<sup>6</sup>

All notes and reports were conserved by Annabel Jones, as a record of this remarkable series of seminars. The reports contributed not only to the Briggs McArthur lectures, but to a further Worcester College international conference on book trades archives that proved instrumental in bringing together international scholars in the history of the book, led by Henri-Jean Martin and Robert Darnton. The seminar was, of course, hugely supportive of the writing of the history of Longman, but also for the foundation of new national history of the book projects, and of the constant questioning of their procedures and aims. Many similar national projects followed the multi-volume *Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* for which Asa Briggs was chair of the advisory board (according to Tim Rix, he was the advisory board). Among the emulative collaborative histories published worldwide are *A History of the Book in America* in five volumes (1999–2007),<sup>7</sup> *The History of the Book in Canada* in three volumes (2004–2007),<sup>8</sup> *The Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland* in four volumes (2007–2014),<sup>9</sup> *A History of the Book in Australia* in two volumes (2001–),<sup>10</sup> and *The Oxford History of the Irish Book* in five volumes (2006–).<sup>11</sup> Similar projects are planned for the Low Countries, India and South Africa.

This subject of historical enquiry has been beset by definitional difficulties from the outset, and it continues to provoke questions about its originality and coherence. What is a book? Should we speak of texts rather than of the material object the book? What does the decision to title some multivolume national histories 'A History' tell us about different approaches and disciplinary confidence? Print undoubtedly transformed politics, religion, commerce and intellectual and cultural life, but is it really possible to speak of a print culture when, in early modern Europe (and in so many parts of the world today) so much continued and continues to depend on oral communication? Much of what



was and is read was also persistently written, not printed, especially in the form of graffiti, ledgers and letters. Book history and print culture studies might therefore offer insight into cultural and communication practises that transcend the technological difference between script and print. Questions also continue about the approach of some of the founding practitioners, surveying the insistence upon interdisciplinarity, but examining also the limits to this ambition. For some contributors to the history of the book, the subject seems bounded and properly exclusive; for others it is inclusive and more a label than a discipline, particularly in regard to the training of respective contributors, whether from literary, bibliographical, historical or library and conservation studies.

Asa Briggs' seminars drew upon different traditions, including the founding *L'Apparition du livre* of Lucien Lefebvre and Henri-Jean Martin, the essays of Robert Darnton on book history and studies by D. F. McKenzie, among others. There are important national distinctions between methodological approaches and conceptual ambition. For example, French and Continental contributions (and their particular theoretical and bibliometric emphases) often contrast with the long tradition of different bibliographical and empirical scholarship in the Anglo-Saxon world. British retrospective national bibliography led the way, but marked also was the seminars' emphasis on what might be learned both from analytical and textual bibliography and from the economic and material conditions of book manufacture.

In fact, some of the earliest work in book history derived from explorations of the most perplexing question in French history: what caused the Revolution of 1789? Although their consequences were not fully appreciated at the time, early 20th-century studies of popular literature of 18th-century France (and notably of the *bibliothèque bleue*) introduced methodologies (and problematics) that transformed cultural history and the history of ideas. The work of Daniel Mornet, Robert Mandrou, Marc Bloch and others, many associated with *Annales* history, introduced strategies (and a study of widely cast *bibliologie*) that invited broader studies and conceptual range. Much bibliometrics (or enumerative bibliography) and statistical work originally derived from French and continental historical projects, including study of the *bibliothèque bleue de Troyes* and investigations of what the French Revolution meant to common people and readers.<sup>12</sup> In the early 1980s, a rich tradition of French bibliographical and sociological historical work remained relatively unknown to English-speaking readers, even though it inspired important new research in literary popular culture in Spain, Italy and Alsace (among other regions).<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the history of reading

and reception led by Michel de Certeau and Roger Chartier repositioned the study of chapbooks and other products of the printing press (and scriptorium) beyond the traditional, critical canon.<sup>14</sup>

The other leading, contributory tradition, British and Anglo-Saxon projects in retrospective national bibliography, date from the late 19th century. Their development through the 20th century provided a secure and distinctive base for ambitious historical bibliography. Although quite separate from French and Continental bibliometrics, there are clear parallels between the results of this research, leading to the development of short-title catalogues (STCs) and other empirical bibliographical listings in many other countries. Digital advances since the 1980s have not only transformed the STCs, but now offer a great variety of searchable bibliographical and literary historical databases (most of which are collection and STC-based). As archival and bibliographical case studies developed and contributed to regional and national histories of publishing, book manufacture and printing, broader questions demanded answers. Was it possible to develop explanatory models of, or at least helpful pointers to, historical relationships between the different agencies involved? A special attractiveness of such modelling was the crossing of traditional disciplinary boundaries, prefiguring later claims for the subject of book history.

The highly influential model of 'communications circuitry' proposed by Robert Darnton, its subsequent modification by Nicolas Barker and Thomas Adams, and the much broader propositions of Pierre Bourdieu influenced (among others) the modelling by Peter McDonald and gender critiques of Lynn Hunt and Paula McDowell (something missing from the Worcester seminars).<sup>15</sup> Maureen Bell's continuation of the work of Don McKenzie has extended our understanding of the range of those involved in the 17th-century book trade of England.<sup>16</sup> It is true that the most prominent women are those defined by their relationship to men – as wives, widows and daughters – but their careers were often long-lived and independent. The research-led expansion of the types of actor and agency that might be involved in communications circuits, has similarly refined interpretations of actor-network theory and other projections of 'mediation' that are the most recent modelling concepts to be adopted by book historians.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the use of the communications circuit diagrams is the resulting tension between modelling and theory, in which further (and older) sets of communication models are often ignored, including those of Harold Lasswell who as a founding father of media studies set out a series of questions relating to production circulation and readership.<sup>18</sup>

If, however, we were to review a basic division between those who sought new interdisciplinarity in the convivial drawing room of Worcester College, it would concern differences between physical, analytical and historical approaches in the long-term development of European bibliography. The most obvious divide was between those seeking to provide a copy-text for an 'ideal' edition for literary evaluation, and those committed to the exploration of the historical context of the manufacture and reproduction (and then the reception) of the text. Parallel idealist approaches in communications studies have insisted that media are the prime moulders of society, with recent emphasis on the fitful and imperfect transition between print and manuscript, and the residual impact of written texts and visual images. The broader history of the book that has expanded historical bibliography has been the more productive. Many of these studies of material production start from historical bibliographical reconstruction of original output. In demonstration of this, many return to the challenges posed by retrospective national bibliography and its more recent enlargement by digital bibliographical resources. Continued analysis of the material production of the book has informed histories of the European and American novel (John Sutherland, Robert Patten, Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, Leah Price),<sup>19</sup> of the Bible (David Hall, John Barnard, Leslie Howsam, Brian J. McMullin),<sup>20</sup> of magazines, serials and newspapers (Thomas Bonnell, Michael Harris, Hannah Barker, Laurel Brake),<sup>21</sup> the history of science (Lisa Jardine, Ann Blair, Adrian Johns),<sup>22</sup> of libraries (David McKitterick, Paul Raabe, Peter Hoare),<sup>23</sup> of literary-political culture (Kevin Sharpe, Steven Zwicker, David Vincent),<sup>24</sup> and of literary culture in general (David Shields, Hugh Amory, Roger Chartier, Hans-Erich Bödeker, Peter Burke and many more besides).<sup>25</sup>

In many ways the most contentious and significant dimension to the history of books is the history of reading (and, in hindsight, the Worcester seminars did not adequately reflect this development). For many historians, study of the reception of books and the exploration of reading practice and the historical understanding of meaning has opened up new horizons in the recovery of social history and of past social constructions of reality. The modern origins of 'reading history' reside with Robert Darnton, Carlo Ginzburg, Anthony Grafton, John Brewer, David Cressy and Roger Schofield<sup>26</sup> (among many others), with consideration given to the difference between the study of literacy and of literacies. The founding anthropological work of Jack Goody<sup>27</sup> is allied to the intersection between bibliography, the study of writing, palaeography, typography and the morphology and sociology of the text.<sup>28</sup>

A great variety of sources can now be employed to determine readerships and reading practices. Most sources are problematic but range over signatures, wills, marginalia in books, diaries, commentaries and visual representations and material artefacts. The Reading Experience Database (RED) has collected references to reading practice, a searchable resource that itself dates back to conversations between Asa Briggs, Simon Eliot and this author at Worcester.<sup>29</sup>

And what of the future? During the last 20 years, many of the advances in the history of the book have been collaborative or associated with research projects based in several combining centres. Most notable are the various national history of the book projects, but these confront the obvious historical nature of the book in all its various material forms. *Livres sans frontières* are not ideally served by national histories, all of which build on national STCs and pragmatic working and funding resources. The political (not always the same as the linguistic) unit is the obvious enabler for retrospective national bibliographies (which some countries have yet to complete), but books circulating within that unit were and are international commodities. Imbalance between different national STC projects is one thing, but quite another matter, and a serious consideration in their use in historical bibliographical analysis is the false perspective created by the national boundary – or more accurately by boundaries in terms of the origins of printing or even of the language (and for some STCs) format and size of the text. Any national history of the book and print really needs to be a history of book exchange in and out, of the trade in books, of the different books in circulation and read at any one time, irrespective of where they were originally printed or even sold. The analogy with histories of letter writing is useful, and correspondence projects such as the Oxford 'Electronic Enlightenment'<sup>30</sup> can assist ongoing research projects engaged in transnational book circulation. A further way forward is to attempt greater analysis of distribution. Much attention is currently being given to the global or transnational, and a key issue here is study of the transmission of texts, of how bibliometrics might move from production to circulation, to an analysis of the mechanics of cultural transaction and the ways in which frontiers for the written and printed word, vernacular or otherwise, were both created and breached. Numerous centres of the book flourish internationally,<sup>31</sup> but the global ambition of book history research needs attention. Pursuit of movement on a global scale transcends the narrow constraints of national histories and invites comparison rather than opposition.<sup>32</sup> It is important to look beyond national boundaries and to think of books crossing borders. It is also timely to

look beyond Europe and North America to collaborative and interdisciplinary work in book history in Africa, South America, India, Australasia and the Far East.

Transoceanic histories offer new directions. Those writing Atlantic and Pacific histories aim to open up new perspectives, or to put it another way, to expose weaknesses in existing accounts of national or imperial political, economic and social histories. Nevertheless, comparative study of the different locales, peoples and initiatives linked by the oceanic connections suggests the intimidating scale of the enterprise and highlights shortcomings and imbalances in existing historical coverage. Outstanding and pioneering comparative studies of migration, settlement and colonial encounter in North, Central and South America, for example, are not yet supported by comparative histories of the creation and maintenance of networks that linked different national and linguistic communities. Studies of French America such as those by Gilles Havard and Cécile Vidal, which incorporate sections on '*échanges, transports et commerce*',<sup>33</sup> are valuable yet poor relations of book and literary histories for British North America and the British Caribbean. Histories of Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, German, Swedish and other transatlantic book communities are even less well known beyond their country of publication. The best-known literary histories very rarely include studies of minority linguistic groups functioning within a majority culture (and exactly where transatlantic connections and dependencies were even more significant). Numbers need not be all. Much is contained in the small, imperfect and discontinuous, in the small but vital intermittent communities of importers and exporters of print, manuscripts and books and correspondence within ethnic and linguistic circuits.<sup>34</sup>

The dangers of tunnel vision persist, not simply in conservative approaches to the history of reading and reception but in the endurance of national perspectives at the expense of global insight. These limitations are apparent in the otherwise triumphant final outcome of the Worcester seminars: Asa Briggs' magisterial history of the Longman publishing dynasty. In name at least, Longman is the oldest continuous publishing house in Britain, North America and the Commonwealth. Founded in 1724, the firm of Thomas Longman and his descendants soon became the chief London rival to the prolific Rivington family of booksellers (whose business began in 1711). Longman out-published the Rivingtons by 1800, and 90 years later proudly bought out the rival firm, subsuming its brand and trademark. Since 1890 Longman has been the grand old man of British publishing. Of other long-term players,

John Murray, founded in 1768, closed in 2002 (sold by John Murray VII), Macmillan (founded 1843), Routledge (1850), and Blackwell (1878) are relative latecomers. Bookselling distributors such as W. H. Smith (founded 1848) are also far junior to Longman. The many history titles and history journals at some time published by Longman include *History Today*, of which Asa Briggs has been a founding and fundamental influence.

The *History of Longmans* by Asa Briggs, enthusiastically commissioned and supported by Tim Rix, was a landmark publication. The history embraces empire, trade, literature and something akin to a corporate biography. Its appearance followed a 40-year journey of endurance; successive high noons at the Garrick were pacified only by the excellence of Rix's choice of claret. But Longman's is a tremendous story. In 1724, Thomas Longman used his inheritance from his Bristol merchant father and wealthy mother to buy the thriving Paternoster Row business of William Taylor. Taylor, recent publisher of *Robinson Crusoe*, traded under the sign of the ship for a decade, and his ancestors had occupied nearby shops with ships since at least 1640. Longman coupled his ship with the equally distinguished black swan, dating from before 1680 and the original sign of another famous business bought by Taylor. In 1724 Longman was persuaded to buy the Taylor business by his former master and brother-in-law John Osborn as a going concern, for the considerable sum of £2,282. We can add that Longman's outlay was more than double that of John Murray for a similar business 45 years later. The history of both firms demonstrates the importance of early wealth in what was a high risk and capital intensive business.<sup>35</sup>

A series of distinguished publications established the reputation of Longman, and the death of the first Longman came in the midst of the firm's publication of Johnson's *Dictionary*. Under the direction of the founder's energetic nephew, Thomas Longman II, and his successor, Thomas Norton Longman, the firm published numerous enduring titles, including William Wordsworth's and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) and Wordsworth's *Excursion* (1814). With Archibald Constable, Longman also published *The Edinburgh Review*. In the firm's first century, Longman published on its own or with others nearly 5,000 separate titles. This number alone is remarkable, but Longman also established its reputation from the breadth and quality of its publication. As Asa Briggs detailed, during the 19th century, Longman published Scott, Macaulay, Disraeli, Christina Rossetti, Nightingale and dozens of household-name authors. Above all, the firm established a reputation for educational textbooks and for numerous, never-out-of-print

titles, including *Roget's Thesaurus* (1852) and *Gray's Anatomy* (1858). The Longman reach ran from the political (including the works of Sidney and Beatrice Webb) to agricultural, sporting and historical publications. These long-running titles and the educational publications (with schoolbooks published in combined editions of hundreds of thousands) proved the twin pillars of Longman's success.

As Asa Briggs also demonstrated, colonial and foreign trade sustained Longman's development. In the mid-19th century, when many major London booksellers were concerned with expansion in Europe as well as competition from cheap foreign reprints in Europe, Longman continued to pursue its long-established 'colonial' markets in the United States, India, the Caribbean and later, South Africa, Canada, Australia, East and West Africa and the Far East. Formal agency was established in New York in 1875, although Longman had exported to the American colonies from the very beginning of the firm in 1724, and this converted into a full branch house in 1889.

This is the global history of the book through the history of one distinguished and many tentacled firm. After the Second World War, successive reorganisations of the departments of the London headquarters of Longman's international expansion based on travelling representatives, branches, subsidiary companies and agency agreements. All this Asa Briggs chronicled with joyous detail, enfolding the literary with the political and the economic. In business terms, Longman proved distinctive in bringing in non-family partners to the firm, although for 248 years a Longman (or more than one) remained at the head of the business. There had been earlier examples of complex publishing family firms (notably the Robinsons from the late 18th century) but Longman is distinctive in the frequency of the changes. Sir Walter Scott called Longman 'the long firm' because in 1824 six partners' names were then included in the ever-varying imprint. The firm published its own *Longman's Magazine* and Asa is punctilious in referring to the firm as Longman. The title of this treasure house of a book, however, echoes the more familiar use, at home and abroad – Longmans.

The Briggs *Longmans* is an astute and attractive history that updates and corrects ancient emphases. It is also a book very much of the seminars, reflecting their strengths as well as their weaknesses. Of these, the national boundedness and limited global perspective is the most striking. Longman was a firm so dependent on Indian custom by the early 20th century that the banners over its stalls at major congresses proclaimed 'Longmans of London, New York and Bombay'. The Bombay branch of Longman opened in 1895; a Calcutta branch opened

in 1906; and a Madras branch opened in 1914. The branches also served as distribution centres for Burma, Ceylon, and Kenya and East Africa. C. J. Longman, presiding at the 1924 200th anniversary dinner concluded:

[i]t would probably have astonished Daniel Defoe and his publisher Taylor if they could have known that the work which they issued from the sign of the 'Black Swan' would be read two hundred years later in very large numbers, as a school-book, by dusky little boys in Hindustan. . . . I imagine that in the last five years more copies of Robinson Crusoe have been read in India than were ever sold by Taylor.<sup>36</sup>

Briggs' *Longmans* does not mention India. There is not even an index entry.

The archives of the Longman firm at Reading reveal massive publication of textbooks and popular literature to serve India, in English but also in a dozen of more indigenous languages. The three Indian branches promoted Longman London publications in India and developed their own publication businesses of locally printed books as well as notably in the vernacular languages of Hindi, Bengali, Sindhi, Nepali, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Gujarati, Malayalam, Kanada, and the languages of Burma and Thailand (Siam). The geographical reach of such publications was immense, covering the huge tracts of India and (modern-day) Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Burma. The edition sizes and sales were enormous. The surviving Indian Statement Book 1925–1936, for example, records total sales of J. C. Allen's *Narrative of Indian History* in that period as 19,854. There are sales of *Elementary Hygiene* of more than 20,000 and similar totals for *Physics for Indian Schools*, the *English Bible for Indian Readers* and dozens more.<sup>37</sup> Together with Macmillan (from 1903) and Oxford University Press (from 1912), Longman provided staple (non-newspaper) reading in English in India, as well as sponsoring the printing locally of texts in native languages, but all this is excised from histories.<sup>38</sup> Cyprian Blagden's term serving in India for Longman, 1940–1947, proved a significant period for growth, and his internal memo of circa 1947 noted:

The story of these Indian branches is not dissimilar from that of the American house. Their original purpose was to promote the sale in India of books published in England, but it was soon found that the Indian branches could also do useful work by the publication in India of books written to supply Indian needs – especially books for the use



in schools and colleges. Books in the vernacular are required as well as English books.<sup>39</sup>

Indian independence in 1947 instigated fundamental structural change to Longman, but one that was resisted by the firm's directors in London. The anticipated (and actual) requirements of the new governments of independent India and Pakistan in 1948 in regard to the operation of foreign companies required Longman to reconsider the organisation of their Indian operations. In relation to India, the correspondence of Longman to the newly established firm of Orient Longman between 1947 and 1974 is remarkably reflective of the culture of Longman represented by Asa Briggs in his history. The records suggest particular and often, in business terms, unhelpful aspects of the gentlemanly ethos of the firm. The appointment to Longman of Cyprian Blagden, who wrote a landmark history of the book trade and of the Stationers' Company in 1960, emphasised loyalty and the gentlemanly traditions of the trade in which, to quote Blagden, 'the routines of the past are still followed'. The culture of 20th-century Longman is savoured and wonderfully brought to life in Tim Rix's edited memoirs of the firm.<sup>40</sup>

In the Reading archives numerous exchanges survive that illuminate this business history survive. In 1953, for example, John 'Jack' H. Adam, Managing Director of Orient Longman in Calcutta writes to K. Potter, director in London:

Would Longmans Green enter into a gentleman's agreement that in the unlikely event of their selling out their holding they will not sell it to 'that certain class of [Indian] businessman'? I personally would not like any such gentleman's agreement to be made in writing. It would not be so bad if for the name of that certain class we could substitute the words 'unacceptable or unsuitable persons' but in that case we should also have to devise some means of laying down who should decide what persons were or were not acceptable or desirable.<sup>41</sup>

Gentlemanly conduct did not endure, however (even before Longman was bought by Pearson). The details of this later Anglo-Indian history, missing from Briggs' *Longmans* but very prominent in the company's archive, surfaced tellingly in the testimony given by this author in the High Court battle in 2007 between Pearson and Orient Longman over the right to use the Longman trademark.<sup>42</sup>

A revisiting of Longman and other book trade archives awaits those walking the path established by Asa Briggs and his Oxford Worcester

seminars. He has been an inspiration for those working in publishing and book history, and his history of Longman is a great and generous book by a great and generous historian. In honouring his example, the challenge for those considering books, manuscript and print as modes of communication and as agents in the history of knowledge and the social history of ideas is to broaden the parameters of study, to think laterally about the type of archives and resources that might be used and to ensure conversation with those in adjacent disciplines. During the past 30 years, many of the advances in the history of the book have been collaborative or associated with research projects based in several combining centres. It is to be hoped that more historians will be involved to challenge the boundaries of the subject by exploring problematic examples of relevant historical investigation in bibliography, literature, communications and the media.

In a particular way, the Cambridge Project for the Book Trust, founded in 1990 and of which Asa Briggs is a valued patron, has taken its model from the sociability of the Briggs academy. To date, the trust has raised over £1m to support bibliographical research and projects. In its hosting of conferences and the publishing of collaborative volumes, it has issued invitations for people to talk to each other, very much following the motto of 'not the usual suspects'. Published volumes by the trust, from *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England* to *Lost Libraries* and *Books between Europe and the Americas*, are notable for the variety of scholarship and academic disciplines represented. Some collaborations are more successful than others, but all attempted innovative introductions and the sharing of perspectives.<sup>43</sup>

The one agreed boon of the history of the book is that it is conversation between scholars and practitioners trained in very different disciplines, from textual criticism to book and print conservation, from cultural historians to bookbinders and papermakers. In some ways, however, it has to be admitted that the strength of the interdisciplinarity of the seminars served, paradoxically, to mute the voice of the historian. The seminar introductions by Asa Briggs could have left no one in any doubt of the historical purpose of the enquiry. The subsequent development of the history of the book, however, has too often fostered on the one hand an antiquarianism that ignores important historical questions and on the other hand an interest in new combinations of literary, bibliographical and critical scholarship, which, although perfectly legitimate and stimulating, leaves people and historical agency largely out of account. Research and writing on the history of libraries, of reading and reception and of gender

in book history have also developed in ways unanticipated by the seminars.

For all such cautions, it would be wrong to underplay the contribution made by non-historical disciplines to the historical study of the material text – anthropology, sociology, communications theory, linguistics, art criticism, palaeography, and above all, textual criticism and literary theory. The confluence of many different disciplines, ranging from historical demography to critical assessment of material culture, has greatly advanced the history of reading which, in turn, forms a vital part of the history of the book. How robust is the notion that authors write texts but do not create books, and that those that do (including readers, recreating texts every time they read) comprise the persistent focus of enquiry in the history of the book? Is the history of the book too little concerned with the social history of ideas? Are the contents of publications, the words and ideas conveyed by texts, overwhelmed by interest in the material object, its production and circulation? The history of the book has been dominated by discussion of the impact and characteristics of print – what of the early book, the book in non-literate societies, and the continuing importance of manuscript and written correspondence? And will global encounters and the colonial history of the colonial book help to bridge and extend comparative work? Different scholarly traditions and national differences persist – with both good and bad consequences. Disciplinary differences remain in the approaches taken in book history projects – some have been led by historians and based in academic history departments; others have developed from the agendas of literary or media scholars, many attempting to use empirical research to counter what they regard as devalued theory. Different motivation is a strength not a weakness, however, and in pursuit of the questions there is now a worldwide, networked and energetic generation of young scholars to take up the mantle of the historian of Longman.

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