

## From John Saville: Commitment and history

# The good old cause

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Around the time of John Saville's death in June 2009, academics in Britain were becoming sorely exercised by the measurement of so-called research 'impact'. Sceptics warned of research becoming still further constrained, commodified and instrumentalised, and of intellectual enquiry becoming subordinated to inimical values and tendentious assessment criteria. Socialist historians might have added that notions of a wider user community, and of 'benefits to the wider economy and society', were liable to be constructed according to the carnivorous business logic so characteristic of the New Labour years. Among his many commitments, John Saville took academic freedom seriously; among his keenest intuitions, corroborated by experience in India and during the Cold War, was a forensic clarity regarding the modus operandi of the British state. One may be sure that he would have had some telling thoughts to contribute to the present discussion, and we are the poorer for not having had them.

Even so, if any academic career exemplified a genuine quality of 'impact', both within and beyond the academy, it was Saville's. A substantial historian of the British labour movement, where his contribution was truly exceptional was in the promotion and enrichment of a wider field of scholarship which at the outset of his career was barely marked out at all. In the establishment of labour history as an academic discipline it is hard to overstate the importance of ventures like the *Dictionary of Labour Biography (DLB)*, the *Essays in Labour History*, the labour archives at Hull and the reprints of numerous labour and radical texts, in all of which Saville had a major hand. There could be no complaining here from the standpoint of conventional notions of impact. At the same time, Saville was a life-long socialist, whose understanding of economic and social well-being

was a world away from what Collini calls the 'economistic officiales' of those fixated on the market and its outcomes.<sup>1</sup> For nearly thirty years he not only co-edited the annual *Socialist Register* but, as Colin Leys describes here, provided it with a regular flow of essays, attesting either the continuing topicality of labour history themes or else the importance of historical perspective in understanding the times we live in.<sup>2</sup> The hundred or so items in the bibliography attached to his autobiography, *Memoirs from the Left*, was anything but exhaustive. Nevertheless, it represents a formidable body of activity over some half a century.

Between the bibliography and the narrative which preceded it there was nevertheless a paradox; for while all these major projects and publications date from after 1956, as do ninety per cent of the items in the bibliography, the text of the *Memoirs* itself is heavily weighted towards the much shorter period Saville spent, at a much lower level of prominence, as a member of the British Communist Party (CPGB). There might of course be incidental reasons for this. The persisting wider interest in communist party history is one. That even the most purposive academic endeavours make for less than enthralling reading is another. More fundamentally, Saville's was a life which in crucial ways remained defined by formative communist values and commitments for decades after he had left the party itself behind him. Along with Edward Thompson, he was a crucial figure in the formation of the New Left, and in the categorical repudiation of Stalinism which provided its original rationale. As Madeleine Davis describes here, however, when Saville and Thompson first produced *The Reasoner* in 1956 they did not at first envisage that this meant removing themselves from the CPGB; when forced out by the leadership's recidivism over Hungary, they departed, according to Saville, 'with great reluctance'.<sup>3</sup> For Saville in particular, neither theory nor practice of communism could be reduced to Stalinism, and the communist experience remained both emotionally and intellectually a critical point of reference. As late as 1991, with the collapse of Europe's communist systems, he felt compelled to bring to bear a sort of personal witness, combining elements of reaffirmation with critique and repudiation.<sup>4</sup> In a very real sense, of which he was himself perfectly conscious, Saville's career as a labour and socialist historian was one he saw as carrying through values and precepts learnt, and never subsequently unlearned, as a communist.

## COMRADE STAM AND JOHNNY SAVILLE

He certainly did not owe these values to his family background. Another peculiarity of Saville's autobiography, which is otherwise conventionally structured, is that its somewhat perfunctory account of his birth and childhood is interpolated some twenty pages into the narrative, where it offers little in the way of insight into his later political attachments. Born Orestes Stamatopoulos in April 1916, Saville was the only son of a well-born Greek attached to a Lincoln engineering firm and a not-so-well born Lincolnshire domestic worker. His father having been killed in the war, his mother found a second husband in a Romford master tailor for whom she had taken up work as a housekeeper. Saville was six when they met, ten when they married; previously he had lived with a surrogate 'Gainsborough Mammy', for whom he expressed a real sense of loss, and with a maiden aunt, who, recalled a little less fulsomely, provided 'what must have been a sense of security and affection'. This might have been an unsettled childhood, but Saville gave little indication that it was an unhappy one. He was a keen and very able sportsman, who by the time he left school had represented his county at football, swimming and athletics. Following his mother's example, he was also an active member of the Anglican church, and the diverse rituals and forms of association it allowed for.

Already in the early 1930s, the issues were fermenting which were to lure so many of the younger generation towards communism. They do not, however, appear to have disturbed the peaceful tenor of the Saville household. Strenuously though Saville would later insist on the reality of the slump, in Romford, still a 'small country town', it must have seemed at one step removed; and even the nearby Becontree estate and Ford motor works are nowhere mentioned in Saville's memoirs. In his wider survey of the period, he did refer to the 'extraordinary spate' of literary bestsellers which expressed a powerful mood of war revulsion in 1928-31.<sup>5</sup> Saville himself, however, appears to have encountered this literature only in his last months at school, in the shape of Beverley Nichols's *Cry Havoc!*, published in 1933, and a volume of Wilfred Owen's war poems borrowed from the local public library. That was rather characteristic of children from such conservative backgrounds. Saville's mother was an avid Dickens reader, his stepfather took the reactionary *Daily Mail*. It took a teacher, again in

his last years at school, to introduce him to Malraux's *La Condition Humaine*, and even then he could not fully make sense of it.<sup>6</sup>

Life, or at least its reconstruction in his autobiography, thus began for Saville when he arrived at the London School of Economics in the autumn of 1934. Enrolling for the broad BSc (Econ) degree with a specialism in economic geography, his studies were in due course to secure him a First. On his arrival in Houghton Street, however, such provident considerations were quickly put to the back of his mind. Student communism at this time was entering upon its most active period of recruitment, and London was one of its centres. Swept along by the current, within a fortnight Saville had joined the LSE Socialist Society and within a couple of months the CPGB itself. By his second year, Comrade Stam, as he was known, was the LSE's student communist organiser and a somewhat daunting figure to later intakes of students.<sup>7</sup> Lectures, with the exception of Harold Laski's, were invariably skipped; writing skills were not as yet honed on student essays. Far more compelling was the 'political excitement' of student communism, pulling him into the library and out again in search of that unity of theory and practice which never seems more attainable than to the student activist.<sup>8</sup> Only continuing prowess on the football pitch provided significant diversion from what was more or less a full-time activity.

Saville was never much taken with Raphael Samuel's emphasis on themes of conversion and a surrogate religiosity in his evocations of British communism's 'lost world'.<sup>9</sup> With his extensive experience as a labour historian, he was certainly sure of his ground in urging how implausible it was to think of militants at the heart of the British labour movement joining the communists out of craving for a sense of belonging.<sup>10</sup> That Saville's own adhesion to the party was as 'matter-of-fact' a decision as he came to believe is perhaps more contestable, and Saville himself conceded that his instant attachment to the student movement was something he was unable to explain.<sup>11</sup> Communism was never for him akin to a religious order; but in its sense of comradeship and common purpose it might well have had the sort of associational compensations which he had continued to find in England's actual established church for some years after he had lost all sense of the religious beliefs on which it was supposed to rest. In casual discussions of communism as a surrogate religion such distinctions are too easily overlooked.<sup>12</sup> 'It would not have been difficult to

feel oneself lonely at LSE', Saville recorded, again with a certain obliquity; and as he made each day the forty-mile round trip from what remained his family home in Romford, one can well believe that he had personal authority for the statement. To join the communists at the LSE, in any case, was 'to belong immediately to a network of comrades and friends whose intellectual sophistication was both encouraging and intimidating'.<sup>13</sup>

Deeply impressed by the communists he encountered, Saville was to continue to express a strong sense of identification in much of his work as a labour historian. As the *DLB* so splendidly demonstrates, he was second to none in his appreciation of the importance of activists' life-histories, and he can be found discussing the (in Britain) neglected subject of labour prosopography as early as 1973.<sup>14</sup> If the CPGB historians were more generally marked by a sensitivity to the issue of political agency, experiences like Saville's own in the party itself were doubtless a significant contributory factor. As Saville pointed out, and as Samuel would certainly have concurred, communists were by no means alone in the commitments they made to social and political movements, which were indeed hardly conceivable without such commitments. From the volumes of the *DLB* Saville singled out the example of the Durham miner Tommy Ramsay, a staunch nonconformist, and from his later experience in Hull the non-communist secretary of the trades council, Jack Nicholson.<sup>15</sup> In later years he was to be curtly dismissive of a literature downplaying the role of such activist minorities, on the grounds of its naivety as to how radical social and political movements were necessarily constructed.<sup>16</sup>

Graduating in the summer of 1937, Saville's initial hopes of a research scholarship were to be disappointed. The three years that followed were something of a hiatus. Voluntary political work and an ill-fated venture into supply teaching were followed by posts for the Dictaphone Company and the British Home Stores. Respectively recalled as 'quite uninteresting' and 'hard but endurable', these at least provided the necessary financial independence to share a flat with Constance Saunders, whom Saville had met at the LSE and who was to remain his lifelong partner, despite her leaving the CPGB some seventeen years earlier than him, over the Nazi-Soviet pact.<sup>17</sup> Had war not intervened, quite conceivably his life course might have taken a very different direction, and detained us much more briefly.

Saville's six years in the army provided a second major formative experience and were presented as such in the second chapter of his autobiography. Called up in April 1940, his first four years were spent in anti-aircraft batteries in Britain, and the latter two in India. Together they represented a significant extension of his personal frame of reference. In defiance of current communist policy, Saville refused to apply for a commission on the grounds that his place in the event of trouble – and communists in 1940 were certainly expecting that – was with the 'rude and licentious soldiery'.<sup>18</sup> It was among these that he consequently found himself, from his earliest stationing at an AA training barracks near Wokingham. With his family roots in Gainsborough, to which he had periodically returned, Saville was not as innocent of working-class life as some of his contemporaries. Nevertheless, student communism by the late 1930s could appear a relatively self-contained world. Earlier in the decade, communism had meant for some a conscious orientation towards the proletariat, expressed in adaptations of dress, demeanour and accent as well as forms of political engagement. With the onset of the popular front, on the other hand, students and intellectuals were valued for what they could achieve in their own more restricted sphere of work. In the last winter before the war, Saville had assisted the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM) in the spectacular demonstrations it organised in London's West End of London, and he himself had taken part in a 'small lie-down' in Piccadilly Circus.<sup>19</sup>

It was in the army, nevertheless, that one has the sense of his crossing some invisible divide. Towards the end of his student days he had assumed his stepfather's name of Saville, possibly influenced by the CPGB's current embrace of Englishness. He also took the forename John, which, one imagines – though without a source to corroborate – must have reflected the inspiration which student communists of his generation drew from the example of the brilliantly gifted John Cornford, who at the age of twenty-one had been killed at Cordova in December 1936. No longer Comrade Stam, except to those who knew him in his student days, Saville found himself transmuted into Johnny Saville, and out of discretion or camaraderie having to modify his previous accent. 'We thought', one of his new confederates told him, 'you were a snotty bastard'. One of the sharpest impressions of his army years was of how deep the class divisions ran in British society, particularly as reinforced and accentuated by rank and segregation.

In India it was even worse, but there was another lesson too. If the universities of the 1930s were restricted in their social intake, in terms of students' national origins they did allow for encounters which did not occur in the average English town or industrial suburb. Saville had associated most closely with American students, and developed a taste for American novelists like Hemingway and Dos Passos. Other friendships were established with political refugees like the Austrian Teddy Praeger and the Spaniard Manuel Azcarate. Exposure to the politics of international solidarity, to which Spain of course was central, was to be reinforced following Saville's graduation, when he worked for a time for the China solidarity campaigns of the Union of Democratic Control. Saville's two years in India, however, made an unforgettable impression that was to mark him all his life. On the one hand, there was the exposure to brutal levels of poverty and exploitation, and the deep-dyed racism of the British in India. On the other, there was the example of the Indian communists, with whom he made immediate contact and whom he was able to assist in the production of pamphlets and the party weekly *People's War*. What most impressed him were the 'self-sacrifice and dedication of the full-time Party workers', and listening to their stories of underground work and prison was an experience at once exhilarating and sobering – but 'much more the latter than the former'.<sup>20</sup> Saville's associations with Indian students in Britain had been constrained by fear of the consequences they might run. In India itself, however, contacts with communists like Mohan Kumaramangalam, a future minister under Indira Gandhi, developed into close friendships. In his discussion in this volume of relations between Indian and British communists, Sobhanlal Datta Gupta notes the perception in India that a commitment to colonial liberation was in Britain a burning issue only for a minority. Through the contingency of his Indian posting, Saville was nevertheless part of that minority, and his wider political outlook was to be strongly marked by this insight into the realities of western colonial rule. He returned to England in the spring of 1946, he later wrote, having seen imperialism at its revolting worst and with his communist convictions strengthened.<sup>21</sup> Whatever his reactions to the Cold War, he was never going to idealise the West.

For a period after his return he was employed in operational research at the Ministry of Works. More fatefully, in the autumn of 1947 he took up the lecturing post in Hull in which he was to spend

his entire academic career. Settling into the area, he was to accept the obligations of local party work, delivering the *Daily Worker* and chairing his local branch of the British-Soviet Friendship Society. The beginning of his university career, however, also coincided with the activation of the most effective of the party's professional groups, the CPGB Historians' Group. This was to provide a third and indelible formative experience, one requiring further discussion in its own right.

### THE LINGERING WORLD OF BRITISH COMMUNISM

What the Historians' Group exemplified for Saville was a method of work whose influence can clearly be traced in his later activities. If that was one major legacy of his communist years, the other was a *Weltanschauung*, or world-view, which may have been modified, and in some aspects even transformed, in 1956, but in other crucial features was to be consistently upheld until his death.

There was, of course, no single communist *Weltanschauung*. The different phases of communist policy and different moments of engagement made for varying cohort experiences of the party, which were further complicated by personal disturbances like war service or even university. Across his twenty-two years of CP membership, Saville not only experienced these successive phases of the communist *mentalité*, from popular front to cold war, but through his appetite for history and theory encountered the still-surviving texts of an earlier period. To sum up even the individual communist world-view is therefore no simple matter. If one has, nevertheless, to compress the matter, one might hazard that Saville was emotionally a communist of 1930s mould, but politically as deeply marked by the Cold War.

Comparison with Edward Thompson, his sometime closest collaborator, is in this respect instructive. Born in 1924, Thompson's adherence to communism post-dated Saville's by eight years, and in the course of their association Saville was repeatedly reminded of his own identity as one of 'the generation of the Red Decade'.<sup>22</sup> The communist narrative of the 1930s was one of Manichean clarity, and in essays like his 'May Day 1937' (1979) Saville gave as emphatic a rendition of this narrative as his condemnation of its revisionist alternatives was severe. Except in the matter of their support for Stalinism in the USSR, the communists in this period continued, in Saville's estimate,

to have the best of every argument: though prisoners of their party's past and of the directives it received from Moscow, theirs were the energy, the inspiration and the outstanding personalities behind what Saville always held to be the decade's major campaigns and social movements.<sup>23</sup> Within the *DLB*, while a negative bias was never consciously intruded, a positive tribute was admissible through entries on key figures and influences in Saville's own life history. Jack Cohen (volume nine) was from 1936 the CP's national student organiser; Don Renton (also volume nine) was the London organiser of the NUWM at the time of Saville's involvement; Clive Branson (volume two) was the sometime International Brigader whose *British Soldier in India* made such a powerful impression on Saville during the war years; even Mohan Kumaramangalam (volume five) crept in on the strength of his student activities.<sup>24</sup> All were of the 'generation of the 1930s', and in Cohen's and Branson's cases their biographies required co-operation with surviving partners who were also of that generation and had remained in the CPGB. It was similarly with the assistance of Margot Heinemann, John Cornford's former girlfriend, that Saville launched his memorable and effective broadside against the misrepresentation of the communists' efforts in Spain in *The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse*.<sup>25</sup> Even Harry Pollitt, an obvious target for critics during the CPGB's Stalinist rearguard action of 1956, was at Saville's urging to be spared *The Reasoner's* personal attacks in deference to these earlier struggles: 'To me', as he wrote to Thompson, 'Harry is linked with Spain, anti-appeasement and the Hunger Marches'.<sup>26</sup> Even at the height of his political disillusionment with King Street, for Saville these remained the indispensable elements of a shared collective memory.

Though to this extent a communist of 1930s vintage, joining as the Seventh World Congress was already on the horizon, Saville was in other respects rather untypical of the popular-front recruit. In particular this was true of his unrelenting suspicion of the Labour Party. Without dissatisfaction with Labour's official policies and leadership one would hardly have been a communist at all, and indignation over issues like non-intervention in Spain was also widely felt within Labour's own ranks. For many of Saville's contemporaries, these internal tensions encouraged a distinct ambivalence towards the Labour Party, graphically illustrated by their willingness to enter the party in their hundreds, particularly in London and the

Home Counties. Saville himself, on the other hand, could never have done this, and he never entertained the idea even after leaving the CPGB.<sup>27</sup>

In some respects this is surprising, for it was Laski, at that time an epitome of the thinking Labour left, whom Saville described as the most important influence in his own intellectual life, and as an inspiration to him as a student.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, self-directed reading allowed a space for heterodoxy which is often underestimated. Like others of his generation, Saville was particularly impressed by the astringency of R Palme Dutt – it was only later that he saw him as a disastrous influence – and the continued attention that he gave to issues of empire and colonialism.<sup>29</sup> Among the books that influenced him, moreover, he singled out John Strachey's *Coming Struggle for Power*, originally published in 1932, and Theodore Rothstein's *From Chartism to Labourism*, published in 1929. Both carried a flavour of more sectarian times; neither encouraged confidence in the British Labour Party. On the contrary, wrote Strachey, 'those very organizations of working-class revolt, which the workers have gradually and painfully created over nearly half a century ... are today by far the most formidable obstacle in the way of an early victory'.<sup>30</sup> What Saville saw as the feebleness of the 1930s Labour Party impressed upon him a scepticism towards social democracy which never abated, and which as late as the 1980s saw him introduce Rothstein's neglected study to a new generation of readers.<sup>31</sup>

If Saville had misgivings about his party's concessions to social democracy during the later war years, he was to find his own underlying antagonism vindicated by the onset of the Cold War. Disillusionment with Bevin's foreign policy was instantaneous. Support for the maintenance of empire and colonial wars was one major factor. The suppression of the communist resistance in Greece, discussed below by John Sakkas, was another, as important in Saville's estimation as Spain had been in the 1930s.<sup>32</sup> Spain itself, with the persistence of the Franco regime, was a third: 'To allow this butcher of so many thousands of his own people to remain in power ... was for me a confirmation of the conservative iniquities of British labourism'.<sup>33</sup> While in the New Deal era Saville had looked with optimism towards the USA, Labour's supine atlanticism now seemed to him the key to these further iniquities, and he was later to describe Britain's subjection to US foreign policy as the outstanding feature of

its post-war history.<sup>34</sup> There was to be no change of heart in this respect. Renewed through the New Left and in his criticisms of the Wilson governments, the analysis was to receive emphatic confirmation in Saville's final years, and he was to conclude his autobiography with a ringing denunciation of Blair's war in Iraq. How unfortunate it is that we shall never have Saville's assessment of Blair's own lamentable and self-serving autobiography. At Hull, however, he encouraged pathbreaking research into cold war history, including the doctoral research of Dianne Kirby and John Sakkas, who contribute to the present collection. We also have some of the fruits of Saville's own research into Labour's post-war foreign policy following his retirement in 1982. As well as articles on Attlee and Bevin in the *Socialist Register*, in 1993 Saville published his major study *The Politics of Continuity*, which John Callaghan evaluates here. The two further volumes he envisaged, however, were never to be published.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Saville was almost as unimpressed by the Attlee government's domestic achievements. The significance of the governments' welfare reforms was a crucial issue for socialists in the 1950s and Saville at one stage proposed a Historians' Group publication on the welfare state. Even Maurice Dobb, the CPGB's most eminent economist, expressed a certain diffidence in the matter: 'This may be because I find it, politically, a harder nut, and am uncertain quite what line we take on the matter – that the welfare tendencies of recent decades are all a cunning liberal manoeuvre to corrupt the workers, or that they are to be welcomed as the products of working class pressure etc and a sign of what determined effort can do even under Cap<sup>m</sup>, or some synthesis of the two?'.<sup>35</sup> Saville, like everybody else, recognised that there were indeed contradictory elements in the phenomenon.<sup>36</sup> To an unusual degree he nevertheless leant towards the 'cunning manoeuvre' interpretation, and, as Madeleine Davis describes here, on subsequently expounding this view in the *New Reasoner* prompted rebuttals from among his closest collaborators.<sup>37</sup>

The issue was also to register in Saville's later writings, for it was on these premises that he was to develop the analysis of labourism which was to prove one of his most characteristic and influential contributions to British labour history. 'It is not only that the social composition of the Labour leadership is increasingly middle class, or that the top and middle level trade union leadership displays the

unmistakable characteristics of a bureaucracy; but it is also that among the rank and file of the movement the dynamism for radical social change has steadily weakened', he wrote in 1957. 'Those who see the growth in numbers and physical strength of the movement as a considerable achievement too often miss the equally important point that these improved instruments of working class organisation and power have today become much blunted in purpose.'<sup>38</sup> Evaluated here by David Howell, the analysis of labourism was to assist the smooth working relations Saville had with Ralph Miliband, with whom for twenty-three years he was to co-edit the *Socialist Register* and whose *Parliamentary Socialism* (1961) embodied a similarly sceptical view of the British Labour Party.

If elements of a communist world-view remained discernible in what Saville published, still more important was the experience of collective work which influenced how he published, and how, more generally, he approached his wider responsibilities as a socialist academic. In some ways, that can be traced back to his earliest activities as a communist. 'In personal terms what I learned from my communist years at LSE was intellectual discipline and a strong commitment to party work', he wrote of his student experiences.<sup>39</sup> Though the party mantra 'Every communist a First' sounds like a virtual parody of socialist competition, Saville was careful to describe how forms of mutual support and discussion, from the borrowing of notes and shared reading tasks to the release from political responsibilities in one's final year, gave even the pursuit of academic excellence something of the character of a shared endeavour.<sup>40</sup> To lasting effect, extending far beyond its immediate members, this was also to be the experience of the CPGB Historians' Group.

#### THE HISTORIANS' GROUP AS WORKING MODEL

The story of the group has been told many times.<sup>41</sup> Its nineteenth-century section, of which Saville along with Eric Hobsbawm was one of the most active members, provided the setting in which Saville conducted the researches into the Chartist movement which provided his first major contribution to British labour historiography. Reflected in the coverage of the *DLB*, and picked up again in another important monograph, *1848*, Saville's analysis of Chartism is worthy of attention in its own right, and is discussed as such below by Malcolm Chase.

In the bibliography in his memoirs, nevertheless, it is interesting that these individual writings are listed only after Saville's diverse editorial undertakings. That, too, may be seen as in the spirit of the Historians' Group, and of the strong conception of collective work that Saville himself developed within it. The proposed collection on the welfare state, for example, was one of three such volumes which he put forward in the form of a '4 Year plan' intended to provide a renewed sense of purpose and direction for the group's nineteenth-century section:

Briefly I am ... arguing that our published work is by no means commensurate with our intellectual forces, and that the Dona Torr volume [see below] has shown real possibilities of co-operative activity. If we can persuade our people to write one 'co-operative' essay per year, we could, within a couple of years, start publishing one of these volumes.

In this first four-year plan, it is not difficult to see one of the sources of such future enterprises as the *DLB*, the *Essays in Labour History* and the annual exercise in co-operative essay writing, the *Socialist Register*. Only on such a basis, Saville continued, could a vigorous tradition of Marxist historical scholarship ever be established in Britain.<sup>42</sup>

The 'Dona Torr volume' was *Democracy and the Labour Movement*, a pioneering collection of labour history essays published under Saville's editorship in 1954. With Kiernan, Hobsbawm and Hill among the contributors, the project exemplified this spirit of collective endeavour and discussion: exactly as do the discussions on the early modern period which David Parker has recently edited.<sup>43</sup> As Hobsbawm emphasises in his essay on its activities, the group was not 'a "school" built round an influential teacher or book' but – again those words – a 'genuinely co-operative' enterprise of equals and as such probably without precedent in British historiography.<sup>44</sup>

For Saville, far more than for Hobsbawm, the dedication of this first major group production was nevertheless rather more than just an incidental formality. Like Christopher Hill, who prepared the volume's preface, he had an unabashed regard for Torr as a sort of role model whose contribution far exceeded anything she had actually put into print. As originally conceived by Hill, the volume's foreword thus ascribed the continuing delay to Torr's long-awaited biography

of Tom Mann, not just to her meticulous attention to detail, but to the less individualised conception of scholarly endeavour to which she was so committed:

and ... to the selfless and sacrificial way in which she has put her learning and her wisdom at the disposal of others. The 'History in the Making' Series [of historical documents] ... is the most obvious result of her genius for collective work ... But her help and guidance have been extended in countless other directions, which cannot be traced, with results which cannot be measured. Hers has been a pervading influence for a whole generation of Marxist historians, of whose extent the modest Dona herself can have no conception. Every one of the contributors to this book, and scores of other investigators of the past, can testify to the patient help and unflinching stimulus which she has given them.

Here at least there was explicitly the sense of a 'whole school of Marxist historians [having] grown up around her', with its principles defined as those of a lived history of the common people.<sup>45</sup> To this extent, Hobsbawm's rather different recollection may be seen as a conscious disclaimer.<sup>46</sup>

With its combination of genius, wisdom and modesty, the foreword's note of late Stalinist excess was prudently modified in the published version.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, Saville's regard for Torr went beyond such rhetorical flourishes. Though Hill had drafted the foreword, the original idea for the book had been Saville's, and it was he who undertook the work of organising it, as 'secretary' to its editorial committee, and without at first assuming responsibility for editorial decisions. 'I have offered to do this', he explained, 'because nobody including me wants additional work of this kind, but I am most anxious to get things moving'.<sup>48</sup> It took over three years to produce the book, with Saville from Hull co-ordinating an editorial committee based in Oxford, Cambridge and Birmingham. In the same period he also found time to organise a seventieth birthday dinner for Torr in addition to his work with the nineteenth-century section. In justice to his editorial efforts, it was Saville's name, very properly, which eventually appeared on the title page with Torr's.<sup>49</sup>

Revising these words in the week of JH Newman's implausible

beatification, there is no need to extend such treatment to either Torr or Saville himself. With a young family and no independent income, Saville understood that conflicting pressures of both time and expense were involved, and that collective goals could not be achieved at the expense of professional self-immolation. After the protracted experience of *Democracy and the Labour Movement* he observed that 'we should not expect our people to concentrate wholly on co-operative work of this kind', and that equally in his own case, with 'two quite separate projects ... running years behind schedule', he felt obliged to keep the following year clear to complete them.<sup>50</sup> One of them was indeed to see publication in 1957 as the scholarly monograph *Rural Depopulation in England and Wales*. Whatever the advantages of leaving the CPGB, however, they did not include release from the sense of collective responsibility he had learnt there. In the midst of their efforts with *The Reasoner* in 1956, Saville confided to Thompson how much he wanted to get back to writing history.<sup>51</sup> In practice, however, *The Reasoner* was followed by the *New Reasoner*, and the *New Reasoner* by the *Socialist Register*. Even as he did get back to history, it was with that marked disposition to forms of collective activity that he had internalised as a communist. As a lecturer at Humberside, Tony Adams, one of the contributors to the present volume, notes the commitment Saville made to the wider promotion of labour history, co-ordinating research discussions and contributing to day schools for predominantly working-class mature students. One result, Saville recalled, apparently without regret and certainly without bitterness, was that major studies like his *1848* appeared some twenty years later than they might otherwise have done.

You could take the historian out of the party, but you couldn't take the party out of the historian. In ways they may not have suspected, and might even have strenuously denied, this was true of many of the historians who left the CPGB in 1956-7. Of none, however, was it truer than of Saville, and to none was this less a matter for embarrassment, apologia or dissimulation. Even half a century on Saville described the Historians' Group as 'the most productive, useful and helpful period of my intellectual career', one that enlarged his intellectual horizons and sharpened his historical wits. Of the monumental enterprise of the *DLB*, which at the time of writing has reached its thirteenth volume, he traced the primary

inspiration neither to the trailblazing *Maitron* in France nor to the files he inherited from GDH Cole, but to the Historians' Group of the CPGB.<sup>52</sup>

In 1991, as Colin Leys reminds us, Saville declared that the time had come to repudiate the name of communism. At the same time, however, he reaffirmed the need for 'a comradeship that will sustain and support the self-discipline and self-sacrifice without which the principles, and the aims, of the Good Old Cause will never be achieved'.<sup>53</sup> The passage recalls Ralph Miliband's tribute on the occasion of Saville's *festschrift* in 1979, and its recognition of the commitment Saville had made 'once and for all, some forty-five years ago', when he set foot in the LSE.<sup>54</sup> There were not many entries in the *DLB*, Miliband continued, which recorded lives of greater integration and integrity. Eric Hobsbawm recalled these words in his *Guardian* obituary, and very properly. Three decades on there are dozens more *DLB* entries, and very soon, one imagines, Saville will have his own. Few socialist academics, as Miliband rightly intimated, have done more to merit their place in such company.

### Notes

1. See Collini's discussion of 'impact', *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 November 2009.
2. It was characteristic, as Colin Leys notes, that a contribution in 1982 ostensibly on recent labour historiography in reality provided an analysis of the state of the socialist project in the UK. But to a lesser degree this was true of other contributions too; Saville could no more write an essay on Hugh Gaitskell (1980) without bringing it to bear on Labour's current predicament than he could discuss the record of the Wilson governments (1967) without a historical frame of reference, in this instance including his key historical concept of labourism.
3. Saville, 'The Communist experience: a personal appraisal' in Ralph Miliband and Leo Panitch, eds, *Communist Regimes: the Aftermath, Socialist Register 1991*, Merlin, 1991, p22.
4. Saville, 'Communist experience', pp1-25.
5. Saville, 'May Day 1937' in Asa Briggs and John Saville, eds, *Essays in Labour History 1918-39*, Croom Helm, 1977, p250.
6. All details from Saville, *Memoirs*, pp21-6.
7. This at least was the experience of Betty Matthews as interviewed by the author
8. Ralph Miliband, 'John Saville: a presentation' in David E Martin and

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- David Rubinstein, *Ideology and the Labour Movement*, Croom Helm, 1979, p18.
9. See Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism*, Verso, 2006.
  10. *Memoirs*, pp9-11.
  11. Saville, *Memoirs*, p9; Miliband, 'John Saville', p16.
  12. See the observations in Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, *Communists in British Society 1920-91*, Rivers Oram, 2007, ch2.
  13. Saville, *Memoirs*, p8.
  14. In the *Social Science Research Council Newsletter*. The item was included in the bibliography of his writings compiled for *Memoirs from the Left*.
  15. Saville, 'Communist experience', pp9-10.
  16. Saville, 'The crisis in labour history: a further comment', *Labour History Review*, 1996, pp322-3.
  17. Constance died two years before him, in 2007. For this period see Saville, *Memoirs*, pp27-32.
  18. Unless otherwise stated, material here is drawn from Saville, *Memoirs*, ch2.
  19. Saville, *Memoirs*, p31.
  20. Saville, 'Communist experience', p17.
  21. Saville, 'Communist experience', p19.
  22. Saville, 'Edward Thompson, the Communist Party and 1956' in *Socialist Register*, 1994, p25.
  23. Saville, 'May Day 1937', pp247-8 and passim.
  24. Saville, *Memoirs*, p56; Saville, 'Books to be remembered', *Socialist History*, 19, 2000, pp82-4.
  25. See the discussion by Colin Leys in this volume. It must have confirmed Saville's low opinion of the editor, Valentine Cunningham, when his *British Writers of the Thirties* (1988) failed to uphold his earlier assertions, but without once referring to Saville's critique – while finding place in his extensive bibliography for his own somewhat less effective response to the critique.
  26. Saville, 'The Twentieth Congress and the British Communist Party' in Ralph Miliband and John Saville, eds, *Socialist Register 1976*, Merlin, 1976, p18.
  27. Saville, 'Communist experience', p12.
  28. Saville, *Memoirs*, p98.
  29. Saville, *Memoirs*, p11.
  30. Strachey, *The Coming Struggle for Power*, Gollancz, 1932, chs 17-18; also Saville, 'Communist experience', p13.
  31. See the discussion by Malcolm Chase below; also Saville, *Memoirs*, p8; Saville, 'Communist experience', pp11-12.
  32. Saville, *Memoirs*, p62.
  33. Saville, *Memoirs*, pp75-6.
  34. 'John Saville and the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*: interview by Malcolm Chase', *Socialist History*, 19, 2000, p80.

35. Saville papers U DJS/10, Dobb to Saville, 19 November 1954.
36. See for example the assessment of his collaborator in the Historians' Group, Eric Hobsbawm, 'The taming of parliamentary democracy in Britain', *Modern Quarterly*, 6, 4, autumn 1951, pp336-9.
37. Saville, 'The welfare state', *New Reasoner*, 3, winter 1957, pp5-25; also Stephen Hatch and Dorothy Thompson, 'Discussion: the welfare state', *New Reasoner*, 4, spring 1958, pp124-30.
38. Saville, 'The welfare state', p25.
39. Saville, 'Communist experience', p14.
40. Saville, *Memoirs*, pp17-18.
41. See for example Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Historians' Group of the Communist Party' in Maurice Cornforth, ed., *Rebels and their Causes: essays in honour of AL Morton*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1978, pp21-47. The fullest account is Antony Howe, "'The past is ours.'" The political uses of English history by the British Communist Party, and the role of Dona Torr in the creation of its Historians' Group, 1930-56', Sydney: PhD, 2004.
42. Saville papers, U DJS/10, Saville to Sam Aaronovitch, 3 November 1954.
43. David Parker, ed., *Ideology, Absolutism and the English Revolution. Debates of the British communist historians 1940-1956*, Lawrence & Wishart, 2008. The other contributors to *Democracy and the Labour Movement*, were Henry Collins, Steven Mason, Ronald Meek and Daphne Simon.
44. Hobsbawm, 'Historians' Group', p43.
45. Saville papers U DJS/106, Hill to Saville with enclosure, 13 January 1954. E P Thompson expressed his own regard for these qualities in the foreword to his *William Morris: romantic to revolutionary*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1955, p8.
46. For Hobsbawm's more downbeat assessment of Torr's contribution see 'Eric Hobsbawm's Interesting Times: an interview with David Howell', *Socialist History*, 24, 2003, p8
47. See Saville, ed., *Democracy and the Labour Movement*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1954, foreword by George Thomson, Maurice Dobb, Christopher Hill and John Saville, pp7-9.
48. Saville papers U DJS/106, Saville to Maurice Cornforth, 24 October 1950.
49. A curious detail is that Torr objected 'violently' to the inclusion of a photograph of her in the collection (Saville papers, U DJS/106, Cornforth to Saville, 27 January 1954). Though Saville evidently allowed the inclusion of such a portrait in his own *festschrift* in 1979, he was also adamant that no photographs should be included in his own published memoirs. With the assistance of John's family, the omission is rectified in the present collection.
50. Saville papers, U DJS/10, Saville to Joan Simon, 27 November 1954 and Saville to Edwin Payne, 27 November 1954.

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51. Saville, 'The Twentieth Congress and the British Communist Party'.
52. 'John Saville and the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*', pp75, 80.
53. Saville, 'Communist experience', p25.
54. Miliband, 'John Saville', p30.