



ASA BRIGGS

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Asa Briggs

1921–2016

Keighley

ASA BRIGGS WAS BORN ON 7 May 1921 in Keighley, Yorkshire. He received the unusual name, Asa, in memory of his mother's younger brother of the same name who died just before he was born. A biblical name, it originated in the Nonconformist, Congregationalist faith of his mother and her family.¹ His father, William, was a skilled engineer who had worked for Vickers naval yard in Barrow-in-Furness, but in Asa's early years he ran a greengrocer's shop established and previously run successfully by his wife, Jane's, father, once a small farmer, driven off the land as agriculture declined. The family, including Asa's sister, Emma, lived upstairs and Jane, and Asa as a young boy, helped in the shop. William was a reluctant shopkeeper, less successful than his father-in-law, driven to it by the depression which hit northern manufacturing from late 1920 and the desire to keep it in the family. As the depression deepened in the 1930s the shop failed and he returned to work as an engineer in a local textile engineering plant.

Briggs recalled Keighley as a small, smoky, industrial town, hard hit by the depression but relieved by the presence of moorlands nearby and Haworth, Brönte country. The family lived in a working-class district and he had a 'happy childhood, despite money worries... [but]... with no sense of economic security or prosperity'.² 'We were not straight working class

¹ A. Briggs, *Special Relationships. People and Places* (Barnsley, 2012), p. 19.

² Asa Briggs interviewed by Jose Harris, 'Interviews with Historians', Institute of Historical

but very near to it,' he said later.³ His father was a skilled pianist and his mother sang in her chapel choir: the family really did sing together around the piano.⁴ It was different from Margaret Thatcher's experience around the same time (she was born in 1925) as a shopkeeper's daughter in the relative security of Grantham. Like her, he gained from his family a strong commitment to hard work and self-help, but not of a narrowly individualistic kind; he grew up with a belief in 'society' and a commitment to helping others. He recalled the environment with affection but no romanticisation of working-class community. Rather, his early life shaped his later commitment to realistic reconstruction of the history of working-class lives and the influence upon them of economic change such as the interwar depression.

Another influence upon his later interests was his grandfather, William's father, also a former engineer, a foreman in Barrow. When Asa was young he took him to 'every abbey and castle and small town in Yorkshire',⁵ firing his interest in history and also another life-long interest in science and technology. An older boy he knew nearby was Denis Healey, future Labour Minister, also son of an engineer of humble origins, later head of a technical college, though he and Asa attended different schools. Asa became active in the vigorous Labour Party culture in Keighley. Even as a boy he was in demand as a speaker for the local Co-operative Socialist Guild and the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), which he came to know well. This was not due to family influence. He believed his father voted Conservative until 1945, and they had vigorous, stimulating arguments, while his mother was a lifelong Liberal.⁶ His parents also differed in their religious beliefs, his father an Anglican, mother Congregationalist. He was brought up Congregationalist, becoming Anglican at Cambridge. He was not actively religious but faith mattered to him in History and throughout his own life.⁷

Research, University of London; <http://store.london.ac.uk/product-catalogue/school-of-advanced-study-publications/institute-of-historical-research/interviews-with-historians/interviews-with-historians> (accessed 15 June 2017).

³T. Dalyell, obituary, 'Lord Briggs: historian and public servant who was an authority on the Victorian era and a pioneer of adult education', *The Independent*, 16 March 2016.

⁴G. Smith, 'Asa Briggs: a personal profile', in D. Fraser (ed.), *Cities, Class and Communication: Essays in Honour of Asa Briggs* (London, 1990), p. 11. Smith was a journalist and novelist, a student of Briggs at Worcester, who kept in touch.

⁵D. Snowman, 'Asa Briggs', *History Today*, 49 (November 1999), 22–4.

⁶Harris, interview.

⁷*Ibid.*; Smith, 'Asa Briggs', p. 15.

Cambridge

He attended a local elementary school. Aged ten he won a competition in a local newspaper for an essay on the League of Nations.⁸ He won a scholarship and a free place at Keighley Grammar School where he did well, without appearing to work unduly hard. His sister said later, ‘he had lots of friends and the house was always full of people.... He would do his homework and then be off for the evening.’⁹ Briggs believed the cleverest boy at his school was not himself but a butcher’s son who left to join the family business.¹⁰ His father had also attended a grammar school. His parents did not expect him to go to university but, unlike some other low-income parents, created no obstacles when his headmaster encouraged him to read History at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, as he had done. Briggs thought he was better at Chemistry than History at school and might have opted to read sciences,¹¹ but Physics was badly taught and he chose History, while retaining a lifelong interest in the sciences. He was interviewed at Cambridge at the early age of sixteen in 1937. The History fellow who interviewed him said, presciently: ‘Briggs, you are only a baby, but there is going to be a war and I would like you to take your degree before you go into uniform.’¹²

Remarkably, he took two, parallel, degrees, graduating in 1941 with starred Double Firsts in Parts 1 and 2 of the History Tripos from Cambridge and a First in Economics from the London School of Economics (LSE), displaying the prodigious capacity for multi-tasking and successful hard work which distinguished the rest of his career. He kept his LSE studies secret from his Cambridge tutors. LSE was evacuated to Cambridge at the time, enabling him to develop the belief rooted in his background in the need to understand economic change to analyse historical change. Acquiring the necessary skills created his lifelong commitment to interdisciplinarity and scepticism about rigid academic boundaries. At LSE he was taught by economic historians Eileen Power and Michael Postan and by Harold Laski, at Cambridge by Herbert Butterfield (also at Keighley Grammar School some years before) and two historians

⁸Ibid., p. 11.

⁹Ibid., pp. 10–11.

¹⁰T. Hunt, ‘Asa Briggs: the last Victorian improver’, BBC Radio 4 broadcast, 7 January 2017, www.open.edu/openlearn/tv-radio-events/radio/asa-briggs-the-last-Victorian-improver (accessed 15 June 2017).

¹¹Harris interview.

¹²P. Lay, ‘Asa Briggs: a very open intelligence’, *History Today*, 61 (January 2011), 60, based on an interview.

of political thought, Ernest Barker and Michael Oakeshott. He seems not to have been active in left-wing politics at Cambridge but was involved in student campaigns to reform curricula and teaching methods, to change how History was conceived of and taught, another lifelong commitment.¹³ He made a little money writing for magazines. He expressed no sense of being wrenched from his roots by higher education, remaining close to his family and early environment, proud of it and building upon it rather than rejecting it.

In his second year at Cambridge, the Physics Fellow at Sidney Sussex suggested he might join the research in progress into radar, becoming a scientist for the duration of the war. He visited C. P. Snow, who controlled university science appointments. He said long after 'I thought he was the ugliest man I had ever seen, but he was terribly nice and he told me I was exactly the kind of person they wanted.'¹⁴ Snow said he should inform him when he was called up for conscription (due on his 21st birthday in 1942) and he would get him deferred from armed service to work on radar. When he graduated in 1941 he was offered a graduate fellowship in Economics at LSE which he delayed until after the war, then turned down because he was offered an Oxford Fellowship. He returned home to Keighley to teach part-time at his old school until he received his call-up papers, then contacted Snow. He replied that radar was now successfully operating and historians were no longer needed to retrain as scientists to bring it about. Briggs joined the Royal Corps of Signals, did initial training at Catterick Camp in North Yorkshire, and was then transferred to Trowbridge in Wiltshire where he trained as an interceptionist, learning high-speed Morse Code.

Bletchley

A friend and contemporary at Sidney Sussex was Howard Smith, later British Ambassador to Moscow then head of MI5. At the outbreak of war Smith was recruited to work at the code-breaking establishment at Bletchley by Gordon Welchman, who devised operations there. Smith recommended Briggs to Welchman and in 1942 he was transferred to the Intelligence Corps and recruited to Hut 6, run by Welchman, the hub of

¹³J. McIlroy, 'Asa Briggs and the emergence of Labour History', *Labour History Review*, 77 (2012), 214.

¹⁴Lay, 'Asa Briggs: a very open intelligence'.

the Bletchley operation, working with Alan Turing, among others, ‘whom we all deferred to because he was a genius’, Briggs said later.¹⁵ He was promoted to become the youngest warrant officer in the British army, helped to crack the Enigma code and worked on enemy signals from the Mediterranean, then the successful duping of the Germans into believing the D-Day landings would take place elsewhere than Normandy. He enjoyed Bletchley, appreciating its egalitarian atmosphere and the company, describing it as his ‘second university’,¹⁶ making friends easily, as ever. Among other colleagues and friends was Roy Jenkins, another future Labour Minister. Like others at Bletchley, Briggs told no one, even his wife, of their activities, crucial as they were to winning the war, until the official secrets ban was lifted in the 1970s. He wrote about his experiences much later in his life.¹⁷

Oxford

While still at Bletchley he was offered a research fellowship at Peterhouse, Cambridge, then a full fellowship in politics and economics at Worcester College, Oxford. He turned down the LSE studentship and accepted the Worcester fellowship. He was also invited to contest a safe Labour seat in Yorkshire in the coming election. ‘This put me in a quandary’, he wrote later, because he felt pressure both from his local MP and from Hugh Dalton, soon to be Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, whom he had met during the war and who was keen to encourage bright young graduates to enter politics. Further invitations followed but, in retrospect, he was sure he made the right choice; ‘I would have found it difficult to accept the discipline of a political party.’ In the election campaign he worked for Roy Jenkins in unwinnable Solihull.¹⁸

He gained speedy release from the services to take up the fellowship. Soon after, he and his former tutor at Sidney Sussex, later Master of the College, David Thomson, joined a group reporting on post-war international relations which visited occupied Germany.¹⁹ An outcome was Briggs’ first, co-authored, book, with Thomson and Ernest Meyer,

¹⁵To a future obituarist: Nigel Jones, ‘Asa Briggs obituary’, *Guardian*, 15 March 2016.

¹⁶Hunt, ‘Asa Briggs: the last Victorian improver’.

¹⁷A. Briggs, *Secret Days: Code-Breaking in Bletchley Park* (Barnsley, 2011).

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 144–6.

¹⁹M. Taylor, ‘Introduction: Asa Briggs and public life in Britain since 1945’, in M. Taylor (ed.), *The Age of Asa, Lord Briggs, Public Life and History in Britain since 1945* (London, 2014), p. 4.

Patterns of Peacemaking (London, 1945), which sought to place current events in historical context. He always believed politicians gave too little attention to history when considering contemporary issues.²⁰ Also after the war he was among the young historians summoned by Winston Churchill as ‘consultant readers’ to fact-check and proof-read his *History of the English Speaking Peoples*. Briggs was quite critical—accusing Churchill of being too Marxist in his interpretation of the American constitution.²¹

At Worcester he initially taught most courses on the PPE degree, after speedily teaching himself Philosophy. With Hugh Clegg, fellow in industrial relations at Nuffield College, and Henry Pelling, History Fellow at The Queen’s College, he taught ‘Labour Movements since 1815’. They were among those, much influenced by G. D. H. Cole, Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford, a long-time supporter of the Labour Party, the Fabian Society and the Co-operative Movement, seeking to develop a non-Marxist labour history, challenging the growing influence of the Communist Party History Group. They aimed to bring it into university syllabuses, building on the earlier work of J. L. and Barbara Hammond, Sidney and Beatrice Webb and others outside the universities. Briggs became concerned that the approach of Pelling, Clegg and other Oxford colleagues was too narrowly institutional. He developed an optional History course, ‘British Social and Economic History since 1760’, aiming to place working-class history within this broader context and extend the Oxford syllabus beyond its focus on high politics and the ruling elite, breaking down the ‘cages’ within which he believed academic subjects were confined. In 1950 Cole had him appointed Reader in Recent Social and Economic History. He also taught on the Oxford Diploma in Economics and Political Science, taken mainly by trade unionists studying at Ruskin College, next door to Worcester in Walton Street. Another lasting commitment was enabling working people to extend the education of which they had too often been deprived earlier in life, a fate he was intensely grateful to have avoided. He wanted Oxford to contribute to social reform through educating adults. Hence he was also active again in the WEA, in which Cole was prominent along with other Oxford academics. Briggs became its Deputy-President (1954–8), and President (1958–67).

²⁰ Snowman, ‘Asa Briggs’.

²¹ *Ibid.*

For similar reasons, he believed History should be widely accessible, and accessibly written, not confined to narrow academic circles and journals. He was involved from the start with *History Today*, the monthly magazine with similar objectives founded in 1950 by Brendan Bracken, Churchill's close associate and wartime Minister of Information. Briggs published an article about Peel and Cobden in an early issue, becoming the longest-serving member of its Advisory Board and a regular book reviewer. In 1948 he published, with Harry Bancroft and Eric Treacy, *One Hundred Years: the Parish of Keighley, 1848–1948* (Keighley) a homage to his home town, locally published for local readers. He had a major influence on the development of local, non-metropolitan, history and the history of northern England, making it academically respectable as well as locally accessible.

His major opportunity to write accessibly about Victorian society, urban development and locality came when he was commissioned to write an official history of Birmingham. This originated in his admiration for Joseph Chamberlain who, as mayor, transformed Victorian Birmingham. His *History of Birmingham: Borough and City, 1865–1938* (Oxford, 1952) was an early stimulus to the emergence of urban history as a strand of historical scholarship and to reviving appreciation of Victorian culture, architecture and artefacts. In the 1950s 'Victoriana' was still widely disparaged and Victorian buildings destroyed, culminating in the demolition in 1961 of the entrance to London's Euston Station, the Great Arch, constructed in 1837, while the grand building of St Pancras Station nearby was threatened.

Briggs continued his mission to educate the British about the Victorians in 1954 when he published *Victorian People. A Reassessment of Persons and Themes, 1851–67* (London, 1965), describing the period as 'one of the least studied and least understood chapters in English history',²² a lacuna he steadily filled. He illuminated the period by presenting men who made a distinctive contribution to Victorian politics and culture including 'Samuel Smiles and the Gospel of Work', trade unionist Robert Applegarth, Thomas Hughes for his representation of public schools in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, Trollope and Disraeli. He was conscious of including no women, many years before Women's Liberation made an issue of this, aware that many women 'reacted against the formality and superficiality of subordinate status' and played important roles in Victorian community life, but that they could not progress further in a

²² Briggs, *Victorian People*, p. 9.

‘community devoted to getting on, and limited at its edges by masculine codes of inherited authority’. A rare exception was Florence Nightingale, but she had recently been well represented in Cecil Woodham-Smith’s biography which he saw no reason to summarise.²³ The insightful, carefully researched essays stimulated interest and research in the period. The book was written for a wide audience, without academic footnotes but with suggestions for further reading. This offended some academic critics but Briggs was unrepentant, believing footnotes alienated many readers.²⁴ It remains in print and in twenty-first-century format as an e-book.

Briggs published increasingly prolifically, especially reviews, in the national press as well as in academic journals, always reaching out to wide, non-academic audiences, a pattern he long continued. In 1952, apart from the *History of Birmingham*, he published three academic articles and eighteen book reviews in academic and more popular places; in 1953, one academic article and sixteen reviews and occasional short newspaper articles; in 1954 *Victorian People*, four short articles and twelve reviews. So his output continued, only slowing in the early 2000s, in his eighties.²⁵ His industry, as ever, was impressive: half an hour before his wedding in 1955, awaiting the bride, he sat in a church ante-room typing a review for the *New Statesman*.²⁶ Tam Dalyell, former Labour MP, another friend, commented in an obituary ‘It is doubtful whether Briggs ever spent a truly idle moment in his life.’²⁷ In 1954 he also produced a report for UNESCO, *Workers Education for International Understanding: a Study Sponsored by the International Federation of Workers’ Educational Associations* (Paris) another product of his commitment to workers’ education, the first of several reports on current issues for national and international bodies.

In 1950 his efforts to educate Britain about the Victorians included an article about Sir Robert Peel in what was then the *Manchester Guardian*. He remained a regular contributor and reviewer, as it transformed into the *Guardian*, until 1990. From 1952 he also reviewed regularly for the *New Statesman* until the mid-1960s and for the influential weekly journal on social issues, *New Society*, throughout its life from 1962 to 1988. Until the 1990s he also contributed occasional reviews and short articles to the

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁴ Fraser, *Cities, Class and Communication*, p. 8.

²⁵ For a thirty-eight-page list of Briggs’ publications, see *Bibliography of Works by Asa Briggs*, a web supplement to Taylor, *The Age of Asa*, www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/historians/briggs.asa.html (accessed 15 June 2017). Despite its length, there are a few omissions.

²⁶ Smith, ‘Asa Briggs’, p. 10.

²⁷ Dalyell, obituary.

Financial Times, *Observer*, still more occasionally the *New Scientist*, *Times* and *Listener*. Not always about History: in 1956 he reviewed Anthony Crosland's revisionist *The Future of Socialism* for the *Observer*, finding it too optimistic and parochial.²⁸ A. J. P. Taylor, also teaching at Oxford at the time, thought him an outstanding lecturer and recommended him to the BBC. He broadcast regularly thereafter. He was certainly a popular lecturer: he wrote later, 'My early morning lectures in Worcester College were overcrowded.'²⁹

Among his students at Worcester was Rupert Murdoch, future media magnate, then a member of the Oxford University Labour Club. In 1952 they made a camping tour of the Middle East, with Harry Pitt, another fellow of Worcester, and George Masterman, another Australian undergraduate, in Murdoch's father's car which they collected in Istanbul after visiting Athens. They travelled through Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Arab Jerusalem (they were not allowed into the Israeli section), Lebanon and Egypt, often sleeping in the open, not always welcomed by local people, returning home by ship from Port Said. Briggs and Murdoch kept in irregular touch for the rest of his life: Murdoch attended his seventieth birthday in Oxford and sent a handwritten note on his ninetieth.³⁰

Briggs came to love travelling and pursued it as vigorously as his other enthusiasms. He 'believed in learning through travelling',³¹ saying in later life 'I've always been a traveller and I want desperately to keep in contact with the non-European world.'³² He gave 'travelling' as his sole recreation in his *Who's Who* entry from its first appearance in 1956.³³ He visited Gibraltar in 1946, arranged by the Army Education Corps to lecture to British troops, travelled to occupied Germany several times, in 1948 lecturing at the University of Münster, as he did at Oxford, 'on the problems of and opportunities of a "welfare state"', later visiting other German and Belgian cities, then Paris for the first of many times.³⁴ In 1950 he took a summer holiday in Venice with two more of his Worcester students who, due to war service, were, like Murdoch, only slightly younger than himself. In 1951 he travelled to Africa, to Accra on the initiative of the Director of Extramural Studies at Oxford who arranged for him to write six articles

²⁸ A. Briggs, 'Socialism and society', *Observer*, 30 September 1956.

²⁹ Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 170.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 184–7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

³² Smith, 'Asa Briggs', p. 19.

³³ Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 163.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

on the political situation in what would soon be Ghana (then the Gold Coast) for a periodical *West Africa*. He met Kwame Nkrumah, later leader of independent Ghana, who had just won the country's first general election.³⁵ In 1952 he was invited by the Army Education Corps to visit Malaya, since 1948 in a 'state of emergency', divided by a Communist-led rebellion against British rule. He went with soldiers on night patrols and lectured to them on life in Britain, again meeting future leaders of independent Malaya, then making short visits to Singapore and Hong Kong.³⁶ He spent 1953–4 at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton.

In 1955 he married Susan Banwell, a graduate student in History at St Anne's College, Oxford. They had two sons and two daughters and fourteen grandchildren—Briggs was prolific in all respects—and a long, happy relationship.

Leeds

Also in 1955 he was invited to take the Chair of Modern History at Leeds University. He returned enthusiastically to his home county, to a Victorian City. He was also frustrated by the conservatism of the Oxford History curriculum and the difficulty of changing it. Leeds was not more obviously progressive, but he became, stated an obituary by a former colleague,

a formative influence ... he oversaw the complete modernization of the curriculum. Under his influence the chronological reach of teaching here was extended from c. 1850 to post-1945; and its geographical reach was dramatically expanded beyond Western Europe to include the USA, Russia and Asia. Other innovations included introducing seminar-based courses, addressing colleagues by their first name (instead of surname alone) and dispensing with wearing academic gowns when teaching...³⁷

A former student remembered him as 'always open and approachable and remembered people and their personal details despite being so busy', while conveying enthusiasm for historical research.³⁸ A later Vice-Chancellor at Leeds, former Conservative Minister Sir Edward Boyle, said

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 176–9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 182–3.

³⁷ University of Leeds School of History, 'In Memory of Asa Briggs (1921–2016)', 16 March 2016. leeds.ac.uk/arts/news/article/4476/in_memory_of_Asa_Briggs_1921-2016 (accessed 15 June 2017).

³⁸ Fraser, *Cities, Class and Communication*, p. 4.

that he ‘galvanized the department’,³⁹ though at Leeds also change was never easy. The University was reluctant to make new appointments and a senior colleague expressed doubts about the viability of recent history: ‘we know where we are with a book on the seventeenth century [but] the criteria of work on history that is almost contemporary have not yet been established’,⁴⁰ not an uncommon reaction among conventional historians. Briggs introduced courses on modern Russia, USA and Asia by teaching them himself, often barely ahead of the students in his reading.⁴¹ He expanded postgraduate research and tried, with limited success, to develop collaboration in teaching and research with other departments.

At Leeds he also continued to build labour history. One colleague in History, Donald Read, worked on early nineteenth-century radicalism and Chartism and members of the Economics department studied the past and present of industrial relations. Leeds had a very active extra-mural department which promoted labour history while it declined elsewhere. Through involvement in the local WEA, Briggs made contact with colleagues there including E. P. Thompson and J. F. C. Harrison, a Cambridge contemporary of Briggs, another scholarship boy, both future respected historians. With Briggs they formed the core of a Leeds Labour History Group, united by the desire to stimulate ‘history from below’ and its inclusion in scholarly history. Academic interest in labour history grew in the second half of the 1950s against a background of growing Labour Party membership, despite its divisions and electoral failures, the crisis in the Communist Party over Hungary and Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin in 1956, the formation of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1958, and the growth of social criticism and protest in Britain and elsewhere. As Labour historian John McIlroy has commented, the growing numbers of labour historians were ‘disparate, sometimes antagonistic, undeniably disputatious’,⁴² perhaps due to this divisive context. One area of expansion since the war had been the Communist Party History Group (CPHG), founded in 1946, involving historians of future distinction including Christopher Hill, E. J. Hobsbawm, E. P. and Dorothy Thompson. It dissolved in 1956 when the Thompsons and others left the party, while Hobsbawm, among others, did not. Despite his belief that the economy had a major influence on social and political change, Briggs was never a

³⁹ Dalyell, obituary.

⁴⁰ M. Chase, ‘Back to Yorkshire: “Asia” Briggs at Leeds, 1955–1961’, in Taylor, *The Age of Asa*, p. 220.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁴² McIlroy, ‘Emergence of Labour History’, 226.

Marxist. Indeed he criticised the CPHG for sometimes over-simplifying and taking the narrow view of history he resisted in all its forms, in particular focusing on the working-classes disconnected from the wider context in which they lived and worked. This was evident in his review of a collection of their essays, *Democracy and the Labour Movement* (London, 1954), edited by John Saville, then lecturer in economic history at Hull University.⁴³ In 1952 E. P. Thompson, Hobsbawm and Hill were among the founders, with some non-Marxists, of the academic journal *Past and Present*, committed to challenging conventional approaches to History. Briggs thought its approach still too narrow, though he always supported it. He issued a challenge in an early issue, with an article 'Middle-class consciousness in English politics, 1780–1846',⁴⁴ a solitary complement to the burgeoning studies of working-class consciousness in the period, exploring influential strands of middle-class thinking, progressive and otherwise, which he felt were neglected or caricatured in Marxist analyses of class relations in the period, pointing out that 'the story of Chartism is an important episode in the story of middle-class as well as working-class consciousness'.⁴⁵ He stressed what divided as well as what held together the middle classes, believing that another weakness of Marxist analysis was prioritising class unity. Characteristically, he did not launch a polemical assault upon those with whom he disagreed. At the time intense conflicts were all too common, notably that raging through the later 1950s and early 1960s between historians of the left, including Hobsbawm, who argued that industrialisation caused deterioration in British living standards, and those, including R. M. Hartwell in Oxford, who discerned improvement.⁴⁶ Briggs resisted such tensions at this and other times and sought co-operation where possible.

He increasingly appreciated the work of Hobsbawm and Thompson as it developed, and they his. His openness and tolerance of different perspectives helped him build cooperation and collaboration to build a multi-faceted labour history. This was promoted through his editorship of *Chartist Studies* (London, 1959) which drew together historians of different political views (though Edward Thompson delivered his contribution too late and too long) to examine Chartism in previously unexplored

⁴³ A. Briggs, 'Marxists', *Manchester Guardian*, 22 February 1955.

⁴⁴ A. Briggs, 'Middle-class consciousness in English politics, 1780–1846', *Past and Present*, 9 (April 1956), 65–74.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁶ E. J. Hobsbawm, 'The standard of living debate: a postscript', in E. J. Hobsbawm (ed.), *Labouring Men* (London, 1964), pp. 120–5.

areas of Great Britain, stimulating further research. Hobsbawm praised it as 'The most important contribution to the study of this remarkable movement made in the past forty years.'⁴⁷ Next he co-edited *Essays in Labour History* (London, 1960) with John Saville. This was prepared as a festschrift for G. D. H. Cole, but became a memorial when he died in 1959. It represented the current, expanding, state of labour history, especially of the nineteenth century, from different perspectives, with more Marxist contributors than to *Chartist Studies*, aimed at non-academic as well as academic audiences. Both books were widely reviewed in the national press as well as in academic journals and had wide sales; *Chartist Studies* went through twelve editions between 1954 and 1973.⁴⁸

Contributors to the volumes and their associates in Leeds and elsewhere, including former members of the CPHG, created the Society for the Study of Labour History (SSLH), launched at a conference in London in 1960, initiated by the Leeds group, with Briggs as its first chair. Unusually for an academic conference this was reported in the *Guardian*, as it now was.⁴⁹ Briggs was crucial to the society's foundation and success,

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 extra-mural fringe and the internal academy, social history and institutional approaches, he proved indispensable to the Society's success.⁵⁰

SSLH flourished, recruiting amateur and professional historians, and still continues. At Leeds he not only connected with Labour historically, he was good friends with Hugh Gaitskell, Labour Party leader from 1955 until his sudden death in 1963, MP for Leeds South, a former academic at University College London. They met in Oxford when Gaitskell's stepson was a student at Worcester. In Leeds Briggs found that 'Gaitskell took a great interest in me and made me several offers of public jobs' (which he appears to have refused), though 'I preferred Bevan (leader of the left-wing Labour faction opposed to Gaitskell) to him'.⁵¹

He also lectured to servicemen at Catterick Camp on industrial history and technical development and on courses for National Health Service administrators.⁵² Pursuing his commitment to local history, in 1956 he organised an interdisciplinary group at Leeds to study 'problems of North

⁴⁷ Review in *New Statesman*, 31 October 1959, 594–5.

⁴⁸ McIlroy 'Emergence of Labour History', 228, n. 73.

⁴⁹ *Guardian*, 28 May 1960, 'Professor Briggs Chairman of Labour Society'.

⁵⁰ McIlroy, 'Emergence of Labour History', 229.

⁵¹ Briggs, *Special Relationships*, 133.

⁵² Chase, 'Back to Yorkshire', p. 213.

of England history' which led in 1966 to the launch of the journal *Northern History*, the first regional history journal. He was an editorial adviser from its inception until his death.⁵³ He chaired the Standing Conference for the Study of Local History (1969–76), and the British Association for Local History (1984–6). His broad conception of History emerged also in 1956 with another commissioned, centenary, history, of Liverpool-based Lewis's department store, exploring a business enterprise established in Victorian times to provide for working- as well as middle-class people.⁵⁴

Then he was commissioned in 1957 by the BBC to write its history. He had no idea how long it would take (almost forty years), but was eager to start while many of its veterans were still alive, especially the first Director-General, John Reith, a difficult man who was resistant until Briggs, characteristically, won his friendship and complete co-operation.⁵⁵ The first volume of five, covering 1922–7, appeared in 1961,⁵⁶ the last in 1995.⁵⁷ He had research assistance for the massive project. The volumes have been criticised by historians as too factual and pedestrian—his writing was always stronger on factual details than analysis and debate—but they did much to stimulate the emergence of media history, which hardly existed when he started, and media historians have been more enthusiastic. Jean Seaton, who succeeded him as historian of the BBC, described his work as

part of a very significant and necessary retelling of the narrative of the BBC back to the people charged to carry it forward...[which]...established the nature of the institution and the importance of the key values...[of]...impartial, public service broadcasting ... all set in the larger framework of social history.⁵⁸

Valuably for future researchers, he persuaded the BBC to establish an archive at Caversham near Reading and from 1976 chaired the committee which developed and oversaw the collection.⁵⁹

Briggs further affirmed his broad approach to history and extended knowledge and understanding of the nineteenth century by publishing *The Age of Improvement, 1783–1867* (London, 1959) which went further

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 215; Editors, 'Asa Briggs and *Northern History*', *Northern History*, 53 (2016), 157–60.

⁵⁴ A. Briggs, *Friends of the People: the Centenary History of Lewis's* (London, 1956).

⁵⁵ Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 96.

⁵⁶ A. Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, vol. 1: *The Birth of Broadcasting* (Oxford, 1961).

⁵⁷ A. Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, vol. 5: *Competition* (Oxford, 1995).

⁵⁸ J. Seaton, 'Asa and the epochs: the BBC, the historian, the institution and the archive', in Taylor, *The Age of Asa*, p. 186.

⁵⁹ Briggs, *Special Relationships*, pp. 94–9.

than previous work in integrating economic, social, political and labour history, the title expressing his belief that British industrialisation brought progress. It was widely praised and read. By 2000 it had gone through eighty-four editions around the world. From 1959 to 1967 he was also a member of the University Grants Committee, which advised the government on the distribution of funding to British universities, from which he learned much about universities.

He still travelled, undertaking lecture tours and conferences for the British Council in India and Ceylon in 1957 and in Poland in 1959. In 1960 he spent six months as Visiting Professor at the Australian National University, Canberra. He studied Sydney and Melbourne as Victorian cities, building up to a chapter in his book, *Victorian Cities* (London, 1963).⁶⁰ He made contacts in the Australian WEA and influenced the formation of the Australian Labour History Society, modelled on SSLH and long successful.⁶¹ Also in the early 1960s he paid the first of several visits to China, during Mao Tse Tung's Cultural Revolution, of which he was enthusiastically uncritical, probably protected from its worst features. It was also an opportunity to amass a collection of Chinese ceramics of which he was proud. He later accepted that Mao had 'probably' been a monster.⁶²

In 1961 he published an assessment of the work of the influential, Yorkshire-born and based poverty researcher and social reformer Seebohm Rowntree.⁶³ This was requested by the Rowntree Trust, supported by the Rowntree family. Briggs refused to write a full biography, preferring to focus on the work, including Rowntree's highly successful business life, which Briggs found instructive. The study informed Briggs' writings on the history of the welfare state.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ 'Melbourne, a Victorian community overseas', in A. Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (Harmondsworth, 1968), pp. 277–310.

⁶¹ F. Bongiorno, 'Australian Labour History: contexts, trends and influences', *Labour History* (Australia), 100 (2011), 1–15; F. Bongiorno 'Asa Briggs and the remaking of Australian historiography', in Taylor (ed.), *Age of Asa*, pp. 90–107.

⁶² Jones, obituary.

⁶³ Asa Briggs, *Social Thought and Social Action: a Study of the Work of Seebohm Rowntree, 1871–1954* (London, 1961).

⁶⁴ Briggs, *Special Relationships*, pp. 134–5; initially, A. Briggs, 'The welfare state in historical perspective', *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, 2 (1961), 221–58. For further contributions see Taylor, *Bibliography of Works*.

Sussex

Also in 1961 Briggs moved to the new University of Sussex as it prepared to open. Sussex was one of eight new universities opened between 1961 and 1967. Government-funded university expansion was recommended by the 1963 Robbins Report on Higher Education, on the grounds that, with only 4 per cent of eighteen–nineteen-year-olds entering university, Britain was lagging behind international competitors, harming the economy. The Conservative government which established the committee and Harold Wilson's Labour government which succeeded it in 1964 accepted the recommendation. A local university had long been an aspiration in Brighton and by 1961 sufficient endowments had accumulated to enable its opening before Robbins reported. As a member of the UGC, Briggs was well aware of these developments. In the late 1950s, as planning for the new university was under way, he was approached by Lord (John) Fulton, designated Vice-Chancellor, to join Sussex as a pro-Vice-Chancellor and Professor of History. Fulton wanted to create a university that was 'new' in all respects and sought a distinguished scholar to lead academic development who was willing to explore new approaches. It was the opportunity Briggs wanted. In 1961, before starting at Sussex, with the UGC he visited York, where another new university was planned. He was invited to become York's Vice-Chancellor, but he had accepted Sussex and it was too late to agree to stay in his home county.

At Sussex he took charge of academic affairs, constructing what was for Britain an innovative system of teaching and learning. He and his family lived on the site on the downs near Brighton as the university was built and, with colleagues, he was responsible also for planning its construction. It was an opportunity to dismantle academic boundaries and establish interdisciplinarity, 'drawing a new map of learning', as he put it, enthusiastically supported by the university's founders.⁶⁵ Staff and students were placed in interdisciplinary Schools rather than departments. Students majored in their 'core' subject, while spending half their time studying other disciplines within their School. Briggs became Dean of the School of Social Studies and in the early years taught Sociology, which he had studied at LSE, as well as History. The method of teaching he introduced, again unusually, gave more prominence to seminars, Oxbridge-style tutorials and essays than lectures. He introduced innovative uses of

⁶⁵ A. Briggs, 'Drawing a new map of learning', in D. Daiches (ed.), *The Idea of a New University: an Experiment in Sussex* (London, 1964), pp. 60–80

technology into teaching, language labs, closed-circuit TV for classroom observation and teacher training, to record and play back lectures and display teaching materials.⁶⁶ True to his long-term interest in the natural sciences he encouraged their development at Sussex, including in 1966 establishing the Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU) for interdisciplinary research ‘to contribute... to the advancement of knowledge of the highly complex social process of research, invention, development, innovation and the diffusion of innovation and thereby to a deeper understanding of policy for science and technology’.⁶⁷

He also encouraged the formation of the interdisciplinary Institute for Development Studies which became highly influential in an emerging field to which he was deeply committed and long remained involved with it. He remained a member of the UGC, requiring often time-consuming committees and visits to universities, but in 1967 when he became Vice-Chancellor of Sussex was required to resign. He coped with a still-massive workload through skilled delegation, but even he recognised limits. He gradually withdrew from active involvement in SSLH, stepping down as chair in 1964, becoming its first President until 1970. He was Vice-Chancellor until 1976, through the period of student revolt. That this was calmer at Sussex than at, particularly, Essex and LSE was attributed to Briggs’ handling. Characteristically, he listened to students and tried to work closely with them as individuals, including during demonstrations. He told Tam Dalyell he owed his skill at dealing with them to his study of Chartism.⁶⁸ He hoped that the creation of new universities including Sussex would widen the narrow social access to UK universities, democratising higher education. There was high demand for places at Sussex, but it attracted a higher proportion of students from independent schools than other universities outside Oxbridge, partly because it became an attractive symbol of the ‘swinging sixties’, promoted by media images of fashionable female students. It did attract more women than the 10 per cent at Cambridge, 15 per cent at Oxford and 25 per cent average of other UK universities: 50 per cent in 1962, though the percentage fell as the sciences expanded, by 1966–7 to 36.4, marginally above Warwick and Lancaster and below the other new universities.⁶⁹

⁶⁶D. Weinbren, ‘Asa Briggs and new maps of learning’, *Open Learn* (Buckingham: Open University) www.open.edu/openlearn (accessed 15 June 2017).

⁶⁷A. Briggs, *Loose Ends and Extras* (Barnsley, 2014), p. 75.

⁶⁸Dalyell, obituary.

⁶⁹C. Dyhouse, *Students: a Gendered History* (London, 2006), p. 102.

As Vice-Chancellor, Briggs brought the Mass Observation archive to Sussex. This exceptional social research organisation, founded in 1937, from 1949 became a market research institution. One of its founders, anthropologist Tom Harrison, took control of its pre-1949 material but never had time to sort or catalogue it and it languished at his home until his friend Briggs suggested in 1967 he bring it to Sussex, where he became a professor. It was gradually catalogued and opened to researchers and took on a new life researching attitudes to contemporary issues.⁷⁰ Briggs also brought to Sussex other invaluable archives including those of Virginia Woolf, whose country home at Charleston was not far away, and Rudyard Kipling, once a resident of nearby Rottingdean. He also worked to establish the Gardner Arts Centre which opened on the campus in 1968, providing a venue for touring theatre companies, music, exhibitions and other activities. He believed it was essential for students to have contact with the arts.

Briggs admired Harold Wilson, Prime Minister from 1964 to 1970. An achievement of this government was the foundation of the Open University (OU), an idea floated by Wilson to the Labour Party conference in 1963, then handed to Jennie Lee, Minister for the Arts from 1964, to make reality. Briggs, in his own words, 'became one of the most active members of an energetic organizing committee set up in 1967'.⁷¹ Originally called the University of the Air, it was intended significantly to widen access to university-level education by enabling part-time students to learn from lectures on TV, supplemented by printed materials, local seminars and telephone calls with tutors plus intensive summer schools. It appealed to Briggs' enthusiasm for wide access, technology and new approaches to lifelong learning but attracted criticism from more conventional academics, civil servants and others for potentially debasing higher education. He 'was delighted to be given the vitally important task of chairing the curriculum sub-committee' for the Open University as it was now called. It opened in 1970. Briggs gave a TV lecture course in its early days, 'Leeds. A study in civic pride', using film and music to supplement the words, as encouraged by the OU.⁷² At his death, the OU created an Asa Briggs Chair of History and PhD studentship to commemorate his contribution. Furthering adult education, at Sussex he organised day release courses for

⁷⁰T. Jeffery, *Mass Observation: a Short History* (Mass Observation Occasional Paper No. 10, University of Sussex Library, 1999).

⁷¹Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 125.

⁷²Weinbren, 'New maps'; D. Weinbren, 'Asa Briggs and the opening up of the Open University', in Taylor (ed.), *The Age of Asa*, pp. 248–66.

shop stewards, weekend schools for GPs and seminars for magistrates' clerks. He established public lectures, giving the first himself on the 1870 Education Act.⁷³

In 1969 he was invited by Richard Crossman, Secretary of State for Health, to chair a committee on the nursing profession. He refused a request by Harold Wilson in 1967 to chair a Commission on Prices and Incomes, because, thought Tam Dalyell, 'being asked to please Barbara Castle on the one hand and Frank Cousins on the other was mission impossible'.⁷⁴ The future of nursing was less politically explosive and in 1972 the committee recommended improved pay and conditions and overhaul of the currently rather disorganised and regionally disparate nurse training. Briggs saw this as one more facet of adult education and recommended it should be directed by a central body, outside NHS institutions, where the students would be 'in true learning situation and not just junior employees in the nursing service'.⁷⁵ Edward Heath's Conservative government was now in power and little happened until another Labour government introduced the Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors Act, 1979, which established a Central Council responsible for regulating nurse training and maintaining standards, leading among other changes to degree-level training for nurses.

Alongside his university and public roles Briggs continued to research and publish. Research on the history of the BBC continued, with assistants generally experienced at working in the BBC contributing valuably to the work;⁷⁶ the second volume appeared in 1965,⁷⁷ the third in 1970.⁷⁸ In 1975 he was awarded the Marconi Medal by the Aspen Institute in Colorado for his work on the history of communications, with a financial prize that enabled him to fund further assistance. This work too won the opprobrium of more conventional historians who thought it a waste of his time and talents. Briggs 'was and am sure that they were wrong. It is impossible to understand the political, social and cultural history of the United Kingdom, or indeed of any country, without examining the

⁷³Smith, 'Asa Briggs', p. 17.

⁷⁴Dalyell, obituary.

⁷⁵Smith, p. 17.

⁷⁶Briggs, *Special Relationships*, pp. 101–5.

⁷⁷A. Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, vol. 2: *The Golden Age of Wireless* (Oxford, 1965).

⁷⁸A. Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, vol. 3: *The War of Words* (Oxford, 1970).

evolution and influence of what has come to be called its media system, with newspapers long preceding broadcasting.⁷⁹

In 1962 he edited a collection of William Morris's writings and designs for Penguin and *They Saw it Happen: an Anthology of Eyewitness Accounts of Events in British History, 1897–1940* (Oxford).⁸⁰ Most importantly in 1963 *Victorian Cities* appeared, probably his most effective and influential promotion of the culture, architecture and achievements of the Victorians, highly regarded by academics and accessible to a wider audience. He assisted a revival of appreciation of Victorian culture. St Pancras Station was saved following a campaign led by John Betjeman, strongly supported by Briggs. Wilson's government ended several decades of demolition of Victorian 'slums' and replacement by high-rise flats by subsidising owner-occupiers and councils to renovate what were increasingly recognised as durable and attractive homes.

Shorter books, pamphlets, articles and reviews in academic journals and the national press continued to pour forth, including in 1972 the only book co-edited with his wife.⁸¹ It was said that he regularly wrote a review on the train from Brighton to London, then worked on the BBC history between a committee and dinner and reviewed another book on the way home.⁸² And he kept travelling abroad. In 1966 and 1972 he was Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago, 'which I regarded as my second university', where he was regarded as a sociologist as much as a historian and was much influenced by ongoing work in urban sociology.⁸³ He travelled to conferences in Cyprus, Mexico, Yugoslavia, the USA and elsewhere.⁸⁴ In 1970 he refused to become rector of the international postgraduate college of the European Community (as it then was), the European University Institute in Florence, then being planned to promote European cultural exchange, which opened in 1976.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 103.

⁸⁰ A. Briggs (ed.), *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs* (London, 1962).

⁸¹ A. Briggs and S. Briggs (eds.), *Cap and Bell: Punch's Chronicle of English History in the Making, 1841–61* (London, 1972).

⁸² Smith, 'Asa Briggs', p. 14.

⁸³ Briggs, *Special Relationships*, p. 12.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁸⁵ Taylor, *The Age of Asa*, p. 12.

Return to Oxford

In 1976 he left Sussex and returned to Worcester, as Provost, until retirement in 1991. He told Sussex he would leave in 1976 when he had completed ten years as Vice-Chancellor. He was proud of Sussex but by 1975 felt 'I had become very institutionalized and I thought that was intolerable ... Nobody thought I'd go.'⁸⁶ He had no plans for the future and was surprised to receive an invitation from Worcester. He said later, 'I never expected to come back ... I've never regretted coming back; but I like to know what is going on at Sussex.'⁸⁷

Also in 1976 he was appointed a life peer: Baron Briggs of Lewes, East Sussex, where he lived. He refused the Labour whip and always sat on the cross-benches. He told James Callaghan, who had just succeeded Wilson as Labour Prime Minister, that he would not have time to attend the Lords very often,⁸⁸ and it was not prominent in his busy life. He remained deeply interested in politics but did not make his maiden speech until 1979, on the Bill finally implementing his 1972 proposals on the nursing profession.⁸⁹ He spoke just ten more times before his death.⁹⁰

He wanted, again, to reform Oxford and break down disciplinary barriers but found it as conservative as before. He wrote later:

while I was happy to be back in a college that I loved, I often felt more frustrated once there than I had ever been at Sussex. The Fellows of the College had changed far less than I had...I was never asked by any Fellow...what my Sussex years had been like except for how I had dealt with radical students...there were too many college committees and not enough of a sense of individual initiative.⁹¹

But if he could not transform the formal academic structures he could achieve change by other means: Oxford historian, Jose Harris, later praised 'Asa Briggs, who for many years fostered conviviality and argument among Oxford historians of modern Britain. With Asa's retirement conviviality declined, but the legacy of argument fortunately remains.'⁹² He played little part in university politics, throwing himself into the life of his college, where he could wield some influence, saying 'I'm not a

⁸⁶ Smith, 'Asa Briggs', p. 18.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Lay, 'Asa Briggs: a very open intelligence'.

⁸⁹ *Hansard*, House of Lords Debates, 19 February, 1979, vol. 398, cols 1660-4.

⁹⁰ Taylor, *The Age of Asa*, p. 15, n. 15.

⁹¹ Briggs, *Loose Ends and Extras*, p. 57.

⁹² J. Harris (ed.), *Civil Society in British History* (Oxford, 2003), p. i.

university politician, I'm a very collegey person.'⁹³ As at Sussex, he worked hard to develop the natural and applied sciences in a college which had very few scientists in the 1950s. Fellowships in science and engineering increased. In 1978 Worcester became co-educational along with other colleges, following the Sex Discrimination Act, 1975. He had no obligation to teach but supervised research students. He worked particularly hard and successfully at fundraising, since Worcester was not a rich college by Oxford standards. And he believed 'a college should be a place where people enjoy their three or four years';⁹⁴ sociable as ever, he and his wife opened the Provost's Lodgings to entertain undergraduates and others.

He carried on broadcasting and writing, pouring out reviews and articles for academic and national publications as tirelessly as ever, and books individually and co-written, individually and co-edited. Those that made the greatest impact were the fourth volume of the History of the BBC, published in 1979,⁹⁵ and the third of his Victorian Trilogy, *Victorian Things* (London, 1988 and 1990). He later called this his favourite book, but it was criticised by some academics as just a list of nineteenth century bric-à-brac with little analysis, 'an idiosyncratic and apparently unordered selection of interesting facts and anecdotes [which] perhaps indicated too clearly the limitations of Briggs' historical method'.⁹⁶ Victorian objects were now much more widely appreciated and less in need of promotion, and many younger academics in particular were impatient with Briggs' empiricism, but the book has also been hailed as sparking historians' interest in material culture and consumption.⁹⁷ In 1977 he and John Saville co-edited another volume of *Essays in Labour History, 1918–39* (London). Later, *A Social History of England* (London, 1983 and 1985) ranged 'from the Stone Age to Mrs Thatcher' in 340 pages. It aimed to popularise the interest in social history which was now highly developed among historians by describing as many facets as possible of everyday life. The Social History Society had been successfully launched in 1976 by Harold Perkin, Professor of Social History at Lancaster, and Briggs was its President from the beginning until his death.⁹⁸ The book probably had a wider

⁹³ Smith, 'Asa Briggs', p. 19.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁹⁵ A. Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in UK*, vol. 4: *Sound and Vision* (Oxford, 1979).

⁹⁶ M. Hewitt 'Asa Briggs 1921–', in K. Boyd (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Historians and Historical Writing*, vol. 1: *A–L* (London and Chicago, IL, 1999) p. 125.

⁹⁷ R. McWilliam 'Asa Briggs (1921–2016)', British Association for Victorian Studies Obituary. www.bavs.ac.uk/uploads/media/Asa_Briggs_tribute.pdf (accessed 15 June 2017).

⁹⁸ When I was honoured to succeed him.

popular than academic impact. In 1983 he delivered a TV series *The Karl Marx Legacy* on another figure in Victorian history, published with John Dekker and John Mair as *Marx in London: an Illustrated Guide* (London, 1983).

He wrote more commissioned histories: *Marks and Spencer, 1884–1984: a Centenary History of Marks and Spencer: the Originators of Penny Bazaars* (London, 1984), followed by the history of Victoria Wine.⁹⁹ Also in 1984 he published a, less handsomely-funded, centenary history of a different institution, *Toynbee Hall: the First Hundred Years* (with Anne Macartney, London), celebrating the centenary of the first settlement house and its ongoing struggle against the persisting, shifting social problems of East London and elsewhere, extending his long-term interest in the history of social welfare. In the same year he edited another collection of the writings and designs of William Morris;¹⁰⁰ he was an early member, then President, of the William Morris Society (1978–91). In 1991 came a commissioned history of the Leverhulme Trust, established in 1925 with the legacy and at the behest of another Victorian entrepreneur, William Lever.¹⁰¹ Briggs remained fascinated by institutions created by Victorians and their subsequent development.

Of course he was tirelessly active outside Oxford, causing, as at Leeds and Sussex, some resentment among colleagues, though there is no sign of his neglecting college duties. Some activities were more time-consuming than others. He and his wife loved music and he was, from 1966 to 1991, a trustee of Glyndebourne, also of the Brighton Pavilion (1975–2008), a Governor of the British Film Institute (1970–7), Vice-Chair of the UN University in Tokyo (1974–80), requiring visits to Japan, and Trustee of the London-based charity, the International Broadcasting Institute (1968–87), which fostered broadcasting as an educational medium. He chaired the Paris-based Council of the European Institute for Education (1975–90) and was active in the politics of European higher education. In 1975 he chaired the Educational Panel of European Architectural Heritage Year, then persuaded the Department of the Environment to continue its mission. He chaired the resulting Heritage Education Group (1976–86), bringing him into close contact with schools, architects and planners. He also chaired the Civic Trust (1976–86).

⁹⁹ A. Briggs, *Wine for Sale: Victoria Wine and the Liquor Trade, 1860–1984* (London, 1985).

¹⁰⁰ Briggs, *William Morris*.

¹⁰¹ A. Briggs, *The Story of the Leverhulme Trust: for Purposes of Research and Education* (London, 1991).

While Provost he took on yet more external roles. In 1987 the Commonwealth Heads of Government established an expert group to encourage the development and sharing of open learning and distance education practice, resources and technologies across Commonwealth countries, to extend high quality education to remote regions and people with limited or no face-to-face learning opportunities. Briggs was a member of the group which published a report in 1987,¹⁰² leading to the establishment in 1989 of the Vancouver-based Commonwealth of Learning, which is still active, and the creation of distance learning operations in all member countries. It matched Briggs' commitment to adult education and belief that education is vital for economic development. He was active in the organisation until 1993, requiring more travels. He became a Fellow of the British Academy in 1980,¹⁰³ President of the Victorian Society in 1983, of the Ephemera Society in 1984, the Brontë Society, 1989–96, from 1986 Vice-President of the Historical Association, which gave him a Lifetime Achievement award in 2010, followed by the Archives and Records Association in 2012. He joined the Advisory Board for Redundant Churches (1983–9). In 1987, with Paul Thompson of Essex University, who for over a decade had led the development of oral history as a method of historical investigation especially of the lives of working people, he established the National Life Stories Collection at the British Library. It aimed 'to record first-hand experiences of as wide a cross-section of present-day society as possible', as it continues invaluable to do, including fifteen hours of Briggs himself interviewed by Thompson.¹⁰⁴ In 1991 he gave the Ford lectures on 'Culture and Communication in Victorian England'. They were much praised but never published, perhaps because he had too many other commitments despite the fact that he formally retired from Worcester in 1991, aged seventy.

¹⁰² *Towards a Commonwealth of Learning: a Proposal to Create the University of the Commonwealth for Cooperation in Distance Education*. Report of the Expert Group on Commonwealth Cooperation in Distance Education and Open Learning (London, Commonwealth Secretariat, 1987).

¹⁰³ At age 59 he was somewhat older at his election than his contemporaries, who were elected, on average, at age 55 in 1980.

¹⁰⁴ www.bl.uk/projects/national-life-stories (accessed 15 June 2017).

Lewes

He returned to live in Lewes. He did not retire from historical and other work, saying from the outset 'I shall travel and go on teaching and examining and writing. I shall be glad to be free of committees and free of the business of raising money. But we want to remain in a community where there are 18 to 21-year-olds. With them every year is a new year; you never get entirely old.'¹⁰⁵ He carried on many of his national and international roles, as we have seen, travelled for pleasure with his wife and continued to pour out his accustomed range of writings. He said around this time 'A day without writing is for me an inadequate day'; his writing day began at 6 am.¹⁰⁶ In 1991 he published the history of the Leverhulme Trust and his third volume of collected essays, following volumes 1 and 2 in 1985.¹⁰⁷ In 1994 he published another commissioned history, of a premier French wine-producing dynasty *Haut-Brion: an Illustrious Lineage* (London, 1994): he always loved good wine. In 1995 Volume 5 of his history of broadcasting appeared.¹⁰⁸ This became the final volume, not by his choice and much to his regret. John Birt, Director-General of the BBC, was under government pressure to make drastic cuts, and the History was one of the victims,¹⁰⁹ though after his death the BBC organised a memorial service and commissioned Tristram Hunt to make a commemorative radio programme.¹¹⁰ In 1995 also he published *The Channel Islands: Occupation and Liberation, 1940–45* (London). In 1996 he co-edited with broadcaster Daniel Snowman *Fins de Siècle: How Centuries End, 1400–2000* (London), in which historians discussed experiences and attitudes at the end of each century since the fourteenth, as the millennium approached. In 1997 he produced with Patricia Clavin, then a lecturer at Keele, the successful survey *Modern Europe, 1979–1989* (London), and edited the collected works of his lifetime hero Samuel Smiles (London). In 1998 *Chartism* (Stroud), a popular 128-page summary, was less well received by specialists. In 2000 came *Go For It: Working for Victory on the Home Front* (London), commissioned by the Imperial War Museum to accompany a

¹⁰⁵ Smith, 'Asa Briggs', p. 21.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁷ A. Briggs, *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs*, vol. 1: *Words, Numbers Places, People* (Brighton, 1985); vol. 2: *Images, Problems, Standpoints, Forecasts* (Brighton, 1985); vol. 3: *Serious Pursuits: Communications and Education* (London, 1991).

¹⁰⁸ Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, vol. 5: *Competition*.

¹⁰⁹ Seaton, 'Asa and the Epochs', pp. 203–4.

¹¹⁰ Hunt, 'Asa Briggs: the last Victorian improver'.

major exhibition on the theme and the unveiling of a war memorial in Coventry Cathedral. In 2001 came a biography of *Michael Young: Social Entrepreneur* (London), a biography of a friend whose energy, including in promoting adult education and citizen rights, equalled his own, including creating the Consumers' Association, the National Extension College and the University of the Third Age. In the same year *A Social History of the Media: from Gutenberg to the Internet* (Oxford), co-written with Peter Burke, a former historian colleague at Sussex now at Cambridge, aimed, successfully, 'to show the relevance of the past to the present by bringing history into media studies and the media into history'.¹¹¹ It was an innovative, influential text which went through several editions, translated into Arabic, Chinese, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish and Turkish.¹¹²

Briggs' output slowed a little in his eighties, until in 2005 came the commissioned *History of the Royal College of Physicians of London*, vol. 4: 1948–83 (Oxford) exploring the impact of the National Health Service, which won him an Honorary Fellowship of the Royal College. In 2008, a last commissioned work was another product of his interest in the history of successful businesses with Victorian roots, *A History of Longman and Their Books, 1724–1990: Longevity in Publishing* (London), on which he had worked, intermittently, from the early 1970s when Longmans first approached him. In 1992 he gave the Ellen McArthur lectures at Cambridge, 'Commerce and Culture: the Publishing Business in Britain', which focussed on Longman's history, including its extensive early involvement in colonial and foreign markets. He was strongly interested in books as media of communication, past and present, and at Worcester (1983–91) organised influential, convivial, interdisciplinary seminars on the history of the book, which helped establish it as a field of study and supported the publication of many books in the field including Briggs' own.¹¹³ It also led to the establishment of the Archive of British Publishing and Printing at Reading University, the main UK archive for the records of publishing firms.¹¹⁴ The Longmans book was regarded as a 'significant contribution to publishing history',¹¹⁵ 'an astute and attractive history'.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ 2nd edition (Cambridge), 2005, p. viii.

¹¹² Taylor, *The Age of Asa*, p. 36.

¹¹³ J. Raven, 'From Worcester to Longman: devising the history of the book', in Taylor, *The Age of Asa*, pp. 267–78.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

He published three more books before his death, all memoirs, and very little else: *Secret Days* in 2011 at last revealed details of his wartime work. Although knowledge of Bletchley code-breaking had been public since the 1970s, he believed ‘there are still some secrets left’ and many misconceptions requiring correction.¹¹⁷ *Special Relationships: People and Places* (Barnsley, 2012) and *Loose Ends and Extras* (Barnsley, 2014) both ranged widely over his friendships, contacts and activities. They were unconventionally, informally, written, published in Yorkshire by the relatively obscure Frontline Books of Barnsley and not widely noticed. But even death did not halt the output: a final publication came in April 2016. He had written, but not published, poetry since the age of 13 and *The Complete Poems of Asa Briggs: Far Beyond the Pennine Way* (Brighton, 2016) contained one hundred poems, with an introduction discussing his ideas about poetry and how and why he had written it over the years. He had always been interested in the relationship between literature, history and society. To the end (he died on 15 March 2016), his range of interests and energy in pursuing them never ceased to surprise and impress.

He was survived by his wife, children and grandchildren as well as his massive output of publications.

PAT THANE
Fellow of the Academy

¹¹⁷ Briggs, *Secret Days*, pp. 1–2.

