



ERIC HOBSBAWM

Eric John Ernest Hobsbawm

1917–2012

I

ERIC HOBSBAWM was born in Alexandria, a chance location which he was able to use later on as an example of the effects on the lives of ordinary individuals of the global reach of the British Empire. His father was Leopold Percy Hobsbaum, the fourth of eight children of David Obstbaum, a cabinet-maker who had emigrated to London from Poland in the 1870s. On his arrival in London a Cockney immigration officer misheard his name, added what he must have assumed was a silent 'H' to the beginning, and dropped the unpronounceable 't', so his name became Hobsbaum. Leopold's brother Ernest, who worked in the British Post Office, suggested that he would find congenial employment in the Egyptian Post and Telegraph Service, established by the British after they took over the running of the country in 1882. In Alexandria in 1913, Leopold met the eighteen-year-old Nelly Grün, one of three daughters of a jeweller in Vienna, who was staying with her uncle Albert on a trip to Alexandria, paid for by her family as a reward for having passed her school-leaving examinations. The couple were married two years later, during the First World War, by the British consul in Zurich, aided by a special permit signed by the British Foreign Secretary. As a couple whose nationality straddled the combatant nations, they were unable to settle in Britain or Austria, so they moved back to Alexandria, where Eric came into the world on 9 June 1917. The British Consulate misspelled his surname when registering his birth, and so he became Eric John Ernest Hobsbawm.

As soon as the war was over, the family sailed to Trieste and from there took the train to Vienna, where they lived with relatives in a first-floor flat in the western suburbs. Eric grew up in the social world of the Viennese bourgeoisie, though distanced from it to a certain degree because he and his sister Nelly, born in 1920, were half-English. Still, to the end of his life he spoke German with a discernible Viennese accent. National identity was weak in the First Austrian Republic, the residual, German-speaking part of the former Habsburg Empire left over when the successor states became independent after the war. Eric grew up in a milieu that was cosmopolitan almost by definition. However, the 200,000 people of Jewish descent in Vienna—10 per cent of the population—including those who, like the Hobsbaums, were not religious, had to face a world of hostile prejudices and negative stereotypes. Eric's mother told him firmly when he was ten: 'You must never do anything, or seem to do anything, that might suggest that you are ashamed of being a Jew.' Such prejudice may have encouraged Eric's subsequent gravitation to the Left, aided by the anti-Semitism of Austria's mainstream Christian Social Party, which provided the nation's government through the 1920s, and the domination of 'Red Vienna' by the secular and decidedly non-anti-Semitic Socialists. He entered adolescence experiencing politics as starkly polarised between a Marxist Left and a radical-conservative Right.

Eric underwent a traditional, conservative bourgeois education in Vienna, learning Latin and Greek, and, without enthusiasm, maths and science. As the family changed address frequently to escape demands for rent, so too Eric had to change schools, going through five in all during his time in Vienna, never staying in one for long enough to make any firm friendships. More importantly, however, he began reading intensively from around the age of ten, devouring books and magazines on prehistory and the natural world. He read popular detective stories, and mastered the now-obsolete Gothic handwriting. History, he recalled later, was barely taught, because the old Habsburg history had disappeared and nothing had emerged with which to replace it. His already unstable life was deeply marked by two catastrophes that struck when he was in his teens, one purely personal, the other also affecting him painfully and directly, but with far wider resonances. On 8 February 1929 his father collapsed outside the family home with a heart attack and died almost instantly, at the age of forty-eight. His mother was devastated with grief. She made some money by writing (under a pseudonym) short stories and a novel based on her time in Alexandria, but a good deal of this income went on paying a servant, without which, she felt, the family could no

longer consider itself respectably bourgeois. Her knowledge of English got her a job with a textile company, but the family had to move again, to a cheaper flat. A passionate Anglophile who spent a good deal of time correcting and improving Eric's English, she sent him for a time after his father's death to a boarding-house run by her sister and husband in Southport, where he discovered boys' weekly magazines and visited the Boy Scouts' world jamboree, conceiving such an enthusiasm for the Scouts that he signed up with them immediately on his return to Vienna—the first close-knit milieu which he joined, and one which supplied the identity, stability and sense of belonging that he surely must have craved. Within a few months of her husband's death, however, Nelly was spitting blood and had to be admitted to a sanatorium. While his mother slowly declined, he stayed first with relatives, then with a widow who put him up in return for English lessons for her children. The doctors collapsed a lung and administered other treatments for tuberculosis common at the time, but none of it did any good, and she died on 12 July 1931 at the age of thirty-six, when Eric had just turned fourteen.

Eric dealt with the 'trauma, loss and insecurity' he suffered in these terrible family tragedies by plunging himself into reading and intellectual enquiry, and engaging in solitary activities such as building a crystal-set radio. He developed, he later recalled, 'like a computer . . . a "trash" facility for deleting unpleasant or unacceptable data'. This was to help him considerably in later life. The break-up of his family deepened the insecurity of his circumstances. It was impossible for him to stay in Vienna, and in July 1931 he was sent to join his sister in Berlin, where the children's uncle Sidney had secured a job with Universal Films. Here he encountered the second great calamity that was to shape his life. Already in the late 1920s the family was impoverished, his father unable to find regular employment, his mother unable to pay the grocery bills, landlords serving on them notices of eviction for non-payment of the rent, and any savings they had accumulated wiped out by the inflation of the immediate post-war years. Now, in Berlin, Eric came to feel the full force of the world economic depression, with banks defaulting on their payments, unemployment hitting more than a third of the workforce and the total collapse of capitalism seemingly just around the corner. During his life up to this point he had experienced capitalism as failure; now he experienced it as catastrophe. This was a very different milieu from that of the late 1920s and early 1930s in Britain, where the political and economic impact of 'the slump' was mild in comparison.

His uncle Sidney enrolled him in the Prinz-Heinrich Gymnasium in Berlin-Schöneberg, a classically Prussian, conservative, but fiercely independent and relatively tolerant grammar school where the pupils protested at the sacking of the Jewish head teacher by the Nazis in 1933 (he was later murdered in Auschwitz). Among teachers and pupils alike, there was no discernible atmosphere of anti-Semitism. Yet the comfortable, traditional world of the Berlin middle class was in crisis by 1931. The liberal, conservative and minority parties had collapsed, their voters all going to the Nazis; the Catholics had no purchase in Protestant Berlin; and the Social Democrats, who were a major presence in the city, had lost all credibility through their passive support for the deflationary and reactionary policies of the Brüning government during the Depression. At these middle-class academic schools in Berlin in the early 1930s, as many other former pupils later recalled, the only political choice, unavoidable in the overheated, frenetic, even hysterical political atmosphere of the time, was between Nazism and Communism.

As a non-German and a Jew, Eric found it out of the question to join in with the Nazis. In addition, as he wrote in his diary shortly afterwards, he had for a long time been ashamed of his family's poverty. The other boys with whom he mixed, at the grammar schools he attended in Vienna and Berlin, mostly came from well-to-do families; his had long lived hand to mouth, even while his father was alive. 'Only by turning this completely around and becoming proud of it did I conquer the shame.' Becoming a Communist meant embracing his poverty instead of feeling embarrassed by it; indeed, he thought that most people who developed a 'proletarian class consciousness' did so for the same reason. He began reading the poetry of Bertolt Brecht. The first real Communist Eric met was his cousin Otto, 'tall, handsome, successful with women', who made a considerable impression on him. When Eric declared naively that he too was a Communist, one 'exasperated master' told him 'firmly (and correctly)': 'You clearly do not know what you are talking about. Go to the library and look up the subject.' The book he discovered there was the *Communist Manifesto*, and a reading of it helped anchor Eric, at the age of fifteen, in his new-found identity.

While still engaging in normal school activities, notably the hiking club, reading widely and continuing with his studies, Eric, liberated by the absence of Sidney and his wife on a business venture in Barcelona, spent the evenings in the back rooms of Communist pubs debating the increasingly desperate political situation. He read Party material, though he did not engage with Marxism at any intellectually serious level, and he took

part in the Communists' last public demonstration in Berlin, on 25 January 1933. With its songs, chants and marching, the Communist movement, like the Boy Scouts before it, gave him a strong, even ecstatic sense of identity. Five days later, Hitler was appointed Chancellor. Within a few weeks, Hitler's brownshirts, enrolled as auxiliary police, had begun rounding up Communists, torturing and killing them in improvised concentration camps. Towards the end of March, as Hitler's grip on the country was tightening, Eric's uncle Sidney, his venture in Barcelona having failed, decided to move the family to Britain; Eric's aunt Mimi, who was also in serious financial difficulties, joined them, opening a cosmopolitan boarding house in Folkestone. Although his uncle may have already noted the anti-Semitism that the Nazis were pushing onto the streets, the first great outbreak of hatred towards the Jews, the boycott of Jewish shops and businesses on 1 April 1933, did not happen until after the family had left. Thus Eric was not a political or any other kind of refugee or exile from Nazi Germany: he was a British citizen who moved to Britain from Germany with his family for financial reasons, largely coincidentally just as the Nazis were in the course of seizing total power for themselves.

For Eric, the move was yet another disruption in adolescent life. Yet his identity was bolstered by his growing mastery of the basic principles of Marxism. At the same time, he also absorbed the linguistic influence of the English Romantic poets, whom he read as relief from Marxist theoretical texts: arguably this gave his mature prose the richness that helped make his writings so readable and so memorable. His schoolboy diaries mention hardly any history books in their long lists of his weekly reading, and in thinking about his future he considered he might become a teacher or a poet, never an historian (the poetry he wrote at this period, much of it crude agitprop sloganising, indicates that history was the right choice in the end). Revolutionary politics was Eric's main obsession at this time. Yet he was neither willing nor able to join the Communist Party of Great Britain. He did not see much hope in the British Communist movement, which never became much more than a tiny sect on the fringes of politics. In contrast to the mass movement of German Communism, which in the last free elections of the Weimar Republic scored 17 per cent of the votes and, thanks to proportional representation, secured 100 seats in the national legislature, the Communist Party of Great Britain had no seats in the House of Commons at the time, gaining only one in 1935, when Willie Gallagher was elected Member of Parliament for West Fife. Moreover, the British Communists at this time rejected the idea of becoming a mass party, and insisted instead on every member being an active militant, a

role Eric was neither willing nor able to assume (he was, after all, still at school). He would, he decided, become an intellectual. Acutely conscious of his own personal appearance—‘You’re as ugly as sin’, his cousin Denis Preston told him, ‘but you have a mind’—he took refuge in the world of ideas and spent most of his time reading, emerging only for the occasional family holiday, or to visit Highgate Cemetery to pay his respects to the grave of Karl Marx.

The only political movement in which Eric saw the possibility of participating was the Labour Party, which at least had some kind of mass base, though in national political terms it was at a low ebb in the mid-1930s. After a major family row, sparked by the fear of his uncle and aunt that he would neglect his studies in favour of politics, he was eventually allowed to attend meetings of the local Labour Party and canvass for it in elections. At least, he felt, it had more political realism than the break-away Independent Labour Party or the Communists, even though its members were poor material on which to base a socialist revolution. Throughout his life, indeed, he remained resolutely pragmatic in matters of practical politics, and unwilling to devote more than a fraction of his time to it. He took his schoolwork seriously, and was encouraged by his masters at St Marylebone Grammar School, especially his history teacher Harold Llewellyn-Smith, who was fascinated by the novel experience of teaching a Marxist schoolboy but also prepared Eric very effectively for the Oxbridge scholarship examinations, and the headmaster, Philip Wayne, later the translator of Goethe’s *Faust* for Penguin Classics. Little more than two years after his arrival in Britain, Eric won a scholarship to King’s College, Cambridge to read History, and went up in October 1936 to begin his studies.

II

Cambridge in the mid-1930s was a small and intimate university. There were 5,000 undergraduates, most of whom had been to English public schools and shared many of the cultural assumptions and practices of the English upper and upper-middle classes. Eric was an almost total outsider. Since in his judgement hardly any members of the History Faculty apart from the Russian-born economic historian Munia Postan were in any way intellectually stimulating, he went to few lectures, despised the routine of one-to-one supervisions by College tutors he regarded as mediocre, and

relied mostly on his own reading and on talking with other students. He was invited to join the Cambridge student branch of the Communist Party on his arrival, his reputation somehow having preceded him. His political allegiance was too open and too public for him to become a Soviet agent, though he subsequently confessed he would have agreed to do this had he been asked, in view of the danger of fascism and the iniquities of Appeasement. The ‘Cambridge spies’—Blunt, Burgess, Maclean, Philby, Cairncross—were all of an older generation, born before the First World War, and had gone down from the University before Eric arrived.

Eric’s commitment to the cause of Communism was shared by many European intellectuals in the interwar years. It seemed the obvious choice for cultured and intelligent people at a time when the anti-intellectual forces of fascism and the racist and anti-Semitic prejudices of Nazism were on the march. Certainly, membership did involve some sacrifice of personal intellectual independence. As his contemporary the later literary scholar Raymond Williams, also a student Communist at Cambridge, later remembered:

You were put into a group according to the subject you were reading: there you would discuss the intellectual problems of the subject . . . An example of the sort of task one was given was the pamphlet Eric Hobsbawm and I were assigned to write on the Russo-Finnish War, which argued that it was really a resumption of the Finnish Civil War of 1918 which had been won by Mannerheim and the Whites.

The pamphlet, *War on the USSR?*, produced by the University Socialist Club at Cambridge and published by the University Labour Federation, warned its readers that ‘the British people find themselves to-day on the verge of a war with Socialist Russia’ as the British government threatened to intervene on the side of Finland. Popular pressure had brought intervention in the Russian Civil War of 1918–21 to an end and must do so in this new crisis (Williams’s memory was at fault: it was this conflict, not the Finnish Civil War, which the pamphlet discussed). The pamphlet went into great detail about what its authors depicted as a military plan for a three-pronged invasion of Russia. Unlike an earlier, much more hard-line pamphlet, *Finland: the Facts*, published by the Russia Today Society in London, it did not advance the mendacious claim that Stalin had invaded Finland to bring freedom and democracy to a fascist state. Instead, it presented his policy as purely defensive, and invited readers to support it in order to preserve the achievements of the Revolution of 1917.

Thus Eric, along with his co-author, managed to preserve at least some intellectual integrity in his collaboration on the pamphlet—a remarkable achievement in the Stalinist world of international Communism in the 1930s. In any case, his commitment to Communism was never exclusive. His reading went far beyond it. What impressed his student contemporaries about him was the extraordinary erudition he displayed even in his early twenties. He ‘had at his finger-tips the strangest details about the obscurest subjects . . . The usual rumours started. “There’s a freshman in King’s who knows about everything” were the words that got around.’ Eric’s cultural interests developed eclectically. He became editor of the student magazine *Granta*, for which he wrote film reviews and brief articles and profiles in the rather arch, facetious style of the student publications of the day. He gave classes in Marxism to interested students and engaged in endless discussions and debates. Britain in the 1930s was still the centre of a vast global empire, and Eric’s horizons were surely broadened by meeting many colonial subjects who gravitated towards the Cambridge Communists, one of whom (Pieter Keunemann) later led the Communist Party of Sri Lanka, and another of whom (Sonny Gupta) later headed the Communist Party of India. In the vacations, Eric went to the library of the London School of Economics (LSE) to read, finding the atmosphere more congenial than Cambridge, and meeting other young Communist intellectuals.

In the summer of 1936, before going up to Cambridge, he had stayed in Paris for three months with the help of a grant from London County Council to improve his French. He was already familiar with the French capital, having been taken there some time earlier by his uncle, and participated in the heady street celebrations of the advent of the Popular Front in the early summer of 1936. He returned every year until the outbreak of the war. Prompted by the Cambridge Communist Margot Heinemann, who exerted a strong political influence over him, Eric acted as a translator at a world Communist Congress in 1937, and during these years he met more Party members from countries across the British Empire. Like many foreign intellectuals in the interwar years he was seduced by the cultural romance of Paris. He took to smoking Gauloises, and lost his virginity in a Parisian brothel. He revelled in the presence of the Jacobin tradition, still then very much alive in France, especially in the Communist Party.

By the time the war broke out, Eric had graduated with a starred first in the Cambridge Historical Tripos, which entitled him to an automatic studentship at King’s College to do graduate work. He proposed a Ph.D.

thesis on French North Africa, where he had already as an undergraduate obtained a grant from the Cambridge Political Science Fund to study agrarian conditions, spending two months in Algeria and Tunis in 1938 interviewing local officials and coming under the scrutiny of the French secret service. He spent the summer of 1939 in Paris carrying on his work on North Africa, proofreading his last issue of *Granta* and helping prepare yet another Communist conference. But his family life was in turmoil again. A few months before, his uncle Sidney, no more successful in Britain than he had been anywhere else, had emigrated to Chile, taking his own son and Eric's younger sister with him. There could be no question of Eric's going as well, in view of his impending examinations. So he waved them off at the waterfront in Liverpool and returned to Cambridge. He was in France when the war broke out on 1 September 1939 and returned to London immediately. His family gone, he slept on friends' couches and floors while the authorities decided what to do with him.

Called up in February 1940, Eric was an obvious candidate for intelligence work, with his command of French and German, his knowledge of North Africa and his first-class Cambridge degree. But the fact that his mother had been Austrian rather than British was a problem. A proposal to employ him as an interpreter came to nothing, his training in cyphers was broken off, and on 16 February 1940 he was enrolled in the 560th Field Company of the Royal Engineers, based in Cambridge. Here, as a private, he mixed with a motley group of other ranks, became friends with the cartoonist Ronald Searle, spent an inordinate amount of time square-bashing and underwent basic training as a sapper. His unit laid mines, attached explosive charges to bridges and dug anti-tank trenches round Great Yarmouth in preparation for the German invasion that never came. It all seemed to him in later life amateurish and ineffectual. His predominant experience, as he recorded in the diary he began keeping again after a break during his undergraduate years, was one of extreme boredom.

By his own confession a military incompetent, Eric was transferred on 2 October 1941 to the Army Education Corps, attached first, somewhat incongruously, to the Household Brigade. In June 1942, after he had made contact with Hans Kahle, a German Communist who had recently been released from internment as an enemy alien, he was placed under surveillance by MI5, who noted that he had been reprimanded twice by his superior officer for using the wall-newspapers he produced for 'partisan' arguments for a Second Front. He was banned from teaching current affairs and from August 1942 restricted to teaching Elementary German. When he was transferred to the Isle of Wight, MI5, alarmed at his

proximity to 'sensitive' military preparations for the D-Day landings, had him transferred out again almost immediately, and he was sent to a military hospital in Gloucester as, in effect, a welfare officer, safely away from anything political. MI5 ensured that the BBC did not accept his application to join the Forces' educational broadcasting service, though the Corporation considered him eminently suitable. His boredom was relieved only in the early summer of 1945 by canvassing for the Labour Party in the General Election held between 5 and 29 July. Most of his free time he spent in London. MI5 ensured he was kept in Britain, safely under observation. After the war, according to his memoirs, when it was proposed to send him to Palestine, where conflict was brewing between Arabs, Jews and the British, he found, as an anti-Zionist Jewish Communist, the situation too fraught with dangerous and unfathomable complexities, and persuaded King's College, Cambridge to write to the military authorities certifying that he needed to be demobilised in order to take up his research studentship.

On returning to Cambridge, Eric did not pursue his pre-war project of writing a thesis on agrarian conditions in North Africa. In May 1943 he had married a Communist woman he had met at the LSE, Muriel Seaman (b. 1915), a civil servant in the pensions division at the Board of Trade, and he did not want to spend long periods of time abroad. The couple lived at first in Gloucester Crescent, on the edge of Camden Town and within hearing of the roar of the lions in Regent's Park Zoo; cheap, central and fashionable with ex-Oxbridge intellectuals. For a year or so, Eric spent most of the week as a research student in Cambridge, but from February 1947 onwards he lived full-time in London, with his wife, on the north side of Clapham Common. At the same time, the Foreign Office, remembering from somewhere the fact that he spoke German, commissioned him to 're-educate' Germans at a hunting lodge on Lüneburg Heath in North Germany as part of the British policy of converting teachers from Nazism: one of the pupils was the later historian Reinhard Koselleck—'I taught him democracy', Eric once said to me, with a wolfish grin. Most of the re-educators were German-Jewish, and did not share the anti-German prejudices of many Britons, though a good number of them—including Eric—had lost relatives in the extermination camps. The programme came to an end soon afterwards with the arrival of the Cold War.

Looking around for a subject for his Ph.D., Eric turned from agrarian sociology to political history as, at the prompting of Munia Postan, he began research into the history of the Fabian Society early in 1946. He

read deeply in its papers and publications and conducted many interviews of the surviving members, and finished it two years later. After much redrafting of the thesis, he was formally awarded his doctorate in 1950. However, the topic had not been a very happy choice. Fabianism was a movement with which Eric was completely out of sympathy. It was, he wrote in his thesis, a 'New Deal' rather than a 'socialist' movement in the modern sense. It did not 'abandon capitalism' but aimed at 'making it more efficient and more secure'. It was intellectually incoherent and politically ineffective. Although the thesis rested on a substantial body of research, and passed the examiners without difficulty, it was never published as a book. Eric's research was hamstrung by the fact that the personal papers of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, the leading spirits in the movement, were barred to all researchers until an authorised biography of Sidney Webb had been published. Asked to consider the thesis for publication, the eminent economic historian R. H. Tawney advised rejection: he found it 'slick, superficial, and pretentious'. It was surely not a coincidence that the authorised biographer who had had access to the Webb papers barred to Eric was none other than Tawney himself. The only publication to emerge from Eric's research was a short collection of edited documents, *Labour's Turning Point 1880-1900: Extracts from Contemporary Sources* (1948), whose value was demonstrated by the fact that it was reprinted in 1974 for a new generation of students. Tawney's own biography of Webb never saw the light of day.

The year before he gained his doctorate, Eric had been elected to a five-year Fellowship at King's College Cambridge. In 1939, his last term as an undergraduate, he had been elected to the elite Cambridge society known as the Apostles, which consisted of clever undergraduates and postgraduates. Its members read papers to each other at the weekly meetings, and kept the fact of their membership a closely guarded secret. Perhaps because of its secrecy, the group became associated both with homosexuality and with the 'Cambridge spies', but in fact most of the members were heterosexual and three of the five spies did not belong to the Society at all. When the former Apostles (known as 'Angels') met in Soho for their first post-war dinner, Eric, as one of only two remaining active student members in Cambridge, was charged with reviving the Society, and he began recruiting new Apostles from among his students and friends. They met in the King's College rooms of the novelist E. M. Forster. Eric stayed a member for the rest of his time in Cambridge.

By now, he had turned from the Fabians to a research topic that was far more his own. Even before he completed his thesis, he began researching

the social and economic history of the English working class during the nineteenth century, in preparation for a book, *The Rise of the Wage Worker*, which he completed and sent to Hutchinson's, a commercial publisher with a strong academic and textbook list, in 1953. The book was turned down as 'too biased' on the advice of an anonymous reference from a senior British economic historian—Eric never found out who it was or, if he knew, never let on—and it was on this topic that he published his first scholarly articles, in the *Economic History Review* in 1949 and 1950. They were followed by many more on similar themes, in a variety of academic and non-academic journals, and he published a first collection of them as *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* in 1964, followed by a second, *Worlds of Labour: Further Studies in the History of Labour* twenty years later.

The thirty-five articles gathered together in these two collections covered four main themes. The first of these was the rationality of plebeian violence against mechanisation. A 1952 essay on the Luddites argued that machine-breaking, far from being an irrational outbreak of ignorance and prejudice, was a form of collective bargaining that carefully distinguished between different types of machine and was widely supported in the population. This important essay was a prelude in some ways to a book Eric was later to write with George Rudé, also a member of the Communist Party, and author of pioneering studies of the crowd in the French Revolution, on the epidemic of rick-burning in East Anglia and other parts of the country in the 1830s by bands of agricultural labourers led by the mythical 'Captain Swing'. Most of the detailed research was carried out by Rudé (except the analysis of the distribution of the riots in Chapter 9); the background and interpretative chapters were written by Eric. *Captain Swing* was published by the Communist Party publishing house of Lawrence and Wishart in 1969 and reprinted soon afterwards by Penguin Books. This too was a study of violence, especially in the face of incipient mechanisation, committed as a desperate form of collective bargaining by established and respectable workers, not by violent or drunken criminals. As such it belonged in a group of publications along these lines by other left-wing historians of the period, notably Edward Thompson's essay on the 'moral economy of the English crowd'. *Captain Swing*, a compelling narrative and analysis of what its authors called 'the most impressive episode in the English farm-labourers' long and doomed struggle against poverty and degradation', immediately established itself as a classic of the new social history.

A second group of articles addressed the question of why there had not been a revolutionary movement in Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century. Written in 1954, Eric's first article on this theme drew on the Leninist argument that craft-based unions and their members were seduced away from the idea of forming a revolutionary working-class party by being accorded a share in the status and profits of the capitalist bourgeoisie. Eric's contribution was the first to inject this argument with some seriously researched contemporary evidence on stratification within the British working class. The argument came under fire, naturally enough, and in subsequent contributions Eric conceded that any idea that the 'rough' working class was more naturally revolutionary than the 'respectable' working class was untenable in the British context. Artisans and craftsmen, like the shoemakers, were also bearers of revolutionary ideas. This work fed into the third major theme of Eric's publications on English labour history, namely the relationship between economy, working structures and conditions, and the labour movement in Britain, exemplified by figures such as 'the tramping artisan'.

The fourth and final theme of these studies was the British standard of living during the Industrial Revolution. This was not a new subject, of course: social commentators in the nineteenth century had argued for the negative impact of industrialisation on the quality of life of ordinary people, and had been echoed by the Webbs and the Hammonds in the twentieth, while a new generation of economic historians, particularly J. H. Clapham and T. S. Ashton, used statistical evidence of real wages to argue the opposite case. Eric took a broader approach, bringing in factors such as mortality and unemployment rates, and by using detailed statistics of food prices and consumption to challenge the view that real wages had improved. He made a powerful case for the Marxist view that the rise of industrial capitalism was based on a brutal exploitation of the new working class that led to a sharp deterioration in its standard of living. His article sparked a major controversy, reflecting the fact that it was published at the height of the Cold War, and was taken to be a reflection of the Marxist-Leninist attack on western capitalism in general. The Oxford historian Max Hartwell, who became Editor of the *Economic History Review* in 1960, published a robust response, criticising Eric's statistics and arguing for a positive development in working-class living standards in the course of industrialisation. An increasingly acrimonious exchange of views and statistical evidence followed in the pages of the journal, and soon others were joining in, as the debate became a major focus of scholarly attention and entered university history curricula as a central

topic in modern economic and social history. Although the end result of the Hobsbawm–Hartwell debate might be viewed as inconclusive, it inspired a massive amount of research over the following decades. During this period, the scope of the debate widened almost continually: the original exchanges, for example, were shown to have focused too narrowly on the real wages of male workers, neglecting the living standards of women and children. Statistics of the average height of children and adults at various ages, the impact of disease and much more besides brought new evidence into play. Broadly speaking, it looks now as if industrialisation did indeed have a negative effect on the living standards of the working class in Britain over a lengthy period, certainly up to the middle of the century, but after that living standards began to improve.

In 1968 Eric published the book that can be seen as the culmination of his work on the social and economic history of British industrialisation: *Industry and Empire*. This was the third volume in the ‘Pelican Economic History of Britain’, published by the non-fiction imprint of Penguin Books at the prompting of the Cambridge historian Jack Plumb, and it covered the period from 1750 to 1964 (the advent of the Labour government of Harold Wilson). At a mere 300 pages, it was a masterpiece of elegant synthesis and compressed exposition. The industrial revolution, which Eric rightly saw as ‘the most fundamental transformation of human life in the history of the world recorded in written documents’, took centre stage and occupied nearly a third of the book—indeed, in editions published after 1999, with an update by Eric’s former student Chris Wrigley, it acquired the subtitle *The Birth of the Industrial Revolution*. What made the book so striking and original was that it took a global view of its subject, placing it in a context far broader than that essayed by previous attempts to explain why the process of industrialisation began in Britain and not elsewhere, attempts which had focused overwhelmingly on factors located within Britain’s economy and society. Presaging the ‘global turn’ of historical studies in the early twenty-first century, Eric argued here that it was the expansion of the British overseas empire in the eighteenth century that provided the essential ingredient by acquiring new markets and suppressing domestic competition in the countries colonised. Massive sales of cotton goods in Africa and, later, India, were achieved as a result, stimulating mechanisation, lowering prices and leading to a rapid accumulation of capital back in Britain.

By the late nineteenth century, however, capitalists, assimilating to the social style of the landed gentry, had become complacent and Britain began to fall behind, as countries such as Germany pioneered a second

industrial revolution based on the chemical and electrical industries. Despite the presentation of more than fifty statistical tables at the end of the book, *Industry and Empire* was far more than a narrowly focused economic history, and had much of interest to say about social and political history too. British society—and Eric really did mean British, with space devoted to Scotland, Wales and Ireland as well as to England—was transformed socially as well as economically, with a large industrial working class providing the basis after the turn of the century for the rise of a socialist political party that had few parallels elsewhere in Europe. Many of these points, written while Labour seemed to be the dominant force in British politics, were to be overtaken by events in the 1970s. The book ended by urging the regeneration of British society, and so may be seen as an early contribution to the ‘decline of Britain’ debate of the 1970s, but it was clear that this was to be in a socialist sense, and that Margaret Thatcher’s radical neo-liberal economic reforms, introduced just over a decade later, were definitely not what Eric had in mind.

III

Given the very small number of specialists in the field in the early 1950s, and the rapid accumulation of his publications on British social and economic history, it was not surprising that Eric was elected to the Council of the Economic History Society in 1952. But this was not the main focus of his organisational activities as a historian during these years. That was the Historians’ Group of the Communist Party, originally established as the Marxist Historians’ Group in September 1938 and reconstituted under its new name in 1946. The Group was divided into period sections, of which the Modern History group, with forty members, very few of whom were professional historians, was the largest. It was to this group that Eric belonged. It met in the upper rooms of the Garibaldi Restaurant in Saffron Hill and, sometimes, in Marx House at Clerkenwell Green. It also held a summer school in 1947, and a general conference in 1948, but after this it declined, despite an ambitious summer school on the rise and decline of British capitalism held in July 1954. The most notable concrete products of the extensive debates and discussions held by the Group during its brief phase of regular activity were, in the long run, the three volumes of the ‘Penguin Economic History of Britain’, whose authors, Rodney Hilton (who never completed the projected first volume),

Christopher Hill and, as we have seen, Eric himself, were all among the Group's original members and took part in its discussions on the rise of capitalism; and, more immediately, the journal *Past and Present*. Borrowing its title from a short-lived series of brief historical books edited after the war by the archaeologist Gordon Childe, the new journal was launched with the bold subtitle *A Journal of Scientific History* at the beginning of 1952 (it was replaced a few years later, with the influx of a new group of non-Marxists to the board of editors, led by Lawrence Stone, by the anodyne *A Journal of Historical Studies*).

The founding meeting of the new periodical took place late in 1949 around the kitchen table at the home of John Morris, historian of ancient Rome and Arthurian Britain, and convenor of the Ancient History section of the Group. Since the idea for the journal was Morris's, he was appointed as its editor, a capacity in which he served until 1960. Each of the guests at the kitchen table pledged to contribute whatever funds they had at their disposal to subsidise production costs, raising the princely sum of £25, which Morris matched with funds of his own. Subscriptions were cajoled out of members of the Historians' Group and its sympathisers, though the journal was never officially sanctioned by the Group, still less by the Party. As one of the founders, Eric drafted the Introduction to the first issue jointly with Morris and the Cambridge medievalist Geoffrey Barraclough, who, though far from being a Communist, had been converted by his wartime experience into a passionate advocate of the relevance of history to contemporary issues. The editors insisted from the outset on accepting articles that combined serious research with broad and stimulating ideas, ruling out narrowly empirical research reports. It was from this perspective that Eric always judged the articles submitted to the journal that he was asked to referee. His comments indicate that he consistently thought an article had to address a significant problem rather than offer a merely factual description, it had to be cogently reasoned and if possible comparative, it had to deal with causality, and it had to be supported by empirical, preferably archival, research. Theoretical or historiographical positioning he did not consider particularly important, but the application of concepts and arguments to the material was crucial. Above all, contributions had to be clearly written and jargon-free. In the editorial discussions that took place from time to time on the future development of the journal, Eric always insisted it should strive to be scientific, in the broadest sense of the word.

Eric's first contribution to the new journal was a pair of substantial articles published in 1954 on what he called the general crisis of the

European economy in the seventeenth century. Here he drew on the extensive discussion within the Communist Party Historians' Group on the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and in particular on the work of the Cambridge economist Maurice Dobb, a long-term member of the Communist Party, whose book *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (1946) had provided an important stimulus. Eric also benefited from contacts with the non-Marxist Annales school in France, to which he had been introduced by Postan before the war, and from discussions at the first post-war international congress of the historical sciences, in 1950. Departing from his usual research territory of nineteenth-century British labour history to range across the economies of several countries, Eric identified a common crisis that led to a widespread series of rebellions and revolts, the most radical and successful of which was the overthrow of the English monarchy in the 1640s, in what he regarded as the first complete bourgeois revolution. The articles revealed for the first time Eric's command of sweeping generalisation, based on an astonishing breadth of reading and ranging across the entire European continent.

The articles sparked another major historical debate as the seventeenth-century specialist Hugh Trevor-Roper, one of the few historians whose command of European history and languages equalled Eric's own, published a contribution on the political consequences of the crisis while at the same time criticising Eric's focus on the transition from feudalism to capitalism, which he considered more a consequence than a cause of the Puritan Revolution in England. Further contributions followed, and they were eventually published as a book. The debate continues several decades later, with the most recent focus being on the climate change of the 'little Ice Age' that underpinned the crisis, earlier dismissed by Eric as an extraneous factor with little relevance to the human history of the time. Along with the debate on living standards during the industrial revolution, the debate on the 'general crisis' was a major, and astonishingly fertile and durable, contribution to historical understanding. Yet while the arguments he put forward in both these debates were distinctively Marxist—a fact that played a major role in provoking responses from right-wing historians such as Hartwell and Trevor-Roper—Eric's intellectual development in the first half of the 1950s was already taking him progressively further away from the mainstream of Communist ideology. The strain between his political commitment as a Communist and his intellectual autonomy as an historian became fully evident in the crisis that overcame international Communism in 1956.

Eric's loyalty, like that of many other Communists, had been tested repeatedly over the years by the frequent reversals of policy dictated by Moscow, from the Hitler-Stalin Pact in August 1939 through the Soviet break with the Yugoslav Communist leader Tito in 1948. While he accepted the former without question, he was not convinced by the about-turn of the British Party leaders on Yugoslavia, jumping from praising the country as a close ally in 1947 to denouncing it as a tool of capitalism in 1948. But this was a time when the rapidly escalating Cold War seemed to be putting the Soviet Union under increasing pressure, possibly even up to and including a nuclear attack. To Communists such as Eric, and to many others, the Soviet Union seemed to be forging ahead economically. It was the indispensable supporter of anti-colonial liberation movements across the globe; and it was the major guarantor of the social revolution's future everywhere. So they swallowed their doubts and knuckled under. The loyalty of the Communist Party Historians' Group was rewarded not long after Stalin's death in 1953 by an invitation from the Soviet Academy of Sciences to four of its members, Eric, Christopher Hill, Robert Browning and Leslie Morton, to the Soviet Union during the academic winter vacation of 1954–5. Entering the mausoleum where Stalin's embalmed body was on display, Eric was impressed by a figure 'so tiny and yet so all-powerful'. But he was depressed by seeing the still-remaining scars of war, the pervasive atmosphere of secrecy in which not even telephone directories or maps were available and the inward-looking and conformist conversation of the group's hosts. For all its drawbacks, however, the Soviet Union was still passionately admired by British Communists: a backward peasant economy that within a few decades had been transformed into an economic superpower; the country where revolution had become a reality; a state that had vanquished fascism in the greatest war in history.

As he emerged from the squabbling factions that jockeyed for power after Stalin's death, however, the new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev began to free the Soviet Union from the straitjacket imposed on it by the dictator. In 1955 he dismayed Communists everywhere by staging a public reconciliation with Tito, thus forcing them into their second reversal of policy on the issue in less than a decade. But it was on 25 February 1956, the final day of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, that the decisive break with Stalin came, in a secret speech by Khrushchev (soon made available to the world by the CIA) that excoriated the 'cult of personality' around Stalin, denounced him for numberless murders and atrocities, and distributed the testament written by Lenin, warning his successors not to trust him. Khrushchev's speech

plunged the British Communist Party into a crisis, which deepened in October 1956 as student demonstrators in Hungary, seeing the Soviet leader's revelations as an indictment of Communism itself, and shocked by the bloody suppression of protests in Poznań in June, forced the resignation of their Communist government and began a policy of liberalisation. The Soviet Union responded on 4 November with a military invasion, followed by the execution or imprisonment of the leading reformers, and the reimposition of a regime led by men who could be relied on to remain true to Moscow.

Eric signed a letter drafted by Christopher Hill and Rodney Hilton, rejected by the Party newspaper the *Daily Worker* and published instead at their request in the *New Statesman* on 18 November 1956. It condemned 'the uncritical support given by the Executive Committee of the Communist Party to Soviet action in Hungary'. This was, the signatories claimed, 'the undesirable culmination of years of distortion of fact, and failure by British Communists to think out political problems for themselves'. The letter was duly condemned by the Party hierarchy as a breach of Party discipline because it was published in a 'bourgeois' magazine. In his response, Eric justified publication on the somewhat flimsy grounds that for the signatories to have discussed the matter with the Party's Executive Committee first would have meant that they had constituted themselves as an inner-party faction. He conceded that the invasion had been necessary because to hand over Hungary to Cold War warriors such as the leading anti-Communist Hungarian Cardinal Mindszenty would have constituted a real threat to the Soviet regime. Still, he went on, the USSR had to recognise that the Hungarian uprising was a popular, democratic movement. Moscow should withdraw its troops as soon as possible. As for the British Communist Party, it needed to admit that Khrushchev had been right and concede that the Party could err, and it had to allow more inner-party democracy and not try to crush internal dissent and debate as it was doing over Hungary.

None of these demands was met. Instead Eric and his co-signatories, who included the historians Robert Browning, Henry Collins and Edward Thompson, and the novelist Doris Lessing, were treated to a lengthy diatribe by George Matthews, the Party's Assistant Secretary, accusing them of violating Party rules and repudiating the Party's achievements over the past years. Their letter, Matthews said, was 'an attack on the Party itself'. In the face of such intransigence, a quarter of the Party's members resigned in the course of the year, along with a third of the staff of the *Daily Worker*. The Historians' Group broke up under the strain;

although it continued in other forms for long afterwards, it was never the intellectual powerhouse it had once been. Eric's proposal for it to reconstitute itself as a grouping of Party and non-Party members came to nothing. Most of its members resigned from the Party, to form the intellectual nucleus of the British New Left; Eric met with a good deal of hostility in Party circles for refusing to break his contacts with them. For a long time after this juncture, the British Communist Party had no real place for intellectuals and became above all a vehicle for radical industrial trade unionism. Eric attempted to justify his stance and that of his co-signatories as appropriate to intellectuals only conditionally subject to Party discipline, but when he tried to do this at one meeting, according to a report by an MI5 agent, his speech was dismissed by Party members present as 'arrogant drivel'. Another Party functionary described him as a 'swine'. Matthews expressed the hope that he could be provoked into resigning.

Yet despite such hostility, he did not resign, nor was he expelled; indeed he remained in the Party until its eventual dissolution in 1991. In truth, he had never been closely involved in its affairs, or taken part in the day-to-day life of meetings, resolutions, leafleting and campaigning. During the war, he had been regarded in Party circles as rather remote from its affairs. Now, in the wake of the crisis of 1956, a leading Party functionary, Bill Wainwright, described him in a bugged conversation as 'a bloke who had given them a spot of trouble now and then and was a slippery customer who still played about with "these other b...y people" and one could never get a really straight answer from him'" (even in 1959, MI5 still felt a Victorian reluctance to write out a swear word in full). His 'great talent' was needed by the Party, although at meetings of the Party's Culture Committee he was not one of those who 'talked like Communists' (he was bumped off the Committee in 1959). When the furore over Hungary had died down, Wainwright told him 'they wanted him to remain in the Party and not do things that might put him out of it; ERIC had been frightfully upset swearing that he never wanted to leave'.

The historian Tony Judt later remarked: 'Others left the Party in despair because it had meant so much to them; Hobsbawm was able to remain because, in his daily life at least, it meant so little.' Certainly the Communist Party hierarchy considered after 1956 that he was less than fully committed to the Party. Still, Eric would not have accepted Judt's verdict. He refused to leave, he said later, 'out of loyalty to a great cause and to all those who had sacrificed their lives for it', and because however great the crimes of Stalin had been, the global Communist movement

remained humankind's best hope for the future. Eric did not want to join the ranks of 'those ex-communists who turned into fanatical anti-communists' who repudiated their former lives in their entirety. A certain cussedness had something to do with it as well: the more people pressed him to get out, the more he dug his heels in and declared he would stay in. Leaving the Party would undoubtedly help his academic career, but he wanted to prove himself by succeeding despite being a known Communist. In the event, his political allegiance probably prevented him from getting a Faculty position in Cambridge, and he was unable to visit the United States until 1960 and needed a special visa every time he went there for many years thereafter. He was carefully watched by successive British governments: his visits to Cuba were extensively reported by MI5 agents, and as late as 1970 the Foreign Office tried to prevent him from delivering a speech at a UNESCO conference on the centenary of Lenin's birth because it thought it would be too positive and so not representative of British academic opinion.

Eric had been converted to the cause not in the lukewarm political world of England in the mid-thirties but in the red-hot crucible of Berlin politics on the eve of the Nazi seizure of power, when joining the Communist Party could easily lead to arrest, beating-up, torture or death; and not in adulthood but during his teens, when becoming a Communist was a central part of the formation of his adult identity. This instilled in him a steely commitment that was ultimately foreign to his English counterparts. A Communist identity acquired a mere decade and a half after the Bolshevik Revolution, in the midst of what seemed to be the final crisis of capitalism, made him, as he said, part of 'the generation tied by an almost umbilical cord to hope of the world revolution, and of its original home, the October Revolution, however sceptical or critical of the USSR'. Yet for all his formal, institutional loyalty after 1956, from this point onwards Eric ceased to be active in any capacity within the Communist Party of Great Britain. By 1969 he was referring to Stalinism as 'that hypertrophy of the bureaucratized dictatorial state', even though the leadership of the British Communist Party still clung to its memory. He was helped from the 1960s onwards by the fact that the new radical causes of the age—Cuba and Vietnam—were at one remove if not two from the classic themes of the Cold War. Eric took part in nuclear disarmament marches, he visited Cuba, he lectured at teach-ins and spoke in debates against the Vietnam War. He joined committees, signed letters and petitions, and took part in demonstrations chanting 'Ho-Ho-Ho Chi Minh!' along with the others in the crowd. Although he was not a leader in any of

these new movements, he was more than the mere watcher from the sidelines that he later claimed to have been.

Eric's Communism was never sectarian or dogmatic, not even in the first years of his adolescent commitment to the cause. He thought the Party should be realistic and not sacrifice the potential unity of the labour movement for the sake of principle. Thus in terms of practical politics he worked far more closely with the Labour Party than with the Communists even in the 1930s; late in life, indeed, in 1997 he voted Liberal Democrat, registering himself in the marginal Tory constituency in Wales where he had a cottage, rather than wasting it in what had by this time become the safe Labour seat of his London residence in Hampstead. Yet in the end, Eric's Communist allegiance was too deeply rooted for him to abandon his formal commitment to the Party, however much he came in subsequent years to distance himself intellectually from the politics of Communism in the real world of his time. As Eric wrote later, his faith in the cause made him reluctant to criticise it:

While I hope I have never written or said anything about the Soviet Union that I should feel guilty about, I have tended to avoid dealing with it directly, because I knew that if I had, I would have had to have written things that would have been difficult for a communist to say without affecting my political activity and the feelings of my comrades. This is also why I chose to become a nineteenth-century historian rather than a twentieth-century one. Thus I didn't want to be involved in debates that would either have taken me over onto the other side, or have brought me into conflict with my conscience as an academic.

Interviewed in the mid-1990s by the writer and politician Michael Ignatieff, he came close to confessing that he still thought the Communist utopia worth the sacrifice of the millions killed in its name. His confession, however, made it clear that he was talking about the promised future, not the present, and balancing out the prospect of the permanent achievement of a prosperous, peaceful and above all socially open and egalitarian future against the sacrifices he thought were needed to achieve it. The passage needs to be read carefully, as much for what Eric does not say as for what he does:

Ignatieff: In 1934, millions of people are dying in the Soviet experiment. If you had known that, would it have made a difference to you at that time? To your commitment? To being a Communist?

Hobsbawm: . . . Probably not.

Ignatieff: Why?

Hobsbawm: Because in a period in which, as you might imagine, mass murder and mass suffering are absolutely universal, the chance of a new world being born in great suffering would still have been worth backing . . . The sacrifices

were enormous; they were excessive by almost any standard and excessively great. But I'm looking back at it now and I'm saying that because it turns out that the Soviet Union was not the beginning of the world revolution. Had it been, I'm not sure.

Ignatieff: What that comes down to is saying that had the radiant tomorrow actually been created, the loss of fifteen, twenty million people might have been justified?

Hobsbawm: Yes.

Yet privately, he took a different line, when asked a real rather than a hypothetical question about the actual as opposed to the potential achievements of Communism, as Isaiah Berlin reported on 9 February 1972 in a private letter to Robert Silvers, editor of the *New York Review of Books*:

I asked Eric Hobsbawm the other day whether he did not think that his party, of which he is still a loyal member—or perhaps disloyal member, but a member—was not on the whole responsible for a great deal more pain than happiness, and shed too much blood with very little to show for it, comparatively speaking, if one was to reckon these things in terms of human beings and not of inexorable cosmic forces . . . Surprisingly enough, he agreed, but what this is worth I simply do not know. I enjoyed my meeting with him very much. He is . . . a very suitable acquaintance for me.

The two men, indeed, became friends, recognising in each other the insatiable intellectual curiosity, cosmopolitanism, deep intelligence and breadth of knowledge that each of them prized more than the political ideologies that divided them.

IV

By the time of the crisis of 1956, Eric's first marriage had broken up. He and his wife had quarrelled over what one of the Fellows at King's described as his outdated attachment to the ideals of the Popular Front. Muriel, who had become a Principal in the Board of Trade but was still a Communist, was more hard line; she 'does not consider him to be a fervent enough Communist', an MI5 officer reported. In 1950 she left him for another man, and despite Eric's entreaties for her to return, by 1952 it was clear that it was all over. They consulted a Communist Party solicitor, and they divorced in the summer. He never saw her again; a few years later, Muriel and her new husband were killed in a car crash in Portugal. Eric moved back to King's for the rest of his Fellowship. He later described

the first half of the 1950s as an unhappy time in his personal life; MI5, who had resumed surveillance on him and were opening his correspondence from the beginning of 1952, continuing for at least a decade thereafter, described him as suffering 'an emotional breakdown'. According to his file he had a girlfriend called Faith, about whom nothing more is known. He was kept going mainly by his extraordinary work rate as an historian. Abandoning the marital flat in Clapham, he lived mainly in his set of rooms in Cambridge, staying over in the capital with friends when he needed to.

In 1947 Eric had been appointed to a Lectureship in History at Birkbeck College, London University's centre for part-time adult education, where classes, mostly for schoolteachers, were conducted between six and nine in the evening. Since there were only half a dozen or so academic staff in the Department, Eric had to cover the whole of modern British and European history in his lectures and classes, often sitting on a table cleaning out, stopping and lighting his pipe as he discoursed on the topic of the day, illustrating his arguments, as several of his former students reported, with an awe-inspiring range of references. On one occasion he emptied the contents of his pipe into the waste-paper basket beneath his feet, which promptly caught fire; when he tried to stamp it out, his foot became jammed, and the students had to rush forward to free him and extinguish the flames before any serious damage was done. Such impracticalities reinforced his popular image with them as the intellectuals' intellectual, learned and authoritative in the classroom but utterly incompetent in everyday life.

He had good relations with his colleagues, except the head of department (permanent, as most heads were in London in those days), the dry-as-dust medievalist R. R. Darlington, whose main scholarly endeavours were devoted to producing editions of medieval chronicles and charters. Because Eric did not use manuscript sources, Darlington blocked his promotion, though there may also have been some political animus as well. Still, thanks to the good offices of Ronald Tress, an economist, who was Master of Birkbeck and overruled Darlington's opposition, Eric secured promotion to a Readership in 1959 (duly noted by MI5) and to a long-overdue personal professorship in 1970, at the age of fifty-four (the previous year, Trevor-Roper had succeeded in blocking his election to the Chichele Professorship of Economic History in Oxford, on political grounds). He retired in 1982, and from the early 1990s he was provided with a small office on condition that he talked to the younger members of the now rapidly expanding department, which he did with relish. In 2002,

his devotion to the College was recognised by his appointment as Birkbeck's President—a largely ceremonial office, equivalent to that of the Chancellor of a conventional university, that he occupied until his death. Eric described Birkbeck as 'the poor man's All Souls' since it allowed its academics time during the day to research before teaching began in the evenings; he was proud of its mission to teach ordinary working people rather than privileged undergraduates, and he felt at home in its politically progressive atmosphere, with colleagues such as the crystallographer J. D. Bernal, whose Communist commitment had cost him a career at Cambridge, or the theoretical physicist David Bohm, an exile from America driven out by McCarthyism.

There seemed to be no problem in Eric's combining his post at Birkbeck with his Fellowship at King's, but when the latter came to an end in 1954 he moved permanently to London, occupying a large flat in Torrington Place, in Bloomsbury, close to Birkbeck, which he shared over time with a variety of Communist or ex-Communist friends. Gradually, as he emerged from the depression that followed the break-up of his marriage, he began a new lifestyle, in which the close comradeship and sense of identity he had found in the Communist movement was, above all from 1956 onwards, replaced by an increasingly intense involvement with the world of jazz. Already before the war his cousin Denis Preston had played records by Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith and other musicians to him on a wind-up gramophone in Preston's mother's house in Sydenham. The two of them went to hear Duke Ellington play at a dance-hall in Streatham, from which Eric left 'captured for ever'. In the Soho jazz scene of the Fifties, he found a close-knit group of people, 'a sort of quasi-underground international freemasonry', a 'small and usually embattled group even among the cultural minority tastes'; the musical equivalent of the Communist Party, combining a sense of intimacy and belonging with a feeling of being out of the mainstream, far from the centre of society.

Financial considerations also played a role in his growing involvement in the world of jazz. Having to pay the rent on a Bloomsbury flat instead of living in free lodgings in a Cambridge college, Eric needed some money on top of his modest academic salary, and when he noticed that the novelist Kingsley Amis, who surely knew less about jazz than he did, was writing on the subject for a national newspaper, he asked Norman Mackenzie, whom he had known at the LSE, and now wrote for the *New Statesman*, to secure him the post of jazz critic for the magazine. He got the job, and began work on the paper as its regular jazz reporter under the pseudonym 'Francis Newton' (Frankie Newton was one of the very few

American jazz musicians who was generally believed to have been a Communist), assumed because he thought, quite rightly, that it would not do his academic career much good if he wrote under his own name. It was also, perhaps, no coincidence that he took up his new activity just as the Soviet Union, which had long condemned jazz as a form of bourgeois decadence, was undergoing a post-Stalinist cultural thaw, releasing jazz musicians from the Gulag and allowing jazz bands to start up again. By this time, too, the cultural dictators of Communist regimes all across Eastern Europe had found another species of capitalist decadence to ban—rock-and-roll, in comparison to which jazz, along with the blues, appeared in a positive light as the music of the oppressed black working class in capitalist America.

Since, as the *New Statesman's* editor Kingsley Martin told him, the readers of the magazine were mostly male civil servants in their forties and therefore unlikely to go to jazz clubs, Eric was required to write his monthly column as a cultural reporter rather than a music critic, a slant that eminently suited his 'man-about-town' lifestyle of the late 1950s. Rather than frequenting Ronnie Scott's, where jazz fans went to listen, he preferred the Downbeat Club in Old Compton Street, which might occasionally feature a pianist but mainly served as a place where off-duty jazz musicians could drink and gossip. The players, he reported later, 'accepted me as an oddity on the scene', as a 'sort of walking reference book who could answer (non-musical) queries'. Drawn into 'the avant-garde cultural bohème', he became a participant observer of Soho life in the 1950s, teaching at Birkbeck between 6 and 9 in the evening, then spending night after night in the clubs and bars of Soho in 'the places where the day people got rid of their inhibitions after dark', mingling with rebels and nonconformists such as the singer George Melly, the Old Etonian trumpeter Humphrey Lyttelton, the theatre critic Kenneth Tynan, the painter Francis Bacon, the cartoonist Wally Fawkes ('Trog') and the writer Colin MacInnes. 'The affair between the solid citizen and the low life or the asocial', he remarked in 1962, was no longer 'furtive' but was 'now out in the open', a trend demonstrated by new movies such as *A Taste of Honey*: he might have noted that his remark also applied to himself. During his late-night sessions in the clubs, Eric got to know their habitués—drug addicts, prostitutes, musicians, poets, journalists and artists—well enough to write down some of their accounts of themselves, their lives and his relationships with them, characteristically prefacing one of them with a lengthy glossary of the drug addict's slang. The clubs, he noted, were also places where black and white people mixed on easy terms,

and this at a time when racist white hostility to a decade of West Indian immigration and its consequences was increasing, culminating in the Notting Hill race riots of 1958 (Eric's articles for the *New Statesman* indeed included an admiring account of the efforts of the jazz community in London to combat the racism that erupted in the riots).

Many of the brief articles that 'Francis Newton' contributed to the *New Statesman* were routine surveys of jazz festivals, 'records of the year', jazz movies and the like. More often than not they were clogged with names and titles, to cater for record-buying readers (Miles Davis was recommended, Dave Brubeck not). But there were more considered pieces on trends in jazz, on trad versus modern, on the emergence of 'cool night-clubs' for the affluent, on the business aspects of the increasing number of American bands visiting the UK, on the virtual absence of female singers from the new wave of pop and many other similar topics. One of his articles attempted to explain why so many jazz musicians died young, a phenomenon Eric attributed to the long hours they worked, the instability of their lifestyle on the road, their lack of a steady income, their exploitation by agents, promoters and club owners, and the unhygienic conditions of the joints they played in ('The average bar or club in which the working life of many musicians is passed', he claimed, 'would not have got by a factory inspector in 1847'). Some of the articles moved beyond the jazz clubs into other parts of Soho. In one, published in March 1961, 'Francis Newton' explored the spread of strip clubs across the West End following the easing of legal restrictions in 1957. They ranged, he noted, 'from fairly elaborate set-ups to sleazy rooms with a few cinema seats occupied by single men who watch a succession of girls (interspersed by strip films) taking off their clothes contemptuously to the accompaniment of one and a half records'. Characteristically, he interviewed some of the strippers and their managers about the economic aspects of their employment, discovering that the girls got as little as £1 for a five-minute strip, though in more luxurious joints they could earn as much as £25 and even more for 'special acts', about which he did not go into any more detail; he ended, somewhat unrealistically, by urging the involvement of Equity, the actors' union, in organising them and campaigning for improvements in their pay and conditions of work.

Through his cousin Denis, now a leading record producer, Eric secured a commission from a publishing house, MacGibbon & Kee, founded in 1949 by Robert Kee, a journalist and historian, and James MacGibbon, a lifelong Communist who confessed on his deathbed in the year 2000 that he had leaked official secrets to the Soviet Union during the latter part of

the war. MacGibbon and Kee had already produced books by Lyttelton and MacInnes, but the firm was not very successful commercially and was being bailed out of financial difficulties by Howard Samuel, a wealthy supporter of the Labour Party. They persuaded Eric to write a book about jazz, which was published in 1959 as *The Jazz Scene*, under his *New Statesman* pseudonym. This was not a collection of his articles, but a freshly written work in its own right. Aspects of the book reflect the introductory survey the publisher intended it to be, notably the chapters on 'how to recognize jazz', on style, on instruments and on the relationship of jazz to the other arts, but mainly the book is a work of contemporary social history, and as such it showed all the hallmarks of Eric's other studies on more academic subjects. Like Eric's doctoral dissertation, it contained a statistical appendix providing a social breakdown of its subject, in this case based on the card-index files for the 820 members of the National Jazz Federation—only sixty were female, and the rest were an eclectic mix of young white-collar workers and skilled artisans, 'cultural self-made men', often of proletarian origins, revolting against the respectability of their parents' generation and the world of bourgeois high culture.

The meat of the book is in its account of the origins and rise of jazz, starting in New Orleans at the end of the nineteenth century. Although it expressed the discontent of the black and the poor, the marginal and the deviant, Eric saw the cultural revolt of jazz musicians and their public not as the prelude to organised resistance to exploitation, but as a diversion from political action. Eric wrote the book at a time when jazz was going through something of a golden age, with trad jazz (a very British style) being augmented by the more experimental bebop, and the big bands such as Duke Ellington's at the height of their fame. Already, however, there were signs that jazz was being overtaken by the rise of modern pop music, rhythm and blues and then the Beatles, all of which aroused his personal distaste as well as the hostility of the Communist movement. For nearly twenty years jazz musicians were to be eclipsed by what Eric in one of his *New Statesman* pieces called 'bawling juveniles', and when they finally re-emerged, it was to cater for a minority taste in a musical niche, no longer a vehicle of moral and social rebellion against convention and propriety: the 'Swinging Sixties' put paid to all that, and the pop music of the day, he thought, reflected the shallow rebelliousness of the affluent young, not the righteous anger of the dispossessed. Thus, he predicted in a *New Statesman* piece, it would not last: the Beatles would be as quickly forgotten as calypso. Nevertheless, *The Jazz Scene* was reprinted several times,

and quickly established itself as essential reading for jazz aficionados even in the twenty-first century.

The book's focus on the marginal world in which Eric was moving in the second half of the 1950s was also reflected in his more academic work of the period. In some respects this paralleled the research for Eric's articles on the Luddites and his co-authored book on *Captain Swing*, seeking to impart a degree of rationality to rebels previously written off as mindless opponents of progress. But his new research focused not on Britain but on other parts of the world. He still spent a good deal of his vacation time in Paris, staying in the Paris flat of the sociologist Henri Raymond and his wife, the painter Hélène Berghauer, who worked at the Brazilian consulate. 'For some years after the break-up of my first marriage', he remarked later, 'they were the closest thing to a family I had.' But their own marriage broke up, and by the early 1960s Eric's contacts in Paris were becoming more academic as his intellectual reputation spread across the Channel. More important to Eric by this time in any case were Spain and Italy. He had already visited Spain on the proceeds of a winning lottery ticket bought in Paris in 1936, when he managed to slip over the border into an anarchist-held town, curious about the revolutionary aspects of the Spanish Civil War. On that occasion he was quickly apprehended by anarchist guards and escorted back across the frontier at gunpoint. But he had seen enough to become fascinated by Spanish anarchism. Perhaps intending to escape for a time his miserable personal situation back home, he travelled to Barcelona in 1951, after reading the second edition of Gerald Brenan's classic social analysis of the warring parties in the Civil War, *The Spanish Labyrinth*, his curiosity aroused by the launching of a general strike against the dictatorship of General Franco. Eric was depressed by the poverty he saw everywhere, the ubiquitous armed police, and the misery and pessimism of the people, whose language he began to pick up as he went along. He returned with some student friends in 1952, by which time his Spanish was good enough to master some of the literature on the anarchist movement cited by Brenan and interview some villagers in Casas Viejas.

The Spanish anarchists formed the subject of a chapter in his book *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, published by Manchester University Press in 1959 and containing, with additions, a set of lectures he had delivered at Manchester University at the invitation of the anthropologist Max Gluckman. Spanish anarchism, he argued, appealed mainly to impoverished peasants and rural labourers, who turned their wrath on the government, embracing a

rudimentary form of millenarianism in which the violent removal of church and state would leave their villages to rule themselves. Thus anarchism, disorganised, spontaneous and undisciplined, was doomed to failure. Eric qualified this dismissive verdict a decade and a half later in his book *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays* (1973), after the student movement of the 1960s had sparked a revival in the study of the anarchists. He still thought them Quixotic, but he recalled with admiration the élan of the fighters he had seen heading for the front in his brief excursion into northern Spain in 1936, and considered that their spontaneous uprisings were vital in the early stages of revolution. And anarcho-syndicalism, the movement that saw the general strike as the means to overthrow the modern state, was a clearly revolutionary working-class movement that could be a significant, though also sometimes troublesome, ally to the more organised forces of socialism and communism.

The remaining chapters of *Primitive Rebels* were devoted to millenarian movements in Italy, a country he first visited in 1952. The book's seed was sown in conversations with leading Communists, especially Giorgio Napolitano, many decades later President of the Italian Republic, who complained about the millenarian tendencies of some rural party branches. Fascinated, Eric visited the country repeatedly over the next few years, often in the company of friends, using contacts supplied by the Cambridge Marxist economist Piero Sraffa. A mass political movement that had entered government at various times and at various levels, the Italian Communist Party was a genuinely significant political movement with a mass base, unlike its British counterpart, and, also unlike its British counterpart, it proved ideologically imaginative and willing to adapt to changes in society and politics, especially with the development of the flexible ideology of 'Eurocommunism'. 'Unlike in Britain', Eric remarked later, 'in Italy it was still worth joining the Party after 1956', which is what, in effect, he did. All this helped him carry out a good deal of work on Italian sources. His research focused on the Sicilian mafia, which had emerged first in the atmosphere of government corruption after unification in the nineteenth century, resisting the agrarian change pushed by the new state; and the millenarian movement of the Tuscan Messiah Davide Lazzaretti, which lasted into the post-war era despite its leader having been shot by police in 1878. To the Spanish and Italian studies printed in *Primitive Rebels* he added essays on religious sectarianism in industrialising Britain and on the pre-industrial city mob, again mostly in Britain.

Primitive Rebels began with a brief chapter on 'social banditry', which Eric later expanded into a short book, *Bandits*, commissioned by George

Weidenfeld, the Austrian-born founder of Weidenfeld and Nicolson publishers, as part of a series of brief studies on similar kinds of people, such as pirates. Here he expanded his field of vision enormously, taking in banditry across the world from China to Brazil. This was perhaps the most purely enjoyable of Eric's books, kitted out with some fifty striking illustrations, and presenting a range of exotic information, stories, legends and biographies. Nothing like it had been published before. It brought together a mass of familiar and unfamiliar material to advance a coherent set of arguments about the whole phenomenon of banditry. The social bandit, he argued, was a representative of rural society, living on its margins and fighting on its behalf to redistribute wealth, like Robin Hood, or avenging the wrongs done to it, like the Brazilian Lampião, or mounting sporadic and unorganised resistance against the state, like the *haiduks* of south-eastern Europe who fought against their Ottoman rulers in the eighteenth century. The neologism of 'social banditry' fitted neatly into a traditional terminology used by Central European Marxists, deriving ultimately from the emergence of the 'social question', the question of the poverty and conditions of life and work of the nascent industrial working class in the 1840s. 'Social banditry' was thus a pre-organisational, pre-ideological but still in a broad sense political attempt to bring about the liberation not of the industrial classes but of the pre-industrial poor, like the other 'archaic forms of social movement' studied in *Primitive Rebels*.

In this sense, all these phenomena were slotted by Eric into a teleology that culminated in the only real and potentially successful attempt to solve the 'social question', namely the Marxist and eventually the Communist labour 'social movement'. Thus he was not entirely rescuing them from what E. P. Thompson called at around the same time 'the enormous condescension of posterity'. On the other hand, what is striking in terms of the trajectory of Eric's thought is that he had moved by the middle of the 1950s from writing about the rising industrial working class to writing about the dispossessed and the marginalised, from history's eventual victors, as he saw it, to history's undoubted losers. *Primitive Rebels* and *Bandits* thus belonged squarely in the context of the New Left's rediscovery of the marginal and the defeated, and its broadening of the scope of 'social history', originally simply the history of the 'social movement', to include many groups of people in the past who could not be portrayed as making a significant contribution to humanity's future. In this way, these two books had an influence far beyond that of their immediate subjects. Moreover, Eric's sympathy for his subjects shone through the teleological framework. Men such as Francisco Sabaté Llopert, he wrote, a bandit and

resistance fighter in Franco's Spain through to the end of the 1950s, were heroes: tragic, doomed heroes, but heroes none the less. *Bandits*, far more than *Primitive Rebels*, was another book that sparked widespread and prolonged debate in academic circles, mainly on the concept of 'social banditry', and inspired a great deal of fresh research. It was widely criticised for taking too romantic and rosy-hued a view of its subjects: but for Eric, the greatest compliment paid to the book was praise from a group of peasant radicals in Mexico in the 1970s, who wrote to him saying they approved of what he had written. 'It does not prove that the analysis put forward in this book is right', he wrote in the 1999 reprint, 'But it may give readers of the book some confidence that it is more than an exercise in antiquarianism or in academic speculation. Robin Hood, even in his most traditional forms, still means something in today's world, to people like these Mexican peasants. There are many of them. And they should know.'

V

Eric's lifestyle in the late 1950s testified to something of a mid-life crisis, as he moved around the Soho clubs, cut adrift from the close-knit community of the Communist Party and its Historians' Group. In 1956 he had an affair with a friend's wife, Marion Bennathan, a mature psychology student at Birkbeck, who bore him a son, Joshua (Joss) Bennathan (1957–2014); she did not leave her husband, though Eric wanted her to, and the couple brought up the boy as their own, only telling them who his real father was when he was sixteen; he later became a successful theatre director. As the Sixties began, Eric seemed destined to continue along this bohemian path, but in 1961, as he was entering middle age, his life changed dramatically when he met the Viennese-born Marlene Schwarz, a music teacher, sister of the political journalist Walter Schwarz, at a dinner party in St John's Wood. It did not matter to him whether or not she was a Communist (she was not), a mark perhaps of the degree to which he had moved away from the Party by this time. 'I confess', he wrote later, 'that the moment when I recognized that I could envisage a real relationship with someone who was not a potential recruit to the party was the moment I recognized that I was no longer a Communist in the full sense of my youth.' They fell in love. He proposed to her at a Bob Dylan concert, he took her to Cuba with him, and they married in 1962, just before the

Cuban missile crisis. Within a couple of years they had two children, Andy (born 1963), who later became an internet entrepreneur, and Julia (born 1964), who subsequently went into public relations, particularly for the Labour Party and associated causes.

Eric and Marlene bought a house in Clapham which they shared with the playwright Alan Sillitoe and his wife, coexisting by getting an architect to partition it down the middle. Marriage and babies inevitably put an end to the nocturnal lifestyle of 'Francis Newton'. He continued to write short articles for the *New Statesman*, but from this point on he became an habitu  of Ronnie Scott's club, where the focus was more sharply on the music than it had been at the Downbeat. Apart from her professional life as a music teacher, Marlene was, their daughter Julia later wrote in the *Financial Times*, 'my father's unsung muse for 50 years, dealing constantly with demands on his time from students, publishers, editors and broadcasters while acting as his general reader'. She quickly established a reputation for convivial dinner-parties 'at which British intellectuals could find themselves outnumbered by German publishers, Czech historians and Latin American novelists' in what some knew, after the Hobsbawms moved to a substantial Victorian town house in Hampstead, with the heath at the end of the road, as 'north London's most distinctive Central European salon'. He tried to communicate his love of literature to the children, reading aloud to them from *Tintin* when they were small, and giving them books which they were barely able to cope with and found generally mystifying; only in adulthood, as Julia later wrote, did they come to appreciate his towering intellect, encyclopaedic knowledge and worldwide reputation.

In the early 1960s Eric and his family started to spend long periods of the summer in Snowdonia, in a cottage on the estate of the wealthy and eccentric architect Clough Williams-Ellis, who built the Italianate fantasy village of Portmeirion on a south-facing slope going down to the sea near Porthmadog. Other friends, including his brother-in-law Walter Schwarz, Edward Thompson and his wife, fellow-historian Dorothy Thompson, Eric's teacher Munia Postan and his wife, and others, almost all left-wing intellectuals, rented cottages of their own nearby; they became known as 'the Welsh Bloomsbury set'. They went on invigorating walks, visited each other for meals and talked late into the night. They had little contact with the locals, and the emergence of Welsh nationalist extremists' hostility to English second-homers in the 1970s—though they were entirely unrepresentative of the area's inhabitants—soured relations with them until Clough Williams-Ellis died in 1978, after which his grandson, who took

over the estate, refused to renew the leases on the cottages as they fell vacant and peopled them with Welsh native-speakers instead. The Hobsbawms finally left their cottage in 1991—Eric, by now in his mid-seventies, was beginning to find hill-walking rather strenuous—and bought one in the less mountainous territory of Powys, further south.

The new-found stability in his life enabled Eric from the beginning of the 1960s onwards to research and write the trilogy that more than any other of his works made him famous across the world: *The Age of Revolution* (1962), *The Age of Capital* (1975) and *The Age of Empire* (1987): all three drew heavily on his Birkbeck lectures. The trilogy owed its existence to the vision of George Weidenfeld's ambitious project of commissioning a forty-volume *History of Civilization*. Advised by Hugh Trevor-Roper, by the philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin and by the ancient historian Sir Ronald Syme, he commissioned Eric to write *The Age of Revolution*; the two others followed in due course. In view of the fact that Eric was a known Communist this was a bold move by Weidenfeld. It proved to be a canny one. *The Age of Revolution* was a textbook of an entirely new kind, addressed not just to students but also to the general reading public. The standard history surveys of the day and for decades previously were built around political narratives and focused on parties, nation-states, wars and international diplomatic relations; to a degree, indeed, this continues to be the case. Eric broke with this tradition entirely, writing instead a comprehensive thematic survey that gave social, economic and cultural history equal standing with political. Narratives of events were cleverly incorporated into analytical treatments of major developments. Rather than covering Europe state by state, he ranged across the whole continent, penetrating to its obscurest parts, to bring out common features. Moreover, he portrayed Europe in the broader context of global history in a way that was entirely original and had few parallels until the arrival of 'global history' in the early twenty-first century. At the same time, however, these volumes were not intended as histories of the world in their respective periods. They made no attempt to provide a total coverage of all parts of the globe or even of Europe. Rather, they were books with a thesis: their mission was to explain the spread of industrial capitalism across the world, alongside the spread of revolutionary politics, and to elucidate the relationship between the two.

The Age of Revolution 1789–1848 is divided into two main parts—'Developments' and 'Results'. Part I begins with an analytical account of what Eric called 'the dual revolution'—industrial revolution in Britain and political revolution in France; the concept has had a huge influence on

history-writing in the last half-century and more, particularly in Germany, where for example it forms the central binding idea of Hans-Ulrich Wehler's monumental multi-volume *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*. Eric's account of the French Revolution followed the standard Marxist interpretation of the day, dominated by Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul. The Third Estate is equated with the bourgeoisie, a 'coherent social group', driving political change when the French monarchy, plunged into a deep financial crisis following the War of American Independence, lost the support of the feudal aristocracy. The sans-culottes whose street demonstrations and revolts radicalised the revolutionary process were equated with the petty bourgeoisie, fighting back the tides of history; a proletariat would only come into existence in the nineteenth century, with industrialisation. Unlike Lefebvre, Eric did not ascribe any notable role to the peasantry: 'The peasantry never provides a political alternative to anyone; merely, as occasion dictates, an almost irresistible force or an almost immovable object.'

The reductionism of this analysis now strikes one as simplistic, and has long been overtaken by detailed research and reinterpretation of the Revolution. Many years later, marking its bicentenary, Eric returned to these questions in a series of three lectures delivered at Rutgers University, New Jersey. Expanding the lectures into a book, *Echoes of the Marseillaise*, published the following year, Eric mounted an impassioned defence of the traditional Marxist interpretation of the Revolution. The memory of the Revolution, he pointed out, dominated nineteenth-century European politics and was enormously important in the turbulent period of the struggle against fascism in the 1930s and in the politics of the Left in the post-war era. Now, however, he complained, it was being downgraded by the reaction against Communism. Certainly, some of Lefebvre's arguments—for example, that the Revolution was triggered by an 'aristocratic reaction', that counter-revolutionaries were unimportant, or that the regions played no role in events, which were driven forward in Paris alone—had, he admitted, not stood the test of time. 'There was not, in 1789, a self-conscious bourgeois class representing the new realities of economic power.' Yet the Revolution remained enormously significant. What French revisionists were really rejecting, Eric felt, was not 1789 but 1917. Historians such as Mathiez or Lefebvre came from humble backgrounds and retained their roots in an 'unreconstructed, ancient, pretechnological France' that went back to the eighteenth century and beyond. By contrast, the revisionists represented the bourgeois intelligentsia of a new upper middle class created by economic modernisation after 1945.

No wonder they and their supporters in countries such as Britain rejected the ideas of 1789. Nevertheless, Eric conceded some of the revisionists' case in 1989, and in so doing revised the account of the Revolution he had given in 1962.

However, although it was written long before the revisionists got to work and is now outdated in many respects, *The Age of Revolution* is still well worth reading, and there are good reasons why it has remained continuously in print since its first appearance. Spiced with witty and arresting character sketches and assessments of individual figures, it provides endless opportunities for discussion and debate. Eric's ability to provide deft and compelling summaries of complex events remains unsurpassed. The book ranges astonishingly widely across the European continent, and is especially good on the Balkans and East-Central Europe, though it has next to nothing to say about Russia, perhaps because the 'dual revolution' did not reach that far before mid-century. It encompasses other parts of the world too, though perhaps surprisingly it has little to say about the impact of the Latin American national liberations of the 1820s on European politics; its model of Europe's relations with the rest of the world is unequivocally one of stimulus by the former and response by the latter. But its account of the revolutions of 1829–34 is a masterly feat of compression, bringing in almost every part of Europe in which the upheavals took place. *The Age of Revolution* manages this feat partly because it assimilates the revolutions to a straightforward class model that pulls all the disparate factors in the revolutionary process together. This has advantages in terms of presentation but disadvantages in terms of interpretation. 'The revolutionary wave of 1830 . . . marks the definitive defeat of aristocratic by bourgeois power in Western Europe,' Eric wrote, an assessment that surely exaggerated its importance across the Continent, and appeared to be mainly based on events in France. The book reaches probably its furthest extreme of social reductionism in its account of the radical politics of the 1830s and 1840s, as different strands of the revolutionary movement are ascribed to specific social forces in a way that now seems sweepingly over-simplified.

There are many other respects in which *The Age of Revolution* provokes disagreement, from its underplaying of the power wielded during the period by Austria to its neglect of the widespread and continuing importance of serfdom, for which there is no entry in the index. Industrialisation is portrayed in unambiguously negative terms, as little better than slavery, while the emancipatory effects of the decline of servile tenures and obligations in the countryside are entirely ignored. One could

go on: yet the book has stimulating theses and arresting judgements on almost every page, continuing through its coverage of the arts and sciences, religion, and class relations in town and countryside in the second part, under the title 'Results'. In the Romantic age, Eric notes for example, 'the artist . . . stood alone, shouting into the night, uncertain even of an echo. It was only natural that he should turn himself into the genius who created only what was within him.' Yet the Romantics' appeal to the new middle class was limited: 'Science and technology were the muses of the bourgeoisie . . . The social mechanism of bourgeois society was in the profoundest manner cruel, unjust and inhuman.' No wonder rebellion seemed 'not merely positive, but virtually compulsory' for the exploited working classes. Thus the book closes by setting the scene for the European revolutions of 1848, which in turn forms the opening to the second volume in the trilogy, *The Age of Capital 1848–1875*, published in 1975.

In some ways this is less successful than *The Age of Revolution*, largely because while the period 1789–1848 is given meaning by the dominance of the French revolutionary tradition and reactions against it, the period 1848–1875 has little real coherence in itself, and the closing date seems rather arbitrary. Nevertheless, the same virtues as were apparent in the first volume of the trilogy are also present in the second—the epigrammatic power and easy flow of the writing, the pan-European approach, now including Russia, the coherent thematic division into 'developments' and 'results', the arrestingly obscure but always telling examples, the approach to a 'total history' covering every aspect of the period. The global coverage is even wider, necessitating perhaps the shortening of the timespan from sixty years in the first volume of the trilogy to less than half that number in the second as the 'dual revolution' spread to Japan and the Americas. The true subject of the volume, however, is the final triumph of the bourgeoisie, now no longer a revolutionary force, and the beginnings of the challenge mounted to it by organised socialism. Here Eric's verdicts, still overwhelmingly negative, lose some of the savage and cutting tone they had taken on in *The Age of Revolution*, though there are still sharp judgements of individual political figures such as Napoleon III of France, who 'seemed imperial only *ex officio*' and 'turned "Bonapartism" from a major political force in France into a historical anecdote'. Politically, the book is very hard on the liberal revolutionaries of 1848, where we would now recognise some of their achievements in pushing forward the project of a liberal civil society. In describing Bismarck's creation of the German Empire in 1871, its verdict that the national parliament, the Reichstag, was merely 'decorative' is too sweeping. The decline

of liberalism after the economic slump of 1873 was, like its rise in the 1830s, less pan-European than the book appears to claim. And historians would no longer view the Paris Commune of 1871 as a 'workers' revolution', a characterisation that owes more to Marx than to modern historical research. Nevertheless, here too the clarity and acuity of the judgements provides inexhaustible food for argument and debate, and meaty fodder for examiners looking for quotes to ask the candidates to 'discuss'.

With *The Age of Empire 1875–1914* (1987), the trilogy reached a conclusion. In this volume, Eric abandoned the division of the first two into 'developments' and 'results' in favour of a straight run of thirteen chapters. The coverage is still comprehensive, and now, in a belated response to the emergence of women's history in the 1970s, there is a chapter on 'The New Woman', though reviewers noted a certain lack of enthusiasm in the writing here. The theme is now the undermining of liberalism, the growing complacency of the bourgeoisie as it lost its sense of historic mission, the advent of new challenges to bourgeois culture and morality, from Freud to Schoenberg, and the slide of the European world into catastrophe as the First World War approached. Empire lies at the heart of the book. By this time, however, Eric had come a long way from the economic theories put forward by Lenin and Luxemburg, which had, as he acknowledged, been undermined by modern historical research. His account prioritised instead the elements of prestige and Great Power strategy emphasised by the new historians of empire. Although India, he insisted, was vital to Britain as a market for manufactured goods, economic factors did not explain Britain's role in the 'scramble for Africa'. The account of empire given in the third volume of the trilogy is primarily an empirical one. If *The Age of Revolution* was a classic because it was unified by a clear and coherent interpretation, and *The Age of Capital* was held together by its author's manifest distaste for its subject, *The Age of Empire* lacked shape and form because Eric obviously felt ill at ease in a period when according to Marx's predictions the cause of the proletarian revolution should have triumphed but failed to do so.

The three volumes, taken together, put a new concept on the historiographical map: 'the long nineteenth century'. Many textbooks of European history have subsequently followed this periodisation, which has proved to be a durable one. The trilogy is undeniably Marxist in approach, and indeed quotations from Marx, Engels and Lenin occupy far more space than their significance to contemporaries justifies. Yet over time the Marxism of Eric's interpretation became progressively more diluted. The trilogy's coverage of every aspect of the period, with a heavy

emphasis on economic development, social structures and cultural production, also reflects the long-standing influence on Eric of the Annales school with its ambition to write *histoire totale*. The three books are of course works of their time: for example, to the twenty-first-century reader the virtual absence of any treatment of gender and sexuality except in the final volume is very striking. Overwhelmingly, however, the three volumes make an indelible impression on the reader through their combination of staggering erudition with an enviably readable and approachable style. It is impossible within the compass of a few hundred words to convey their many-sided richness. Names, dates, statistics and maps make sure that the student will find them useful, but the general readers to whom they are principally addressed bought copies in their millions, in scores of languages; the three volumes have remained one of the most widely read of all historical works across the globe and have exerted an incalculable influence on generations of readers.

One of the threads running through the trilogy is the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century, a subject with which Marxists, with the possible exception of the Austrian theorist Otto Bauer, have always found it difficult to come to terms. In *The Age of Capital*, Eric argued that nationhood was 'constructed' by educated elites around the creation of a literary language and made the basis for a claim to the parliamentary sovereignty and liberal reforms denied by conglomerate states like the Habsburg Empire. Just as he was bringing his work on *The Age of Empire* to a close, he returned to this theme at much greater length in his six Wiles Lectures, delivered at Queen's University Belfast in 1985 and subsequently reworked. This is primarily a work of deconstruction. Having grown up in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of 1920s Vienna and having experienced extreme nationalism at its most destructive in early 1930s Berlin, Eric was a convinced internationalist who saw it as his mission in these lectures to demonstrate that national identity and national movements were modern constructions based on artificially created myths, rather than (as, for example, Anthony Smith argued) expressions of a long-matured sense of identity stretching far back into the Middle Ages. As usual, drawing his examples from across the whole of Europe, including the Balkans and Scandinavia, and extending his coverage, though rather more thinly, to other parts of the world, he dazzled his listeners and the readers of the book that emerged from the lectures, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (1990), with his analytical power and erudition. Here he dealt in a remarkably brief compass with the emergence of nationalism, the belief that the nation, defined culturally and linguistically,

should be congruent with the state, in a more complex way than he had done in the very brief treatments of the subject in his trilogy. Conceived by the literate, liberal bourgeoisie in the Romantic era, nationalist ideology spread to the masses with the late nineteenth-century democratisation of politics, and reached its destructive apogee in the first half of the twentieth century. The book ended with a prediction that nationalism would decline with the growth of collective institutions such as the European Union, a view falsified to some extent by the dramatic outbreak of nationalist passions after the end of the Cold War, from Scotland to Serbia. Nevertheless, it immediately established itself as one of the key texts in the study of nationalism, to rank alongside other treatments by Gellner, Anderson, Smith and Breuilly.

Contrary to the claims of some critics, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* paid close attention to the role of myths and symbols in the development of nationalist ideologies, as their proponents attempted to construct an imaginary continuity of national identity reaching back far across the ages. In the collection of essays he edited with the Africanist Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, published in the *Past and Present* book series in 1983, Eric sought to apply this insight, gained many years before when he was at King's College, Cambridge, through the realisation that the traditional Christmas Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols was only a decade and a half old, on a wider front. There were lively essays by Hugh Trevor-Roper on the invention of Scottish Highland traditions such as the kilt, by David Cannadine on the invention of the modern public ceremonies of the English monarchy, and by others, including one by Eric himself on the invention of tradition in modern Europe, when events such as Bastille Day in France, Sedan Day in Germany and May Day across the Continent were devised to deal with the new problems of identity and cohesion that came with the advent of mass politics. An invented tradition, Eric noted, was a set of practices designed to inculcate certain values and norms through a repetition that implied continuity with the past. Unlike custom, which could change because it was informal, tradition remained bound to the same set of formal ritual practices once it had been fixed. The symbols, flags, anthems, even language used by the modern invention of the nation-state were classic examples of the genre. Rather than sparking a widespread debate, as some of Eric's earlier ideas had done, however, the idea of the 'invention of tradition' immediately became accepted as a powerful conceptual tool, to be applied by historians and anthropologists to a wide variety of subjects, from the interpretation of sacred texts through the ages to the revival of the formal attire of Hamburg

Senators in the late nineteenth century. The book became an instant classic and has remained in print to the present day.

VI

By the time that these works had been published, Eric had retired from his post at Birkbeck. He enjoyed teaching, and was able to continue doing so for a few months every year from 1984 onwards, until he reached his eightieth birthday in 1997, at the New School for Social Research in New York, a cosmopolitan and unorthodox institution established in 1933 to provide employment for academic exiles from Hitler's Europe. It was during these years that Eric's reputation achieved global prominence. After the success of *The Age of Revolution* he had been asked by the literary agent David Higham to become his client, and this helped Eric get better financial terms for his publications and sell translation rights. His books were taken up in the 1970s by opponents of dictatorships from Spain to Brazil, and increasingly he received invitations to travel all over the world to attend academic conferences, deliver lectures, occupy brief visiting professorships, carry out research and launch foreign-language editions of his books (though none of Eric's books was ever translated into Russian before the fall of Communism, and Eastern European regimes regarded him with suspicion during the Cold War). With a growing reputation came an increasing number of academic honours, from Fellowship of the British Academy (1978) to Fellowship of the Royal Society of Literature (2006), both preceded by Foreign Honorary Membership of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1971. Honorary degrees were showered on him by universities across Britain and the world. He joined that august Pall Mall institution the Athenaeum Club. By this time he was, he said, a 'Tory communist', proud to be a 'member of the official British cultural establishment'. In 2003 he was awarded the Balzan Prize for his work on European history: probably the nearest equivalent the discipline of history has to a Nobel Prize, it came with half a million Swiss francs, 50 per cent of which had to be used to fund a research project (Eric established one at Birkbeck on European reconstruction after the Second World War).

All of this meant that Eric became increasingly well off. He had entered the academic profession when lecturers were relatively well paid, before the global oil crisis of the 1970s took inflation in the UK above 20 per

cent, leading to a dramatic plunge in academic rates of pay relative to the private sector. Luckily for him, this was just when his earnings from books and other publications began to take off. As a consequence, Eric could never remember a time when he was overdrawn. By the end of the 1980s he was making around £100,000 a year from his publications and his lecturing engagements, more than three times the average professorial salary of the day. Yet the memory of the poverty and insecurity of his childhood and adolescence never left him, and he took steps to ensure that his financial affairs were organised on a sound basis. He had engaged an accountant some years before to help him with his tax affairs, and on his advice wrote off between half and two-thirds of this income as foreign travel expenses (this was before the days when universities, charities and research councils provided generous fellowships and grants to cover such expenditure, which Birkbeck did not and could not meet). What remained after tax he put, on his accountant's prompting, into a Swiss bank account, making sure it was invested safely and uncontroversially in Canadian utilities (on which, over the long haul, he eventually made a small loss). He was able to pay off his mortgage on the Hampstead house and support his family, though Marlene continued to work as a music teacher well into the new century. All this meant that he could afford to buy the cottage in Powys he and the family used from the early 1990s onwards.

The new global lifestyle and historical engagement he developed during the last decades of the twentieth century did not mean that Eric loosened his ties with the British Left. On the contrary, indeed, he began to exert on it a greater influence than he had ever previously managed to do. In 1978 he was persuaded to publish his Marx Memorial lecture, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?' in the theoretical journal of the Communist Party, *Marxism Today*, then being taken steadily in a reformist, Eurocommunist direction by its young editor, Martin Jacques, a former university lecturer turned journalist. Already in 1968 Eric had noted in his book *Industry and Empire* the beginnings of the relative decline of the industrial working class in Britain. The British labour movement, born, unlike its Continental counterparts, before the advent of Marxism, was congenitally reformist, and with the growth of working-class affluence in the post-war boom years this was unlikely to change. In his Marx Memorial Lecture he built on these insights to warn that unless it constructed a coalition with other social groups, the Labour Party was heading for long-term trouble. This was far more than a plea for a new version of the Popular Front, which united all the forces on the Marxist left: it was an argument for building a broad anti-Conservative

coalition to include liberals and progressives of every variety. These arguments sparked fierce controversy on the British Left.

The debate gained urgency within a few months of the lecture being delivered. As the Conservatives won the 1979 election under Margaret Thatcher, whose radical neo-liberalism began to roll back the collectivist reforms of the post-war era, Eric initially welcomed the emergence of the Labour Left under Tony Benn. But this leftward drift led to the break-away of a group of moderates to form the new Social Democratic Party in 1981, opening the way to years of Conservative government. When Thatcher mobilised a strident imperialist nationalism in the Falklands War the following year, uniting the labour movement against what he perceived to be the quasi-fascist direction taken by British politics under Thatcher became the paramount priority for Eric, echoing the imperatives of the Popular Front in the struggle against fascism in the 1930s. As disaster followed disaster for the labour movement, culminating in the comprehensive defeat of trade unionism in the miners' strike of 1984–5, Eric was clearer than ever that pinning the hopes of socialism on the industrial working class was no longer realistic. His critics, as the volume on the controversy edited by Martin Jacques and Francis Mulhern, *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (1981) and in Eric's robust responses to them in his *Politics for a Rational Left* (1989) made clear, were in his view refusing to face reality. Sectarianism, as he had thought even in the days of his political formation in adolescence in London, was a recipe for political irrelevance. He poured cold water on the ambitions of the Bennite Left, and spoke out against it in a fringe meeting at the Labour Party conference in 1983, where he supported Neil Kinnock's successful candidacy for the leadership in succession to Michael Foot. In these controversies, the fact that a well-known left-wing intellectual such as Eric took the position that he did was a significant factor in the triumph of the moderates, and *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* became for a time the political bible of Kinnock and his supporters.

It was as much in recognition of the role that Eric played in the restoration of the Labour Party as a serious electoral force, as well as to honour his eminence as a historian, that Tony Blair, on coming to power in 1997, immediately recommended him for a knighthood. Knowing that this might prove difficult for him to accept, however, the Prime Minister also held out to him the alternative of appointment as a Companion of Honour, an order established in 1917 to recognise the services in Britain and the Commonwealth of fifty (later sixty-five) individuals who had made distinguished contributions to the arts, sciences, politics, industry or

religion. Eric was impressed by the fact that the left-wing trade unionist and former fighter in the International Brigade during the Spanish Civil War, Jack Jones, had accepted a CH. 'I couldn't take the K', Eric said to me at the time: 'I could never have looked my old comrades in the face again. CH is for the awkward squad. Any order that has Jack Jones in it is good enough for me, what?' (this drawling Woosterish inflexion, omitting to pronounce the final 't', was one of the very few idiosyncrasies of Eric's use of English, along with the way he said 'particularly'—*pah-tic-u-lah-ly*—every syllable precisely articulated).

Won over, as so many were in the heady moment of victory, by the promise of a return to the post-war consensus in 1997, Eric soon became disillusioned as the government of Tony Blair retained the essentials of Thatcherite neo-liberalism, revealing 'New Labour' to be 'Thatcherism in trousers'. That this was a result of the destruction of the Labour Left to which he had himself contributed he did not want to acknowledge. By this time too, the Communist movement to which Eric had in one way or another devoted so much of his life had also effectively ceased to exist. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, 200 years after the French Revolution, triggered a political cataclysm of similar proportions, as Communist regimes collapsed in one country after another, and by 1991, when the Soviet Union itself had disappeared as a political entity along with its Communist Party, the British Communists dissolved themselves as well. Eric had remained formally a member till the very end, but during the 1990s he conceded that in backing Communism he had backed a losing cause, though in his 1993 Creighton Lecture to the University of London he added the qualification that 'losers often make the best historians'. From this point onwards, he spent increasing amounts of time looking back over the events and currents of his own life, as he approached his eighties. He decided to add a fourth volume to his nineteenth-century trilogy, taking the story up to the present. George Weidenfeld, publisher of the first three volumes, counselled against it, so the book was published by Michael Joseph. The resulting work, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991*, appeared in 1994, when Eric was seventy-six. While Eric was familiar with the period in a very personal way, having lived through all but three years of it, he also had to cope with the fact that it now looked very different retrospectively than it had in the decades when Communism was still a force to be reckoned with. His struggle to come to terms with this new perspective, as someone who had supported the cause of Communism, for good or ill, for almost his entire life, is one of the many aspects of the book that give it an enduring fascination.

Age of Extremes quickly became Eric's most successful publication. It was translated into more than fifty languages and was a worldwide best-seller, bought in its millions by readers who wanted to make sense of the epoch that had clearly just come to an end and collect their thoughts about the new century just over the horizon. The book's appeal lay first in the fact that with his unrivalled capacity for developing large and coherent conceptual frameworks, Eric identified the period from the outbreak of the First World War to the fall of Communism as a distinctive era in its own right, 'the short twentieth century', dominated by the conflict between capitalism and socialism. The new volume could not be, of course, an account of the impact of the 'dual revolution' as his nineteenth-century volumes were, and without this narrowing focus, it was perhaps inevitable that the book, at 626 pages, was considerably longer than any of the earlier volumes in the series; instead, it was a global history organised mainly on chronological lines and divided into three separate periods, 'the age of catastrophe' from 1914 to 1945, 'the golden age' from 1945 to the world economic crisis of 1973, and 'the landslide', taking the story up to 1991. Within these periods the book replicated the earlier volumes' encyclopaedic coverage, ranging from economic and social change to the development of the sciences, culture and the arts; but it was held together far more by a central narrative spine of political history than they were. Yet Eric's dazzling erudition moved with seeming effortlessness across a staggering number of themes, providing all kinds of novel and arresting information as it went along. It was hardly surprising that the book aroused widespread and sometimes impassioned debate.

Age of Extremes was notable indeed for the number of lengthy and considered reviews it garnered, reviews that differed strikingly in their assessments of the book and its author.¹ Overwhelmingly the commentators recognised its brilliance and readability, and in raising objections to its arguments they paid tribute to the provocative nature of its theses. The Palestinian literary theorist Edward Said, in a generally positive and admiring review, criticised the dismissive tone of the book's account of the rise of politicised religion, its jaundiced view of modernism and post-modernism in the arts, its Eurocentrism and the deep pessimism of its conclusion. From a different political standpoint the American historian Eugene D. Genovese thought the book was right to dispense with the old Communist view that Nazism was the creature of big business, noting the

¹A complete listing of all reviews of Hobsbawm's books is in the bibliography assembled by Keith McClelland referred to at the end of this memoir.

breadth of its social basis. 'On one matter after another', he noted, 'Hobsbawm, who remains devoted to the left, destroys its pet notions. But then he has been doing so all his life.' Thus he dismissed the customary left-wing designation of dictators like Franco and Pinochet as fascists, just as in the 1970s he had warned the American left not to put its faith in Third World Revolutions as a model for the West. 'Hobsbawm's heart remains with the radical left, but his formidable head demolishes its every shibboleth.'

From the political Right came criticism of his failure to condemn Communism with the unconditional vehemence now considered obligatory in the triumphalist atmosphere that followed its collapse. A particularly sour and ungenerous review came from the American historian Walter McDougall, a Vietnam veteran who had charted what he described as the USA's championing of freedom and democracy as 'the central event of the past four hundred years'. McDougall dismissed Eric as 'a dreary old British Marxist' whose new book was 'by his own admission ignorant, impressionistic, and prejudiced', presenting 'a bewildering mass of unproven assertions pronounced, as it were, *ex cathedra*'. The book's 'true project', McDougall charged, was to rehabilitate Leninism. Everywhere he saw Communist bias, from the book's exiguous treatment of the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 and the Bolshevik 'Red Terror' of 1918–21, both of which fell into a 'memory hole', to its pillorying of the USA as responsible for the Cold War. McDougall's invective gave a foretaste of the vitriol that the Right was to pour over Eric's corpse after his death. Yet while such reviewers condemned Eric as an unrepentant Communist, others, notably the Harvard-based historian of France, Stanley Hoffmann, concluded that the book showed that since the emergence of new forms of social and political radicalism in the late Sixties Eric had become a political and cultural conservative. There was indeed in the Communist tradition a strong dose of cultural conservatism and a prioritising of order and discipline that made it deeply suspicious of the anarchism and spontaneity of 1968 and all that followed, as Eric's own writings on the student movement showed.

Many reviewers were taken aback by the pessimism of the book's conclusion. The same gloom radiated out from a series of interviews conducted with Eric, in Italian, by the journalist Antonio Polito, in 1999, published in English the following year as *The New Century*, where he castigated the growth of social inequality, the weakness of global institutions, the decline of political ideology, the degradation of the environment, the disorientation of the Left and much more besides. The future of

the public sphere, he concluded, 'was obscure. That is why, at the end of the century, I cannot look to the future with great optimism.' A large part of the book was autobiographical, no doubt because he had already begun to research and write his own memoirs, published in 2002 as *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life*—the title being an allusion to the supposed Chinese curse, 'may you live in interesting times' (a saying first reported by the British ambassador to China in the 1930s but not documented in any older sources either in China or anywhere else). The book offered scintillating insights into the events Eric had lived through, told with an appealing mixture of self-detachment and irony. It was not, he said in the preface, a 'kiss-and-tell' story about his private life, but an account of his life in politics and history. At 450 pages it is a substantial volume, and for the first two-thirds or so it pulls the reader along with a strong narrative drive, before dissipating the momentum in a country-by-country account of the various parts of the world with which he was familiar.

Interesting Times skates over much of the detail of Eric's private and interior life: the 650 or so closely handwritten pages of the diary he kept, with intervals, in German, from 1934 to 1951 are used, for instance, mainly for reference, with only a handful of quotations appearing in print, though he did re-read them in preparation for the book—and yet, this is the section of *Interesting Times* where he reveals most about himself, before turning to a more impersonal tone once he gets to Cambridge: particularly in his discussion of his career as a Communist, as Perry Anderson pointed out in a perceptive review, 'we' tends to replace 'I'. In similar vein, Tony Judt categorised Eric as a romantic, whose nostalgia for the élan of the Communist movement in Weimar Berlin coloured all his writing on Communism, even on the drearily conformist GDR. Judt admired Eric's consistency in remaining in the Party, but this did not, he thought, come without a cost. 'The most obvious damage is to his prose. Whenever Hobsbawm enters a politically sensitive zone, he retreats into hooded, wooden language, redolent of Party-speak.' And, Judt went on, his commitment also damaged Eric's historical judgement. For instance, he referred to Khrushchev's 1956 speech as 'the brutally ruthless denunciation of Stalin's misdeeds', but called those misdeeds neither brutal nor ruthless themselves. Acknowledging Communism's mistakes was one thing, but, Judt charged, 'Hobsbawm refuses to stare evil in the face and call it by its name; he never engages the moral as well as the political heritage of Stalin and his works.' But moral denunciation is not the function or purpose of the historian, whose aim, Eric rightly argued, should

be above all to understand. There was something of the witch-hunt about Judt's shrill exhortations to Eric to recant or be damned. In both *Age of Extremes* and *Interesting Times* we have the gripping and moving sight of a lifelong Communist struggling in old age to come to terms not only with the political failure of the cause to which he had devoted the best part of his life, but also to reach some understanding of why it had failed, and how much damage it had done. It should not be surprising that the struggle only met with partial success.

One of the most engrossing features of *Interesting Times* is its inclusion of deft and often entertaining pen-portraits of the many people, mainly though not exclusively on the Left, whom Eric got to know in his long life. It is noticeable that in describing leading figures of the New Left such as Edward Thompson and Raphael Samuel, he focused on what he saw as their self-indulgence and lack of self-discipline. Why, for instance, did he spend so much time describing the comically impractical Samuel's quixotic project, the Parisian Coffee house in Soho, and so little in analysing the enormously influential History Workshop movement he founded and led? Perhaps he considered the History Workshop as sentimental and antiquarian; certainly he must have resented the obloquy its practitioners brought upon the article he published in *History Workshop Journal* on women in socialist iconography, a piece that once more pointed to his inability to come to terms with the feminist movement. In discounting the influence of the New Left, Eric was implicitly defending his decision to stay in the Party, but the result was that he seriously underestimated its influence on younger generations of British students and intellectuals. These views also emerged in *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion, and Jazz*, where Eric reprinted some of the essays that had already appeared in earlier collections and added some new ones. The collection demonstrated yet again Eric's alienation from the student rebellion of 1968, his disapproval of the preoccupation of young radicals with sex and his rejection of the development of popular culture since the advent of the Beatles. In a further collection, *Globalisation, Democracy and Terrorism* (2007), he printed more recent work, mostly unpublished lectures, denouncing globalisation not merely because it increased inequality but also because, with its misleading rhetoric of human rights and democratisation, it too often acted as a cloak for the 'megalomania' of American foreign policy not only under George W. Bush but also under Bill Clinton.

These essay collections, which appeared at frequent intervals until his death, showed that Eric's intellectual sharpness was undiminished as he moved into his nineties. But *Interesting Times*, published when he was

eighty-five, was his last book. 'I can't write books any more', he told me at the time: 'I don't have the intellectual stamina.' Perhaps he did, but, stamina or not, it is difficult to retain the long-term perspective needed to research and write a lengthy book, a project that usually takes five years or more, when you are approaching ninety years of age. Nevertheless, he continued to pour out a stream of essays, lectures and reviews that would be impressive in a scholar sixty years younger. In 2011, prompted by the deep crisis of the European and world economy that had begun with the 'credit crunch' of 2009, Eric published *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism*, in which he restated his faith in Marxism and asserted its relevance at a time of renewed capitalist crisis. The essays reprinted here are a world removed from the doctrinal sectarianism that has disfigured so much writing on Marxist theory over the decades. As Tony Judt once remarked, Eric had 'a very English unconcern with continental-style, intra-Marxist debates and theory, to which he pays little attention in all of his writings'. Much of the substance of the book is didactic and expository. A substantial part of it reproduces three pieces he had written in the 1960s for *The History of Marxism*, an introductory textbook he had edited and which had originally appeared in Italian. This was bolstered by accounts of *The Communist Manifesto* and Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Particularly important on its first appearance in 1964 had been his forty-page introduction, also reprinted in the new collection, to extracts from the *Grundrisse*, the vast, inchoate manuscript composed by Marx in the late 1850s, just before he began work on *Das Kapital*. The extracts, published in German in 1952 and translated two years later under the title *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* by Jack Cohen with Eric's introduction, contributed to the discovery of a more complex and nuanced Marx than had been evident in the mainstream Marxist tradition, and established the relevance of his ideas to the politics of liberation in the 'Third World'; or, at least, so was the intention of the official Party organ that initially produced it.

The only post-Marxian writer Eric considered in the volume, apart from Engels, was the Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci, discussed in essays dating from 1982 and 1995, whose influence was perhaps at its height in the 1970s: we owe to him above all others the now commonplace distinction between 'political society' and 'civil society', the discrediting of economic determinism on the Left and the crucial concept of 'hegemony', an indirect form of government in which the ruling class's ideas and assumptions are internalised by the ruled. Like Gramsci's Marxism, Eric's too was far removed from the dogmas of Stalinist orthodoxy. He did not

hold that all societies were on a unilinear trajectory from feudalism through capitalism to socialism. He did not read back class-consciousness into the pre-industrial world. He conceded that socialist revolutions had occurred in backward and marginal countries, while the strength of the bourgeoisie and the weakness of the proletariat in and after the 1848 revolutions led to a situation in which non-revolutionary alternatives prevailed as industrial society grew more advanced. In Britain the proletariat was a subaltern stratum that never challenged the hegemony of the bourgeoisie. The state, as Marx and Engels had conceded in their writings on Napoleon III and the Second Empire, could gain a relative independence that allowed it to be the arbiter of sectional interests. From early on, Eric had followed Gramsci in using the concept of hegemony to denote the indirect and sometimes limited nature of bourgeois domination, rather than the vulgar-Marxist line of reducing everything to the deliberate operation of class interest and class rule. With the credit crunch and economic recession that began in 2009, Eric declared finally, the time had come to take Marx seriously again. But the fact was that the overall debate on the causes and consequences of the crisis, and the discussion of possible solutions to it made little reference to Marx or Marxism in practice and was centred almost entirely on the all-conquering doctrines of economic neo-liberalism. *How to Change the World* was not really an apposite title after all: the essays collected in the book were more a requiem to an ideology whose time had passed than a recipe for political action to shape the future.

VII

Eric had always drawn his cultural attitudes primarily from the Central European tradition of high culture in which he had grown up. His surveys of nineteenth- and twentieth-century history contain little on popular culture, least of all on the folk cultures to which the great mass of Europeans were bound for most of the period. He repeatedly made his distaste for pop music and post-1968 youth culture apparent. His hostility to the cultural avant-garde of the modern age, indeed to modernism in general, was undisguised. Although in his writings he dismissed Classical music as the endless, barren repetition of the familiar, and modern music as incomprehensible and irrelevant, in fact he possessed a substantial collection of recordings of the Classical repertoire and went to the opera

and to concerts. The visual arts continued to be an inspiration throughout his life, ever since as a teenager he had explored the great museums and galleries of London. He was an avid reader of fiction in a variety of languages. His devotion to all aspects of high culture was lifelong, though at times he did his best to keep it private.

In his last phase of writing, Eric returned not merely to the cultural world of his youth, but also to his fascination with its Jewish heritage. His posthumously published *Fractured Times: Culture and Society in the 20th Century* (2013), which he put together and prepared for publication in the final months of his life, presented a collection of essays and lectures nearly all of which he had composed since the turn of the century. He included in it a number of deeply knowledgeable and sympathetic surveys of Jewish, and especially German-Jewish bourgeois culture, particularly its novelists and writers. The Austrian satirist Karl Kraus takes pride of place here, but many others feature too, as Eric demonstrated yet again his encyclopaedic knowledge. Undermined by democratisation, technological change and the advent of consumerism, bourgeois culture was also destroyed by Hitler's extermination of the Jews who played such a central part in its creation in the course of their political and social emancipation in the nineteenth century. This book too was thus in large part a requiem for a vanished world. A passionate anti-Zionist, Eric was perhaps for much of his life in Isaac Deutscher's terms a 'non-Jewish Jew'. Deutscher observed among other things that this meant being 'a Jew by force of my unconditional solidarity with the persecuted and exterminated', a remark that surely applied to Eric too.

For some time in the 1960s Eric associated closely in London with committedly Jewish leftists such as Chimen Abramsky, though their relationship broke down when Abramsky drifted towards a more religious form of Jewish identity (Eric was always determinedly secular). Thus he never escaped his Jewish heritage, and as he entered extreme old age, it seems to have become more important to him. Mentally undiminished, writing almost to the end, he became increasingly physically frail with the effects of a slow-acting form of leukaemia, and after being hospitalised more than once, he died of pneumonia in hospital on 1 October 2012. At his funeral, Mozart was played followed by music from a jazz band, and the guests filed past his coffin to the strains of the *Internationale*. As his ashes were laid to rest in a plot in Highgate Cemetery (just to the right of Karl Marx, as his son-in-law pointed out), his friend the American political scientist Ira Katznelson said the *kaddish*, the Jewish prayer for

the dead, over his grave, in honour of his mother, who had told him all those years ago never to forget that he was Jewish.

Eric's death was reported all over the world, in many countries in the main television news bulletin of the day. He had for some time not only been a respected public intellectual in Britain, but also the world's most famous and widely read historian. Newspapers and periodicals everywhere paid tribute to him in lengthy articles. Marlene and the family received over a thousand messages of condolence. The media concentrated on his lifelong Marxism and his unrepentant allegiance to Communism, and radio and television discussions in particular did so to the virtual exclusion of his historical works. A tiny handful of unrepentant Cold War warriors poured vitriol over his grave. The writer A. N. Wilson claimed, without any evidence at all, that he had 'hated Britain' and suggested he might have been a Soviet spy. His books were little more than propaganda and would not be read in the future. His reputation would 'sink without trace'. Wilson was echoed by another *Daily Mail* writer, the right-wing military historian and journalist Nigel Jones, who also accused not only Eric but also those who admired him (including, by name, myself) of 'hating Britain'. Tributes from serious historians focused rightly on his history books and on the contributions he had made to historical understanding. These included figures on the Right as well as the Left, notably Niall Ferguson, who declared himself to have been Eric's friend despite their ideological differences. 'Unlike many continental intellectuals of the left,' Ferguson wrote, 'Hobsbawm the historian was never a slave to Marxist-Leninist doctrine. His best work was characterised by a remarkable breadth and depth of knowledge, elegant analytical clarity, empathy with the "little man" and a love of the telling detail.' His four 'Age of' books were, he said, one of the truly great historical works of the twentieth century.

What made Eric Hobsbawm a great historian? It was not archival research or empirical discovery, important though these achievements can be for the profession. It was above all his ability to see the big picture, to organise and frame his subjects, to devise arresting new concepts, to excite major historical debates, to combine analysis and interpretation with striking and appropriate examples often chosen from obscure yet telling material. He wrote brilliantly, often with memorable and lapidary epigrammatic force. There are no dreary passages of factual exposition in his works: everything is subjected constantly to the relentless questioning and probing of the historian, whose drive to explain and assess was always present no matter what the subject. Eric's own views of the discipline he

chose to practise, collected in a volume of essays *On History*, published in 1997, and in his chapter on historians in *Interesting Times*, revealed him to be a defender of the Annales school's central tenet, that history is a social science. Indeed, one critic described him as more an anthropologist than an historian. In the face of postmodernist hyper-relativism he declared roundly 'that what historians investigate is real'. In his most influential essay on the study of his subject, 'From Social History to the History of Society', published in 1970, he charted, analysed and supported the transition from the traditional historical concerns of the labour historian to the far broader approach that was just beginning to be adopted by younger historians at the time he was writing. He believed that social history was not another sub-specialism of the discipline, but a way of approaching the whole of the past. An economic framework was essential, but so too was the inclusion of politics, even if in a far broader way than the 'high political' history still practised in some quarters under the balefully constricting influence of Sir Lewis Namier. 'It is a good moment to be a social historian,' he concluded. For the generation of historians born immediately after the war, this was a clarion call and an inspiration. Here too, Eric believed in a kind of popular front of progressive historians, encompassing both Marxists and modernising social scientists of other political and methodological persuasions.

Thus while there was never, as he remarked in a conference held at Birkbeck to mark his eightieth birthday, such a thing as 'Hobsbawmism' or such people as 'Hobsbawmians', there was, as Tony Judt noted, a 'Hobsbawm generation', consisting above all of baby-boomers such as himself, who read everything Eric wrote, debated it, absorbed it, quarrelled with it and profited from it. Although he supervised a fair number of doctoral students, they never formed a school, unlike, say, the pupils of his exact contemporary the French Revolution specialist Richard Cobb, whose students extended the history of the years from 1789 to 1794 from Paris to the provinces under their master's guidance. Although Eric received two *Festschriften*, neither of them was cast in the conventional mould of the genre as a collection of essays written by the dedicatee's present and former pupils. Indeed, in both cases the selection of contributors is eclectic and borders on the arbitrary, united only by their admiration for the dedicatee, and neither of the two collections achieves any real kind of intellectual consistency. The editors of both his *Festschriften* note, of course, that his influence has been mainly on Marxist historians and historians on the Left, but as Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones remarked, in the course of his work 'certain ideas or areas of questioning

recognisably Marxist in inspiration have lost their sectarian qualities and have become almost the “common sense” of these subjects’. Thus it is difficult to pin down his influence because while it has been very wide, it has also been very diffuse and many-sided. Moreover, Eric’s work did not derive from any particular school, but was forged by himself from a wide variety of influences, from the Cambridge economic historians of the 1930s to the *Annales*, from the Communist economist Maurice Dobb to Italian Marxists such as Gramsci in the 1950s. His ‘unusual combination of theoretical clarity, large generalising capacity and an uncanny eye for suggestive detail’, as the American historian Eugene D. Genovese noted, combined with his staggering breadth of reference across countries, continents and centuries, drawing on sources in a wide variety of languages, made his example difficult if not impossible to follow. All these are reasons why his books and essays are still read and debated today, and will continue to be read and debated long into the future.

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Fellow of the Academy

Note. I am grateful to Mrs Marlene Hobsbawm and to Eric Hobsbawm’s Literary Executors, Professor Chris Wrigley and Mr Bruce Hunter, for granting access to his papers, most of which are now in the Modern Records Centre at Warwick University, for supplying information, and, along with Sir Roderick Floud FBA, Sir Keith Thomas FBA and Professor Logie Barrow, for commenting helpfully on the first draft of this Memoir. I am greatly indebted to the magnificently comprehensive and continually updated bibliography of Eric Hobsbawm’s works, together with all reviews of them, comments and other relevant material, compiled by Keith McClelland (and available at http://www.academia.edu/1372593/Bibliography_of_the_Writings_of_Eric_Hobsbawm), and to Victoria Harris, Daniel Cowling and Mary-Ann Middelkoop for help with the research. I also profited greatly from the various conferences and memorial events held in the months after Eric’s death, and of course from a close reading of Eric’s remarkable autobiography, *Interesting Times*. Many other people have helped with references, discussions and suggestions. Full source references will be provided in the full-length biography which I have currently under preparation. Those wishing to follow up references to books, articles and reviews cited in this Memoir before the biography becomes available can easily access them on the Internet.

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