



CHRISTOPHER HILL

# John Edward Christopher Hill

## 1912–2003

CHRISTOPHER HILL was a great historian. People who question this can point to his apparent limitations. Nearly all his huge output was on the seventeenth-century ‘English Revolution’ and its origins. He seldom used manuscript records or original letters. He did not write much straight narrative. He said little about art or music or agriculture to add to his huge knowledge of literature. More seriously it was claimed that his Marxism, even when mellowed, led him to ignore evidence that did not support it. The ‘bourgeois revolution’ was a theme he never quite discarded but its meaning changed uneasily. None of this, even so far as it was valid, diminished his great achievement—to show, largely from one period and country, the role of historical studies in the sum of human knowledge. In at least twenty books and innumerable articles he made two vital additions to the old accounts of his chosen time: the impact of popular movements and the immense range of ideas written and spoken. No seventeenth-century author escaped him. No group and no person was insignificant. His regular technique was to combine close study of an individual, great or obscure, with a forthright account of the social and economic setting. His style was lucid, uncomplicated, enthusiastic. He showed that it was possible for a great historian to have a most pleasing personality, generous and tolerant, warm and humorous. Belief in equality was as essential in his life as in his scholarship even when he rose to a position of power.

John Edward Christopher Hill was born near York on 6 February 1912. His father, Edward Harold Hill, was a prosperous solicitor and a devout Wesleyan Methodist. He is not remembered as forbidding or

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severe, rather as ‘shy and reserved’. He had one great enjoyment—cycling. Christopher’s mother, Janet Augusta Hill, was more relaxed and lively. A great-uncle, David Hill, had been a well-known missionary in China. Together the Hill parents were ‘kindly, genial, hospitable and benevolent’. Their life was simple but far from austere. They had a large, mostly late Victorian, house staffed by a gardener, a cook and a live-in maid. There was a large library. Its three or four thousand books included ‘most of the classics of history, English and philosophy’. Christopher had unrestricted access to it, though bible-reading was of course compulsory. On Sundays life became strictly regulated. The whole family twice rode their bicycles to the Centenary Chapel in York and afterwards discussed the sermons together. Occasionally Christopher had to follow his father’s example in cycling round the villages delivering leaflets and collecting money. Methodism in practice took the form mainly of devotion to hard work and personal morality. Drink and any hint of sexual interest outside marriage were sin. A misdeed by Christopher after his first term at Oxford was to take a girl to the theatre. She was his sister, but that made it worse. Their father was aghast, though there were ‘tense silences rather than shouted anger’.<sup>1</sup>

St Peter’s School in York, where Christopher was first a day-scholar and later a boarder, evidently developed and recognised his brilliance. He might well have gone, as several of the family had, to Cambridge. Two Balliol history tutors, Vivian Galbraith and Kenneth Bell, were so impressed by reports of his quality that they drove to York to persuade his parents that Balliol must have him. By his own account he did not feel at all like a star applicant. He was ‘a very shy, callow and unsophisticated boy’ who after his interview sat despondently in a cold Balliol room feeling that he had failed. But two tutors ‘burst in unannounced’ and staged an argument between themselves in the hope of provoking him to join in. ‘What good’, said Galbraith, ‘ever came out of the Church of England?’ Hill, in a thin small voice, at last intervened with one word: ‘Swift’. He was led to ‘improvise a defence of Swift’.<sup>2</sup> Any lingering doubts disappeared: Hill was awarded the main entrance scholarship. That was in

<sup>1</sup> Penelope Corfield, ‘“We are all one in the Eyes of the Lord”: Christopher Hill and the Historical Meanings of Radical Religion’, *History Workshop Journal*, 58 (Autumn 2004), 113–15. Further information on Hill’s early life has been generously supplied by Professor Corfield and her mother, Christopher’s younger sister. See also Samuel H. Beer in Donald Pennington and Keith Thomas (eds.), *Puritans and Revolutionaries* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 1–4.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Hill, ‘Historic Passions: a First-Class Performer’, *History Workshop Journal*, 42 (1996), 207–9.

December 1930 and as the academic year would not begin until October there were months to wait. It was probably then that he had a long visit to Freiburg. This was his first escape from the parental home—though his mother went out to see him—and he must have made friends whose opinions were very different from those he had met in the Methodist chapel or the conservative school.

Hill's undergraduate career was as distinguished as expected. Vivian Galbraith was the tutor who appreciated 'how bored I was by the way some parts of history were being taught' and encouraged him 'to combine English literature and history'. He won the University's Lothian Prize with an essay not on his future field but on the French Jesuits of Port Royal. Some of his contemporaries remembered him for a different reason: he scored a decisive try that won the rugby cup for Balliol. ('Heartiness', he once remarked, 'has always been a skeleton in my cupboard.') His brilliant first-class degree was followed by a Goldsmiths' Senior Studentship and, in November 1934, a fellowship at All Souls. Its residence requirements were lax and with the guidance of another Balliol tutor, Humphrey Sumner, Hill decided on a prolonged visit to Russia. He returned with a critical admiration for the Soviet system, a fluent knowledge of Russian and a grasp of Russian historical scholarship that few western academics could have claimed.

Conversion to Marxism was not a sudden event. Early in his undergraduate career he had to admit to his parents that he was now an agnostic, causing them inescapable distress. He was not exceptional in this. Raphael Samuel found other British Marxists, including E. P. Thompson, with a Methodist education. The non-conformist strand in British socialism could be traced back to its earliest days. A very different writer, D. H. Lawrence, described in 1931 how being soaked in the Bible from infancy had made him, like many of his generation, dislike and resent it.<sup>3</sup> Hill did not openly resent. How completely he rejected his Methodist past is a question hidden in the rest of his life. In 1965 his *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* was dedicated to T. S. Gregory, acknowledging 'a thirty-five year old debt which can never be repaid'. Gregory had been a fiery Methodist preacher in Yorkshire and was, Hill wrote, the first person who showed him that 'all accepted truths, just because they are accepted, tend to become lies'. Gregory became a Roman Catholic, Hill a Marxist. Asking Hill about the origins of his Marxism allowed him to

<sup>3</sup> Raphael Samuel, 'The British Marxist Historians', *New Left Review*, 120 (1980), 41–5. D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse* (London, 1931), p. 3.

enjoy giving typically enigmatic replies, such as ‘through reading the metaphysical poets’.<sup>4</sup> He certainly read far more widely than most undergraduates. G. D. H. Cole’s Left Book Club discussion group put him in touch with the socialist writing of the 1930s. A. D. Lindsay as Master, a Scottish Calvinist and one-time member of the Independent Labour Party, was not then hostile to extreme opinions. But Hill, with his career still uncertain, did not assert his politics too forcibly. During his undergraduate years he joined the Communist Party. There was nothing deeply secret about that. Denis Healey, briefly a member himself, reckoned that by 1939 there were about two hundred undergraduate members in Oxford. ‘Not many outstanding undergraduates on the left did not join the Communist Party.’ Many more belonged to the predominantly Marxist Labour Club.<sup>5</sup>

Hill could perhaps, on his return from Russia, have found a lasting Oxford fellowship; but Maurice Powicke, after many years at Manchester, recommended a spell at a provincial university. Accordingly in 1936 Hill became an assistant lecturer at Cardiff. Not all his Welsh superiors welcomed the appointment of this product of Balliol and All Souls, especially when he developed a more informal relationship with students than was customary. His lectures on the Reformation were noticeably lacking in Christian belief. Instead of attending chapel, he addressed meetings of the Left Book Club. His application to join the International Brigade fighting in the Spanish Civil War was rejected; but he devoted great energy to helping Basque refugees, even inviting some to York. He lodged on a housing estate with a family reputed to be communist. Gradually his success in teaching and his tactful charm broke down the suspicions. Dorothy Marshall and eventually the Principal, Sir Frederick Rees, were among those who saw him as an outstanding member of the academic community.<sup>6</sup>

In 1938 Balliol was able to bring Hill back as fellow and tutor in history. For the next two years he was, with Richard Southern, Humphrey Sumner, Kenneth Bell and A. B. Rodger, one of an aptly varied group of Modern History teachers. His published work was not at first extensive. Two articles appeared in his first year. ‘The 250th anniversary of the “Glorious Revolution”’ demolished the accepted idea that 1688 was the great turning-point in English history, of which the Civil War and

<sup>4</sup> Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1965), p. ix; Penelope Corfield, *History Workshop Journal*, 58, 116.

<sup>5</sup> Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London, 1989), p. 36 in Penguin edn.

<sup>6</sup> Gwendolyn B. Whale in Pennington and Thomas (eds.), *Puritans and Revolutionaries*, pp. 4–6.

Interregnum were unsuccessful precursors. The article would have made excellent reading for undergraduates: but it was in the *Communist International*, 16 (November 1938) under the pseudonym C. E. Gore. Rodney Hilton later recognised in it the characteristics of future Hill writing: it was 'incisive, witty, densely packed with suggestive lines of thought . . . and refreshingly free from jargon'.<sup>7</sup> Then there came a contribution to the *Economic History Review*, a periodical that was safely academic but more enterprising then than later. Under the title 'Soviet Interpretations of the English Interregnum', Hill was able to introduce in a detached form what became some essentials of his own view. Soviet historians had the advantage of familiarity with a social order in some ways like that of seventeenth-century England. Most saw the civil war as a conflict of classes. The old landed aristocracy were in possession; attack came from 'the bourgeoisie' plus the 'progressive country gentry' behind whom stood a peasantry and in London the small masters. The later split between presbyterians and independents was a struggle between commercial and industrial capital. The thorough research of Arkhangelsky led to a less crude analysis that found possession and exploitation of the land behind each of the conflicts.<sup>8</sup>

In June 1940 Hill entered the army. According to an unconfirmed report his nominal attachment to the Field Security Police concealed a scheme to include him in an abortive plan to drop agents into the Baltic states. In 1942, having reached the rank of Major, he was seconded to the research department of the Foreign Office and soon transferred to the Northern Department that handled relations with the USSR. In May 1944 the Foreign Office set up a not very successful Committee on Russian Studies that was to consider the facilities for studying every aspect of Russian culture and institutions. Hill became secretary of one of its sub-committees, on teaching facilities. Forty years later his work at the Foreign Office was the subject of a section in the book by Anthony Glees, *Secrets of the Service*. It suggested, with few unqualified factual allegations, that Hill had concealed his membership of the Communist Party (though the Foreign Office and Intelligence authorities can hardly have been so stupid as not to know this) and had used his position to further his own friendly relationships with Russia. The story, with its numerous obvious errors, was comprehensively demolished by John Saville in

<sup>7</sup> Pennington and Thomas (eds.), *Puritans and Revolutionaries*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>8</sup> Hill, 'Soviet Interpretations of the English Interregnum', *Economic History Review*, 8, (1938), 159–67.

his book *The Politics of Continuity*. By using documents released in the Public Record Office, Saville was able to show how Hill, chosen for his knowledge of Russian language and society, held a valuable but not vitally important position in the Foreign Office. Despite all this, Glees was the main source of the absurd stories that were widely circulated as soon as Hill died that he had been a 'spy' or 'mole'.<sup>9</sup>

In 1940 the name of Christopher Hill first became known for a small book. *The English Revolution 1640* (a date chosen for the tercentenary rather than any crucial significance) was not at first intended for a large readership. Hill's seventy-page work was followed by shorter essays by Edgell Rickword and Margaret James.<sup>10</sup> He described it in later reprints as 'a first approximation . . . with all its crudities and oversimplifications'. It was, he explained in 1980, 'written very fast and in a good deal of anger' and aimed to be 'rather provocative'. It was to be 'my last will and testament' since he was convinced that he was about to be killed in the war.<sup>11</sup> Later editions explained how the words 'feudal' and 'progressive' were used in a Marxist sense. They did not explain the word that was to bring endless trouble in years to come—'bourgeoisie'. The wars and interregnum were 'the English bourgeois revolution' but it could not be shown that a simply identifiable class was responsible for it. 'The merchant class' was all-important; but 'England was still ruled by landlords'. The 'capitalist farmers and progressive landowners' had to be treated as part of the bourgeoisie. A new class of 'petty bourgeoisie'—peasants, artisans and journeymen—had interests temporarily identical with those of the capitalist merchants and farmers. This complex class struggle was not liked by Stalinists; for others who had known only the cavalier and roundhead stories of the Civil War it was a revelation. Adam Phillips, when he was sixteen and a 'wishy-washy royalist' found it in a second-hand bookshop. He had, he wrote, discovered 'a new country in a country I knew. . . . It fascinated me without effort.'<sup>12</sup> For most readers it was not Marxist theory that mattered. The sections on 'the economic background' and 'the political background' formed more than half the book.

<sup>9</sup> John Saville, *The Politics of Continuity. British Foreign Policy and the Labour Government 1945–6* (London, 1993), pp. 212–17 and notes on pp. 265–5. A. Glees, *Secrets of the Service* (London, 1987), pp. 279–88. Typical of the 'spy' stories is Ian Cobain in *The Times*, 5 Mar. 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Hill (ed.), *The English Revolution, 1640* (London, 1940), Hill's own essay was often reprinted and translated separately.

<sup>11</sup> Hill, *The English Revolution, 1640* (3rd edn., London, 1955), pp. 4–5.

<sup>12</sup> Adam Phillips, 'Historic Passions: Revolutions and Rebellions', *History Workshop Journal*, 39 (1995), 219–23 at 220.

They covered the whole Tudor and early Stuart period, condemning the orthodox accounts and raising questions 'not usually very satisfactorily answered in the text-books'. One of them was whether the events had 'any significance for us at the present day'. Many readers saw that they had. The rest of the war naturally produced little under Hill's name; but an approved booklet *The Two Commonwealths: the Soviets and Ourselves* (1945) was by the pseudonymous K. E. Holme.

In 1945 Hill was back at Balliol. His success as a tutor did not come from assertions or provocations. Tutorials were cheerful rather than formidable occasions. He could seem interested even in the most tedious essays and he would rather have an argument between a pair of pupils than one with him. (A rare exception was when, it was reported, a monstrous misstatement made him fling up his arms with such horror that he fell backwards off his oddly-shaped chair.) Of the many pupils who went on to academic careers only one or two were lifelong Marxists. It was neither dogma nor scholarly learning that he sought to convey but enthusiasm. He was the most accessible of the fellows, able to talk to undergraduates and postgraduates as friends. In the later 1940s he was, as he put it, 'fairly politically active in the Communist Party', writing 'a lot of more or less hack party stuff'.<sup>13</sup> Some articles on Stalin are now, fortunately, hard to find. At the same time he was beginning the vast accumulation of notes on which his later work was based. Hugh Stretton described how the restricted supply of paper was cut into small squares on which summaries and quotations were recorded in a very small hand even more illegible than his correspondence. The margins and endpapers of the books he acquired were filled in the same way.<sup>14</sup> One work, *Lenin and the Russian Revolution* (1947) in the 'Teach Yourself History' series made some use of his familiarity with Russian sources. It seems an unexpected and fairly subdued item in the Hill bibliography; but it produced a little welcome money.

There were many other activities. Overcoming a mild stammer, Hill became a much-appreciated lecturer both for the university and for the wider audiences he preferred, such as the WEA and the Historical Association. Occasional essays appeared in such periodicals as *The Communist Review*, *Science and Society* and *The Modern Quarterly*. But the body at

<sup>13</sup> Geoff Eley and William Hunt (eds.), *Reviving the English Revolution: Reflections and Elaborations on the Work of Christopher Hill* (London, 1988), p. 100.

<sup>14</sup> Pennington and Thomas (eds.), *Puritans and Revolutionaries*, p. 13.



the centre of his Marxist life down to 1956 was the Communist Historians' Group.<sup>15</sup> Its origins can be traced back to discussions of A. L. Morton's *People's History of England* (1938) that encouraged the writing of *The English Revolution 1640*. Hill, Morton and Dona Torr were the natural leaders of the informal group. They were soon joined by John Saville, Jack Lindsay, Eric Hobsbawm, Gordon Leff, the young Raphael Samuel and several teachers. Hobsbawm describes meetings at Marx House, Clerkenwell, with its 'physical austerity, intellectual excitement, political passion and friendship'. Hill, unlike any of the others, was able to report discussions in the Soviet Academy of Science, and produced 'Nine Theses on Absolutism'.<sup>16</sup> Ambitious plans for a many-volumed collection of documents covering the whole of British people's history were not completed. Dona Torr, whom Hill regarded as one of the main influences on his development, was to be the editor. One of the four volumes that appeared in 1948–9 was by the unlikely collaboration of Christopher Hill and Edmund Dell, *The Good Old Cause*, with the subtitle *The English Revolution of 1640–60, its Causes, Course and Consequences*. (Dell soon departed to begin the career that made him a right-wing Labour minister.) There was a simple answer to complaints that this was selective evidence: it was meant to be. The purpose was to reproduce 'some of the evidence on which *The English Revolution 1640* had been based, showing 'how one social class was driven from power by another' and an appropriate form of state power replaced the old.<sup>17</sup>

By 1952 the Group had become a fully developed organisation, supported by the Party but allowed to debate freely. Recruits included Edward and Dorothy Thompson, who stayed on the fringe, George Rudé, Victor Kiernan (who was sharply critical of orthodox Marxism) and Rodney Hilton. There was a committee, a secretary, and even some local branches. Large weekend conferences at Netherwood House in Sussex brought active and less active members together. One of these in July 1954, was devoted to the scheme for a large-scale history of British capitalism. A cyclostyled *Local History Bulletin*, later *Our History*, appeared

<sup>15</sup> Accounts of the Group include Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Historians' Group of the Communist Party' in Maurice Cornforth (ed.), *Rebels and their Causes: Essays in Honour of A. L. Morton* (London, 1973) and Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: a Twentieth-Century Life* (London, 2002), ch. 12 and notes; A. L. MacLachlan, *The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England* (London, 1996) pp. 116–21; John Saville, *Memoirs from the Left* (London, 2003), pp. 86–9. A good summary of Hill's own comments on the Group is in the interview with Lee Humber and John Rees, 'The Good Old Cause', *International Socialism*, 56 (London, 1992), 131–3.

<sup>16</sup> MacLachlan, *Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England*, p. 116.

<sup>17</sup> Hill and Dell, *The Good Old Cause* (London, 1949), pp. 19–20.

rather uneasily. But the most successful activities were in the period sections. Of these the one on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries dominated by Hill was outstanding. He recalled the discussions as 'some of the most stimulating experiences I've ever had'. Hobsbawm called the Group 'a continuous Marxist seminar'. Dorothy Thompson, on the other hand, felt that the picture of great minds discussing great thoughts was a myth.<sup>18</sup> Certainly there was tension in the Group, which tended to be between the academics and those led by Harry Pollitt who saw it as a means of celebrating the glory of the Party. Hill's view was clear: the Group would not advocate any crude class interpretation but would encourage debate between non-Marxists and every variety of Marxist. He was even able to introduce an interest in literature. In 1954 the Soviet Academy of Sciences invited Hill and three other historians to Moscow, where their high-powered entertainment was an embarrassment in the 'visibly impoverished country'. There were splendid parties but no serious discussion. They returned depressed.<sup>19</sup>

For one lasting achievement Marxist historians, though not the Party or the Group, were largely responsible. *Past and Present* began in 1952. It was to be a journal where Marxist and non-Marxist historians would share a common outlook. It would have no narrow academic monographs: articles would draw on every place and period and would be in plain English that the non-specialist could understand. The Introduction to the first number quoted a fourteenth-century Arab scholar, Ibn Khaldun: history is 'the record of human society or world civilisation . . . and of all the transformations that society undergoes'. The editor, John Morris, was to be completely independent, though Hill, who at first doubted whether such a publication could survive, joined an 'editorial board' including Rodney Hilton, and, as assistant editor, Eric Hobsbawm. It was hard at first to persuade non-Marxists that it was respectable to write for *Past and Present* and some who had joined the board soon left. The formation of a 'Past and Present Society' with Hill as president helped to extend the list of two hundred subscribers. Hill's own contributions began with his article on 'Puritans and the Poor' and later included occasional debates. The controversies on 'science and society' in 1964–5 and on 'parliament and people' in 1982–3 showed his ability to mix powerful argument with courteous and sometimes ironical

<sup>18</sup> Information on the Group kindly supplied by Dorothy Thompson.

<sup>19</sup> Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 97.

readiness to agree as far as he could.<sup>20</sup> From 1958 distinguished historians not of the left, such as Lawrence Stone, Keith Thomas and Joan Thirsk, began to serve on the editorial board. When the hundredth number appeared in 1983 *Past and Present* had won an international status as the liveliest of all English historical journals.<sup>21</sup>

The years 1956–7 were a crucial time in Hill's life. His marriage in 1944 to Inez Waugh had begun very happily but ended distressingly. In his second wife, Bridget Sutton, he now found the ideal partner who shared all his future career. Her optimism and outgoing cheerfulness must have been a salvation in every difficult time. Also in 1956 there appeared his first major book. *Economic Problems of the Church: from Archbishop Whitgift to the Long Parliament* was a title no one could complain of, though the Oxford University Press was a little dubious about publishing work by Hill. While keeping carefully to its theme, it intended to 'throw fresh light on the part played by religion in preparing for the seventeenth-century revolution'. There was no slogan-shouting here and the book was recognised as an academic triumph. After years of preparation it drew on probably a wider range of sources than his later books. The Historical Manuscripts Commission, record societies and county histories had been searched exhaustively. 'I have relied mainly', he explained, 'on printed sources, since my object was to cover as wide a field as possible. But there is room for far more thorough investigation' using the material buried in manuscripts. He kept carefully to the 'non-religious reasons' for the church's difficulties: class interests and capitalism were mentioned only casually. In perhaps a hint of his developing emphasis he noted that 'literary evidence, evidence of opinion has been used, though I hope with caution . . .'.<sup>22</sup> In the same year two essays showed how Hill's international reputation was growing. 'Die gesellschaftlichen und ökonomischen Folgen der Reformation in England' in *Beiträge zum neuen Geschichtsbild* (ed. F. Klein and J. Streisand) was revised in English in *Puritanism and Revolution* (1958). 'A propos d'un article récent sur Cromwell' was in *Annales E.S.C.*, 11 (The article was by Trevor-Roper.) There were the reviews too. Hill had hitherto reviewed occasionally, for publications ranging from the *English Historical Review* to the *Daily Worker*. Now he became a regular reviewer for, of all unlikely weeklies,

<sup>20</sup> *Past and Present*, numbers 27, 28, 29 (1964), 31, 32 (1965), 92 (1981), 98 (1983).

<sup>21</sup> *Past and Present*, number 1 (1952) i–iv; number 100 (1983), 3–28.

<sup>22</sup> Hill, *Economic Problems of the Church: from Archbishop Whitgift to the Long Parliament* (Oxford, 1956), pp. ix–xii.

the *Spectator*, which carried some twenty of his contributions in the first year. Perhaps it was a coincidence that the owner and editor, Ian Gilmour, was Hill's former pupil.

In the same short period Hill found himself at the centre of British communist politics, when the Historians' Group led the movement to end the Party's obedience to Moscow. As Eric Hobsbawm pointed out, they were 'the most consistently active and flourishing group of communist intellectuals'.<sup>23</sup> To accept uncritically Soviet suppressions and misstatements would be a betrayal of their principles as historians. For all western communists the problem of Stalin's USSR had grown more acute. What little information emerged on the atrocities could be dismissed as capitalist propaganda and the failures of the Soviet economy blamed on western hostility or natural causes. But the adulation of the dictator before and after his death could only be swallowed for the sake of 'unity'. Then, in February 1956, the twentieth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union heard in a secret session Khrushchev's speech denouncing some of Stalin's abuses of power. It was soon published in the west; but the British Communist Party contrived almost to ignore it. The speech, and the beginnings of 'destalinisation' in Russia and the eastern bloc countries, confirmed what the British historians agreed was 'the most serious and critical situation the Party was in since its foundation'. Hill was now regarded as the most senior member of the Historians' Group. A junior member, Gordon Leff, remembered him as a guarantee against totalitarian attitudes, combining enlightened Marxism with tolerant liberalism. It was after discussion with Hill that Edward Thompson and John Saville inaugurated *The Reasoner*, at first typed and duplicated, demanding full debate within the Party. The national executive banned it. Its third number was almost complete when news came of the Soviet invasion of Hungary. Most of the historians signed a forthright letter of protest at the 'uncritical support given by the Party to the Soviet action'.<sup>24</sup> Protesters faced the choice between resigning (or being expelled) and hoping to reform the Party from within. Many resigned at once, others, including Thompson and Saville, in the next few months. The Party tried to appease the 'little band of bourgeois intellectuals' by permitting a Commission on Inner Party Democracy, with a safe majority supporting the official line. Hill led the opposition and presented to the Party Congress in the spring of 1957 what became known as the Minority

<sup>23</sup> Hobsbawm, 'The Historians' Group', p. 30.

<sup>24</sup> Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 207. The main part of the letter is printed on p. 425.

Report. It was not until October 1994 that he revealed publicly his regret at Thompson's departure. In the *Times Higher Education Supplement* he suggested that without the resignations the outcome might have been different. The precipitate action of those who resigned had 'ensured that the Party would decline into insignificance'.<sup>25</sup> The Hills and Thompsons remained good friends. After the Congress Hill himself left the Party. Unlike some he never abandoned the principles he held when he joined.

In the following years Hill's prolific pattern of work was established—a major book every two or three years, a great variety of essays and a constant stream of reviews and lectures. During term teaching and friendship with pupils and colleagues left only some afternoons and some evenings for reading and writing. Yet he seldom seemed stressed or exhausted. The next book, *Puritanism and Revolution*, was a collection of essays written, according to the Preface, 'independently on various occasions during the past eighteen years'. The list of where they were originally published shows an impressive range of acceptability: *The English Historical Review* (1940), *The Modern Quarterly* (1946), *Philosophy for the Future* (New York, 1949), *Past and Present* (1952), the *Japanese Journal of Historical Studies* (1953), *History Today* (1953 and 1957), and the BBC Third Programme in 1956. Part One of *Puritanism and Revolution*, on 'Movements and Men', has the long article on the Norman Yoke—the belief that a golden age of equal prosperity existed before 1066—and the varied interpretations of this in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries until it became 'a stick to beat the modern aristocracy with'. The article is reprinted from *Democracy and the Labour Movement: Essays in Honour of Dona Torr* (1954). In the second half of *Puritanism and Revolution* eight essays announced their method by a dual title on person and topic, such as 'Lord Clarendon and the Puritan Revolution', 'John Mason and the End of the World', 'James Harrington and the People'. 'The people of England', according to a typical Hill aside, was 'a subject one mentions with diffidence.' One of the best chapters, 'Society and Andrew Marvell', written originally in 1946, was an early exploration of the links between literature and society. Marvell's poetry was 'shot through with consciousness of a conflict . . . between the idea and the reality, which it is perhaps not too far-fetched to link up, very indirectly of course' (we can picture the wry smile behind that) 'with the social and political problems of his time'. A final essay on Richardson's *Clarissa*, 'one of the greatest of unread novels', is a proof from fiction of the need

<sup>25</sup> Hill, 'The Shock Tactician', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 7 Oct. 1994.

to understand 'Puritan attitudes towards society, marriage and the individual conscience'.<sup>26</sup>

In 1962 Hill delivered the Ford Lectures. The invitation to do this is generally seen as the foremost distinction the University could confer on historians. *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1965) was an expanded version. 'I was', he admitted, 'advancing a thesis . . . I therefore picked up evidence which seemed to me to support my case'—a remark which later critics chose to apply unjustifiably to everything he wrote. 'Revolutions are not made without ideas'; but a body of thought 'takes on' when it meets the needs of significant social groups. He was not suggesting a direct relationship between London science and the parliamentary cause. 'Science' meant not just academic theory but the inventions and work of 'the industrious sort of people'. We might suggest 'very tentatively' a link between kinds of interest in science and degrees of political and social radicalism. Parliament 'was believed', for instance, to have support from most medical doctors.<sup>27</sup> The uncertainty was not to be taken too literally. No text could quite convey the moments of ironic humour and self-deprecation that enlivened the lectures.

There were two contrasting books in the early sixties. *The Century of Revolution, 1603–1714* (1961) was intended for sixth-form students, or those whose schools did not ban such a dangerous writer, as well as for a wide public. Its popularity grew and lasted: the latest reprint was in 2002. This was not an ordinary textbook. The narrative that introduced each of four chronological parts was short if not perfunctory. Then came chapters on economics, politics and the constitution—a separation he often deplored. Hidden in these were indications of Hill's modified outlook. Several of his own books were added to the reading-lists in later editions, but not (as A. L. Merson pointed out) *The English Revolution 1640*. 'Feudalism' and 'bourgeoisie' were terms still occasionally used, but cautiously. 'The division in England is not Third Estate versus gentry and peerage but country versus court.' Those excluded from economic privilege looked to parliament and common lawyers to help them to get it. The revolution eventually was 'incomplete'.<sup>28</sup>

*Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (1964) confronted another dangerous word. It 'tries to suggest that there might be

<sup>26</sup> Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17th Century* (London, 1958) pp. 26, 367.

<sup>27</sup> Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1965), pp. vii, 72, 119.

<sup>28</sup> A. L. Merson, 'Problems of the English Bourgeois Revolution', *Marxism Today*, Oct. 1963, 310–15; Hill, *The Century of Revolution, 1603–1714* (London, 1965), pp. 101 etc.

non-theological reasons for . . . being a Puritan'. The first chapter adds to the countless attempts to define the word. As a term of abuse 'Puritan' could be applied to almost anyone, or at least to any opponent of church or court. But there was 'a mainstream of puritan thought'. It was, as the abundant quotations showed, a living faith and a view of life 'deeply rooted in the English society of its day'. Much of the social content survived when Puritan ideals degenerated into hypocrisy. To appreciate this we must understand the needs, fears, hopes and aspirations of the godly artisans, merchants, yeomen, gentlemen, ministers and their wives.<sup>29</sup> The order in which the groups are listed may be significant: artisans, or the industrious sort of people, came first and are the subject of one of the best chapters. Some ministers kept their ideals; but the priesthood of all believers was ushering in a secular society. The parish was becoming part of the machinery of government rather than a purely church unit; but the household was becoming 'spiritualised', with its head taking on the authority of the priest.

In the years down to 1965 Hill's success as a Balliol tutor continued to grow. One of the pupils and later colleagues who admired him while holding opposite opinions, Maurice Keen, recalled the weekly evening parties. All historians were welcome. 'Christopher and Bridget, a barrel of beer and a large number of people' were always there. It meant that they did not think of him as 'someone on the other side of a barrier of status'.<sup>30</sup> Relations with other fellows were not always as easy as with junior members. Lord Lindsay, whom Hill greatly admired despite many disagreements, resigned as Master in 1949 and was succeeded by the 'stolid traditionalist' Sir David Keir. Almost all reforms of the College were blocked, Lindsay became Principal of the first post-war new university, Keele, where there were prospects of a broader curriculum and a less privileged intake than seemed likely to happen in Oxford. There was a distinct possibility that Hill might go to Keele. But he stayed, and his position in the Senior Common Room improved. To many he was 'the acceptable face of communism'. His unassuming friendliness and his advocacy of the practicable rather than the ideal were appreciated by both younger and older fellows. In 1965, with the retirement of Keir, there arose the possibility that Hill might become Master. It needed some shrewd campaigning before the formally unanimous vote was announced. A few old members, and some in other colleges, were

<sup>29</sup> Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (London, 1964), pp. 9, 29, 510.

<sup>30</sup> Pennington and Thomas (eds.), *Puritans and Revolutionaries*, p. 18.

shocked and some newspapers contrived to be alarmed that Oxford should appoint a supporter of the cold-war enemy to such a post. But it was soon apparent that Hill as Master would be a success. Richard Cobb, the only fellow who could rival Hill's scholarly output, enjoyed teasing him as 'Supergod' but was more explosive than others in combining opposition to some reforms with, he wrote, 'affection and respect'.

There were a few immediate indications of change. The new Master's first request was that he would continue to be known, except on the most formal occasions, as Christopher. He chose not to occupy the Master's lodging in College, releasing some rooms for undergraduate residence. He renounced the Master's right to admit some applicants without examination. He soon coped well with routine duties. Ceremonies were lightened by taking the pomp only half solemnly. He could produce whenever it was needed a witty and moderately tactful speech, usually with a few ironic ambiguities for those able to detect them. He nearly always accepted the occasional defeat in College Meetings, though he admitted that he liked a little intrigue now and then. Bigger developments would evidently be gradual. One of Hill's hopes was not in his time quite realised—to have a smaller proportion of entrants from public schools. He made a few unobtrusive visits to grammar schools himself and encouraged some fellows to do the same. He initiated a summer-school for underprivileged sixth-formers, with undergraduates as tutors and guides. (One was Howard Marks, with whom Hill kept in touch.) He upheld cautiously the campaign for the admission of women. 'Can Balliol afford not to admit women?' he wrote in his last annual Master's letter. A series of votes indicated that the College was in favour of this provided nothing was done yet. Female undergraduates first arrived in 1979.

One reform proved easy. Much of the work of the College Meeting was transferred to an Executive Committee on which there were to be undergraduate representatives (though for some purposes the committee met without them). Relations with undergraduate organisations required all Hill's diplomatic skill, especially in the peak years of student rebellion. Balliol had long been reputedly the most left-wing of colleges. Hill's instinctive sympathies were with the undergraduates against what they saw as tyrannical authority; but he accepted his duty to protect the status of the College. He presided equitably over the governing body in its exercise of disciplinary power, and accepted the penalties demanded by a majority of fellows. Afterwards he, or he and Bridget, might quietly help the victim.



The mastership made it even harder than before to understand how Hill could do more in a day than seemed humanly possible. The new burden might well have reduced his literary output; but the only hint of that was that he did not write quite as many reviews. He hardly ever seemed to be in a desperate hurry. College work still included a few tutorials; more afternoons and evenings had to be given up to committees. Somehow there was still time to mix on equal terms in the Senior Common Room, where his wit was sometimes ambiguous but rarely hurtful. There was nearly always time too to see the many people in and outside the College who wanted to talk to him. He often gave major lectures away from Oxford. The Riddell Memorial Lectures at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne became the book *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1971). The Barnett Shine Foundation Lecture in the Economics Department of Queen Mary College, London, in 1974 on 'Irreligion in the "Puritan" Revolution' (with significant quotation marks in the title) found sources for a subject that usually 'we hear of only through the reports of its enemies'. The Hobhouse Memorial Lecture (1969) was on 'Reason and Reasonableness'.

An extraordinary range of collections and periodicals can be added to earlier lists. *The Baptist Quarterly*, *The Listener*, *Royal Society Notes and Records*, *The British Journal of Sociology*, *The Texas Quarterly*, the Italian *Historia* and the German *Studien über die Revolution* were a few of them. There was another textbook, *Reformation to Industrial Revolution: a Social and Economic History of Britain 1530–1780* (1967). *God's Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution* (1970) blended a fair amount of revolution into the biography. In these Hill, as Professor Corfield put it, 'quietly shifted his emphasis'. Without diminishing the Revolution he was seeing it 'not as the triumph of capitalism but as a triumph for the conditions that allowed capitalism to flourish'.<sup>31</sup> The outstanding work of the mastership period was *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972) with the subtitle *Radical Ideas during the English Revolution*. Many reviewers rated it as Hill's best book so far.<sup>32</sup> It had frequent reprints and translations and must be the only work of its kind to be made into a play, which the National Theatre performed. The book

<sup>31</sup> Penelope Corfield, *History Workshop Journal*, 58 (2004), 111–26. See also her article 'Il percorso intellettuale di Christopher Hill: dal protestantismo biblico al umanesimo marxista' ('Christopher Hill's Intellectual Trajectory: from Biblical Protestantism to Humanist Marxism'), trans. Paola Redalli, *Italia Contemporanea*, 232 (2003), 401–505.

<sup>32</sup> The book is studied 'in retrospect' by Barry Reay in Eley and Hunt (ed.) *Reviving the English Revolution*, pp. 53–72.

smoothly combines the favoured essay form with a full unity of theme. Three chapters are on the social background in which radical ideas developed. The focus was no longer on a bourgeoisie but on ‘the mobile society of early capitalism . . . the crowds of masterless men, vagabonds and urban poor’. Some of the poor had been brought together in the armies, especially the New Model, some in the gathered churches that could now flourish. Theirs was to be a revolution within the revolution. Each of the subsequent chapters is an essay in itself, exploring the variety of radical ideas and people who expressed them. Hill does not add to the abundant studies of the Agitators but investigates ‘something vaster if more inchoate’, the multitude they hoped to lead. London is not the exclusive interest: almost every county appears somewhere in the book. In one region, the north and west, ‘the dark corners of the land’, some of the most revolutionary schemes begin. In towns remote from the south-east Ranters were most easily found. Fourteen specimens of northern and western radicals are listed. There are other beliefs too: astrology, magic, and alchemy contributed to the radical outlook. ‘Base impudent kisses’ have a chapter, as do other sins—and hell. At every opportunity Hill’s most characteristic method takes over: generalisations are linked to individuals, some famous, others unknown to most of us.<sup>33</sup> An admirer who talked to Hill on long car journeys remarked that he discussed everyone he had written about as if they were his own friends.

There was one outstanding figure in *The World Turned Upside Down*. Gerrard Winstanley was Hill’s lasting hero. He had written briefly about Winstanley in an introduction to a selection of the writings in 1944. In 1973 he brought out his own edition of the main works and in 1978 a *Past and Present Supplement* on ‘The Religion of Gerrard Winstanley’. The unchanging belief of Winstanley in the equality of all mankind was also Hill’s ideal. In the theological tracts Winstanley developed a solution to some problems of bible-centred Puritanism that had been touched on by other nearly-heretical writers: scriptural stories could be allegories or myths. God was within every man and woman. ‘The ascension so called’ was the rising of the spirit of the Father, which is pure reason. Clergy and the state church were barriers to accepting the God within us, barriers which governments for their own ends maintained. Secular ideas became more prominent in later Winstanley works than the purely theological.

<sup>33</sup> Ch. 9 includes sections on William Erbery, Abiezer Coppe, Lawrence Clarkson, Joseph Salmon, Jacob Bauthumley, Richard Coppin, George Foster, John Pordage and Thomas Webbe. Chs. 11 and 12 are on Samuel Fisher and John Warr.

He was ‘groping his way towards a humanist and materialist philosophy’. *The Law of Freedom* in 1651 showed Winstanley as the ‘true leveller’—a communist in the widest sense of the word. The Norman Yoke had meant the theft by landlords of the earth that had been and could be again a common treasury. But it was not enough to wait passively for the return of Christ. Action was needed; and action had been taken in the symbolic form of digging up the commons on St George’s Hill. Now it was time to show Cromwell how ‘true magistracy’ could be compatible with liberty and equality. It involved some detailed plans of government that were bound to look like compromise. In a powerfully original appendix to *The World Turned Upside Down* Hill showed how Winstanley and Hobbes, ‘two opposite poles’, were both determined to ‘penetrate the bedrock of politics’ and grasped the same problems of authority.<sup>34</sup>

In 1974 appeared *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century England*—‘Old hat stuff’, said Hill, ‘not a proper book’. It was a further selection of essays written in the previous twelve years, including some of the best specimens of his work. Two chapters were on London and the outlying regions, first on Puritans in the north and west and second on an ‘endearing’ character, Arise Evans—a Welshman in London. Under ‘Continuity in Change’ there were studies of three groups attacked by radicals—the two universities, the Inns of Court and the medical profession. A section on social attitudes showed the alarm of men of property at the ‘many-headed monster’. Each essay, incidentally, had like almost all Hill works, one or two delightfully apt quotations before the title. The book acquired unexpected notoriety, from an implacably hostile review. Professor J. H. Hexter of Yale was later described by a colleague as a ‘rough tough wreckster’. His review of *Change and Continuity* was the occasion to attack Hill’s whole historical method. After paying tribute to the ‘simply astounding achievement’, of his output and erudition, Hexter seized on the chapter ‘Protestantism and the Rise of Capitalism’. Some arguable reviewer’s points led to the fundamental accusations. Hill was a ‘lumper’ who put the past into boxes. He ‘can be sure of arriving at any conclusion he aims at’ and of finding evidence to support it. He ‘could go on for ever writing about the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism . . . without for a moment feeling impelled to inquire whether any Protestant capitalist expressed any views relevant to

<sup>34</sup> ‘The Religion of Gerrard Winstanley’ is reprinted with additions in Hill, *Collected Essays*, 2 (London, 1986), 185–252. His writings on Winstanley also include ‘Gerrard Winstanley and Freedom’, in Hill, *A Nation of Change and Novelty* (London, 1990), pp. 114–32 and ‘Gerrard Winstanley: The Law of Freedom’, in Hill, *Liberty against the Law* (London, 1996), pp. 273–97.

the matter'. He had 'failed his colleagues'. The tone was so offensive that it brought protests from historians of many different opinions as well as a restrained reply from Hill that pointed out some of Hexter's own contradictions.<sup>35</sup> Years later an ageing Hexter was entertained by the Hills in Oxford. 'It was difficult to hate him', wrote Bridget. As it happened *Change and Continuity* contained a review by Hill as devastating as Hexter's. 'A One-class Society' was on a popular book by Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (1965) based on research by the Cambridge group for the History of Population and Social Structure. But Hill used specified points to destroy Laslett's picture of an ill-defined past and to show his sheer incompetence. One instance was his misuse of Parish Registers, with which Hill, said to neglect manuscript sources, was evidently well acquainted. Laslett had not read his sources 'with any comprehension' and had done a 'disastrous disservice'.<sup>36</sup> There was not much response to that.

Besides the disputes with historians, Hill's devotion to poetry had brought him into conflict with literary critics. The argument is well summarised by Margot Heinemann, a Marxist writer whose work Hill had for years admired. 'One of Hill's most important contributions', she wrote, 'was to free students and teachers from the restrictive view of seventeenth-century literature . . . based on T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis.' To study 'the words on the page' without enough investigation of the author, his readers and their social setting ignored the conflict in society that was 'the central context'.<sup>37</sup> One great event forgotten by many critics but stressed by Hill was the collapse of censorship which from 1641 made possible the huge increase in printed works. They could now be written in plain prose addressed to a popular audience. We might have heard more about the sudden appearance of newspapers; but perhaps they lacked the appeal of the introspective individual writer.

One figure above all others seemed ideally made for studies by Hill. Milton was 'the greatest English revolutionary who is also a poet, the greatest English poet who is also a revolutionary'. Hill, according to a typical aside, had been 'thinking about Milton off and on over a long period'. The thoughts had appeared in many of his books. *God's*

<sup>35</sup> J. H. Hexter, 'The Burden of Proof' in *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 Oct. 1975, reprinted in Hexter, *On Historians* (London, 1975). Replies by Hill in *TLS*, 7 Nov. 1975 and by others in *TLS*, 14 Nov. and 12 Dec. 1975.

<sup>36</sup> Hill, *Change and Continuity and Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1975) ch. 9. See also 'Sex, Marriage and Parish Registers', in *Collected Essays*, 3 (London, 1986), 188–209.

<sup>37</sup> Margot Heinemann in Eley and Hunt (eds.), *Reviving the English Revolution*, pp. 74–9.

*Englishman* had cited the apparent allusions to Cromwell in *Samson Agonistes* as well as the warning, in 1655, that ‘a stubborn and intractable despot’ could turn his followers into new royalists.<sup>38</sup> Appendix 2 in *The World Turned Upside Down* had shown how Milton’s radical intellectual convictions, such as his hatred of ‘priests, an established church, forms, ceremonies and tithes’, clashed with his ‘patrician social prejudices’.<sup>39</sup> In 1977 *Milton and the English Revolution* appeared and brought Hill to the forefront of literary as well as historical controversies. Anyone who took seriously his sardonic claim to be ‘only a historian’ and that ‘such expertise as I have is not literary’<sup>40</sup> would be disillusioned by his demolition here of hostile scholarly critics. Milton had been the subject of passionate literary disputes ever since Leavis in 1936 claimed to have dislodged him ‘after two centuries with remarkably little fuss’. Now he had to be ‘defended from his defenders’. The ‘immensely productive Milton industry’, particularly in the United States, had made him ‘the poet of scholars and academic critics’, though he was really the arch-enemy of academic pedantry.<sup>41</sup> Many of his underestimated qualities are discussed—such as his sense of humour and the romanticism that links him to Blake and Wordsworth. But the major theme is the effect on Milton of the English Revolution and radical ideas.

Hill is cautious in his assessments of Milton’s relations with radicalism. He was not a Leveller, Ranter, Fifth Monarchist or Muggletonian but ‘lived in a state of permanent dialogue’ with radical views. How close he came to radicalism is a question treated here with carefully chosen words. The influences of the Revolution were ‘much more radical than has been accepted’. A claim, which critics were quick to pounce on as lacking due evidence, was that Milton got ideas from talking to ‘plebeian radical thinkers’.<sup>42</sup> (The ‘persistent attempts’ to get him into a pub—the Mermaid Tavern was just round the corner from where he grew up—seem a light-hearted extravagance.) Early enthusiasm for popular movements had led to bitter disillusionment in the post-war chaos. Even so in 1651 *The Defence of the People of England* had proved a ‘fantastic success’ in explaining the republican Commonwealth to the Europeans as well as the English. But the Revolution went wrong, betrayed by leaders who ‘turned out to be avaricious and ambiguous, or hypocrites’. After the

<sup>38</sup> Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (London, 1977), pp. 4, 471; *God’s Englishman*, p. 191.

<sup>39</sup> Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, pp. 321, 324.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Eley and Hunt (eds.) *Reviving the English Revolution*, p. 74

<sup>41</sup> Hill, *Milton*, p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Hill, *Milton*, p. 4; B. Worden, ‘Milton among the Radicals’ in *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 Dec. 1977.

Restoration, when the three great poems were completed, the renewal of censorship made it necessary to bury topical comment in allegories. Hints of anti-trinitarianism and materialism were easy to find. Milton, it is constantly admitted, was uncertain and inconsistent and Hill admits that the political analogies might not always have been in the poet's mind.<sup>43</sup> But cumulative evidence upheld the arguments. The noble Cause, which was God's Cause, had failed and like the fall of Adam it was a moral failure. Pride and arrogance were vices of Satan—and of Cromwell. Many allusions were obviously to Milton's personal torments and determination. The biographical content of the book is a convincing demonstration of Hill's insistence that literature can only be understood by relating it to the writer's life. *Samson Agonistes* and *Paradise Regained* escaped from despair. There was hope of Salvation, not as a gift from Christ but from man's own effort. The struggle must go on, but longer, soberer, less exhilarating . . .'.<sup>44</sup> Disentangling analogies did not diminish Hill's appreciation of the style of the poems, liberated from the 'straitjacket of the rhymed couplet'.<sup>45</sup> With its reference to almost all Milton's works and 800 or so other sources the book would have been a lifetime's achievement for many scholars. For Hill it was one activity among many.

During the writing of *Milton* Hill was involved in the establishment of a journal, that brought his dual interests together. *Literature and History* first appeared in 1975. It did not aspire to the status of *Past and Present* but it attracted some eminent contributors. Hill was critical of its 'pre-occupation with, and indulgence in, theory'; but in the following years he supplied fifty-four reviews and gave papers at two of its associated conferences.<sup>46</sup> In 1998 an issue on the seventeenth century was dedicated to him. A better-known periodical was *History Workshop Journal*, which first appeared in 1976. History Workshop had been founded at Ruskin College by Hill's former pupil Raphael Samuel in 1967. It persuaded students with little previous training to find and write small histories of ordinary individuals as well as studying popular movements in every period. It naturally had Hill's active approval. Sometimes he was able to join in workshop discussions as, more or less, a normal member of the group. The movement spread from Ruskin to local associations in England and abroad, holding regular conferences. The *Journal* broadened

<sup>43</sup> Hill, *Milton*, pp. 285–95, 331, 380.

<sup>44</sup> Hill, *Milton*, p. 390.

<sup>45</sup> Hill, *Milton*, p.404.

<sup>46</sup> *Literature and History* 3rd series, 13 no. 1, R. C. Richardson, 'Complementaries: Christopher and Bridget Hill and Literary History'.

its scope to include worldwide subjects. Three of Hill's contributions suggested its range. In 1980 'Defoe and Robinson Crusoe' showed, predictably, a thorough knowledge of the varied interpretations—including Marx's. In 1984 a reprinted lecture to one of the London workshops had a splendid Hill title: 'God and the English Revolution' and he reviewed a book by Alan Bray on 'Male Homosexuality in Seventeenth-Century England' that opened up 'quite a new subject in English social history'.<sup>47</sup>

Besides all this, Christopher and Bridget had been bringing up a family. There was a daughter, Fanny, from Christopher's first marriage. She died in 1986. The first child of the second marriage had been tragically killed in a road accident; but Andrew (born 1958) and Dinah (1960) were a lively and understanding pair. Each was later thanked for help with a book. An escape from immediate College tasks was the house the Hills acquired near Verteillac in Périgord. It did not have a telephone. It had a meadow, sometimes cut energetically by hand-mower. The popular Dordogne settlement area was well to the south. There in vacations country life, such as walks to the local bistro, with bar-football, or swimming in the River Dronne, was a total change from Oxford. Hospitality could be offered to many visitors. But at a prescribed time in the day or evening the study door would close and the typewriter would begin forthwith. There was no wasted time.

In 1978 Hill retired from the mastership of Balliol. He and Bridget left Oxford for a country home at Sibford Ferris, within easy reach of the Bodleian. Retirement for Hill was not the end of a career but the beginning of a further twenty years of high-powered work. He had been involved with the Open University from before it opened in 1969. Bridget had taught there and had been responsible for much of its development. A university open to all students, teaching by correspondence, radio, television and summer school and offering courses not restricted to a single conventional subject approached Hill's educational ideals. He accepted an appointment for two years as a professor. He led the planning and teaching of an inter-disciplinary course on seventeenth-century England that included science, art, philosophy and music as well as his own specialities. Holding together the experts in so many fields must have needed all his tact and tolerance. The course was an immediate success, with nearly 2,000 students a year. (Balliol had no more than twenty a year

<sup>47</sup> Hill, 'Defoe and Robinson Crusoe', *History Workshop Journal*, 10 (1980), 'God and the English Revolution', *History Workshop Journal*, 17 (1984), 'Male Homosexuality in 17th-Century England', *History Workshop Journal*, 18 (1984) reprinted in Hill, *Collected Essays*, 1. 105–30, 2. 321–42, 3. 226–35.

reading history.) One of the teachers who took part, Anne Laurence, described how he joined the rest of them in commenting on each other's draft material and was happy to rewrite his section on the historiography of the Civil War when it was thought too difficult. At the same time he was 'a consummate politician' well able to deal with committees and administrators. The course remained on the syllabus for eight years—a long time by Open University standards.<sup>48</sup>

The Hills now had more opportunity for overseas visits. North and South America, Australia, New Zealand and Japan were among the places where Christopher's lectures and informal discussions were great occasions. In 1981 he was for three months a visiting professor at the Humanities Research Centre of the Australian National University, Canberra. One lecture there was on Lodowick Muggleton, whose unfortunate name had, Hill admitted, led him to misplace the Muggletonians on the 'lunatic fringe' of seventeenth-century sects. He quickly recognised their place in the 'cultural underworld' and the lecture was reprinted, with other chapters by Barry Reay and William Lamont, in *The World of the Muggletonians* (1983), dedicated to the memory of the last Muggletonian, who died in 1979.

In 1984 there appeared *The Experience of Defeat*. 'Experience' suggested its emphasis on the individual rather than the movement. Hill had long accepted that the 'Puritan Revolution' ('a facile anachronism') had been defeated 'in a superficial sense'. Now he faced outright what the defeat of the radical revolution meant to those who suffered it. His purpose was to 'understand the elation of the fight and the desolation of defeat when it was realised that the world was not after all to be turned upside down'. The defeated were studied in groups—the 'first losers' in 1649–51, the second in 1653–60. William Erbury, William Sedgwick and Isaac Pennington were 'bewildernessed' into changes of allegiance. The two Pordages, Stubbes and Marvell were 'survivors' who adapted their radicalism to post-Restoration conditions. Even Cromwell experienced defeat, after the collapse of Barebones' Parliament. It had been seen in *God's Englishman* as the moment when 'his high hopes had gone and he became a tired, disillusioned old man'. (He was 54.) For nearly all these the defeat was that proclaimed by Milton, the failure of sinful man to uphold

<sup>48</sup> Anne Laurence, 'Christopher Hill at the Open University 1978–80' (typescript kindly supplied by Professor Laurence).



God's Cause. Harrington was silenced by defeat; but his followers modified his ideas into another cause that led to eighteenth-century whiggery.<sup>49</sup>

Hill's position at the very height of academic success was now recognised everywhere. In 1985 he was back in Australia for a term at the University of Adelaide. There had also been three months at Rutgers University, New Jersey. In England he was giving generous time to lecturing. The Centre for Seventeenth-century Studies at Durham, the South Place Ethical Society, King Alfred's College, Winchester, and the Lancashire Polytechnic, Preston, had major lectures. Much as he disliked the national honours system, honorary degrees were an acceptable way of extending his academic contacts. He was given ceremonial doctorates by Hull, East Anglia, Glasgow, Exeter, Leicester, Sheffield, Bristol, York, the University of Wales, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the Academy of Sciences of the German Democratic Republic and the Sorbonne nouvelle. He had become a Fellow of the British Academy in 1965. He was glad to be made, like his father, a Freeman of York.

*The Experience of Defeat* might well have been the title of a last Hill work. Happily it was nothing of the kind. *A Turbulent and Seditious People: John Bunyan and his Church 1628–1688* (1988) was derived from another lecture series, the Sir D. Owen Evans Memorial Lectures at Aberystwyth. It won the W. H. Smith Award, for which neither Christopher Hill nor John Bunyan would seem likely candidates. But the book managed more smoothly than Cromwell or Milton to combine straightforward and fascinating biography with continuous discussion of, among other topics, the radical tradition and the moral and practical problems of life after the Restoration. It was also an opportunity to say still more about local history. Bunyan was 'the first major writer who was neither London based nor university educated'. The Bedford congregation of 'such as in those days did bear the name of puritans' has a big part in the story.<sup>50</sup>

One book had been overwhelmingly important to nearly every writer in the seventeenth century. The Bible, it might have been supposed, would be an essential subject of study for historians of the period. It had not been; and somehow *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (1993) seemed an unexpected Hill title. 'I have done the best I can', he remarked in the Preface, 'on the basis of many years of desultory

<sup>49</sup> Hill, *The Experience of Defeat* (London, 1984), pp. 48, 321, 323, 326–7.

<sup>50</sup> Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People: John Bunyan and his Church 1628–1688* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 3, 90, 346.

general reading in and around the subject.<sup>51</sup> (Was ever a reader less desultory?) Despite the title, the book extends from the Geneva Bible of 1557 to ‘the Bible dethroned’ after 1660. It does not examine the text but its multiple effects on society, politics and literature. The clergy, so men of power and property assumed, would guide worshippers to the passages in the new Authorised Version demanding obedience to authority. But other verses seemed to justify revolution. It did not matter if no law permitted the execution of the king when Isaiah, Daniel and especially Revelation upheld it. God was less prominent in the next book, *Liberty against the Law: some Seventeenth-Century Controversies*. It had been suggested that as a historian of ideas Hill was less interested in the mental world of ‘the less-than-radical majority’.<sup>52</sup> The section here on lawlessness includes some of the ‘the class of permanent poor’ who rejected wage-labour and the law. Who, he goes on to ask, are the people? Whose law? Whose liberty? There were, as there still are in the welfare state, many who are hardly included as ‘the people’. There was room too for one more essay on Winstanley. His ‘superb prose gave expression to the half-formed ideas of the inarticulate men and women whose outlook I have been fumbling to recapture’.<sup>53</sup>

Apart from the books a lot of Hill’s work was by now becoming almost unobtainable. Collections were out of print; back numbers of periodicals were lost. Then in 1985–6 the Harvester Press reprinted over forty of his essays, chosen from thirty years’ writing, in three volumes, *The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill. Volume 1: Writing and Revolution in Seventeenth-Century England* (1985), *Volume 2: Religion and Politics in Seventeenth-Century England* (1985), *Volume 3: People and Ideas in Seventeenth-Century England* (1986). The essence of his output was suddenly available. Some chosen pieces are delightfully easy reading, such as the anecdotal account of Karl Marx in England or the ‘footnote’ on Marvell ‘Till the Conversion of the Jews.’ Important essays reprinted include those on ‘Censorship and English Literature’ (originating in seminars held in Switzerland), ‘Parliament and People in 17th-Century England’ (a Sir John Neale Memorial Lecture), ‘The Poor and the People’ (from a lecture at Brown University and a festschrift for George Rudé) and ‘Science and Magic’ (from a lecture at the J. D. Bernal Peace Library and a festschrift for Eric Hobsbawm).

<sup>51</sup> Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (London, 1993), p. vii.

<sup>52</sup> e.g. David Underdown in Eley and Hunt (eds.) *Reviving The English Revolution*, p. 327.

<sup>53</sup> Hill, *Liberty against the Law: some Seventeenth-century Controversies* (London, 1996), p. 274

There were two more collections. *A Nation of Change and Novelty* (not everyone will recognise the quotation from Aphra Behn): *Radical Politics, Religion and Literature in Seventeenth-Century England* (1990) has chapters from other festschrifts, from lectures, and conferences, with expansions and additions. *England's Turning Point: Essays in 17th-Century English History* (1998) was a nicely varied assortment of sixty years' writing in chronological order. The samples are selected from so many that Hill himself is occasionally uncertain whether a piece had already been published. One or two certainly had not been. The changes in outlook are shown and discussed; but the sequence illustrates clearly how the essential conclusions remained. So, after some deliberate mellowing, did the style. The clarity, the sometimes shattering wit and the generous appreciation are always evident.

Christopher Hill died on 24 February 2003. In his last years his immensely powerful brain was, with cruel irony, destroyed by Alzheimer's Disease. Bridget, by then an important historian herself, was able to care for him almost to the end, hiding the fact that she was dying of cancer. It had been the most productive life he could have wished. His writing had remained so prolific and confident that it was easy to forget the turmoils he had overcome. One dogma—Methodist Christianity—had been rejected. Another—Marxism—had been drastically changed. A stock reply to the regular question 'Are you still a Marxist?' was, in the familiar sentence: 'It depends what you mean by Marxism.' What mattered was the lasting contribution of Marxism to the development of his thought. 'My position is I suppose a modified Tawneyism', he remarked in a post-script to 'Parliament and People'. 'I have changed my vocabulary', he explained in the 1991 essay 'Premature Obsequies': 'Bourgeois' had been an unproductive term. He had become 'more careful and less strident'. But the main Marxist point remained: the events of 1640 to 1660 were 'aptly described as a revolution'.<sup>54</sup> Without it the later developments could not have happened. Certainly Hill was never an economic determinist: ideas in all their variety became for him the essence of history. From ideas expressed by a minority he was able to reconstruct the beliefs and aspirations of the silent majority. 'History from below' was truer and more important than the old history seen only through the eyes of the powerful. He had studied the revolutionary years through the experience of individuals, from the Lord Protector and the greatest poet to the poor

<sup>54</sup> Hill, *Collected Essays*, 3, 65; *History Today*, 41 (April 1991) reprinted in *England's Turning Point* (London, 1998), pp. 291–6.

and unknown. They were all part of Winstanley's 'universal community' of equals. Some day it would not be defeated.

Hill's sympathy for the downtrodden and unsuccessful was an unchanging part of his historical and his practical beliefs. Everyone who knew him will remember the cheerful, communicative and unassuming Christopher whose vast knowledge and thought were borne so lightly. The world-eminent historian who after delivering a major lecture queued for fish and chips with two former pupils and the lucid thinker who seized on whatever was valid in the blundering of others seemed unique. He was often described as 'quizzical' and some remarks were recalled, on reflection, as skilfully ambiguous. He could make unsupported assertions and evade awkward questions; but on fundamental principles he would not be shaken. On everything else he was increasingly ready to admit that he might be wrong. 'Certainties come, certainties go: history alone remains, because history changes with the events it records.'<sup>55</sup> And history meant the interconnection of society, politics, economics, religion and literature. Who else connected them so well?

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<sup>55</sup> Hill, *The Century of Revolution*, p. 311; Brian Manning, 'The Legacy of Christopher Hill', *International Socialism Journal*, 99 (2003).

