History and the Present

Christopher Hill

Introduction by Mary Fulbrook

65th Conway Memorial Lecture
26 April 1989
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SOUTH PLACE ETHICAL SOCIETY

South Place Ethical Society has been in existence for almost two centuries. In 1888 its name was changed from South Place Religious Society to South Place Ethical Society. It has slowly shed religious forms, with *Hymns of Modern Thought* unsung from the 1960s. In 1980 it was decided that the Society was a charity, with these objects (as interpreted by its General Committee in the light of the 1980 Court ruling): the study and dissemination of ethical principles; the cultivation of a rational and humane way of life; the advancement of education in fields relevant to these objects.

Formally, the Society's objects are "the study and dissemination of ethical principles and the cultivation of a rational religious sentiment."

Its journal, *The Ethical Record*, is among the benefits which members enjoy (subscription still £4 a year). Its library is also open to members. Meetings every Sunday morning and afternoon are open to all—as is the annual Conway Memorial Lecture. Further features of the Society's year are Sunday concerts in the evening, and classes on weekdays (recent themes include Paths to Humanism; Evolution and Controversies in Biology; Futures, Utopias, Science Fiction; Third World in One World; Humanism and the Novel; Radical Britain 1930s-1980s), as well as a newly instituted annual prize for an unpublished pamphlet on a secular theme.

In 1989, South Place Ethical Society is a centre in London, with national and also transnational links, for the introduction and exchange of fresh concepts and goals.

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CONWAY, CARLYLE, HILL

This is the sixty-fifth Conway Memorial lecture. In introducing his Republican Superstitions, Moncure Conway published a letter from Louis Blanc, containing the sentence “As you have rightly observed, there are political as well as religious superstitions, nor are the former more easily uprooted than the latter”.

That letter of 1872 prompted a reading of Conway’s autobiography. He describes the “shadow” Thackeray’s sudden death put over a sermon by F. D. Maurice—on whom in any case “the burden of the world’s labour rested more heavily . . . than on the working-men themselves”. Conway then recalls Carlyle’s saying “the English Church was ‘the apotheosis of decency’, which was no characteristic of the conventicle. He had not for many years entered either church or chapel, but, when visiting some friends in the country, was persuaded to go to a dissenting chapel. ‘The preacher’s prayer’, he said, “filled me with consternation. O Lord, thou hast plenty of treacle up there; send a stream of it down to us! . . . He did not seem in the least to know that what such as he needed was rather a stream of brimstone’”.

Conventicle, dissent, no truck with treacle from on high: freely associated elements in Christopher Hill’s world-enlightening work, and binding power as historian and critic. He has observed that Bunyan’s The Holy City “is not about ‘the life beyond’ but about living on earth, now”. History and the Present assists the forces of life on our shared planet.

Nicholas Hyman
CHRISTOPHER HILL was born in 1912 and educated at St Peter's School, York and at Balliol College, Oxford (of which he was later Master, like John Wyclif before). His numerous distinctions include honorary doctorates from the Universities of Hull, East Anglia, Glasgow, Exeter, Wales, Sheffield, Bristol, York, and from the Open University and the Sorbonne Nouvelle. He is a Foreign Honorary Member of the American and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences; and an Honorary Associate of the Rationalist Press Association.

He was awarded the W. H. Smith prize in 1989 for his study of John Bunyan.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*The Good Old Cause: The English Revolution of 1640-60*  
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*Economic Problems of the Church: From Archbishop Whitgift to the Long Parliament*  
*Lenin and the Russian Revolution*  
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*The Century of Revolution*  
*God's Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution*  
*Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*  
*Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution*  
*Reformation to Industrial Revolution*  
*The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution*  
*Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England*  
*Winstanley: The Law of Freedom and other Writings* (edited)  
*Change and Continuity in 17th Century England*  
*Some Intellectual Consequences of the English Revolution*  
*Milton and the English Revolution*  
(Heinemann award; Milton Society of America award)  
*The Experience of Defeat: Milton and Some Contemporaries*  
*Religion and Politics in 17th century England*  
*Writing and Revolution in 17th century England*  
*The World of the Muggletonians* (with Barry Reay and William Lamont)  
*People and Ideas in 17th century England*  
*A Turbulent, Seditious and Factious People—John Bunyan and his Church*  


Michael Roberts "A Nation of Prophets": England and Christopher Hill  
*(History Workshop, 27 (1989)*)

MARY FULBROOK lectures in German History at University College, London, and is the author of *Piety and Politics: Religion and the Rise of Absolutism in England, Württemberg and Prussia*
Introduction

It gives me great pleasure to introduce Christopher Hill, a man of great stature, who has combined many things in his career: immense intellectual contributions as well as considerable controversy; the English orthodoxy of being Master of Balliol College, Oxford, as well as the English heterodoxy of being a committed Marxist in a hostile climate. Even within Marxism, Hill’s work has been controversial. The son of strong Methodists, Hill has always been interested in the power and impact of religion, while at the same time exploring the material reasons which make religious views appear meaningful to people in their everyday lives. Moreover, Hill is a man of strong ethical and political principles, who has always felt that history cannot be a dry, academic subject, divorced from the struggles of the present. The passion and commitment, the taking of the cause of the underdog in his work, has further affected the debates surrounding his writings.

Christopher Hill early became a committed Marxist, and his espousal of radical views soon left its stamp on his writing. His first book, *The English Revolution, 1640* (1940), was perhaps the most procrustean in its Marxist interpretation, but at least rescued the English Revolution as an important historical event from the previously dominant Whig gradualist views of history, which at best ignored this minor hiccup, as they saw it, in England’s evolutionary progress. Subsequent writings were much more subtle, sophisticated, and sensitive to the complexities of the historical process, with an eye to the range of ambiguities involved in Marx’s dictum that people make their own history, but in conditions not of their own
choosing. Hill’s massive piece of research on *Economic Problems of the Church* (1956) illuminated all manner of interconnections between economy, society, politics and religion. Although it has stimulated an immense amount of increasingly detailed subsequent empirical research, as an interpretive opus it has arguably never been bettered, and remains a classic of English history. Hill then turned his attentions away from the establishment to a range of heterodoxies. If I may add a personal note, it was reading Hill’s book on *Society and Puritanism* (1964) as a young graduate student which stimulated me into wanting to do research on Puritanism also. I only later discovered what a hornet’s nest I was stepping into. Hill also turned his sights, not only onto the great individuals of early modern England—Oliver Cromwell, John Milton, and others—but also on resurrecting the beliefs of the smallest, apparently craziest sects of the revolutionary period, as documented in *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972). For Hill, there could be no enormous condescension of posterity; every voice had a right to be heard. Moreover, every listener in the twentieth-century had a right to hear; Hill also wrote two eminently readable textbooks on early modern English history, as well as being involved in the foundation of that important historical journal *Past and Present*.

There is not space here to detail all the many contributions made by Hill in his marvellously productive career; nor to respond to the many criticisms levelled against him, from a wide variety of positions, over the course of the years. To some extent, all great thinkers must expect criticisms, while hoping that their contribution will enable succeeding generations, standing on their shoulders, to see further than they were themselves able. But Hill’s work has perhaps been more unfairly criticised than most. In large degree this has been due to his evident passions, his taking of sides, and seeking to illuminate beacons in the darkness of exploitative, unequal societies. No doubt Hill, like all great scholars, would be the first to recognize his own areas of weakness; but one weakness to which he
has never succumbed is that of a politically motivated distortion of history. He has always sought, as best and honestly as he could, to reconstruct aspects of the past in the light of current concerns and endeavours. One definition of a PhD thesis has it that research is about transferring dead bones from one graveyard to another. Hill’s work has constantly reminded us that history is not about meaningless dates and dead bones, but about human beings, past and present, communicating to each other across the generations, exploring the limitations and possibilities for human action, and helping us, as responsible human beings, to live more intelligently in the present.

There can be no more appropriate topic for Christopher Hill to speak to you on than the one he has chosen: History and the Present. I am delighted to hand over to Christopher Hill and to ask him to give the Conway Memorial Lecture for 1989.

Mary Fulbrook
History and the Present

It is a great honour to be invited to give a Conway Memorial Lecture. But when Nicholas Hyman sent me last year's lecture, to show the kind of thing that was expected, my heart sank. It was *The Meaning of Life* by Sir Alfred Ayer. Philosophers are always cleverer than historians, and Freddie Ayer is one of the wittiest men I know. What could be the historian's equivalent to *The Meaning of Life*? I chose *History and the Present* as a way of keeping my options open. What in fact you are going to get are the uncoordinated reflections on his subject of a rather elderly practitioner. In the background will be the present crisis of our educational system, which is endangering the survival of our universities as competitive academic institutions, though for the purposes of this lecture I shall assume that they will somehow continue to exist.

I feel very strongly that the government's latest proposal to separate teaching from research, and to concentrate research in a few selected centres would be disastrous, at least as far as the arts are concerned. No amount of research will turn a bad teacher into a good one, but teaching is a necessary stimulant for researchers, because
students are always making one rethink what one is saying, forcing us however reluctantly to make communicable sense of our ideas. To herd researchers into a ghetto of excellence, where they talk only to each other, is a recipe for the production of erudite and incomprehensible abstract thinking.

Also in the background will be the promised new national curriculum for schools. I have no first-hand experience of teaching history in schools, which must be a task of formidable difficulty: schoolteachers, I am sure, can never be paid enough. But I have some ideas about the sort of history that should not be taught.

History means two things: first the past as we believe it to have existed, and second the past as we attempt to reconstruct it in our writings. Cynics say that when historians claim to be describing the past they are really writing contemporary history—or autobiography. This is true to the extent that the new questions which each generation of historians asks inevitably reflect the interests of that generation. This is clearly true of 17th-century English history, which I know best. When Britain got manhood suffrage, historians rediscovered Leveller democracy; the rise of socialism and communism created a new interest in Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers; the women’s movement drew the attention of historians to the fact that women were not an invention of the Industrial Revolution; the student revolution of the 1960s revived interest in Ranter libertinism and scepticism. A kind reviewer even said that a book which I published in 1984 called *The Experience of Defeat*, dealing with Milton and other radicals after 1660, represented my reaction to Margaret Thatcher.

It is right and proper that historians should ask new questions of the past, and such questions may well be stimulated by happenings in our own society. I can see no objection to this so long as our answers do not derive from
the present. I remember having a rather unprofitable argument with a Chinese historian, who said that what went wrong in 17th-century England was that the English revolutionaries lacked an organised and disciplined party with a clear ideology. He didn’t say “Like the Chinese Communist Party”, but that I fear is what he meant.

When I was young every bright up-and-coming historian had to discover a new revolution in the past. Even Geoffrey Elton found “the Tudor Revolution in Government”. Others located Industrial Revolutions in 16th- and even 13th-century England. Now, quite the other way, the with-it thing is to abolish revolutions: to say that none of what have been called revolutions had any causes or consequences. The French and Industrial Revolutions went some time ago, the English Revolution is under attack; only the Russian Revolution has been allowed to survive, and that will no doubt go in due course. It is possible to suspect that this change in fashion has something to do with the politics of the two periods: though in noting the swing of the pendulum as a historical fact I am not saying that we haven’t all learnt a great deal from—say—Sir Geoffrey Elton’s work on 16th century England and Earl Russell’s on the 17th century. But finality has still not been reached.

The most fruitful change in historical attitudes in my time, I think, has been the emergence of “history from below”—the realisation that ordinary people also have a history, perhaps that they played more part in determining the shape of the historical process, whether for change or for continuity, than we have thought. This new emphasis must, I suppose, be related to the emergence of a more self-consciously democratic society. History no longer deals exclusively with kings and their mistresses, prime ministers and wars, statutes and debates in Parliament. The work of Edward Thompson, George Rudé and Keith Thomas has changed all that: and they, interestingly enough, are the
historians who are best known outside Britain. There is a declining band of traditionalists who continue to think that only political, constitutional and administrative history is real history: those who argue for history from below want to add a dimension to this older, narrower tradition.

Similarly with women’s history, which as a serious subject dates from early in this century, and got going after the 1950s. I still remember the frisson of horror which went round Oxford historical circles when the enfant terrible Keith Thomas put on a series of lectures on “Women in 17th-century England”. We have moved a long way since then. Women’s history, I suppose, is the best advertisement for the beneficial result of asking of the past questions which arise from the present. One of the things I am most ashamed of is that for decades I proudly illustrated the spread of democratic ideas in 17th-century England by quoting the ringing Leveller declarations, “the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he”, “every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government”. Every he? Every man? What about the other 50% of the population? I suppose in one sense I must have noticed the absence of woman from these statements; but I somehow assumed that that had to be taken for granted in 17th-century England. But if we are to understand that society we have to ask why it was taken for granted—not only by men, but even by Leveller women who canvassed, agitated, petitioned, leafleted and lobbied for the vote for their menfolk and apparently never even thought of asking for it for themselves. Once we ask the question, other questions are opened up about the overwhelming influence of the Bible, about the law of property, about the prevalence of the household economy. We have to undertake a bigger rethink of the past than even feminist historians have yet realised.