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Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2002).

Harold Perkin, *The Making of a Social Historian* (London: Athena Press, 2002).

David Rubinstein, *But He'll Remember: An Autobiography* (York: William Sessions, 1999).

John Saville, *Memoirs from the Left* (London: Merlin Press, 2003).

E. H. Carr famously advised the student of history to 'study the historian before you study the facts'. Four opportunities to follow this advice have recently arisen, in the form of the autobiographies of four prominent twentieth-century historians. Together, and in various ways, these four books deliver the verdicts of members of the first and second generations of British post-war economic and social historians on the historical profession, the lives that have been spent within it, the political considerations that shaped those lives and their impact on the discipline of history – especially economic and social history – and, incidentally, on the wider course of human history in the twentieth century.

Eric Hobsbawm's *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* is the longest and on the whole the most interesting of the four autobiographies. Hobsbawm describes in some detail his early life as a British citizen growing up and being educated, first in Vienna and then in Berlin, recalling Hitler's accession to power in January 1933 and his own subsequent move to Britain as a teenager. Hobsbawm's political commitment began strikingly young: he joined a Communist organisation for the first time at the age of fifteen (pp. 66-7). He admits that his 'passionate commitment to world revolution' (p. 57) would probably not have arisen in a different context (he instances 1950s England and 1980s America). Nevertheless, the story of this political commitment is the one thread that runs right through the book, although it is dealt with at length in a particularly well written chapter entitled 'Being Communist', as well as in two chapters on the Cold War and 'Stalin and after'. Hobsbawm honestly and eloquently deconstructs his own and his fellow Communists' personal and collective histories, writing with disarming frankness about his and their political disappointments. Of 'that traumatic year', 1956, he recalls the 'collective nervous breakdown' experienced by the British Communists (pp. 205-6), and of his decision to remain in the Party, in contrast to those who left or were expelled, he reflects that his own 'situation as a man cut loose from his political moorings was not substantially different from theirs' (p. 216). The second half of the 1950s were, for Hobsbawm, a 'Watershed' (the title of chapter 13), after which he found himself 'well on the way to the everyday life of academic and middle-class respectability', after which 'nothing much happens any longer to the subject of autobiography except inside his or her head or in other people's heads' (p. 222). Having said this, the book continues for a further two hundred pages! Hobsbawm's text is littered with brief character-sketches of Communists, fellow travellers, and other individuals whose encounters, fleeting or longer term, with the author are frankly, often wittily and at times lovingly recounted. Hobsbawm's wide knowledge of many countries and their political figures since the second world war is displayed in a series of chapters at the end of the book, in which his considered reflections on Europe, South America and the USA are delivered.

The complexity of Hobsbawm's life and his diverse involvements in politics, academia and jazz, his two marriages and his many personal friendships, would make it virtually impossible to structure an autobiography around a simple chronology of his life. Many of the chapters are thematic: one, for example, is devoted to the eccentric architect Clough Williams-Ellis and the part of north Wales in which Hobsbawm spent many of his family holidays, although even here the political dimension is interwoven with the personal recollections as Hobsbawm describes the growth of Welsh nationalism in the area. Two describe his life as a professional historian, although of course there are many other references to this in the rest of the book. According to Hobsbawm, it was the second world war – spent with the Royal Engineers, who found themselves 'lumbered with an intellectually overqualified and practically underqualified oddball with minimal gifts for the military life' (p. 156), and then with the Army Education Corps – which set his research career back by six years and hence enabled him to enjoy a longer working life than many of his fellow post-war academic historians. (His time in the Army Education Corps was a frustrating one, but as a lecturer at Birkbeck he spent much of the rest of his life working in the education of adults.) He did not become a professor until his mid-fifties, although he feels that this can be partially explained by his Communist stance during the Cold War (p. 302). During his period as a professional historian, he remembers spending, along with his colleagues, much of his 'working time on the routines of teaching, research, meetings and examining' and much of his leisure time 'in the society of other academics, a species which, however interesting as individuals, is not thrilling company en masse' (p. 298). It is a tribute to Hobsbawm's wide range of interests that most of his autobiography does not relate directly to his career as an academic historian, and that he reflects so engagingly on his multi-faceted life and experiences.

Harold Perkin's *Making of a Social Historian* has a clearer structure than *Interesting Times*, reflecting his less geographically and politically hectic life and his closer focus on his own life history; various threads hold Perkin's narrative together more effectively than Hobsbawm finds possible. Perkin describes in some detail his upbringing in the Staffordshire Potteries, his time as a student at Cambridge and his early career as a historian. He goes on to recount his involvement with the Association of University Teachers – of which he was the historian and president – his distinguished body of published work as a historian, his work with Granada Television on popular history programmes in the 1960s and, subsequently, his move to Northwestern University in Chicago. The book ends with two chapters expounding Perkin's views on the recent economic, social and political history of the world and how historians should adopt a global social-historical approach to their work. Unlike Hobsbawm, who is concerned to document his experiences of, and opinions about, various regions and nations of the world without really considering the implications of these opinions for the future course of historical scholarship, Perkin, whose book revolves around the historical discipline, links his interpretations of recent world history into the themes that have dominated his own published work over the years. His autobiography is in part a defence of his emphasis on the 'growth of professional society', and in part an attempt to widen this interpretation of the past to cover countries other than the United Kingdom; it is also an account of one man's life that epitomises the evolution and the significance of British professional society. Universities and the university life dominate the book – there is an appropriately misspelt reference to 'Christopher Robbins' Milne (p. 14) – and it is through the prism of higher education that Perkin, unsurprisingly, views the world. Perkin

understands higher education to be the 'key profession' in modern society: in this book his view of universities as 'an integral part of society and its reproduction' (p. 172) informs the whole story of his life.

Politically, Perkin has never been a Communist: he dates his antipathy to Communism to his schooldays, when, he read 'Marx and Co.' and 'came to the conclusion that they had got it wrong' (p. 40). He was, apparently from childhood, 'a socialist in the social democratic sense, attached to a liberal belief in individual freedom', and he 'suspected the intolerant, authoritarian streak in the communists and fellow travellers' with whom he came into contact (p. 41). The working-class young man's traditional dislike of 'public school lefties' (p. 41) no doubt intensified this suspicion of the Communists. At Cambridge in the immediate post-second world war years Perkin found that he was 'not hard left enough' for the Socialist Club (p. 54), and spent his time engaged in the more traditional undergraduate pastimes of rowing, writing for *Varsity*, acting in the Footlights and hanging around with girls from Newnham and Homerton. Repeatedly Perkin points to middle-class Marxist historians of the working classes and what he perceives as their lack of understanding of the realities of working-class life, although he does admit that the challenge of writing about a social group remote from one's own is a valuable one for the historian, and can make for good history. 'It would have been far better', he suggests, 'for left-wingers to write business history and right-wingers to write labour history: they would have been forced to use their imaginations and confront their own prejudices' (p. 62). This hope, while not entirely unrealised within the historical profession, is Perkin's most striking statement in this book about the way he feels that history should be written.

Perkin, who started high school in 1938, was too young to serve in the second world war, but like Hobsbawm his experience of military life – during his National Service with the RAF – was one which involved him in adult education, as an RAF education officer at Bridgenorth. He also worked for the WEA, and briefly held a position at Holly Royde residential college in Manchester, in a rather unfulfilling position teaching overseas and short-term release students what might be described as liberal studies; some of his comments in this section (pp. 71-93) are of particular interest to the historian of adult education. Following his appointment as the first lecturer in social history in the United Kingdom, at the University of Manchester in 1951, Perkin found himself teaching students from a range of backgrounds, not only those trained in political or 'hard economic' history, but also in a variety of arts and social sciences. From an early stage, then, social history as taught in universities crossed disciplinary boundaries. As a 'pioneer' of the discipline, Perkin had no doubt as to its importance. He recalls telling his interview panel at Manchester that

social history was not the 'residual' history of Trevelyan, history with the politics left out, but the history of society, a history with backbone. Social structure was the framework in which every other activity in life operated, the foundation on which every other kind of history rested, and without which political and economic history lacked context (p. 93).

He continues: 'I harangued them for twenty minutes or more without a break'! Duly appointed, Perkin went on to his well known career as a historian, many episodes from which the autobiography rehearses. For example, he describes the establishment of the Social History Society, recalling how he and his fellow founder members 'avoided publishing a journal' (p. 165). On the whole the book provides a readable

and quite exhaustive account of a life in social history, although some sections – for example, an interesting but breathless whistle-stop summary of the history of the self, from Adam and Eve to George Soros (pp. 283-6) – are not particularly thorough and perhaps need not have been included.

David Rubinstein's *But He'll Remember* recounts the life of another early lecturer in social history, appointed to his post at the University of Hull fourteen years after Perkin's appointment at Manchester. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1932, the son of a concert pianist, Rubinstein studied at Swarthmore College, a Quaker establishment in Philadelphia, before making what he describes as a 'quixotic' decision to emigrate to Britain at the age of 22 (p. 320). Always an anglophile and a socialist, he became active in Labour politics in the mid-1950s while reading for his PhD at the LSE; he then worked in London as a comprehensive school teacher for some years. This period of his life was punctuated by two years in the American army, mostly based in France, where he lived with his first wife. There is a rather fleeting reference to his limited involvement with army education (p. 102), but this does not appear to have had the importance to Rubinstein that it did to Hobsbawm or Perkin. In 1965 Rubinstein took up his post at Hull – he gives credit for his appointment to John Saville (pp. 137-8) – where he was to remain until 1988. He is quite frank about his personal and professional unhappiness during many of these years; perhaps because of this, the personalities of the other historians with whom he worked are not explored as fully as the professional historian reading the book might wish. Nor do we get much detail on the departmental politics at Hull which so frustrated Rubinstein, especially during his period as head of department. We get much more on another circle in which Rubinstein moved: the Ramblers Association, his involvement with which he describes at considerable length. After leaving the higher education sector, he worked in local government, as a political adviser to the Labour group on Tower Hamlets Borough Council: again, this period of his life, and those with whom he worked, is covered in depth. Here in particular his declared aim of avoiding turning 'this account of my working life ... into a list of names' (p. 264) is not really achieved. The final two substantive chapters form the least interesting part of the book, describing a world tour undertaken with his second wife Ann Holt (like Joan Perkin, also a historian): this is little more than a diary of a long holiday, although there are some perceptive comments on the cultural differences between America and Britain from the perspective of a man who had transferred his citizenship from the former to the latter more than three decades previously.

The political dimension of Rubinstein's life has been important, and in this he bears comparison with the other autobiographers. He has never been a Communist, either in the USA or in Britain; and he admits that his attitude towards Communism was probably coloured by his American upbringing. As he notes (p. 59), in his student days at Swarthmore he 'had not been tempted to join the party (and indeed would not have known how to), though [he] was later to sympathise from the sidelines with its British counterpart'. He was undoubtedly influenced by individual Communists, not least Sam Fisher, head of history at Woodberry Down comprehensive school under whom Rubinstein taught, 'one of the Communist intellectuals of the 1930s generation which had such a marked influence on British intellectual life after the war' (p. 89); as representatives of this tradition Rubinstein instances Hobsbawm, John Saville, Rodney Hilton, Christopher Hill and Brian Simon, with whom Rubinstein co-wrote a history of comprehensive education in Britain. Rubinstein was a Bevanite in the 1950s, a reluctant supporter of the Wilson-led Labour party (although he allowed his membership to lapse for many years), and

was also an active member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. As with Hobsbawm's, political disappointment is an important theme of Rubinstein's book:

Our world is one of mass ignorance and consequent exploitation in which the social solidarity of the past, which for all its faults was real enough, has degenerated into unbalanced and selfish individualism. Our vision of reality is the product of the mass media, and much of the population has lost interest in anything other than sensation and tinsel images. For someone who has spent most of his working life primarily engaged in trying to persuade children to read and think for themselves this has been particularly disappointing (p. 321).

Rubinstein is frustrated that the age in which he is writing is a 'non-political' one (p. 119), and he contrasts this with the years during which he first lived in Britain. He may reflect, however, that the age of political apathy, even among professional historians, is not new: his colleagues at Hull in the 1960s apparently (p. 142) 'typified the male members of the Great British Public in showing little interest, outside their research, in other subjects than cars, sport, holidays and sex'.

One colleague of whom this was not, in Rubinstein's view, true, was John Saville, whose *Memoirs from the Left* recalls a lifetime of sometimes passionate political commitment and involvement in a range of academic activities. Saville echoes Rubinstein in regretting that the 'majority of British academics are technicians' and 'do not form part of an intelligentsia concerned with the wider cultural or political issues in the world beyond their stone or redbrick buildings' (p. 1). In this book, as in Hobsbawm's, the author's personal history is interwoven with the key events of the twentieth century with which he has been associated: in Saville's case, the narrative is organised around the events of 1956 and their implications. Khrushchev's secret speech, the responses of Saville and Edward Thompson, the establishment of the *Reasoner* and *New Reasoner* and the rise of the New Left form the central themes of Saville's book and life. Although he gives a sparse account of his childhood, a somewhat fuller account of his student days at the LSE and an over-long description of his service in the second world war (his association with adult education during the war appears to have been mostly informal, although there is a brief reference to the Army Bureau of Current Affairs (p. 43)), there is rather less on the more recent period. Saville recounts his academic life fairly briefly: Rubinstein, who refers frequently to Saville, is mentioned only once in *Memoirs from the Left*, as the co-editor of the latter's *festschrift* (p. 171; see Rubinstein, p. 144). The most interesting aspects of Saville's story are his account of British Communists' support for Stalin, and his own position on the Soviet Union in the 1940s and 1950s, together with the subsequent trajectory of the New Left. Saville describes his friendships with influential left-wing intellectuals, sometimes taking issue with individuals over particular episodes, but in general offering a considered examination of the British left and his own place within it. One or two presentational idiosyncrasies are rather irritating, in particular a recurrent creative employment of the apostrophe and references to domestic servants as 'peasants' and the 'peasantry' (pp. 96, 143). Overall, Saville delivers a readable mixture of self-justification and political commentary, rounded off with a coda on the Labour party and the Iraq war of 2003.

Taken together, these four autobiographies chronicle the personal and intellectual development of a varied group of historians, all from the left. None of the lives described can be said to have been especially important in terms of the social or political history of the twentieth century: Hobsbawm in his preface confesses that he

has not been one of those ‘men and women who have actions on a wider public stage to record or defend, or who have lived close to great events and those who took decisions affecting them’ (p. xi). He modestly and probably correctly expects that, at most, his name ‘will crop up in some books on twentieth-century British intellectual culture’ (p. xii). His book consists of a series of insights into the intellectual culture of European Communism, and while his two chapters on the historical profession and his place in it are interesting, they tell the reader less than one might have hoped about a professional career whose trajectory was by no means typical. Perkin’s book is more valuable as a documentary account of a career as a historian, trade unionist and administrator, and, like the same author’s history of the Association of University Teachers, provides an account of the politics of higher education in an age of unparalleled expansion. Except in the final paragraphs, there is relatively little evidence of Perkin’s attitude to what was happening in his own times. As a result, its content is less intrinsically interesting and its appeal likely to be more narrow than that of Hobsbawm’s autobiography. The same is true for Rubinstein’s *But He’ll Remember*, which, although it recounts a lifetime of political involvement and is on the whole more self-critical than Hobsbawm’s or Perkin’s accounts, is also rather self-indulgent in places. Saville, on the whole, avoids self-indulgence, and his story of the establishment of the *Reasoner* and *New Reasoner* offers an insider’s perspective on one of the more important episodes in the history of British political culture in the second half of the twentieth century. However, it would also have been interesting to read more about the author’s views of the practice of history and the historical profession with which he has been associated.

Academic historians will find many small items of interest in all four of these autobiographies. All comment on the experience of teaching and the early stages of their careers. It is reassuring for the young historian to read Perkin’s recollection of spending ‘seven insecure years’ before being able to ‘feel home and dry, no longer liable to be cast out into the outer darkness of school teaching or worse’ (p. 106). Alternatively, Rubinstein, who spent many happy years in this ‘outer darkness’ before embarking on lecturing life, recalls the frustration of seminar teaching at Hull: ‘it was not always a simple matter to motivate a seminar and persuade the students to take part in discussion’ (p. 141). Hobsbawm gives his own views on colleagues and students, memorably characterising M. M. Postan, for example, as ‘impressive, charming and absurd’ (p. 283). Saville’s fond recollections of Philip Larkin, who differed greatly from him in temperament and political outlook, are interesting (pp. 137-45). Different readers will pick out different favoured anecdotes from the four books: I particularly enjoyed Saville’s recollections of the bawdy songs sung in the sergeants’ mess in the Shetland Islands, which enliven some otherwise rather dull material on the second world war (pp. 48-50; the account of Saville’s experiences in India at the end of the war is much more interesting than his recollections of the war in Britain). All these books are worth reading, for different reasons. All recount lives which have influenced to a greater or lesser extent the development of the discipline of social history in British and overseas universities, and all offer insights into the lives and opinions of those who have spent their careers in the historical profession. All have something to say about British and international politics and society in the twentieth century.

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