

Afterword: The Historian's Work in Progress

Right up until his death in 1996 Samuel continued with his attempts to provoke and facilitate historical debate. He was closely involved in the conceptual development of proposals for MA courses in historiography and public history at Ruskin College.¹ Notably, these courses were as much about the idea of history as they were courses in history. In 1996, the last year of his life, he left Ruskin College, bound for the University of East London (UEL) where he assumed responsibility for a proposed Centre for East London History, a fitting homecoming for the Londoner whose natural affinity to the city, and attraction to its diverse communities and converging layers of histories, had been lifelong.² In the Centre, he saw another opportunity to create a space for unspoken histories to find a voice through shared discussion and debate.³

Samuel turned the role of the historian upside down, inverting many accepted conventions for both professional and radical history-making. Working within a postwar political and intellectual culture characterised by fragmentation, he responded by expanding his emphasis from the subject matter or theory of history to its entire mode of production. In doing so, he reimagined its social value. 'Good' history was not an unanswerable argument but a conversation with an open invitation. Critics who bewailed his inconsistencies and ambiguities did not misinterpret him but failed to recognise that striving for conceptual authority was not what motivated him as an intellectual.

1 Hilda Kean, 'People, Historians and Public History; De-mystifying the Process of History Making', *Public Historian*, 32, 3 (2010), 25–38.

2 Carolyn Steedman, 'Raphael Samuel 1934–1996', *Radical Philosophy*, 82, Mar–Apr (1997), 53–55.

3 Following his death, it was renamed the Raphael Samuel History Centre.

In understanding Samuel as a historian, biography provides a crucial insight, unavailable by other means. In a field dominated by ‘generations’ and the collisions between them, he occupied a ‘nonconformist’ position, making it difficult to align him to one or other political moment or tradition.⁴ His ideas and practices were fluid and adaptive, evident in the various roles (organiser-activist, club chairman, adult tutor, oral historian, Workshop editor) that he assumed in different contexts. But amongst these subtle transformations, there remained a continuous thread: democracy was realised in the practice as much as in the theory.

The matter of his legacy as a historian and intellectual is difficult to assess. He deliberately worked in close dialogue with his times, with the result that much of his work has a dated feel. His ‘social outsiders’ were more likely to be Gypsies, Jews and the Irish rather than women, ethnic or sexual minorities.⁵ Despite this, there are components of a tangible legacy. The *History Workshop Journal (HWJ)*, of which Samuel was a key founding editor, continues and, whilst more of an academic journal in character than originally intended, still strives to occupy a critical territory in contemporary historiography.

In terms of his writing, texts such as *Theatres of Memory* feel heavy-handed and repetitive. He was tackling ideas which have subsequently become more familiar and more fluently expressed, but here again he still touched on themes that have contemporary relevance in a style that continues to offer a unique perspective on what have become more common questions of historical representation. Further evidence of his enduring significance can also be seen in a number of recent studies that have used his work as the basis for their own investigations into the politics of heritage, memory and the role of the historian.⁶

Samuel’s legacy also contains elements that are hard to measure. His main stock-in-trade was inspiration and the provision of spaces to experiment. The History Workshop (HW) movement (in conjunction with other spaces and endeavours such as the Social History Group and the Centre

4 Ken Jones, ‘Raphael Samuel: Against Conformity’, *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education*, 5, 1 (1998), 17–26.

5 Lynne Segal, ‘Lost Worlds: Political Memoirs of the Left in Britain’, *Radical Philosophy*, 121, Sept–Oct (2003), 6–23.

6 Laurajane Smith, *The Uses of Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, eds, *Memory, History, Nation: Contested Pasts* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006); Jorma Kalela, *Making History: The Historian and the Uses of the Past* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

for Social History) all helped to facilitate the development of cultural history in Britain. Within this, the HW in particular contributed to the development of a British feminist history.

The HW and the *HWJ* provided a crucial ‘nursery’ for the early work of a number of prominent British historians.⁷ Samuel’s work as a tutor was also directly influential for a generation of historians such as Sally Alexander, Alun Howkins and Paul Martin, all of whom were his former students.⁸ Equally, there were countless others who benefited not only from his approach to history but also from his compassion and support. Some of these became prominent, holding high-profile public offices; others are not so widely known, but play significant roles in politics, social and community work, and educational and heritage work.

Samuel’s most enduring significance, however, was the attitudinal response he offered to plurality in history-making. Instead of lamenting the fragmentation of conceptual categories, he shifted focus onto how they could be brought into dialogue with one another. Assessing an attitudinal change requires an adjustment in what we acknowledge as intellectual work. Samuel suggests the need to read texts for their performative points as much as their content or intellectual affiliations, to see the skill in organising a journal, project or event as much as that required for turning out well-written prose. Moreover, he demands a recognition of the work involved in guiding without (directly) imposing authority and the resourcefulness needed to ‘bring with you’ people whose social, cultural and intellectual positioning is far removed from your own, to make them feel valued and encouraged to carry on.

This raises a question of how we treat the ethical dimension of intellectual work and where this figures in our frameworks of critical judgement. When lacking a neat unfolding development of published work, professional titles and accolades, how do we ‘see’, if we ‘see’ at all, the historian who opts to make the democratisation of history-making, rather than publication, their primary professional objective?

7 Including amongst others: Sheila Rowbotham, Professor of History, University of Manchester; Gareth Stedman Jones, Professor of the History of Ideas, Queen Mary University of London; Carolyn Steedman, Emeritus Professor of History, University of Warwick; and Barbara Taylor, Professor of History, Queen Mary University of London (all correct as of April 2017).

8 Sally Alexander, Professor of Modern History, Goldsmiths University of London; Alun Howkins, Emeritus Professor of Social History, University of Sussex; Paul Martin, Associate Tutor of Museum Studies, University of Leicester (all correct as of April 2017).

The historian recast in this way is far less glamorous than the scholarly expert or the politicised intellectual (although perhaps more useful to those who benefit from it). Whilst a more modest role, it is no less difficult. It requires a magpie's eye for hidden treasure and a gadfly's glee in provocation.⁹ It demands endless patience, gritty endurance and extraordinary feats of imagination. It draws on an archive hidden in plain sight, on streets, in bodies and voices, and offers a past that is always in progress, the work of a vast ensemble cast. This was the role of the people's historian that Raphael Samuel adopted, adapted and came to personify.

9 Samuel's magpie qualities were frequently noted by commentators: '[T]hat great cornucopia of popular life and customs', Stuart Hall, 'Raphael Samuel: 1934–1996', *New Left Review*, 1/221, Jan–Feb (1997), 126; '[A] show case for Samuel's quite astonishing historical and cultural range ...', Stefan Collini, 'Speaking with Authority: The Historian As Social Critic', in *English Pasts: Essays in History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 95. I am grateful to Lawrence Goldman for suggesting the term 'gadfly' in relation to Samuel's general intellectual persona.

This text is taken from *The Histories of Raphael Samuel: A portrait of a people's historian*, by Sophie Scott-Brown, published 2017 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.