The Workshop Historian: Ruskin College and the Early Years of the History Workshop

It is rare to hear of a history conference being described as a ‘festival of history’ or a ‘carnival of scholarship’, but these are exactly the phrases used to convey a sense of the atmosphere of a History Workshop (HW) meeting.¹ By the late 1960s these Workshops were attracting all the tribes of socialism, along with various of their kin or ‘fellow travellers’: young and old, students, activists, amateur enthusiasts, all descending upon and crowding into Ruskin College’s Buxton Hall.² The HW’s makeshift, make-do and do-it-yourself charm were made all the more potent against the stern gothic grandeur of its Oxford surroundings.

Established historians and graduate students stood side by side with Ruskin students delivering papers that delved into the suffering and struggling, the dismay and defiance of working-class lives. These papers drew not only from archival research but also from oral testimonies. Sometimes they even broke out of the comfort of the hall and meeting room to take living history walks around the ancient city they found themselves in. They celebrated the pasts inscribed onto human minds, bodies and environments. Beyond the papers themselves, the Workshops were opportunities for animated debate, socialising, films and folk music,

² Workshops were held at Ruskin College’s Walton Street, Oxford, location during this time.
reunions and new encounters. What was lacking in elegant catering arrangements was made up for in passion, of which there was no shortage, both in its political and personal guises. Acts of unity and solidarity abounded in all possible forms.

Central to this action was the lean figure of Raphael Samuel dashing about, seemingly everywhere, his trademark dark hair in a state of perpetual disarray as he seamlessly switched from supportive tutor to event organiser to coparticipant, talking avidly all the while. This was Samuel in his element and at the height of his powers, revelling in the dynamic atmosphere, the intense discussions, the converging of politics with history and personal conviction. The liveliness and dynamism of these events gave him purpose and energy, quite different from the forlorn and half-starved figure that arrived at Ruskin in late 1962.

Like the New Left, the HW is also subject to various interpretive incarnations. Alongside Samuel’s own accounts of its genesis and development, discussion has ranged in the assessments offered: from those who view it as a key crucible for the development of cultural history or as a model of emancipatory pedagogic practice to those critics who perceived in its political-intellectual orientation limitations which were both fostered and exacerbated by its militant populism.
Looking back in later years, Bill Schwarz, a former workshopper, explained this profusion of opinion by arguing that the early Workshop had encompassed three distinctive historical-political ‘moments’ which he characterised as 1935 (Popular Front), 1956 (New Left) and 1968 (Countercultural Revolution). He defined these ‘moments’ in reference to their positioning of class as the critical political category of focus. The first, 1935, viewed an alternative or popular history as one firmly embedded within a framework of the labour movement and workers’ history. The second, 1956, adapted this by offering a more expansive view of class, sensitive to questions concerning working-class consciousness and its expression through cultural form. The third, 1968, signalled a move towards the decentralisation of class in favour of a more diffuse range of political-cultural identities (such as gender, race or sexuality). Whilst compatible on many points, Schwarz argued that these ‘moments’ contained fundamental differences in their respective political and intellectual agendas generating conflict in later years.7

Whilst Schwarz is right to identify distinctive political and conceptual strands active within the HW, these were far from being clearly defined. The boundaries between them were porous and fluid, reflective of the eclecticism characteristic of the times more generally. For the political left, the late 1960s contained a curious mixture of confidence and confusion.8 A resurgence of enthusiasm for Marxism coexisted with renewed interest in anarchist and libertarian traditions in which the creative individual and the ‘organic community’ were extolled over the planned society.9

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Equally, a surge in union militancy found itself both in and out of step with a proliferation of social movements for whom it was not class but gender, race, sexuality or the environment that occupied the central focus. Underpinning all of these diverse and disparate forms was a shared sense of optimism and faith that the world should and could be remade, that history could be rewritten and the silenced be allowed to speak. The HW, acting as a catch-all for all these contending strands, served as both product and producer of that hope.

Despite the variety of interpretations on hand concerning the HW’s approach to history, on one factor all accounts are agreed and that is the centrality of Samuel in its creation and early years. Curiously, whilst this is everywhere acknowledged, it is nowhere closely examined. The focus of this chapter is to analyse more thoroughly the role that Samuel took in setting up the HW and the nature of his relationship to it. It contends that, to some extent, he moved across all three of Schwarz’s political ‘moments’ and that the HW’s underlying agenda – to expand the use of history as critical political tool – was also continuous with his earlier activities. This view further reinforces the importance of the biographical approach in understanding Samuel as a historian. In setting up and running the HW in its early form, he drew on the cues from his communist childhood, the ethos inspired by the Popular Front and the skills and behavioural practices required for the communist organiser in conjunction with his more recent experiences as a New Left activist. He proceeded to use and adapt these in close dialogue with the political atmosphere of the time as it manifested through the particular context of Ruskin College, Oxford.

The Ruskin tutor

Samuel was very reluctant to take a full-time job at Ruskin College. He did not take it out of idealistic zeal and desire to educate adult workers alone, but out of necessity. After the break-up of the first New Left he had fled to Ireland, despairing of Labour leader Harold Wilson’s modernisation program. Whilst there, he had attempted to write some poetry and do some historical research but unable to find work had returned to England.

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quite literally starving. Once back in Oxford, he suffered from severe depression. Emotionally, physically and intellectually, he was at a very low ebb. His old comrade and mentor Christopher Hill had tried to help him find teaching work but in a show of bravado, he cancelled the interview.10

Eventually, he took a position as tutor in labour history and sociology at the trade union affiliated, adult education focused Ruskin College, Oxford, but even so he did this reluctantly with a sense of trepidation. This was a point in his life when he was deeply vulnerable, disappointed and disillusioned. Later he would say that by 1963 he was ‘psychologically no longer a Marxist’ and that during this period he became ‘quite influenced by libertarianism, anarchism and self-management’ and that he continued to foster ‘a deep suspicion of any kind of political leadership’.11 Nevertheless, there was still no simple straight line away or clean break from his earlier communist commitments.

Politically in a state of flux, Samuel was a man in search of something to believe in. It was his location at Ruskin, his position as an adult education tutor and the comradeship of Ruskin students that provided relief. He later spoke of:

[being] enormously helped by the students there and really responding enormously to them, both intellectually and politically, because then for the first time since I left the Communist Party I could kind of see what political work should be about.12

This revived sense of purpose ultimately found expression in the HW.

His early students at Ruskin were predominantly, although not entirely, older men drawn directly from the unions and the labour movement, often with various kinds of hard physical labour under their belts, experiences which had shaped both their bodies and also their minds. One had, for example, wrestled and jostled with cattle for 30 years; another had 20 years of experience working on the railways.13 Most had come to Ruskin

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10 Brian Harrison, Interview with Raphael Samuel, 23 October 1979, 19 Elder Street, London, transcripts held in Raphael Samuel Archive (RSA), Bishopsgate Institute, London.
via various union-funded schemes. Some were involved in union politics, or aspired to be. Others were not so overtly politicised, but all of them had come to Ruskin with expectations to learn.

Despite these intentions, many of the students harboured misgivings. Many had not stepped foot in a classroom for years, and the memories still rankled from the last time they had. Teachers were figures of authority, much like the overseer or the boss, who seemed more preoccupied with belittling or controlling them.¹⁴ What they had been forced to learn before had meant little to their lives. They were not always comfortable with reading or writing; not many of them did these things for pleasure. As a result, learning could be a fractious and highly sensitive process, one in which defensiveness masking wounded pride could be roused at the merest suggestion of condescension. Britain in the 1960s was still a place where social class retained a stranglehold on hopes and ambitions. The students came to Ruskin College, and sat defiantly amidst the splendour of the ancient colleges of Oxford University, because it was their college, sensitive to their needs. Or, at least, it was supposed to be.

As an institution, Ruskin College occupied a unique position in the history of adult education in England. Founded in 1899 by Americans Charles Beard and Walter and Anne Vrooman, it was named for the Victorian art critic and educator John Ruskin (1819–1900) whose philosophy of ‘purposeful education’, learning that was suitable and meaningful to an individual’s situation in life, was taken as its primary ethos.¹⁵ Conceived as an independent venture (not directly attached to an existing educational institutional or body), it was purposely designed as a working-class institution with the express intention ‘to educate working men in order to achieve social change’. This did not mean providing working-class students with a means of ascending the social ladder through education but, in keeping with its namesake’s ideals, equipping that class with its own thinkers and leaders, drawn from amongst its own communities. As Vrooman expressed it: ‘knowledge must be used to

¹⁵ For more on Ruskin’s ideas on education see: Sara E. Atwood, Ruskin’s Educational Ideals (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2011).
emancipate humanity, not to gratify curiosity, blind instincts and desire for respectability’. Accordingly, the proposed subjects of study were specifically selected to:

- guide students in gaining the knowledge which is essential for intelligent citizenship to give them a conception of the forces of the past which have contributed to the making of modern civilization; to acquaint them with the social organism of which they are a part, with the political machinery of the English speaking nations, and to inspire them with a hope for still greater achievements by mankind along rational lines.

These illustrious topics, upon which so much rested, included History (with courses on English Constitutional and Political History, the History of Christianity and American History with a separate course on English Biography), Philosophy (including a course on Comparative Religions), Literature and Art (Historical Novels), Political Science (Present Day Institutions, Industrial History, Sociology, Political Economy, Political Machinery of England and America) and Science (including Psychology and Sociology). In his later years, Beard, reflecting on the optimistic idealism that had propelled the initial venture, came to the view that it had been unrealistic to expect students, on completion of their studies, to return to their working-class lives rather than using their education to pursue their own individual ambitions.

Ruskin’s political and educational project did not go uncontested. In 1908, a conflict erupted following the publication of a report written by a group of Oxford academics outlining a proposal to enable Ruskin students to study for and sit Oxford Diplomas. In the eyes of the authors, this was a means of opening up Oxford University to working-class students, but for some amongst the Ruskin student body it represented an insidious attempt at neutralising or subduing the critical dimension of working-class education.

A group rebelled, forming the ‘Plebs League’ and running their own classes based around the principles of Marxist political-economy, enthusiastically supported by the Ruskin principal Dennis Hird who lost his job (or was ‘encouraged into early retirement’) as a result. The governors responded by closing down the college for two weeks and then reopening its doors to students who agreed to abide by its regulations, prompting a number of the rebellious students to break away altogether and set up the Central Labour College, which ran until 1929.20

It was this spirit and these principles of independent working-class education and the sense of solidarity, of confidence, that it fostered in the worker students that inspired the young Oxford-educated former Communist tutor. Samuel was naturally captivated by Ruskin’s history, carrying out substantial personal research into the college’s history and the life stories of its early former students. The points that he felt to be particularly salient he picked out in a document entitled: ‘Emphases one could bring into “The Story of Ruskin College” if one had time, inclination or felt them to be important’. These emphases included:


2. Vrooman’s ambivalent attitude to the university and academic standards. Scholarship applied to worthwhile practical ends was OK but the barren academic life was to be shunned. Seemed to fear possible effects of bringing working-men to Oxford. But also hoped the founding of Ruskin would bring a revolutionary resurgence to ‘young Oxford’ (hence title of the early magazine).

3. More stress on early combination of a strong sense of social purpose (college to train future leaders of working-class movement) plus adherence to non-doctrinal methods of teaching the social sciences. In this combination lay the seeds of the later strike depending on which was emphasised to the detriment of the other. Hird was all social purpose. Lees-Smith all liberal non-doctrinal education.

4. More stress on early days of Ruskin Hall as centre of Ruskin Hall movement.21

21 Raphael Samuel, ‘History of Ruskin College’, RS 1: New Left/Ruskin College, other Oxford institutions and interests, 401, RSA. Ruskin Hall was the original name for Ruskin College.
The list continued further in the same vein. It is worth noting Samuel’s interest in Vrooman rather than Beard. His notes further imply that he saw Vrooman as the more articulate on Ruskin’s social purpose whilst Beard, the academic historian responsible for the composition of the curriculum, assumed the more dubious role of ensuring the ‘liberal non-doctrinal’ content.

Working as a Ruskin tutor was compatible with the earlier roles and political sentiments that had attracted Samuel as a younger man. The organiser, drawn from the rank and file of party membership and distinguished by their self-taught scholarly commitment and intellectual prowess, had pronounced parallels with the role of the adult educator. As he would later comment, demonstrating his own sensitivity to the connections between the organiser and educator: ‘Recruiting – the only Party activity I was any good at – involved, I now realize, a tutor-pupil relationship, not least in its elaborate pretence of equality between the teacher and the taught’.22

Accounts from his former students suggest that he enjoyed considerable popularity as a tutor, and was remembered fondly for his eccentricities such as falling asleep whilst invigilating exams, or giving impromptu tutorials on a train.23 More seriously, he was also renowned for his considerable skills as a teacher. Dave Douglass (at Ruskin from 1966 to 1971) recalled that: ‘[N]obody had ever succeeded in getting me to work in the way he did. Raph was able to prise out of me things I didn’t know were there’.24 A trait further acknowledged by his close friend Gareth Stedman Jones who noted that ‘he led people on journeys of creative self-discovery by blowing away the walls which separated working people from literary culture’.25

His political background and general persona carried an air of radical glamour about it, which even translated into his physical appearance. One poetic account described him as follows:

23 Oral and written communications with author, 2011–12, recordings and transcripts held in author’s private collection.
24 Dave Douglass, ‘Ruskin Remembered’, *Tributes to Raphael Samuel*, held at the Bishopsgate Institute, London.
25 Stedman Jones, ‘Obituary: Raphael Samuel’. As a colleague, however, he was less popular, due to an uncanny ability to get out of tedious administrative responsibilities.
His long wildly straying hair and his narrow eager face were perfectly right for his fervent, restless personality … In later years he was described as looking like a 1960s character, but perhaps he was more like a Bohemian of the era of Baudelaire.\(^\text{26}\)

In addition to this, Samuel could be a charismatic speaker and compelling performer, with an extremely idiosyncratic lecture style. His papers were typically unscripted, with little regard for the formalities of time keeping, involving piles of notes and sources piled precariously by his side.\(^\text{27}\) They were delivered with ardent passion; at their best, his oratorical talents were unsurpassed, matched only by E.P. Thompson.\(^\text{28}\) American historian John Gillis recalled his time as a visiting graduate student in Oxford during the 1960s where he heard Samuel and Thompson speak: ‘For the first time, I felt myself connected to history, moved to draw on my own experience to illuminate the generational relations that had become increasingly problematic in the 1960s.’\(^\text{29}\)

On other occasions, however, his gifts as a speaker could fail him and he could miss the mark entirely. As former workshopper Sheila Rowbotham remembered:

> I went to hear Raphael again soon after, anticipating another tour de force. It didn't happen. This time he didn't pull it off. He spoke on Tawney but somehow lost the thread and simply relied.\(^\text{30}\)

Samuel treated his students seriously, showing great respect for and an inexhaustible interest in their lives and backgrounds.\(^\text{31}\) As former Ruskin student John Prescott (1963–65) (later British Deputy Prime Minister) reflected:

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29 Gillis, ‘Detours’, 163.
30 Rowbotham, ‘Some Memories of Raphael’. See also Stedman Jones, ‘Obituary: Raphael Samuel’. Samuel’s delivery of the 1994 James Ford public lecture in British history, Oxford, was a notorious disaster in which he failed to reach any meaningful point or argument.
31 This seriousness has been the source of some of the accusations of romanticism. There have also been suggestions that it was not always sincere. Whether or not this is the case only the man himself could tell; perhaps what is more significant is that he made people feel valued.
He had this tremendous understanding of the inner inferiority that mature students have in a society that tells them they’ve missed out. He learned from you and you learned from him. He was fascinated by other people’s experience.32

Similarly, Paul Martin (a Ruskin student from 1986 to 1988) recalling the derisive general reactions to his idea for a study on the history and use of the lapel badge in the trade union movement remembered that: ‘Raph was the only one who accepted [the project] at face value, as though its validity and interest were self-evident. As my supervisor, he was never less than enthusiastic and supportive’.33

He was also profoundly caring as a tutor, becoming deeply involved in his students’ lives and supportive of them through difficult times. As one student wrote to him in the summer of 1967:

Should I survive the course … you are the one I will owe most thanks, because you have been so very patient with me … I know this is something you would have done and will do for any pupil of yours … but as I also know there are very few tutors who would do the same, I am indeed very grateful.34

Or this from another student, writing in the previous year, which hints towards the extent that his support for his students could lead him into conflict with the college’s management:

If you ever need to justify what you are doing, and of course the very idea is stupid, but if you ever do, then simply think of me … for if you never achieve another success, then the joy and pleasure which you have given me make it all worthwhile.35

For all that he was an entertaining and kindly teacher, he was a conscientious one too, judging by the nature of his commentaries on student essays. These commentaries, written to provide feedback on student tutorial essays, were typically positive and encouraging (never unnecessarily rude or disparaging), but they were also meticulous in providing a detailed critique, often running to four or five densely typed pages, sometimes

32 Prescott, ‘Genuine Love for Others’.
34 Letter from student to Raphael Samuel, Summer 1967, RS 1: The New Left/Ruskin College, 405, RSA.
35 Letter from student to Raphael Samuel, Summer 1966, RS 1: The New Left/Ruskin College, 405, RSA.
longer than the original essay. No mistake went unamended, no obscurity remained unclarified, no potential development unacknowledged. The gravity and rigour with which he treated all his students’ work undermines any claim that he was uncritical towards them.36

All, however, was not quite so optimistic at Ruskin College during Samuel’s early years there in the 1960s. The college was undergoing a crisis in its sense of identity and educational mission, reflective, in part, of a wider situation in the field of adult education. As Tom Steele has argued, in postwar Britain, independent workers’ education was almost a moribund force. In an age enamoured with the ethos of modernisation and the languages of social planning, it was viewed as ad hoc, disorganised, and lacking in structure, clear objectives or tangible outcomes. Moreover, this time also saw a move away from ‘workers’ education’ towards a more generalised notion of ‘popular adult education’, administered and organised within extramural university departments.37

Strong objections to this were voiced by figures such as G.D.H. Cole. Writing in 1952 he advised the Workers’ Educational Association to vigorously resist handing over control to university departments, asserting that the WEA was at its healthiest when rooted in the local community and maintaining close ties with the labour movement.38 The purpose of workers’ education was at stake here, as it had been over half a decade earlier for the students of the Plebs League. There was a significant difference between educating workers to ‘get on’ in the society in which they lived or educating them in order to foster radical changes to that society, to expose and understand the structures of oppression and act as crucible for the formulation of independent ideas and practices. By collapsing workers’ education in with the more generalised notion of ‘popular liberal education’, Cole argued, its critical edge was blunted: education in this guise served to ensure the stability and continuation of the status quo,

36 See for example: Raphael Samuel, feedback on student essays, RS 1: The New Left/Ruskin College, 407, RSA. Sheila Rowbotham also recalled his thoroughness in reading her handwritten PhD thesis (despite the fact she was not one of his students or even a student at the college) and responding with detailed commentary and, again, great enthusiasm, ‘Some Memories of Raphael’, 128.


the means for gratifying personal interest or, worse still, fracturing class solidarity by offering a chosen few, often those deemed ‘the brightest’, the means for individual advancement.

Cole had issued his warning in the early 1950s; by the 1960s and 1970s the reformers and modernisers were well underway with their plans. Adult education flourished, with large extramural departments at the universities of Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Nottingham, all offering regulated programs of study and corresponding frameworks for judging educational attainment based on performance in these programs. Further indications that adult education was becoming an established, professionalised field is suggested by the emergence of the first scholarly journal, *Studies in Adult Education*, and the formation of the Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA) in 1970.39

The situation faced by Ruskin in the 1960s reflected these tensions. Its historic mission to provide independent working-class education rang ever more hollow amidst a cultural and political shift towards the more encompassing notion of ‘adult education’. Furthermore, the professionalisation of adult education increased pressures to provide students with a more tangible outcome, such as qualifications, to justify their years of study. The result, in terms of both the curriculum and ethos of the college, was ambiguity. From Samuel’s perspective:

> When I started to teach at Ruskin I was very shocked at the ways in which students were treated, adult students, worker students. And they were treated as being sort of under privileged, educationally retarded people who had somehow or other to be dragged up to the level of grammar school university entrance.40

The key point of contention amongst the staff and students at Ruskin was the college’s attachment to the Oxford Special University Diploma qualification and examination system designed and administered by Oxford University. Samuel’s notes from this time repeatedly questioned and critiqued the preoccupation with the diploma, which he felt to be ‘an unnecessary obstacle which we place in the students’ path’.41

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41 Raphael Samuel, ‘Notes towards reform of the diploma’, RS 1: The New Left/Ruskin College, 408, RSA.
The content of the diploma syllabus also raised his ire. Economics claimed the privileged position. The liberal arts were afforded very little space. The labour history course dwelt at length on the trade union movement, industrial disputes and key legislative reform in industrial relations. Social history, meanwhile, focused on charting the rate and extent of industrialisation with its attendant technological advances and shifts in patterns of work, habitation and consumption.42

A demeaning examination system that provided no opportunity for independent research and the lack of student input into the governance of the college were the key issues that fuelled an outbreak of student unrest at Ruskin in 1966. Naturally, Samuel supported the protesting students. Penning an internal document, ‘The Future of Ruskin’, he argued that the college’s enthrallment to the examination system had not only weakened its sense of purpose but was a betrayal of the hopes and expectations of the Ruskin student body. Using the polemical skills of the seasoned activist, he juxtaposed Ruskin’s own radical history, the ‘spirit of endeavour’ amongst its founders and optimism of its early working-class students, against its lacklustre present situation saying:

there is a real uncertainty about the purpose of Ruskin, and no clear view at all about its future educational role … it may be seen in the disappointment that many of our second year students express with what the College has done for them, and on the part of the staff – when faced with the question of what Ruskin is for? – by a kind of dull unease.43

In this passage he made clear that as important an issue as Ruskin’s lack of firm identity was, the shift from ‘spirit of endeavour’ to ‘dull unease’ and the loss of intellectual excitement amongst Ruskin staff and students was even more concerning.

Amongst the notes and drafts for ‘The Future of Ruskin’ document are proposals for reform. He suggested, for example, that in labour history:

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42 For example: a ‘Revision Paper’ in social and economic twentieth-century British history from 1967 includes the questions: ‘Compare and contrast the labour policies of the war time government in 1914–18 with that of 1939–45’ and ‘How do you account for decline in the rate of population growth during the first four decades of the twentieth century?’ Raphael Samuel, ‘Revision Papers for Labour and Social History 1966–1968’, Samuel 097/Undergraduate teaching, RSA.

Our students have special strengths that can be brought to bear upon the subject. Many have strong local roots and come from communities rich in the history and historical materials of the subject ... For project and vacation work – for making some creative contribution, however modest, during their period of time at Ruskin the subject is therefore one in which our students are particularly well-placed.44

Elsewhere, he recommended that economics not be a compulsory subject and that the liberal arts be better represented amongst the college courses:

For anyone who goes on to teach liberal studies, as many of our students do, the reading of literature would be plainly of more importance [than economics]: indeed the narrow training of the diploma condemns our students to go to ... the least imaginative training colleges ... at a time when the best training colleges are teeming with experimental and new ideas.45

His allusion to ‘liberal studies’ and ‘literature’ makes a reference to one area where postwar extramural education had proved particularly dynamic. In his study of cultural studies and postwar adult education, Steele suggested that the space that opened up between the breakdown of confrontational class-based forms of adult education and the growth of the more inclusive concept of popular education provided a fertile niche for the early emergence of cultural studies. In the work of figures like Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson (all of them former New Left colleagues), cultural studies, in this guise, retained elements of oppositional social critique combined with a more expansive definition approach to the definition of people.46

His suggestions continued: on teaching practices, he suggested that exams be used to test understanding rather than used to judge ability. Above all, he urged repeatedly that substantial project work be incorporated into the students’ studies. This, he added, would have the added benefit of challenging the tutor who risked ‘growing too reliant on old lecture notes and losing their own intellectual creativity’.47 Whilst he was not alone amongst the Ruskin staff in harbouring or advancing these criticisms,
he was, perhaps, the most vocal. One fellow staff member wrote to him saying, ‘You seem to be a born catalyst and how the history in the Dip needs one’.48

Neither Samuel’s suggestions nor the staff–student protests against the diploma and the college’s structure of governance yielded much response. The college authorities opted to contain, rather than address, the problems, which they did by establishing an internally examined diploma and a series of committees designed to keep student representatives tied up in an endless procession of meetings.49 To those protesting, this seemed a rather dismal and unsatisfactory response on the part of the college. As he would later say, ‘I found the educational regime at Ruskin profoundly offensive, and was looking around for ways [the students] could have a more dignified existence’.50

In an irresistible echo of the independent actions, although not the exact politics, of the earlier ‘Ruskin rebels’, the concept of the HW began to develop. It was, in the first place, ‘an attempt to encourage working men and women … to become producers rather than consumers of their own histories’.51

The Workshop historian

In setting up the HW, Samuel was immediately confronted by a number of practical considerations which, for a former communist organiser, was familiar territory. He wanted to introduce forms of history that appealed and resonated with his worker students. He wanted this history to be ‘useful’ to them, to tell them something about how their own experiences of work and life connected with wider social structures and processes. Above all, he wanted to do this in a manner that showed respect for their innate intelligence and made them into active participants in the learning process; giving them the confidence to become producers of history.

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48 Unsigned to ‘Raff’, RS 1: The New Left/Ruskin College, 408, RSA.
The problems that Samuel faced in achieving these objectives included the hostility shown from the college’s authorities, particularly (in his view) to class-time being siphoned away from studying for the college’s diploma qualification. Then there were also the problems of limited external sources of funding and the issue of the students’ own low levels of confidence or experience in research and written work. On the other hand, Ruskin was positioned in close proximity to exceptional resources such as the Bodleian Library, not to mention the rich reservoir of the students’ personal experiences and interests.

His first priority was to create an environment that broke down the ‘barriers’ and formality inherent within most academic institutions, but particularly those formalities associated with Oxford life. This was achieved by subverting many of the behavioural ‘manners’ implied by the conventional academic seminar and rejecting some of the conventional insignias of scholarly superiority. The cultivation of a ‘dispassionate’ research personality and emphasis on text-based sources of knowledge were replaced with an openly ‘partisan’ atmosphere in which all the participants pooled their respective forms of knowledge, often non-textual in nature, in the shared activity of history-making. This made the concept of the ‘Workshop’ so critical.52

It is worth reflecting briefly on the significance of the term ‘workshop’. Historically, it conjured images of a pre-industrial form of production: a cottage industry, often informal and small-scale, involving one or more highly skilled craftspersons. Conceptually, it made reference to ideas of ‘learning by doing’ and of the intellectual journey from apprentice to skilled craftsperson during the course of which the former continually learned from the latter and the latter then continued to learn through ongoing practice.

He borrowed the name of ‘workshop’ from the Theatre Workshop (TW) (1945–67) set up by Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl (he later collaborated with MacColl on a HW book about working-class theatre movements).53 Both former communists, MacColl and Littlewood had learnt their craft through agit-prop theatre and the TW was no less political in its theatre making. It became known for productions such as Shelagh

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Delaney’s *A Taste of Honey* (1958), which examined issues of gender and race in working-class lives, and the satirical musical *Oh, What a Lovely War!* (1963), which took a critical stance on the First World War.

**TW** was also the first British company to engage with the work of the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, staging *Mother Courage and her Children* in 1955 and introducing British audiences to Brecht’s trademark dramatic technique of ‘de-familiarisation’ whereby the viewer is deliberately alienated from the unfolding drama. In its working methodology, it cultivated an approach to drama that was intended to be experimental and participatory, with performances often developed through protracted processes of improvisation. Littlewood in particular was renowned for her openness as a director. Samuel, who harboured a deep admiration for theatre as an art form, took great inspiration from the idea of creative production as a collaborative activity.

Another openly acknowledged connection came from the Communist Party Historians’ Group (CPHG). Samuel said later:

> the line, certainly, from the Communist Party Historians’ Group to History Workshop is an extremely close one, because History Workshop is a fairly simple realization of what was one of the dreams of the Communist Party Historians’ Group, which believed that history ought to be a democratized, popular thing.

Whilst the fusion of history with an openly partisan political agenda undertaken in a collaborative and comradely working atmosphere certainly took its cue from the CPHG, this was uncoupled from any explicit Marxist framework. There was, he acknowledged, no conscious attempt to reformulate Marxism and its conception of history.

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A less recognised cue for the HW came from Samuel’s own educational experiences at various progressive schools such as King Alfred School (KAS) in Hampstead, North London. KAS was founded in 1898 by a group of residents from Hampstead Garden Suburb, itself the result of a progressive approach to social planning, concerned with creating an educational environment in which the student assumed a more active role in the day-to-day running of the school and in their own learning processes. The school was also concerned to expand student experiences beyond purely academic study. The young Samuel had been a rebellious student, critical of his schooling and the progressive political ideals that it espoused; nevertheless it accustomed him at an early age to the idea of alternative forms of education outside of the narrowly prescribed ‘academic’.  

His sensitivity to and consciousness of alternative pedagogical philosophies and the politics of education were further honed through his teaching of the sociology of education. He was responsible for designing the rubric of the course, suggesting thorough knowledge and familiarity with the full range of ideological perspectives on education and pedagogical theory. The essay questions that he composed for the course reflected this: ‘Are school and university textbooks value free?’, ‘Is the home a greater influence on educational achievement than the school?’ and ‘In what ways do teachers try and reinforce their authority over pupils?’ There can be little question that in setting up the HW he was fully conscious of the educational environment he was trying to achieve (making it slightly less of an ‘organic’ evolution than he would later depict).

Finally, inspiration came from his enthusiastic reading of the journal *Anarchy* (1961–70), edited by the British anarchist thinker and writer Colin Ward. He later described *Anarchy* as ‘the only revolutionary reading around at that time’ (giving some indication of his feelings towards the highly theoretical direction that the *NLR* had taken under Anderson’s editorship). The anarchism discussed in *Anarchy* was of a very different nature to the extreme, even violent, forms of revolutionary politics and

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direct action with which it is typically associated. This was a form of social anarchism based on principles of community, compassion and cooperation rather than cataclysm, chaos and carnage.

Under Ward’s editorship, *Anarchy* emphasised the primacy of humans as social beings but rejected the need for any central controlling power such as the state or revolutionary vanguard. The journal carried numerous articles and features on various approaches to cooperative social organisation, including several case studies of non-authoritarian forms of education such as, for example, community ‘workshop’ initiatives.62 This stress on the arts of cooperative organisation and community activism had obvious appeal to the former communist who had cultivated the skills required to organise and coordinate rather than dictate and lead. Samuel placed the principles of collective work, solidarity and autonomy at the heart of his vision of the HW. Ward would later acknowledge the HW as a good example of cooperative and collaborative education. Samuel, in turn, would also maintain an enthusiastic and receptive view of Ward’s work and politics.63

The HW started life as an informal student seminar series on ‘The English Countryside in the Nineteenth Century’ (1966), later hosting a day event, ‘A Day with the Chartists’ (1967), in which established historians were invited to share with the students their insights into the research process. The second day event, ‘Workers and Education in Nineteenth Century England’ (1968), was the one at which the term ‘Workshop’ was formally adopted and Ruskin students began to co-participate in the event. By HW 4 (1969), attendance figures had swollen dramatically, with over half the papers coming from student contributions.64

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64 HW 4, ‘Proletarian Oxford’ (1969), dedicated an entire day to student papers.
In the early manifestations of the HW, Samuel assumed the major responsibility for organising the meetings. The seminar sessions, for example, worked closely with the Ruskin history syllabus. The subtlety of Samuel’s influence in these events, familiar to those who knew, was acknowledged by a letter from a friend following ‘A Day with the Chartists’ who commented: ‘I cannot pretend to have loved all the papers at the workshop but most were very interesting and some stimulating. The organisation and so on were a great credit to your alter ego’. Later, as it developed, a student Workshop Collective was formed with Samuel as a ‘guiding’ presence, still acting as the main point of contact for all HW communications concerning everything from details of proposed papers to enquiries concerning accommodation arrangements (which is not to say that he necessarily dealt with these himself).

He canvassed his personal network of contacts – former comrades from the CPHG, friends from university, former New Left colleagues – for contributions to Workshop events. Dorothy Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm and Stuart Hall, for example, were all participants in early HW events. One of the most memorable of these early contributors was E.P. Thompson who gave a rousing paper on eighteenth-century rural resistance in HW 3 (1968).

Undoubtedly Thompson and the historical vision outlined in his book *The Making of the English Working Class* were extremely influential for the HW, although perhaps not as much as some commentators are apt to suggest. The book had been written against the backdrop of the first New Left debates over working-class history and consciousness and bore within its eloquent pages much of the passion those debates had provoked. Starting with the assertion ‘I do not see class as a “structure”, nor even as a “category”, but as something which in fact happens (and can

65 This was particularly the case for the early seminar sessions such as ‘The English Countryside in the Nineteenth Century’ (1966).
67 An insight into the nature of this ‘guidance’ is discussed below.
69 Dorothy Thompson spoke at HW 1, ‘A Day with the Chartists’ (1967), Eric Hobsbawm spoke at HW 4 (1969) and Stuart Hall spoke at a Workshop on ‘Popular Culture and Past and Present’ hosted at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University (1971).
71 Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Post War Britain*, 189.
72 Elements of the argument rehearsed in ‘Commitment in Politics’ and in his review of Williams’s *Long Revolution*. 
be shown to have happened) in human relationships’. Thompson unfolded a compelling narrative set at the early dawning of the labour ‘movement’. He argued that far from being a product of nineteenth-century industrialisation, arriving promptly alongside the factory, the overseer and the machine, working-class consciousness was a living entity composed from shared experiences of exploitation and suffering but also a sense of injustice and defiance and drawing on the fragments of a once vibrant popular culture dispersed, but not lost, in the relentless advance of industrialisation.

As much as *The Making of the English Working Class* displayed a powerful historical imagination, it also captured the mood of the times (in particular the paperback version published in 1968). It was a call to arms, a defiant assertion of the capacity of people to create and, more to the point, to re-create their worlds. Following the positive reception to the book, Thompson had taken the directorship of the Centre for Social History at the University of Warwick (at which Samuel was an occasional guest speaker) where he continued to focus intently on the relationship between ‘value systems’ and class struggle. Rather than progress through the formal development of the labour movement, the evolution of its institutions and its political vehicle, the Labour Party, Thompson turned backwards, intent upon retracing the prehistory of the movement expressed informally through culture, customs and collisions with authority. It was a timely project for a period increasingly characterised by disillusionment with party politics and the ‘official’ channels of government.

Samuel described the bold political vision and historical methodology set out in *The Making of the English Working Class* as an influential ‘starting point’. He also insisted that the HW did not set out to pursue a ‘Thompsonian’ political or historical project, even going as far as to suggest that it had made a conscious attempt to ‘escape’ from the ‘grand

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76 Raphael Samuel, ‘Notes on proposed Ruskin Social History course 1966’, RS 1: The New Left/ Ruskin College, 405, RSA.
terrain’ of Thompson’s history.\textsuperscript{77} The main point of distinction between
the historical approach in his book and that of the HW was the latter’s
far more expansive interest in ‘everyday life’ and ‘ordinary people’, an
expansiveness directly influenced by the Ruskin students, its primary
participants.

Samuel took an extraordinarily enthusiastic interest in his students’ lives
and backgrounds. As his close friend Hall put it:

He knew an astonishing range and variety of people each of whom at
some point he had engaged in a searching conversation about their
background, their families, their work, their life as if preparing everyone
for the possibility of becoming an oral historical testimonial.\textsuperscript{78}

This was not just natural curiosity but a highly conscious process, bearing
traces of the methods once employed by the would-be party organiser.
He would engage people in intense and searching conversations much
like those conducted whilst attempting to recruit at university (the case
of Denis Butt for example, see Chapter One). The effect of this was to
make the individual feel valued and understood, often prompting an
intimate sense of trust and confidence to develop.\textsuperscript{79} Rather than use this
as the grounds for a recruitment pitch, he now used the insights gained
as a ‘way in’ to history-making, encouraging students to draw upon their
own lived experiences, working in a coal mine or growing up in a rural
town, as a point of departure for historical inquiry.

For others, he drew upon their interests. He encouraged Sally Alexander,
a Ruskin student (1967–69), to draw on her passion for and knowledge of
nineteenth-century novels to provide a point of entry into understanding
the complex and shifting landscapes of working-class Victorian social and
cultural life.\textsuperscript{80} What, for example, could be drawn from Charles Dickens’s
representations of the world of children in contrast to the one of adults;
what did this suggest about attitudes to childhood? How did changing

\begin{itemize}
  \item Raphael Samuel, \textit{Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture} (London: Verso,
  1994), 320.
  \item Ibid.
  \item Sally Alexander, oral communication with author, January 2011, London, recordings held in
  author’s collection.
\end{itemize}
depictions of the Victorian heroine, as found in the works of Charlotte Brontë or Elizabeth Gaskell, reveal prevailing social attitudes to women or suggest changes to female self-identity?81

Unsurprisingly, a recurrent Workshop favourite were the novels of Thomas Hardy. In Hardy, the students found much to identify with both in his books’ larger themes, such as the thwarted attempts of Hardy’s tragic protagonist Jude to become an Oxford scholar, but also the ‘incidental’ components of the novels, the parts that nineteenth-century readers would have scarcely noticed but which stood out to twentieth century ones. Student Jennie Kitteringham drew upon her own family’s rural roots to illuminate Tess’s gruelling labour as a swede trimmer, Arabella’s robust technique at pig killing and Marty’s sleepless night making spars for thatching as insights into the tough physicality of female labour.82 Elsewhere, the tensions between Henchard and Farfrae83 provided generous scope for assessing changes in the culture and conduct of nineteenth-century business practices.84

Slowly ‘investing’ the student with such a direct sense of their own connection to the past was useful in kindling their curiosity, a key motivational factor for overcoming reticence towards libraries or archives, viewed by many of the students as the preserve of the cultural ‘elite’. Given the Oxford location, the greatest example of this was the magisterial Bodleian Library, which many Ruskin students habitually avoided, despite their entitlement to use it. Emboldened by their interest and animated by the thrill of investigation, Workshop students were inspired to head into the Bodleian’s silent catacombs.85

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83 Thomas Hardy, The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886).
85 Dave Douglass, oral communication with author, December 2011, Newcastle, recordings held in author’s collection.
Once lured inside an archive or library, the sheer physical thrill of encountering documents, often untouched since their deposit, was a further potent force. Close concentration on primary sources was a defining feature of Workshop history. Again, Samuel was personally implicated in this. He spent the summer of 1966 in the newly opened local records office in Lancashire, rummaging amongst a treasure trove of documents relating to local news, events, disputes and organisations, untouched since their original deposit. On his return to Ruskin, he shared the fruits of his investigations with his students, passing on his personal excitement at the pleasures and possibilities offered by original primary source research as he did so.

This personal enthusiasm was a vital tool. Highly infectious in nature, it extended far beyond the text-based document, reaching into the realms of visual and material culture, music, art, architecture, physical landscapes, photography and drama, all read as social documents inscribed with meaning, situated amongst overlapping webs of social and historical context. Running in close conjunction with this was his eager interest in oral history. Instead of the quiet gloom of an archive and the faint rustle of ancient paper, the document was a living human being, the precious insights into the past etched in their bodies, strewn about their manner of speaking and stored up in their minds. His enthusiasm for this led to his close involvement with the formation of the Oral History Society (1971– ) and the *Oral History Journal* (1971– ) to which he was an early contributor.

But the HW did not simply expand the range of subjects and approaches to history. Critical to the HW’s *modus operandi* was its insistence on linking history to present-day events – further enhancing the sense of inter-connectedness between past and present, giving renewed emphasis to the relevance and urgency of historical research. Certainly there was no more appropriate time to be rewriting history, as the political landscape of Britain seemed electrified, with groups jostling to have their voices

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87 Ibid., 76, 82; Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, 337–49. Workshops would often conclude with an evening’s entertainment of folk music. There was a performance of ‘The Factory Lad’ at the 1970 Workshop. Ruskin student and Workshop participant David Marson’s research was also turned into a play, ‘Fall in and Follow Me’, performed at a Workshop in July 1973.
heard, their causes recognised, their political visions realised. These were irresistible conditions for the erstwhile activist with an exceptional talent for organisation and agitation.

Ruskin’s close relationship to the trade union movement meant that much of the HW’s early work was conducted in close dialogue with (and, through the students’ often quite intimate knowledge of) the rising union militancy that dominated the political landscape of the period starting with the Seamen’s Strike in 1966 and peaking with the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders’ dispute (work-in) in 1971. Themes like ‘Workers’ control in Nineteenth Century England’ complemented, and in some cases, anticipated union actions.89

Aside from the organised labour movement, there were further close connections between the HW and the flourishing student movement. Samuel’s notoriety as one of the first New Left’s primary instigators and his position as a tutor at what had traditionally been a workers’ college made him an attractive mentor figure to the younger generation. As once he had canvassed the support of ‘elder’ figures, he too was now approached for support in ‘new’ ventures or for contributions to ‘new’ journals.90

Student political activity in Britain, whilst never quite reaching the ferocity or extremities seen in France or America, became a more vocal presence during the late 1960s, galvanised, in part, by the implementation of the Robbins Report into higher education (1963) that recommended both the expansion of access to existing institutions and the creation of new universities, which became the sites of dynamic student activism.91 Even the tranquillity of Oxford was disturbed by lively protests against the Vietnam War and former Conservative MP Enoch Powell’s ‘rivers of blood’ speech. On a more local scale, there was opposition to a ‘colour bar’ at a local hairdressers and to the regulatory powers that college proctors had over student personal lives. Ruskin students regularly joined forces with their (often) younger comrades at the university over the issues of

89 HW 5, ‘Workers’ Control in Nineteenth Century England’, was held in February 1971, anticipating the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders’ dispute, June 1971, by some months.
90 Examples of this can be found in: ‘Assorted notifications, posters and pamphlets’, RS 1: New Left/Student and other Revolutionary movements of the 1960s, 201–02, RSA.
racism and Vietnam, and it was Ruskin students who took the lead in agitating for civil rights in Northern Ireland or in supporting the workers in industrial disputes taking place at the local Cowley car factory (an old favourite of Samuel’s, see Chapter One).92

Part of this student ferment involved a renewed questioning and struggle over the politics of education and of knowledge itself, and it was here that the HW, ‘guided’ by Samuel, intersected most emphatically. Not only was the HW itself emblematic of an alternative, independent approach to education, it also addressed the subject directly in its choice of themes. Naturally, he took a particularly strong lead in instigating this topic, returning to it several times, firstly in HW 2 (1968) on ‘Education and the Working Class’ and again in HW 10 (1975), which was more specifically focused on the working class and adult education. As early as 9 May 1975 (one year before it was intended), Samuel began circulating his plans for HW 10, detailing objectives, speakers and topics as he had once detailed objectives, contributors and articles for the Universities and Left Review:

> If we do our job properly we ought to be able to raise some central questions on working class education, at the same time as opening up a serious historical inquiry into its various impulses. There is a considerable accumulation of work to draw upon as this is something that the Workshop has been engaged with, off and on, throughout its existence … There is also a possibility of a discussion on the present state of adult education in Britain; the crisis in the WEA, Open Universities, literacy programmes, Ruskin itself.93

A note addressed directly to the student Workshop Collective, dated a few days later, proposed further suggestions:

> First as to subject. We could define it much more generously to include unofficial sources of learning eg. apprenticeship and the practice of craft skills and also indirect contributions to adult education – eg. libraries. We could also frame the Workshop in a clearer statement of a central problematic: the relationship of adult education to class consciousness.

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92 Purdie, “‘Long Haired Intellectuals and Busy Bodies’”, 58–79.
Second, as to method. It would be possible to divide the Workshop into large sessions, having the character of lectures or addresses, and a parallel series of smaller ones inquiring into particular subjects and spending more than one session discussing them. For example, the class character, the ideological and cultural contribution of reading rooms …

Third, preparation. If we were to draw up some preliminary statements about each area – and a preliminary statement about adult education and history … we could canvas [sic] support from WEA branches and tutor organisers.

Finally, a draft program for the event (dated 18 June 1975) (italics are my own):

Themes – working sessions
Below is a possible grouping which would cover, though not by any means all of, the planned papers. We could make, perhaps, two themes per day, one and two on Saturday, three and four on Sunday.

Religion and Politics
Eric Hobsbawm – Radical Shoemakers
Anna Davin and Raphael Samuel – Open Air Preaching in Mid Victorian London
Stan Shipley – Club Life and Socialism in Mid Victorian London
J.F.C. Harrison – Owenite Education
Alun Howkins – The Word of the Lord Made Flesh (Primitive Methodists and the Word of the Lord Made Flesh)
…

The Present State and Crisis of Adult Education
(No suggestions made)

Working Class Writers
David Goodway – Chartist Writers
Martha Vicinius – The Industrial Muse; Working Class poetry in 19th c Lancashire
…
Ken Worpole – Autobiography

Adult Students
Sheila Rowbotham – Early years of University Extension

94  Ibid.
These documents illustrate his organisational mind in action. Three observations might be ventured from these plans. Firstly, the desire to connect the HW to wider contemporary debates on the ‘current crisis’ within adult education (the erosion of its independent forms and structures, such as the Workers’ Educational Association) was not an additional sideline to a Workshop on the history of education. It was a central strand, planned from the earliest stages and shaping the entire form and shape of the event. Secondly, following on from the first, the proposed content of the HW demonstrates the uses of historical inquiry in engaging with this debate. His suggested papers juxtapose studies of independent forms of working-class education (self-organised initiatives): ‘Radical Shoemakers’, ‘Club Life and Socialism in Mid Victorian London’, ‘Chartist Writers’ and so on, with papers on the points of intersection between the working classes and formal institutions (religion, the universities): ‘The Word of the Lord Made Flesh’, ‘Early years of University Extension’.

Finally, the plans set out here did not stop at setting out an objective or settling upon subject matter, they extended into the very structure (ways of dividing the HW events for maximum effect) and dissemination (ways of attracting and recruiting participants and attendees) of the material. All this recalls strongly his detailed plans for shaping and extending the reach of the Universities and Left Review (see Chapter Two) proving, again, that for Samuel no organisational detail was too small or insignificant.

These themes, workers’ control and workers’ education, fell firmly within the former communist’s familiar intellectual and political territory. There was, however, one major area of the HW’s burgeoning interests in which he was not on such well-known ground and could not, therefore, be as interventionist: the HW’s pivotal relationship with the Women’s
Movement. The first British Women’s Liberation conference was organised as a direct result of a Workshop meeting, with several of the key organisers of this event closely associated with the HW.

A major figure in instigating this was the historian and feminist activist Anna Davin.96 She was born in 1940 to Winnie and Dan Davin and raised in Oxford.97 In 1958 Davin married the British mathematician Luke Hodgkin with whom she had three children. She went on to study history at Warwick University (1966–69) where she encountered E.P. and Dorothy Thompson.98 Following the breakup of her marriage to Hodgkin, Davin met Samuel and during the early 1970s the two formed a personal and working relationship, with Davin often laying aside her own research to take on the editing of Samuel’s Ruskin students’ papers.99 Already a prominent figure in the women’s movement, having set up a Women’s Liberation group at Warwick in 1968, Davin, along with others including Sheila Rowbotham and Sally Alexander, was one of the key architects behind the first Women’s Liberation Workshop held at Ruskin on the last weekend of February 1970, attracting over 500 participants.100

Subsequently, Workshops were held on ‘The Child in History’ (1972) and later ‘Women in History’ (1972). The effect of these was to move the HW more firmly into the history and politics of the personal. Looking at the histories of social groups such as women or children not only demanded more creative interpretation of historical sources, it also gave renewed significance to living history and oral testimonies to counteract the paucity or limitation of official sources and forced a closer examination of the relationship between private and public spheres in social life.

As fruitful as the relationship was, it also contained some of the seeds of Schwarz’s collision of ‘moments’. As Schwarz argued, the HW encompassed a range of political positions and agendas which, whilst often overlapping in their sympathies and revolutionary zeal, bore within them highly distinctive, even conflicting implications. Unsurprisingly, for many of the Ruskin students, many of whom were coming to the college

through the largely masculine world of the trade unions, the concepts of class and class struggle were fundamental and all-encompassing. Within this, women’s history was broadly acceptable provided it complemented and contributed to this agenda, restricting its comments to the experiences of women and children in labour.

As some, like Davin, began to probe more deeply into the realms of the private and personal spheres, this prompted a shift towards conceptualising gender as a distinct form of politics in its own right, one that not only questioned the emphasis placed on class but in some cases challenged its sovereignty as the main site of political oppression. Fractures and fission within the working class as a social group gave rise to the idea that the working classes were just as complicit in creating and perpetuating inequities on the basis of gender, race or sexuality. This was the crux of the division, noted by Schwarz, between the older political moments and the post-1968 generation, a shift from class as central focus towards a view of it as one of many imposed or constructed social identities and sites of struggle.

Samuel’s position here was supportive. In his accounts of the HW, the Women’s Movement is always respectfully acknowledged as a critical part of the HW story, a turning point in its trajectory. Elsewhere, he staunchly defended the need to probe into the relationships that operated within working-class communities against critics who thought this extraneous to the major political and economic issues of the day. But his support had limitations. His own work never fully metabolised the deeper implications of a gendered approach to politics raised by some amongst the Women’s Movement (by way of example, in his plans for HW 10 on the ‘Working Class and Adult Education’, discussed earlier, ‘Women and Education’ was, firstly, a handwritten note added on to the original document and, secondly, a theme for which he was able to identify possible contributors but not to propose a topic). For Samuel, women and children were another group neglected from the official record, whose energies and creative potential were either squandered or crushed.

102 Samuel, ‘General Editor’s Introduction’.
103 This view was broadly endorsed by Anna Davin, his partner during this time. Oral communication with author, January 2011, London, recordings in author’s collection.
As the HW grew in size and ambition, several of the student papers were turned into pamphlets of around 20,000 words each (the realisation, in part, of a suggestion made in 1966 by David Selbourne, Samuel’s Ruskin colleague, about publishing occasional papers by Ruskin students), compiled and published by the HW collective.\textsuperscript{104} The first HW book collection of essays, \textit{Village Life and Labour}, appeared in 1975.

Samuel was the ‘General Editor’ for the HW pamphlet and book series. The role and function of the editor shares parallels with that of his other roles; the organiser, the club chairman and, of course, the tutor. It was principally organisational in nature, overseeing the project and coordinating the individual components into a whole. Editorial work demanded the forging of close relationships with the respective authors in the development and evolution of their contributions. Drafts and re-drafts, comments and replies flew back and forth between writer and editor as the piece slowly took shape. In many respects, this process was similar to the critical feedback he had provided as a tutor but in other respects this relationship was far more intensive, effectively demanding a concession of the ‘power’ of the tutor to set questions or assign grades. Rather than \textit{impose} arguments the editor could only (in theory) \textit{offer} suggestions.

In making such an offering, he had also to exercise his creativity as a historian in connecting his own substantial knowledge of nineteenth-century British social and labour history to the student’s specific research or particular case study. He worked, for example, with Alun Howkins to explore how the lingering of pre-industrial customs (the marking of the Whitsun holiday in nineteenth-century Oxfordshire) could reflect on the unevenness of the spread of industrialisation and the reluctance or antagonism of rural communities to the imposition of the industrialised working week and calendar.\textsuperscript{105} Similarly, he encouraged Dave Douglass to ‘mine’ his intimate inside knowledge of pit life in County Durham.

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to provide insights into both the physical experiences of the work and the ways in which the pitmen understood and organised it through their language and stories. It was not, however, inevitable that his suggestions or advice would be taken. Douglass, for example, recalled a terrific struggle between the two men over his insistent inclusion of a sea monster story in his work. (Convinced by Samuel to abandon it in early writings, he later, stubbornly, returned to it, convinced of its significance.)

Samuel subsequently continued with and expanded upon this editorial role through the History Workshop Journal (HWJ), which made its debut appearance in 1976.

The historian of the Workshop

There is no greater proof of Samuel’s centrality to the HW than the fact that he was its first and, for a long time, only historian (he remains the main source of Workshop accounts). If, as he professed, the writing of history was an innately political act, the power to endow an order, a shape and meaning on the facts of the past, then a close reading of his first attempt to construct and frame the HW story is revealing.

The mood of this account was set by the epigraph, Brecht’s poem ‘Questions from a Worker Who Reads’ (1935). The poem took well-known coordinates in world history, such as the building of Thebes or Alexander’s conquering of India, and asked the reader to be curious about the people upon whose mundane labours, and sufferings, they were made possible: ‘And Babylon, so often destroyed, Who kept rebuilding it?’ It continually juxtaposed glory and power with the small, everyday acts that went into their realisation: ‘Caesar beat the Gauls. / Without even a cook?’

The poem also asked the reader to recognise the humanity of these people beyond the contribution of their labour: ‘Philip of Spain wept when his fleet went down. / Did no one else weep besides?’ In this way, not only does the poem make an argument about the restricted view presented in so much of history as it was recorded and passed down, Brecht also

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107 See Chapter Five for a fuller discussion of the journal.

reminded his readers of the shared humanity between leadership figures and the people who laboured for them, served them, paid for them or were crushed by them. This spoke of a history that had wearied of ‘great’ battles and instead asked of the histories that were less apparent, concealed in the ordinary experiences and struggles of everyday life.

Set against this interpretive framework was the HW’s ‘story of origin’. In the first place, Samuel positioned the HW as an act of resistance against an authoritative force that undermined the confidence and self-esteem of the Ruskin students. This can be seen with most force through his choice of language in describing the situation (italics are my own): ‘The Workshop began as an attack on the examination system, and the humiliations which it imposed on adult students’. This key theme of defiance and struggle was continued by his references to the sustained failure of educational institutions to support the HW in its endeavours: ‘[N]o grants from the SSRC [Social Science Research Council] facilitated [the students] in their work’.

This failure extended to the student’s own college authorities, which in his view had come perilously close to an act of outright betrayal: ‘in the early years, when such research activity was wholly unofficial, even – from the point of view of the curriculum – clandestine, there was not even recognition or support from their own college’.109

In contrast, failure on behalf of authority figures was juxtaposed by the determination and sacrifices made by the students: ‘one student financed his research by cleaning the rafters in the British Leyland Motor Works at Cowley; another by selling his car; a third by living on baked beans; most by going short’. Here he echoed the technique used in Brecht’s poem. The sheer mundaneness of the activities, cleaning rafters, eating baked beans, are imbued with nobleness and political significance. The students were willing to accept these physical discomforts in order to satisfy their desire to become independent learners. Further on, he continued with this theme of physical deprivation saying: ‘[A]ll that sustained them was the seriousness of their commitment, and the awakening pride that comes from mastering a craft for oneself’.110

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Replacing a more varied diet or other material luxuries as the key sources for bodily nourishment or pleasure was the sense of ‘commitment’ and of ‘pride’. The points made here were the significance of less tangible qualities, such as mental stimulation and independence, for nurturing a general sense of wellbeing. These sacrifices were small acts and choices made according to what these students could arrange out of the resources at hand in their everyday life. What he invoked in this passage was a sense of the ‘innocence’ and humbleness in the HW as a venture.

He concluded this early account with a few striking lines that hinted towards how he viewed his own relationship to the HW during this time. In speaking of the role that his partner, Davin, and he himself had played in putting together the papers for the HW book collections he, once again, referenced a profoundly domestic setting, his own home, to enforce the earlier invocation of ‘everydayness’:

\[\text{T}\]he manuscripts line the passageways, crawl up the stairs to sleep at night, and invade the children’s bedroom. For us, as for many of the contributors, they are the troubled product and labour of love.\textsuperscript{111}

Manuscripts that line passageways where human beings pass to and fro as they go about the daily activities of domestic life, that, like the human inhabitants, head up the stairs to bed at night and crawl into the children’s bedroom. The HW papers are depicted here as part of the fabric of his family life. Davin and Samuel are positioned in parental roles, presiding over and managing the day-to-day running of the household, caring for the students’ work as they did for Davin’s three young children, with love and hard work.

In this early account, the sentiments were heavy-handed, overly defensive or protective, but they do suggest the chief contours of Samuel’s thought. The guiding motivation behind the HW was inextricably bound with the Ruskin students (arguably, symbolic for a general conception of ‘workers’) who, in turn, served as a metaphor for people who had been silenced, dismissed or ridiculed but were yet struggling to be heard. The initial motivation behind the HW was simply to make people into producers rather than consumers of their own history. This was the key principle embedded in his emerging sense of politics. His role, as tutor and Workshop organiser, was to guide and facilitate this process.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., xxi.
The time during which Samuel first arrived as a tutor at Ruskin College and initiated the History Workshop was a period of personal, political and intellectual ‘recovery’ and expansion. On the one hand, the adult tutor and later the HW’s general editor were intellectual roles that were not far removed from his earlier aspirations, all of which involved working within given circumstances to encourage people to actively participate in political or intellectual work. On the other hand, the creative thinking and openness involved in finding and facilitating the links between his students’ experiences, interests and wider historical frameworks in conjunction with the political mood of the times, actively forced him to expand his own ideas. This expansion could also be discerned in Samuel’s own development as a historian, which is the subject of the next chapter.