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The Secret Life of Headington Quarry: People's History in the Field



Raphael Samuel (second from right) and History Workshop students
outside Ruskin, Oxford 1980

Raphael Samuel Archive, Bishopsgate Institute, London, courtesy of Alison Light
and the Raphael Samuel Estate.

Masons Arms pub, Quarry School Place Road, Headington Quarry, Oxfordshire, 1969

In the summer of '69, the unobserved-observer, quietly ensconced in a snug in the Masons Arms pub, would have witnessed an intriguing spectacle. An unusual visitor had joined the usual array of Quarry drinkers that year. This was long before the days when village pubs arrayed their exteriors with hanging baskets and served gourmet seasonal lunches. The Masons Arms was still very much a 'local' place where newcomers were noticed. And this 'stranger' would have been particularly noticeable. This stranger was a historian, a tutor at the workers' college, in Oxford city. He and some of students had been visiting the Quarry for some time now. They all seemed to be absolutely fascinated by the place. On this occasion the newcomer was alone, conducting another one of his interviews. Whilst casually dressed, scruffy even, everything about him, from the poise with which he held himself to his educated accent betrayed him as different.¹ Even his name, 'Raphael Samuel', would have sounded exotic and different. Not from Oxford. Not a working man.² Yet so sincere was his interest that slowly the Masons Arms' locals had started to share with him their most prized memories and secrets.

What might those old Quarry boys have made of all this? Perched in their accustomed spots, hands rested on pint glasses or fingers nimbly rolling cigarettes, listening solemnly with rapt concentration as one or other of them recited their remembrances and spun out the old tales to the eager delight of this stranger and his cumbersome recording equipment.³ Perhaps they were a little suspicious, unused to finding so receptive an audience amongst the younger generations. Perhaps they enjoyed the process, the opportunity to resurrect and reinvent their younger selves, to revisit old grievances and relive old triumphs:

1 Chimen Abramsky, 'Raphael Samuel', *The Jewish Chronicle*, 17 January 1997.

2 Samuel noted the 'class barriers' between himself and his interview subjects. Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 23 October 1979, 19 Elder Street, London, transcripts held in Raphael Samuel Archive (RSA), Bishopsgate Institute, London.

3 Samuel remembers pint and cigarette fumes during the interview process. *Ibid.*

[D]id old Crowy tell you? As when they used to have to come in Quarry – now I be going back ninety years ago – what I heard Granny Webb tell me – that when the policeman come in the Quarry on 'orses they took'm off the horse and put him down the well.⁴

It certainly made them think about things that they had not brought to mind for many years. As memories proved patchy or treacherous, the speakers pondered over whom amongst their connections and acquaintances would be able to fill in the spaces. Furthermore, could they convince these possible informants, their friends and relatives, to talk to this man?⁵ This process of talking and remembering also caused arguments to break out amongst them about the way things used to be, but even when these squabbles broke out the historian Samuel was unperturbed.⁶ In fact he seemed all the more enthralled. The contrast between the men's thick local Oxfordshire accent and the newcomer's University of Oxford English was almost comic, yet he could not have been a more attentive or appreciative audience.⁷ He really seemed to be trying to piece together a picture of the Quarry back as it was before they put in the roads. Even back before old Bessie had opened up her shop and started selling all those delicious cheap pies.⁸

The picture that Samuel had been trying to construct went much deeper than a concern for the sequence of events that may or may not have taken place in the village all those years ago. Samuel was gleaning information from all manner of clues, not simply from the stories themselves, but from the very nature of their performance.

During the 1970s, Samuel published his first major *historical* publication. Now a well-established Ruskin tutor, and having gained some distance from the events and activities of the first New Left, he had spent the last decade or so learning his own historian's craft alongside his students. Taking his first major oral history essay 'Quarry Roughs' (published in the first History Workshop (HW) book collection *Village Life and*

4 Raphael Samuel, "'Quarry Roughs': Life and Labour in Headington Quarry, 1860–1920. An essay in oral history", in Samuel, ed., *Village Life and Labour* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 151.

5 Samuel referred to 'little cousinhoods' as providing much of the core qualitative material. Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 23 October 1979.

6 Samuel, *Village Life and Labour*, 247, note 85.

7 The quotes in *Village Life and Labour* are written out in full dialect. For an example of Samuel's speaking voice: Bishopsgate Library's channel, 'Raphael Samuel on history from below, 1990', uploaded 5 January 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=w96_NF-RJHs (accessed May 2014).

8 Samuel, "'Quarry Roughs'", 243.

Labour, 1975) as its focus, this chapter explores the development of his historical imagination during the early 1970s. To further illustrate this, it also considers more closely the contrast between Samuel and E.P. Thompson as historical and political thinkers. This, it argues, lay as much in their distinctive personalities and backgrounds as in their generational difference.

Headington Quarry: Origins and influences

The research into the community of Headington Quarry was pedagogical in its origin. Since his arrival at Ruskin College, Samuel had been battling to force an experience of primary sources on his students, something missing from the college's existing history syllabus. As part of this attempt, he designed four- to five-week projects for the students to undertake before they wrote any history essays or read any textbooks. This was how Headington Quarry came about.

Samuel had found documents in the Oxfordshire County Record Office relating to a 30-year struggle between the Quarry community and local authorities, which had ended in an act of communal incendiarism in 1880. Not only were the documents relating to this study available and 'manageable', the subject matter and location of the project made it an attractive project to Ruskin students. Not only were first-year Ruskin students based out in Headington, but the poetic appeal of this common rights struggle happening right on the doorstep of Oxford University was attractive. He was delighted to have found a part of Oxford 'that wasn't Anglican and wasn't Tory and wasn't College and was historical'.⁹

During the course of this initial phase, some of the students visited the Quarry independently and returned with tales of its wildness, enhancing its potential for a more in-depth case study into 'living history'.¹⁰ He described his own attraction to such an approach:

I think the whole idea of the micro, of the small-scale, of seeing large things in miniature was important. I mean if you're kind of in revolt against abstraction, reductionism, systemisation – I mean wanting something that, as it were was congruent to how you actually experience life, I mean you could find a whole number of different ways in different subjects in

9 Brian Harrison, Interview with Raphael Samuel, 23 October 1979.

10 Ibid.

which people were reaching round, often, as I think in retrospect, quite unsatisfactorily, but I mean the effort was to produce something that was more life-like, more real, corresponded more to the human experience, the texture of human speech, the scale of human life i.e the community as studied ...¹¹

The roots of his ‘revolt against abstraction, reduction and systemization’ could be discerned in the New Left debates, in part a reaction against Stalinism, but also a response to the ‘social science’ turn that had begun to dominate intellectual culture. Some of his most polemical writing had been levelled against the application of sociological methodologies and modelling to explain social issues, such as the effects of affluence on voting behaviour or the causes of juvenile delinquency amongst adolescent boys.¹²

As a history tutor at Ruskin, he had also rallied against prevailing forms of social, economic and labour history. The substantial growth of social history, as championed by vehicles such as *Past and Present* (*P&P*), had done much to fracture the stranglehold of traditional political history, but whilst it had successfully expanded the subject matter on which historians worked, little inroad had been made into the ways of thinking about history. In some incarnations, social history remained unreflective on the question of politics, content to accumulate facts in contribution to existing debates (such as rates of industrialisation or changes to standards of living and so on).

Where it did engage with politics (like at Ruskin, a self-identified workers’ college), this was often on a literal level; the internal histories of unions, union leaders, the details of legislative reform in labour and industrial relations. In other forms, it drew upon simplistic sociological models, such as ‘nineteenth century v. status models of class’, for which it provided factual information. In short, it offered few satisfying answers to the nature of the relationship between material conditions and social-political consciousness.

If Samuel’s activities during the late 1950s had informed his strong scepticism towards the reductive tendencies in sociological modelling, they had also suggested alternatives. Richard Hoggart’s bestselling

11 Ibid.

12 See for example: Ralph Samuel, ‘Dr Abrams and the End of Politics’, *New Left Review* (*NLR*), I/5, Sep–Oct (1960), 1–8.

Uses of Literacy (1957) provided a strong example of a community study concerned with the impact of social structures on popular mentalities. In highlighting this relationship, Hoggart's work reached towards a sociocultural anthropological approach.

Despite its more formal alliance with sociology, the Institute of Community Studies's (ICS) early work also had an anthropological flavour. This came through the influence of Charles Madge, co-founder of Mass Observation (a popular ethnography movement), anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer and sociologist Edward Shils, all of whom were on the institute's advisory board.¹³ The institute's publications, such as *Family and Kinship* (1957), had drawn upon elements of an, albeit 'unschooled', anthropological approach to illuminate the importance of kinship structures in shaping community life. Samuel's own work as a researcher and interviewer had brought him into close contact with 'Bethnal Green adolescents' and 'working-class Tory voters', and revealed the complexity between people's lived conditions and their understandings of their worlds.

His most conscious engagement with anthropology, as a distinct discipline, came initially through extensive independent reading. An early influence was Erving Goffman's *Asylum: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and other Inmates* (1961).¹⁴ The book contained three essays charting the experiences of patients within mental institutions and one looking at the relationships between medical staff and other professionals. It was later described as an 'ethnography of the concept of total institutionalisation'.¹⁵ What excited him about Goffman's study was the use made of the quotidian, the seemingly inconsequential details of everyday life, which were transformed into openings for whole new avenues of inquiry.¹⁶ This was not an account of an institution's development but

13 For more detailed accounts of Charles Madge and the Mass Observation movement see: James Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History 1937–1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Samuel would later argue that Gorer and Shils were critical early influences for the ICS: Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 23 October 1979; Asa Briggs, *Michael Young: Social Entrepreneur* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 147.

14 'Most cited authors of books in the humanities, 2007', data provided by Thomson Reuters, ISI Web of Science, 2007, *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 26 March 2009.

15 Gary Fine and Philip Manning, 'Erving Goffman', in George Ritzer, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Major Contemporary Social Theorists* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003).

16 Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 23 October 1979.

an examination of its impact on individual consciousness. Despite the focus on individual perception, the study did not rely on abstract theories alone, but based its arguments on detailed observation.¹⁷

During the mid-1960s, Samuel even designed and taught a course on social anthropology at Ruskin. Although retaining the title ‘Sociology’, it featured well-known studies by prominent anthropologists such as E.E. Evans-Prichard (*Kinship and Marriage Amongst the Nuer*, 1951) and Margaret Mead (*Coming of Age in Samoa*, 1928; *Growing Up in New Guinea*, 1930) and proposed tutorial questions such as: ‘Compare the Kinship system described in any recent English study with that described by Evans-Prichard among the Nuer’. Other topics playfully subverted some of the sociologist’s most favoured subject matters. In addressing urbanisation, he asked about the types of associations which developed amongst immigrants in industrial areas. Another section in this curious, explorative mixture used Christopher Hill’s *Society and Puritanism in Pre-revolutionary England* (1964) as a core text for exploring the impact of Puritanism on the family.¹⁸

The attractions of anthropology as a discipline were familiar to historians, particularly those working within the flourishing field of social history. Keith Thomas’s influential article ‘History and Anthropology’, published in 1963 in *P&P*, urged the case for a fruitful relationship between the two disciplines. This, Thomas acknowledged, was not new (a similar appeal had been made by R.H. Tawney in his Inaugural Lecture at the London School of Economics 30 years before) but in the present climate, where history seemed ever more fragmented into specialisms, it bore further pressing. Thomas welcomed new calls for a more integrated analysis of history’s enduring relationships, the sort advanced through journals like *P&P*. At the same time, he critiqued over-reliance on ‘a brand of vulgar Marxism’ in attempting such a synthesis. Perhaps naively, he dismissed this as owing more to ‘a lack of acquaintance with any other theoretical

17 Other examples of his readings include: Horace Miner, *The Primitive City of Timbuctoo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955); Conrad Arensburg and Solon Kimball, *Family and Community in Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).

18 Raphael Samuel, Course Outline and Tutorial Notes for Sociology, RS 1: New Left/Ruskin College, Correspondence and Notes 1965–1967, 405, Raphael Samuel Archive (RSA), Bishopgate, London.

attempts to effect that interrelation and mutual explanation of social facts which they would so much like to see' than a commitment to the doctrine itself.¹⁹ Anthropology offered that alternative.

Drawing upon anthropology, the historian would find both the subject matter of their discipline greatly expanded and familiar historical problems given fresh perspective. The application of anthropological technique to an apparently paradoxical event, for example, might reveal a rationale not immediately apparent from an exclusively external perspective. Closer examination of myths, legends or histories read for their internalised attitudes to social and political authority could shed an intimate light on the dynamics of a society's organisation. Historians, Thomas concluded, could ill afford to ignore the insights offered by anthropology: '[T]he justification of all historical study must ultimately be that it enhances our self-consciousness, enables us to see ourselves in perspective and helps us towards that greater freedom which comes with self-knowledge'.²⁰ Following the publication of Thomas's article, Samuel wrote to Thomas (a former Balliol contemporary) expressing his enthusiastic support and agreement.²¹

The argument for anthropology was not conceived as a rejection of or antidote to social history but as an enrichment of its aims, which were only impoverished by a relative lack of conceptual resources. The recognition of a mutual concern to expand historical subject-matter and integrate its component parts into a more holistic form of analysis was important, but Thomas was too hasty in dismissing the potency of social history's political motivations. In the tumultuous years of the 1960s, others saw in the thorough-going study of the past, its structures, evolutions and points of transition, the key to the transformation of the present.

The work of E.P. Thompson also drew emphatically on anthropological insights. *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) had demonstrated how the physical experiences of early industrialisation had fused with existing values, prompting direct confrontation with those in power, all of which had informed the emergence of a self-conscious English working

19 Keith Thomas, 'History and Anthropology', *Past and Present (P&P)*, 24 (1963), 7.

20 See also: Keith Thomas, 'Should Historians be Anthropologists?', *Oxford Magazine*, 1 June 1961, 405–6; Keith Thomas, 'The Tools and the Job', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Belief in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971).

21 Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 23 October 1979.

class and labour movement. As director of the Centre for Social History at Warwick University,²² Thompson continued to focus on value systems and their role in stimulating conflict between the ‘ruling’ and ‘ruled’. In a challenge to depictions of the eighteenth-century English collier who claps his hands spasmodically upon his stomach and responds to elementary economic stimuli, he pursued the shared ‘moral assumptions’ animating popular life, the outrage of which ‘quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action’, whether in the form of the flouting of poaching laws or the staging of food riots.²³ Elsewhere, he considered how the imposition of new technologies of time measurement, the physical restructuring of the working day, week, year to align with the requirements of factory and market place, struggled against, and eventually rewrote, preexisting conceptions of time and production.²⁴

For Samuel, however, the most important training ground for his historical thinking was the Social History Group (1964–74) which he established alongside recent Oxford graduates Gareth Stedman Jones and Tim Mason, both of whom would go on to be critical figures in the *History Workshop Journal*.²⁵ A generation younger than Samuel, the two men had already voiced strong critique over the existing state of Oxford history teaching as they had encountered it during their student days. Mason had joined a growing chorus bemoaning the ‘Anglo-centric’, chronological and narrative-based history syllabus. He had supported a student campaign towards a reduction of compulsory English history, the option of presenting a thesis in finals, and the introduction of more courses in social, cultural and intellectual history (including, for the future historian of Nazi Germany, subjects with texts in foreign languages).²⁶

22 Thompson held this position from 1965 to 1971. John Rule, ‘Thompson, Edward Palmer (1924–1993)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

23 E.P. Thompson, ‘The Moral Economy of the Crowd’, in *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991), 187–88.

24 E.P. Thompson, ‘Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism’, *P&P*, 38 (1967), 56–97; E.P. Thompson, ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’, *P&P*, 50 (1971), 76–136; E.P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975); Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E.P. Thompson and Cal Winslow, eds, *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth Century England* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977). Collected together in: Thompson, *Customs in Common*.

25 Raphael Samuel, ‘The Social History Group 1965–1974’, in Samuel, ed., *History Workshop: A Collectanea 1967–1991* (Oxford: History Workshop 25, 1991), 85–86.

26 Tim Mason: ‘The Teaching and Study of History’, *Isis*, 31 May 1961, 20–21; ‘Reform of the History Syllabus’, *Isis*, 5 December 1962, 15; ‘The History Syllabus: The End of the Road?’, *Isis*, 13 March 1963.

Stedman Jones, active in student left-wing politics and a student member of a first New Left Club, put the case more strongly in his article, 'The Pathology of English History', published in *NLR* in 1967. Denouncing the prevalence of a Liberal bias in English academic history, he argued that the discipline's unswerving commitment to empirical inquiry failed to recognise its own ideological positioning. The splintering of the profession into so many sub-disciplines reinforced this with few attempts 'made to fuse this aggregate of specialist routines into a meaningful historical totality'. The article ended with a war cry: socialist historians must form their own institutions, be 'aggressive and iconoclastic'. '[O]nly vigorous intellectual imperialism and collective assault' would make a mark.²⁷

The Social History Group was, however, not intended to be the vanguard of a historiographical revolution. The intention, more modestly, was to bring together champions of a broad range of new historical methods, 'united mainly by a common ambition to break out from the narrow confines of political and constitutional history'.²⁸

The group took an initial interest in the social history of religious belief, under the guidance of John Walsh, a senior history tutor at Oxford and a historian of eighteenth-century religious history.²⁹ The first text to be studied by the group was Blaise Pascal's *Pensees* (1669) which the group subjected to close textual examination attempting to pay particular attention to how the nuances of language, phrasing and reference provided a glimpse into that brilliant but deeply conflicted thinker situated amidst his life and times in seventeenth-century France. This text, in which Pascal struggled between competing forms of knowledge and seemingly contradictory values, was quite appropriate for the mid-1960s, also caught amidst its own maelstrom of contending ideas and sentiments.³⁰

An early project that Samuel initiated in conjunction with the Social History Group historians and the Ruskin Workshop historians was on 'Nineteenth Century Cromwell', an ambitious and expansive project attempting to 'read' political mentalities through the various

27 Gareth Stedman Jones, 'The Pathology of English History', *NLR*, 11/46, Nov–Dec (1967), 43.

28 Gareth Stedman Jones, 'History and Theory', *historein* [Athens], 3 (2001), 111.

29 Ibid.; Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 23 October 1979; Stuart Hall, Alun Howkins, Sally Alexander and John Walsh, 'Raphael Samuel 1934–1996', *History Workshop Journal* (*HWJ*), 43 (1997), x–xi.

30 See Blaise Pascal, *Pensees and Other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

representations of Oliver Cromwell in Victorian popular culture. Despite a substantial amount of work, the early yields of the research were turned down for publication by the editors of *P&P* (a critical informing prompt for the creation of the *History Workshop Journal* (HWJ)).³¹

Against this backdrop, Headington Quarry, whilst originating as a pedagogical exercise, was also an opportunity to utilise and apply the techniques of social anthropology in order to gain a deeper sense of the internal relationships that shaped life in the community. Aside from the close scrutiny of the documents, another way of achieving this was through oral history and the use of living memory and oral testimony as a primary source. The first student project on the common rights struggle was presented at a Workshop held in 1968 which was also attended by Paul Thompson, a pioneering figure in British oral history who was instrumental in founding the Oral History Society and *Oral History Journal*.³²

Thompson was a social and labour historian who had become interested in libertarian traditions, in particular the political thought of William Morris about whom he wrote his own study, *The Work of William Morris* (1967). Thompson was struck by Morris's sensitivity to the domestic dimensions of life, which made him unique amongst socialist thinkers.³³ Whilst working as a sociology lecturer at the University of Essex during the late 1960s, Thompson became involved in a project looking at the social history of Britain from 1900 to 1918. During the course of this project he had become aware of the lack of direct evidence relating to the everyday life of the Edwardian working class. Funded by a grant from the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) (who Samuel would pointedly note did not contribute towards the Headington project), he embarked on a large-scale project conducting some 450 interviews with men and women, by then very elderly people, who had lived during that time.³⁴

The interviews were conducted by part-time researchers and followed a loose structure that included gathering information relating to domestic routines, household roles, meals, upbringing, family values, relationships with the wider community, courtship, school, politics and experiences

31 Trevor Ashton to Raphael Samuel, 'Letter Concerning 19th Century Cromwell', in Samuel, ed., *History Workshop: A Collectanea 1967–1991*, 94.

32 Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 23 October 1979.

33 Paul Thompson, *The Work of William Morris* (London: Heinemann, 1967).

34 Raphael Samuel, 'General Editor's Introduction', in *Village Life and Labour*, xx.

of work.³⁵ The result of this project was *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (1975). This project also formed the basis for *Voices of the Past* (1978), Thompson's methodological textbook on oral history.

Recognising the close parallels with his own work, Thompson responded supportively to the HW's approach to historical research.³⁶ The Headington Quarry project had already made some use of oral history as a key methodological technique. Alun Howkins, who had not spoken at the first Workshop, had already undertaken one long interview with Crowy Kerry, a Quarry poacher. The insights gained from this interview had not, as yet, been worked into the papers on the common rights struggle. Thompson's enthusiasm, along with the inherent interest that this little community had aroused in some of his students, encouraged Samuel towards a more sustained turn to oral history.

During the course of 1969, Samuel, along with some of his Ruskin students including Sally Alexander and Howkins, undertook three projects on Headington Quarry.³⁷ Alexander's work concentrated on the relationship between the local St Giles fair and the industrial revolution. Howkins focused on the importance of poaching to the informal economic life of the Headington community. Samuel's work on life and labour in the Quarry was intended to provide an overview and background context to these papers through the more concentrated use of oral history. The three also planned a future Workshop meeting to be held in November 1969 showcasing the student work on 'Proletarian Oxford'.

The Quarry, with its apparently lawless, wild inhabitants, its transient gypsy population, its defiant poaching activities and its unique traditions of Morris dancing, resonated with the restless spirit of rebellion and radicalism that characterised the late 1960s. Yet, despite the Quarry's inherent 'wildness', the project was not consciously about an 'outsider' community and the research not about finding an 'ancestry' for the next appointed revolutionary social group. Samuel's expressed intention was more about telling the histories of the 'other Oxford'.

35 H.J. Dyos et al., 'The Interview in Social History Part 1: General Discussion', *Oral History*, 1, 4 (1972), 126–28; Paul Thompson, Edwardian online: www.qualidata.ac.uk/edwardians/original/method.asp (accessed May 2014).

36 Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 23 October 1979.

37 Alun Howkins, email communication with author, October 2013, transcript held in author's private collection.

Inside the Quarry

Samuel did not embark on his Headington Quarry research in a state of starry-eyed innocence, ready to believe whatever was told to him. He approached the project having already conducted substantial documentary research into the area, and through his training in social and labour history he was already aware of some of the established patterns and trends in labour processes. In the course of his interviews, he carefully framed his questions around factual details, such as family history and work life, rather than directly addressing more subjective matters of belief and opinion.³⁸ During the research process for his essay on the Quarry, he continually performed a complex intellectual operation of sifting and interplaying the different sources, forms and registers of historical evidence.³⁹

How did this work ‘in the field’? During the course of one of the interviews a reference was made to the casual nature of work in the Quarry, even amongst skilled labourers like stonemasons. The ‘manner’ in which it had been mentioned, matter-of-factly, suggested that it was not an uncommon occurrence but an accepted feature of village life. Samuel then checked such an assertion against the locally available documentary evidence. In the case of the Quarry research, this had included the discovery of a diary written by a Quarry stonemason in 1883.⁴⁰ The diary’s contents did not address the matter of ‘casual’ employment directly, but noted that during the course of one year this stonemason gained and lost work six times. It also recorded the location of these jobs allowing for further verification in official records. This erratic employment pattern supported the idea that work life was not stable whilst the sparse and factual manner of writing, in conjunction with the original casual reference made to this form of work life in the interview, reinforced the idea that this was typical, not worth commenting on in depth. He had then to reference this against his wider knowledge about temporary, seasonal, or piecemeal labour practices in nineteenth-century British economic life to make

38 Samuel in Dyos et al., ‘The Interview in Social History Part 1’, 133.

39 Samuel would write about some of the challenges – perils – of conducting oral history and of the research undertaken on the Quarry. Raphael Samuel, ‘Perils of the Transcript’, *Oral History* 1, 2 (1971), 19–22; ‘Headington Quarry: Recording a Labouring Community’, *Oral History* 1, 4 (1972), 107–22.

40 Brian Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 23 October 1979.

a convincing argument.⁴¹ In this way, he validated the comment made in the interview and, in turn, identified a highly specific example or case study against which to attach a discussion about wider economic trends.

It was not only the residents of Headington Quarry that were teaching him about the art of the oral interview, its uses for historical research and its potential pitfalls. In the early 1970s he also embarked on another project, a life history of Arthur Harding, an old criminal figure from the East End of London.⁴² The six-years-long series of interviews with Harding, at the time a man in his nineties, continued some of the themes and questions that had emerged during his time working at the ICS. Young and Willmott had placed a strong emphasis on the way in which structures of thought and feeling were imparted through familial and kinship relationships in their landmark study *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957).⁴³ His own work, both for the ICS and later undertaken independently, had further reinforced this concern and sensitivity towards the importance of social relationships in mediating political and moral consciousness.⁴⁴ His work with Harding swept up all these various components and coordinates as they had manifested in and shaped the lived experience of Harding as an individual.

The two made an unlikely pairing. Harding had been raised in the slums of East London. He was a former criminal, strike-breaker, Conservative voter, and former bodyguard to fascist politician Oswald Mosley. Samuel by contrast had been raised in the genteel surrounds of Hampstead Garden Suburb. He was from a Jewish family, a former member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and still a committed man of the radical left. Yet despite the social and ideological chasm between them, they struck up an instant rapport, another testimony, perhaps, to Samuel's capacity to engage with a wide range of people.⁴⁵

The interview process, however, had been far from straightforward. It must have been quite a strange situation with both participants 'performing their parts' on multiple levels. Samuel entered the process with 'concealed'

41 Demonstrated to strong effect in Raphael Samuel, 'Comers and Goers', in H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff, eds, *The Victorian City: Images and Realities* (London: Routledge, 1973), 123–60.

42 For a background to this project see: Stan Newens, 'The Genesis of *East End Underworld: Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding* by Raphael Samuel', *HWJ*, 64 (2007), 347–54.

43 Acknowledged in the preface to the subsequent book. Arthur Harding and Raphael Samuel, *East End Underworld: Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding* (London: Routledge and Paul, 1981), vii–viii.

44 See for example: Ralph Samuel, 'The Deference Voter', *NLR*, I/1, Jan–Feb (1960), 9–13.

45 Newens, 'The Genesis of *East End Underworld*', 349.

intentions: to relate Harding, as an individual, to the wider social conditions which led to ‘delinquency’. In order to gain Harding’s trust, however, it was important that he was not made fully aware of Samuel’s agenda. Meanwhile, Harding entered into the process with his own set of intentions: the opportunity to ‘present his story as being a fight against the unjustified charges of the police’.⁴⁶ And so ensued a battle of wits between the interviewer and interviewee, the agenda of one clashing with the agenda of the other. ‘I mean’, Samuel would say of this project later, ‘one couldn’t be naïve on that because he was... certainly being very political himself in handling the interview [...]’.⁴⁷ If Samuel had not been equally ‘political’ in interviewing Harding, the result would have had little use as a form of social documentary.

The end result, *East End Underworld: The Life of Arthur Harding* (1981), bore the scars of this struggle between the two men. His precarious balancing act between situating Harding’s testimony in historical context and allowing Harding, as a subject, a voice, pleased no one. Harding allegedly disliked the book, feeling it did not represent his story well.⁴⁸ Critics, such as historian David Cannadine, felt the heavy inclusion of ‘anecdotal’ evidence obscured the strength of the argument.⁴⁹

As embattled (and embittered) as this particular project was, it did, however, indicate the potential of such an approach. In this instance, as Cannadine argued, Samuel had not been able to fully integrate all the diffuse sources into coherent form, but the richness of the material and fluidity with which multiple dimensions of insight were traversed showed promise.⁵⁰

This process of shifting between different sources and registers of information was supported by his habitual style of note-taking and research.⁵¹ One observation or note was written on a single, loose sheet of paper along with assemblages of related material, supporting documentary evidence and secondary sources – journal articles or book chapters – compiled into one large collection. Out of this, he would compose draft paragraphs or passages from which an essay or article would be

46 Brian Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 23 October 1979.

47 Ibid.

48 Oral communication with author, Stefan Dickens, Head Archivist of RSA, Bishopsgate Institute, London, December 2011.

49 David Cannadine, *The Pleasures of the Past* (New York: WW Norton & Company Inc., 1989), 190–92.

50 Samuel, *East End Underworld*.

51 Light, ‘A Biographical Note on the Text’, xv–xxii.

constructed. Although outwardly chaotic as a working methodology, one of the great benefits of this approach was that these discrete facts could be continually shuffled and reshuffled, arranged and rearranged in relation to different perspectives, questions and positions. Accordingly, one encounter or observation had the potential to splinter outwards into multiple contexts, dependent on what aspect of the information was placed in central focus.⁵²

How, then, did he set about reintegrating this mass of facts, gleaned from multiple sources, identified and extracted by direct and indirect means, into the organised whole of an essay? The first major clue lies in the title itself: “‘Quarry Roughs’: Life and labour in Headington Quarry, 1860–1920. An essay in oral history’. The title starts by borrowing from a description of the Quarry residents taken from an article published in 1905 in a local newspaper. It then goes on to state the subject matter, ‘life and labour’; the place where this matter is being studied, ‘Headington Quarry’; and provide the time frame for the study, ‘1860–1920’. Finally, the essay informs the reader of its own methodological approach: ‘an essay in oral history’. All this information is factual, relating to specific coordinates. This makes the title ‘descriptive’, rather than ‘argumentative’ in nature. It is designed to give the impression that what follows is an investigation that might lead to the suggestion of some provisional conclusions rather than an argument that will either be ‘proved’ or ‘disproved’ by the evidence.

The essay continued on in this investigative mode; its sections were thematic, addressing the different economic relationships at work in the community which moved in ever-decreasing circles drawing on more intimate perspectives of life in the Quarry. He opened the essay with a broad overview of the village and its situation, the function of which was to sketch a view of the Quarry in terms of the interplay between the natural environmental features of the landscape (the quarry itself) and the built human settlement – the intersection of which informed the basis for the Quarry community’s distinctive internal character and its conflicted relationship with Oxford City (and the outside world more generally).

52 Keith Thomas, ‘Diary’, *London Review of Books*, 10 June 2010, 36–37. Thomas also described his use of a similar practice of note-taking. Thomas acknowledged that, whilst never formally taught this approach, he took his cues, in part, from the working methods of Christopher Hill, the tutor that Thomas and Samuel shared as undergraduate students at Balliol College, Oxford University, during the early 1950s.

Having equipped his reader with mental coordinates of the Quarry as a place, he proceeded to address quarrying, the primary economic activity in the area. Samuel did more than just describe this activity, he explored the implications of this form of occupation. The nature of the employment combined with the location of the village created a sense of fluidity in working roles and relationships. Quarry labourers suffered from an unreliability of work, but enjoyed more freedom in their activities. As for the work itself, it was characterised by its hard and physical nature. Activities like brickmaking were largely male dominated and the Quarry labourers gained a reputation for being good workers who were physically strong.⁵³

One might think that this would imply a highly dominant masculine culture in the village, and consequently a predominantly masculine focus to the essay, but Samuel dedicated as much space to the work undertaken by Quarry women whose primary occupation was laundry work. This was characterised by the hard physical nature of the labour processes involved. He noted how this work was often done in all-female groups or coordinated through families, citing an example of a family in which grandmother, mother and granddaughter all worked in the laundry together fostering close all-female relationships.⁵⁴ He commented on how laundry offered the potential for an independent income, providing widowed women with an alternative to Parish relief.

The analysis then moved to consider the community's 'secondary' forms of income generation, reflecting first on the need for a secondary economy. He suggested that the seasonal nature of building or brickmaking work forced the Quarry's inhabitants to find other means of supporting themselves and their families. He demonstrated how these were often determined by the natural resources available (produce from kitchen gardens and allotments or the keeping of pigs for example, which then became the basis for swaps, exchanges and bartering amongst the villagers) and pointed to the ways in which this 'informal' economy had a major influence on everyday village life, structuring family life through the organisation and distribution of labour, which shaped the relations between the genders and generations.⁵⁵ It also informed personal

53 Raphael Samuel, "Quarry Roughs", 168.

54 *Ibid.*, 180.

55 *Ibid.*, 200, 203.

preoccupations. A series of entries in the stonemason's diary, for example, detailed both the work he had done in the garden and the clemency of the weather (a continual source of anxiety for the keen gardener).⁵⁶

Not content to rest at this, he probed ever further into these 'unofficial' realms exploring those activities conducted in a legally 'ambiguous' manner through the opportunistic uses of natural resources, such as the acquisition and selling of firewood, the catching of birds and the poaching of rabbits.⁵⁷ Again, his interest in these activities was not just for their own sake but also for the ways in which they provided an insight into the sociocultural life of the village. He cited the ways in which these 'goods' became an additional contribution to the household coffers, noted the manner in which the 'fruits' of poaching transformed the local diet; and observed how these 'unofficial' economic practices informed the village's relationships with both authority figures and community 'outsiders', such as the gypsies who camped in the local woodlands during the winter.⁵⁸

Within all these sections, the most striking feature of the writing was the use that he made of his oral sources. Quotes taken from the oral testimonies were written out in full and original dialect, which had the effect of invoking the sound and sense of the speaker:

Old Uncle George – Pedgell Webb – used to have a big 'llotment up there and 'ee used to have plenty of carrots, plenty of swedes – well that was a good feed, good rabbit-they'd ketch their own rabbits.⁵⁹

By contrast, Samuel's own voice, as the historian, took a back seat. This did not mean that his commentary was cold or disinterested. It was friendly, free from technical language but for the most part avoided making its 'presence' too demonstrative. This was done partly in order to allow the voices to 'speak for themselves' and partly to avoid the 'superiority' implied by the researcher more intent on their personal interpretation than responsive to the information being given to them. The quotes were not just used as an illustration of the essay's analysis. They were *integral* parts of the study's analytical process. Samuel and his interview subjects worked in a dialogue with one another, the quotes providing certain informative cues that the commentary went on to explain.

56 Ibid., 193.

57 Ibid., 210.

58 Ibid., 209–25.

59 Ibid., 225.

The information provided by the oral testimonies also provided him with a compelling methodological argument as to why the use of qualitative sources was so crucial to the study:

So far as the standard of life is concerned, it is difficult to assess the value of these extras in monetary terms, to ‘quantify’ in a way that the economic historian might feel professionally obliged to demand, or to incorporate them in the week-by-week household budget.⁶⁰

Not only was this a general ‘challenge’ to the sociological tool kit of ‘standards’ and modes of ‘assessment’, it also reinforced the idea that understanding these ‘unofficial’ forms of economy demanded a close perspective. Little trace of them, or their central importance to village life, would have emerged from the documentary record alone.

Whilst the quotes used in “‘Quarry Roughs’” were often taken on the basis of their direct informational content, some of his observations utilised the oral testimony more indirectly. He used the accounts told to him by villagers of that unfortunate policeman who had met with a watery drop down the village well less for their literal content and more for what the story, and its popularity amongst the villagers, could tell him about village attitudes to authority figures. He did not attempt to adjudicate over which of the many available versions of the story was true, nor did he attempt his own version of the actual incident; he simply took the telling of the story as a source of evidence in itself.⁶¹

As rich, in-depth and intriguing as his treatment of community life in Headington Quarry was, the essay also advanced a large political argument. Drawing on the prevalence of small-scale enterprise and non-accumulative capitalism in the Quarry’s economy, he ventured an insight into the socioeconomic life in late Victorian and Edwardian English society as a whole:

Capitalism in the nineteenth century was an uneven development, in the countryside no less than in the towns, and Quarry was one of those dark corners of the kingdom – like the East End of London – which had been imperfectly colonized, from an economic and industrial as well as from a cultural and social point of view.⁶²

60 Ibid., 219–20.

61 Ibid., 151.

62 Ibid.

The implications of viewing capitalism as an uneven development, unconsolidated even as late as the twentieth century, posed a stark challenge to notions of class emerging as a political identity in response to an industrialised, capitalist society. This linked back to the New Left debates where he had rejected an overly simplified ‘nineteenth-century class model’. But the argument here felt tenuous, additional rather than central.⁶³ It could hardly be said to have been plied with force. In fact, it was almost subdued, lingering in the background, drowned out by the colour and vibrant detail of Samuel’s internal study of community life.

This argument emerged with more clarity in a later article “‘The Workshop of the World’: Steam Power and Hand Technology in Mid-Victorian Britain’, an astonishingly detailed ethnographic study of the heterogeneity of labour experiences during this time, emphatically demonstrating a protracted history of fragmented and disjointed encounters with industrialisation amongst the mid-nineteenth-century labour force.⁶⁴ The article gave chapter and verse to the paucity of existing views about the historical development of capitalism. Its forms were more diverse and its spread more uneven than typically assumed.

The personal politics of Raphael Samuel and E.P. Thompson

“‘Quarry Roughs’” was a fascinating exploration of community life. As an insight into nineteenth-century capitalism it was more limited. It bore the heavy imprint of Samuel’s concerted drift towards left-libertarian politics, evident in this concluding comment:

There was plenty of individual enterprise in Quarry, but it was apt to be dispersed in a variety of directions rather than concentrated in a single whole. The villagers were good at making ends meet, often in trying conditions, but not, it seems at making money. They lacked the capitalist instinct for getting rich at other people’s expense, or on the basis of other people’s labour. They made the best of their environment, but they did not overstep its limits, or treat it as a point of take-off.⁶⁵

63 Samuel later acknowledged that he could have done more to develop this point. Brian Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 23 October 1979.

64 Raphael Samuel, ‘Workshop of the World: Steam Power and Hand Technology in Mid-Victorian Britain’, *HWJ*, 3 (1977), 6–72.

65 Samuel, “‘Quarry Roughs’”, 234.

This celebration of a fiercely independent people, unmotivated by greed, felt a little idealised, too willing to overlook those who had willingly taken up the security of a reliable wage packet when the opportunity, in the form of the Cowley car plant, had arisen. This was the view taken by a number of critics for whom the HW's approach to history often lacked clarity in its political and theoretical framework.⁶⁶ One of the first people to advance this sort of critique was one of the HW's original and major sources of inspiration, E.P. Thompson.

It might appear puzzling that Thompson should criticise the HW's historical endeavours given that his own historical methodology and research interests had been so informative of it. In fact, there were many parallels between Thompson and Samuel. Both took their stance on 'history from below', concentrating their interests on popular life and culture.⁶⁷ Politically, both drew inspiration from English traditions of libertarianism and ethical socialism, emphasising the role of human agency and preferring the popular movement to party politics. Methodologically, both drew upon the insights and techniques of social anthropology but retained their fidelity to the empirical methods of historical inquiry. Yet despite all these similarities in interests and approach Thompson regarded Samuel, and the HW, with a sternly critical eye.

In Thompson's view, the HW's principal flaw was the extent of its immersion in popular life which, he felt, verged at times towards 'evacuating large territories of established political and economic history'.⁶⁸ At best, he would allow that the HW could be seen as part of a wider resurgence of libertarianism, which he welcomed.⁶⁹ By contrast, Thompson's sense of the politics in his own historical project was clear. *The Making of the English Working Class* had set out a bold account of suffering and struggle. Later essays delved even more deeply into the concealed and subversive 'theatres' in which such struggles took place. For Thompson, the driving preoccupation of his historical interests was

66 Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 192.

67 E.P. Thompson, 'History From Below', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966. Samuel, 'General Editors' Introduction: People's History', in *Village Life and Labour*, xiii–xxi.

68 Quoted in Samuel, 'General Editor's Introduction', xix. A view echoed by subsequent critics including: Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*, 187. Harvey Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984).

69 Terry Hott, 'Interview with E. P. Thompson', *The Leveller*, 22 January 1978, 22.

the relationship between value systems and class struggle, and his interest in popular culture was, therefore, continually subjugated towards the politics of struggle.⁷⁰

Samuel's response to Thompson's critique was to argue that there was nothing intrinsically 'micro' or 'macro' in the study of history. He teased his old comrade, asserting the validity of travelling the historical terrain by foot rather than 'in armoured car or tractor' (Thompson had been a tank commander the Second World War and was known to traverse the Worcester countryside, where he lived, by tractor).⁷¹ In a further jibe, a cheeky misquotation of William Blake (Thompson was a notorious connoisseur of Blake), he contended that it *was* 'possible to hold eternity in a grain of sand'.⁷²

In an article, 'Local History and Oral History', published the following year and appearing in the first edition of the *HWJ* (1976), Samuel advanced a clearer and more articulate statement of his historical methodology. Rejecting the view of the local study as myopic, dry or antiquarian, he argued that the demands imposed by the 'local' framework challenged overarching concepts such as 'class', 'community' or 'place', forcing them to shed some of their apparent cohesiveness when viewed 'up close'. With regards to oral history, he insisted that:

The value of the testimonies depend on what the historian brings to them as well as on what he or she takes, on the precision of the questions, and the wider context of knowledge and understanding from which they are drawn.⁷³

Here, he deftly shifted the onus of value onto the imaginative capacity of the historian. It was not the subject matter itself that determined its worth, but the way it was handled, interpreted and drawn out into a wider network of connections.

70 E. P. Thompson [interview by Mike Merrill], in Henry Abelove, Betsy Blackmar, Peter Dimock and Jonathan Schneer, eds, *Visions of History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), 20.

71 Samuel, 'General Editor's Introduction', xix; W.L. Webb, 'A Thoroughly English Dissident', *Radical History Review*, 58 (1994), 162.

72 William Blake's famous stanza should read: 'To see the world in a grain of sand, And a heaven in a wild flower, Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, And eternity in an hour'. William Blake with David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 2008). Samuel, 'General Editor's Introduction', xix; E.P. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (New York: New Press, 1993).

73 Raphael Samuel, 'Local History and Oral History', *HWJ*, 1 (1976), 206.

Samuel clearly considered the HW, and by extension himself, to be pursuing a distinctive intellectual and historical agenda to the 'grand terrain' occupied by Thompson.⁷⁴ How best to understand this distinctive agenda? Whilst Thompson's 'people's history' retained the centrality of class struggle and stressed the role of people in shaping that struggle, Samuel's historical interests were diffuse, stretching widely across popular life in all its guises and splintering off into many different avenues. Like Thompson, he shared the view of people as creative agents but was beginning to approach this more expansively, as interested in those not so explicitly engaged in forms of class struggle (the Arthur Hardings and deference voters of this world) and in the struggles that took place amongst and between members of a group.

In part this difference was informed by the influence of their respective generations on their intellectual dispositions and emotional sensibilities. Thompson was born in 1924, 10 years earlier than Samuel. Numerically this is not a long period of time, but, as Perry Anderson would later comment, between Thompson's generation and Samuel's lay the unbridgeable gulf of the Second World War; a sentiment echoed by the novelist Doris Lessing, a former comrade and contemporary of Thompson's who said of her generation: 'For that is how I see our lot now – war crazed – even if we were hundreds or thousands of miles from the actual fighting'.⁷⁵

Thompson's adolescence was conducted in the shadow of the threat of fascism and impending war.⁷⁶ He went up to Cambridge as a student in 1942, a point where university life and student politics were, inevitably, dominated by both the intellectual and the practical implications engendered by being a nation at war. In 1944, aged 20, he undertook active duty, serving as a tank commander in Italy and North Africa.⁷⁷ He would later acknowledge that he had been 'forged in the forties', the decade of heroes, a time fuelled on the sort of sentiments to be found in the (early) works of figures like W.H. Auden, and when a British newspaper could say in all seriousness:

74 Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994), 320.

75 Perry Anderson, 'Diary', *London Review of Books*, 21 October 1993, 24; Doris Lessing, *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 290.

76 'E. P. Thompson [interview by Mike Merrill]', in Abelove et al., eds, *Visions of History*, 11.

77 Rule, 'Thompson, Edward Palmer (1924–1993)'.

At moments like this it is especially fitting that we should pay homage to poets ... for the sake of that clearer vision which their eyes, superimposed upon our own failing sight, can restore to us.⁷⁸

The Carritts, neighbours and close friends of Thompson and his family, provided one example of this sort of heroism. Three of the boys, Gabriel, Anthony and Noel Carritt, became actively involved with resistance movements in the Spanish Civil War (Anthony was killed fighting with the International Brigade in 1937).⁷⁹

The greatest symbol of the idea that the poet could also be a hero, however, lay even closer to home. Thompson's elder brother, Frank (1920–1944), was an exceptionally gifted linguist and poet, gaining mastery over 10 modern and ancient languages by the age of 23. Frank won a scholarship to Winchester College and later to New College, Oxford, to read Mods and Greats (classics). Thompson lacked his brother's gift for languages or aptitude for classical literature. Unlike Winchester, Thompson's school Kingswood had had no pretensions to elitism. He later described his own cultural and political drive as 'low-brow, moralising – perhaps even Methodistical – and self-consciously demotic'.⁸⁰ Frank's intellectual strengths were not matched by physical ones. He was tall, quite frail and uncommonly clumsy, very far from the physical perfection of the classical heroes that had so captured his imagination.⁸¹ Thompson, of a stronger build and an enthusiastic sportsman, would often assume the role of his protector.⁸²

During his years at Oxford, Frank became increasingly politicised, frustrated by the British Government's lack of firm response to the rising threat posed by fascism. Influenced by the future philosopher and author Iris Murdoch, he joined the CPGB in 1938. His attraction to communist politics, however, did not equate to a full acceptance or even a thorough understanding of Marxist theory but was an extension of his poetic sensibilities blended with his innate good nature and courage.⁸³ When

78 E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978), 264. This was also acknowledged by Raymond Williams in *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: New Left Books, 1979), 135–36. Quote taken from *The Times*, 26 September 1938.

79 Peter Conradi, *A Very English Hero: The Making of Frank Thompson* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 84–86.

80 E.P. Thompson, *Beyond the Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 52.

81 *Ibid.*, 51.

82 *Ibid.*

83 *Ibid.*, 57; Conradi, *A Very English Hero*.

war was declared in September 1939 Frank was amongst the first to join up, disregarding the position of the British Communist Party. Ultimately this led him to a dangerous mission aiding communist partisan fighters in occupied Bulgaria. The mission ended tragically with Frank executed alongside several of the other partisans by a fascist firing squad in 1944.⁸⁴ Thompson and his mother, Theodosia Thompson, later published a collection of Frank's poetry entitled *Spirit in Europe*, taken from a letter by Frank sent to his family the Christmas before his death, in which he had written:

There is a spirit abroad in Europe which is finer and braver than anything that tired continent has known for centuries, and which cannot be withstood ... It is the confident will of whole peoples, who have known the utmost humiliation and suffering and who have triumphed over it, to build their own life once and for all.⁸⁵

Thompson's preoccupation with the relationship between value systems and class politics could be read as an attempt to reconcile the nobility of this spirit with the rigours of political-economic structural analysis.⁸⁶

Following the war and the defeat of European state fascism, there was a sense of hope amongst socialists that a new world could be constructed. Thompson and his partner Dorothy travelled out to Yugoslavia (which voted to become a 'People's Republic' in November 1945) to join a group of international youth workers on a railway-building project. This was an important experience. The internationalism of the youth workers reinforced the sense of socialism as a universal politics, whilst the close-knit life of the group had demonstrated the small-scale cooperative community in action. What this experience also highlighted was the distance of the Soviet Union from this form of communist politics. Little support or interest was shown in the project by the Soviet Union and there were no Soviet people amongst the youth group.⁸⁷

84 Roderick Bailey, 'Thompson (William) Frank (1920–1944)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

85 Frank Thompson, *There is a Spirit in Europe: A Memoir of Frank Thompson*, collected by T.J. Thompson and E.P. Thompson (London: Gollancz, 1947).

86 'E. P. Thompson [interview by Mike Merrill]', in Abelove et al., eds, *Visions of History*, 20.

87 Sheila Rowbotham, 'The Personal and the Political: Interview with Dorothy Thompson', *NLR*, I/200, Jul–Aug (1993), 87–100; E.P. Thompson, ed., *The Railway: An Adventure in Construction* (London: British-Yugoslav Association, 1948); 'E. P. Thompson [interview by Mike Merrill]', in Abelove et al., eds, *Visions of History*, 12.

Thompson's formative intellectual years took place in dramatic and disruptive times where the line between life and death, good and evil was vividly apparent. Samuel, meanwhile, a child on the British home front during the war, came into intellectual maturity in the postwar years. His student days at Oxford had been conducted in the political landscape of the 1950s, dominated by the inhibitive politics of the Cold War. These years were further characterised by successive Conservative governments, a welfare state entering the first decade of its existence and beginning to reveal the limitations of its vision, the resurgence of a consumer-based capitalism and the politics of affluence. All this had given rise to a decade categorically defined in its intellectual and artistic culture by a retreat from (and often mockery of) the heroic, taking instead the ordinary and the everyday as its major aesthetic. The tenor of political debate was transferred from the bloody theatres of conflict in a war-torn world and repositioned in the finer points of social planning and welfare policy.⁸⁸

It was not, however, only generational difference that distinguished the two men but also a question of personal temperament informed by their respective upbringings. Thompson was raised in Boars Hill, a small settlement on the outskirts of Oxford. The community of Boars Hill constituted a 'self-conscious intellectual elite', renowned for its concentrated population of academics, writers and artists, conscious of their position as cultural figureheads and leaders in English society.⁸⁹ This was certainly applicable in the Thompson household. Thompson's father, E.J. Thompson, a former Methodist missionary in India who had become a lecturer in Indian languages at Oxford University, remained an articulate voice against British imperialism in India, and eminent figures from Indian politics and literature, such as Gandhi, Nehru and the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, were known to have graced Scar Top, the Thompson's villa, with their presence.⁹⁰ It was generally agreed that all the Thompson family were highly informed and articulate in their political knowledge.⁹¹

88 Tony Judt with Timothy Snyder, *Rethinking the Twentieth Century* (London: William Heinemann, 2012), 325.

89 Conradi, *A Very English Hero*, 53. John Masefield, Gilbert Murray and Sir Arthur Evans were all neighbours of the Thompson family. Webb, 'A Thoroughly English Dissident', 161.

90 Thompson, *Beyond the Frontier*, 47.

91 Conradi, *A Very English Hero*, 99–100.

Thompson shared his family's passion for literary culture and awareness of global politics, but a trait that developed more distinctively in him was an acute sense of moral seriousness, something that could on occasion worry his father and something that he recognised and acknowledged in himself.⁹² This was partly informed by the strong influence of Methodism on his early education. Kingswood's Methodism, with its strong emphasis on public demonstrations of faith, infused the school day and the curriculum. 'Methodism is not far wrong', E.J. Thompson once wrote to his teenage son, 'when it reminds you that your job is to "serve the present age"'.⁹³ Whilst Thompson would later vehemently reject the Methodist church as an institution, he retained this sense of personal moral duty and public obligation, transferring it instead to the secular sphere of politics.⁹⁴

By contrast, Samuel's childhood was entrenched in a direct experience of a communist culture in a way that Thompson's had not been (Thompson joined the Communist Party, aged 18, in 1942; Samuel was raised in a, albeit unique, North London communist 'community'). He had learnt to be suspicious of anything resembling individual aggrandisement, preferring to subjugate everything to the notion of the collective. Within this, the intellectual role he had aspired to was that of the organiser, which depended on working amongst the rank and file membership, gaining trust, persuading and facilitating whilst never *appearing* to be authoritative. In fact, as he later commented, many of the party roles, like the organiser, depended for their success on 'elaborate pretences of equality' between the organiser and the organised, the recruiter and the recruitee.⁹⁵ The most effective means of achieving this was to be able to communicate with people on their own terms and in their own environments, not from any sort of platform of superior knowledge or insight.

A further point to consider is the developmental trajectory of the two men's working lives as historians, which also had significance for their ideas and uses of history. Both Thompson and Samuel became historians more through circumstance than by conscious intention, discovering in

92 Mary Lago, *India's Prisoner: A Biography of Edward John Thompson 1886–1946* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 294; Conradi, *A Very English Hero*, 74.

93 Lago, *India's Prisoner*, 294; Thompson, *Beyond the Frontier*, 52.

94 Particularly evident in his treatment of it in his book, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin books, 1991), 405. See also Samuel's reference to Thompson's Methodism in: Raphael Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians 1880–1980', *NLR*, I/120, Mar–Apr (1980), 54.

95 Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism* (London: Verso, 2006), 195.

history an important medium with which to develop their political and philosophical ideas. Thompson's early passion was for literature, which he studied for a year at Cambridge after his demobilisation, conceiving a particular passion for Elizabethan and Jacobean writing.⁹⁶ As a tutor in the extramural department of Leeds University in Halifax, Yorkshire (1946–65), he predominantly taught classes in literature.⁹⁷ His first historical work on William Morris (notably a biography of a literary figure) was published in 1955. *The Making of the English Working Class* followed eight years later.

Evidence of Thompson's passion for English literature was on clear display in *The Making of the English Working Class*. The book was a carefully crafted narrative, a 'biography' of a class.⁹⁸ As the unseen 'narrator' of the piece, Thompson was nevertheless an unmistakable presence. The rich baroque style of his prose made the sufferings and, more importantly, the struggles of 'ordinary people' compelling and noble (notably, many of Thompson's 'ordinary' people were often *extra*-ordinarily radical in their ideas and active in their politics). It told their story with great pathos, generously illustrated with choice passages of poetic and literary quotation, leavened with sharp parries of wit, reinforced elsewhere with impassioned polemic. Not once did Thompson transgress too far or lose sight of his main subject but continually drew the great expanse of his vision back to its central theme and powerful conclusion. Blending tragedy with the seeds of hope, he made his plea for the courage of those early pioneers *not* to have been in vain. Compare this with "Quarry Roughs", where the words of *the Quarry residents* bear most responsibility for the writing's vibrancy and, as narrator, Samuel retained a more modest distance.⁹⁹

The success of *The Making of the English Working Class* prompted Thompson's move in 1965 from adult education to the directorship of the Centre for Social History at the newly created University of Warwick. As an established historian in his early forties and the director of a research centre, he was able to shape and determine much of the centre's research activities, and it was during this time that he furthered some of the lines of inquiry first intimated in his book. Thompson's Warwick students were mostly young graduates, some of whom collaborated with him on his

96 Dorothy Thompson, 'Introduction', *The Essential E. P. Thompson* (New York: The New Press, 2001).

97 Andy Croft, 'Walthamstow, Little Gidding & Middlesborough: E.P. Thompson, Adult Education and Literature', *Socialist History*, 8 (1995), 24.

98 Raphael Samuel, *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain* (London: Verso, 1998), 218.

99 I am indebted to Carolyn Steedman for this observation.

research projects.¹⁰⁰ He was renowned for being a tough, uncompromising teacher, determined that his students be academically rigorous and dispensing such career advice such as, ‘If you want to teach, then TEACH, and don’t put on a great fraternal anti-authoritarian act pretending that snotty-nosed 18-year-olds know as much as you do’.¹⁰¹

In 1971, Thompson left the centre at Warwick to become a full-time writer. His political articles regularly appeared in mainstream media outlets such as the *New Statesmen* and *The Times Literary Supplement*.¹⁰² At a point when the HW was just beginning to develop its historical interests, he had served his time as a teacher and was largely preoccupied with his own independent writing, typically on political issues.

Samuel also held an influential role in the organisation of the HW, and yet for all his centrality, his ability to control all of the HW’s activities was subject to certain limitations (perhaps curtailed by the performance of a ‘great fraternal anti-authoritarian act’). The HW started life as an informal pedagogical exercise designed to encourage his worker students to write their own histories. Workshop projects were, therefore, largely dependent on the students’ residual interests and experience. As the HW received little financial support from the college, it also depended on what materials were readily to hand. Unlike Thompson, Samuel was not an established, published historian. On his arrival at Ruskin he was learning his own historian’s craft directly alongside his students. This meant that he did not have a clear research agenda that he was attempting to develop.¹⁰³

Whilst Thompson’s historical interests were concentrated intently on the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Samuel focused on a much later period which, as his work on Headington Quarry demonstrates, allowed him to make extensive use of oral history. This meant encountering his historical ‘subjects’ face-to-face, inevitably restricting some of his interpretive ‘freedoms’. There was no way, for example, that he could have easily transformed Harding into a well-intentioned libertarian rebel!¹⁰⁴ Similarly, the HW’s close relationship with the women’s movement had prompted considerable revision of concepts such as ‘class’ and ‘class

100 Hay et al., *Albion’s Fatal Tree*.

101 Peter Linebaugh, ‘From the Upper West Side to Wick Episcopi’, *NLR*, 1/201, Sep–Oct (1993), 23.

102 Collected in E.P. Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight* (London: Merlin, 1980); E.P. Thompson, *The Heavy Dancers* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

103 First significant publication in history: Samuel, ‘Comers and Goers’.

104 Newens, ‘The Genesis of *East End Underworld*’, 348.

struggle', which were inadequate for dealing with marginalisation on the basis of gender (or, equally, sexuality, age or race). This relationship had also fostered, inevitably, a more concerted focus on everyday, domestic life. Notably, one of the main criticisms to be levelled at Thompson addressed his lack of sensitivity towards the distinctive politics implied by the oppression of cultural identities such as gender.¹⁰⁵

Whilst Thompson and Samuel shared many similarities in their historical interests, methodologies and political influences, they were distinguished by the different trajectories of their lives giving rise to their distinctive politics of performance as intellectuals. Thompson had been raised in an atmosphere steeped in high literary culture and infused with a solemn sense of duty to offer moral leadership. As a historian, no one surpassed his ability to tell the heroic story in which 'the people' (or a select few of them) were the central protagonists in the making of 'History'. But for all its undisputed power and prowess, *The Making of the English Working Class* still performed a species of ventriloquism: the people's story selected, crafted and given meaning by another.

Samuel, by contrast, had grown up deeply suspicious of overt displays of leadership. At an early age he had taken to heart the organiser's insight that in the battle of ideas for change, a heroic story alone was not sufficient. Change was more profound when individuals had a personal stake in creating it, when they were more than just readers of the story but its writers as well (recall his description of the party's recruitment processes which, in his view, were most effective when the sympathiser was directly 'involved' in party work¹⁰⁶). He had cultivated the subtle arts of achieving this. As the moving spirit behind the HW he drew on these skills to facilitate history-making, thus deepening the extent of personal investment in the stories of the past. 'The people' in "Quarry Roughs", for example, were not just the subject matter of the piece, they were co-collaborators in the writing of it.

105 Catherine Hall, 'The Tale of Samuel and Jemima: Gender and Working Class Culture in Early Nineteenth Century England', in Harvey Kaye and Keith McClelland, eds, *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 78–102.

106 *Ibid.*, 125–26.

Naturally, the work on Headington Quarry was the product of its time, place and conditions of production. As those times always appear differently when viewed from a distance, so do the ideas and work produced in them. Alun Howkins, one of the original student researchers on the project, later reflected that whilst they ‘had got a lot right, they had also got quite a lot wrong’ about turn of the century Headington Quarry.¹⁰⁷ This is an inevitable feeling for historians who revisit a project over 30 years after it was first begun. From the distance permitted by an elapse of time, the subject matter of “Quarry Roughs” does have its restrictions. It rejoices too uncritically in the ‘organic community’, intimating its roots in the political atmosphere of the late 1960s and 1970s.

What is of greater interest is what the “Quarry Roughs” essay reveals about how Samuel was starting to think about and practise history. There was the painstaking excavation of the relationship between social consciousness (as expressed in the oral testimonies) and the material experiences of daily life in the Quarry. There was also the attempt to pick out the threads of connection between the details of the micro study and the wider, overarching historical theme or question. For some commentators, history-writing like “Quarry Roughs” with its sheer density of detail suggested a lack of clarity in the HW’s political framework. What made this ‘Socialist’ history? Was it enough for the subject matter to focus on working-class life or was something more substantial needed?

The publication of the first HW book took place in the same year that the idea for a HW journal was developed. The journal was initially conceived of as a space where some of these issues could be worked out and addressed, whilst still retaining the general spirit of experimentation and democratisation of history enshrined in the HW meetings. Its manifesto, echoing so much of the HW endeavour, was hugely optimistic and vastly ambitious presenting would-be readers with a vision of a harmonious exchange between vigorous inquiry and a democratic ethic of participation. Whilst this ambition did not ‘fail’, it certainly found itself on a different path. The journal quickly became caught up in the epistemological debates that had been taking place across the political and intellectual left, growing ever more intensely contested. These debates would ultimately reach a crisis point at a HW meeting in December 1979.

107 Alun Howkins, email communication with author, October 2013.

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