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Stranger Memories of Who We Really Are: History, the Nation and the Historian

Raphael Samuel (third from right, back row), Ruskin staff and students during a field trip to Ironbridge, 1994

Patrick Wright was perplexed. What on earth was Raphael Samuel up to? Wright had just sat down to review Samuel’s *Theatres of Memory* and was unimpressed. Samuel had always ‘played up’ to the role of the people’s historian, appearing at times perilously close to abandoning his responsibilities as a critical intellectual. His latest offering brought to mind something of those zealous young intellectuals of the 1960s who had gone off to work in factories or on collective farms, driven by some combination of romantic zeal and middle-class guilt. But this book of his, surely, was too much!

For a start, it was inconsistent with his earlier views. Only a few years ago, Samuel had been one of the sternest critics of the heritage industry and its promiscuous play with the past. One had only to recollect some of his writings where he had strongly criticised the ‘gentrification’ of his home turf in Spitalfields, East London. He had been utterly confounded at the anachronistic attempts to recreate a fictitious Georgian glamour in what had been the old weavers’ quarter. And now, here he was, celebrating retro-chic and other such liberties with the past, going so far as to suggest that professional historians had something to learn from it. This was not only inconsistent, it was foolhardy. As an intellectual and educator, surely Samuel had a responsibility to reject it, to put the record straight, to say firmly to people who did not know any better that it was not like that. Wright was particularly stung by Samuel’s response to Wright’s own book, a careful meditation on the links between heritage, memory, psychologies of nostalgia and the role of history. And yet here he was, painted as a killjoy and boisterously clubbed over the head in Samuel’s folkish-fairground approach to history. Just what exactly was Samuel trying to achieve?

Whilst the 1980s was an inauspicious time for the political left, for Samuel it was another period of reinvention. Whereas many of his colleagues and comrades felt socialism to be a demoralised and fractured force, further strained by the decade’s aggressive invocations of patriotism, he seemed to relish a renewal of the battle of ideas. He read the flourishing of history in the popular sphere as a potential opportunity rather than a dismal
calamity. This chapter examines the controversial position he assumed in the debates surrounding British national history. It also engages with *Theatres of Memory* (1994), the only sole-authored monograph published during his lifetime, which, it suggests, was both a response to the times *and* a reassertion of his preexisting priorities and principles.

An outbreak of nostalgia?

At the start of the 1980s, Britain seemed a country in decline. Internationally, the once almighty epicentre of empire was now greatly reduced to the status of a small-island member of the European Economic Community, increasingly peripheral on the international economic and political stage. Domestically, the economic slump of the 1970s, the embittered state of British industry besieged by strikes, and high levels of unemployment had resulted in a nation disillusioned and unsure of itself.5

For Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the reason for this decline lay in history and the throttling of British entrepreneurial spirit; choked between upper-class paternalism, leftist expansions of state control and the denigration of an intellectual and cultural elite, the capitalist middle classes had been squeezed out. This interpretation, as James Raven observed, was not unique to Thatcher but had been given substance by historians from both the right *and* left of the political spectrum.6 On the one hand, historian Martin J. Weiner could endorse this from a neoliberal perspective but, on the other, Perry Anderson could also propose a similar explanation for the ‘incompleteness’ of Britain’s capitalist revolution.7

For Thatcher, if the fault lay in history so must the remedy. Her response to this was to adopt a bewildering position, simultaneously iconoclastic and deferential towards the past. More than any other British prime minister, she attacked the pillars of the establishment in a ‘neo-populist’ confrontation with hereditary privilege: deregulating the City of London

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and attacking the Higher Civil Service, the Church of England, the House of Lords, the universities, the Bar and the Tory Party itself. She re-invented liberal *laissez-faire* economic policy, pushing back the role of the state and allowing market forces to assume a leading role.

At the same time, Thatcher invoked a return to ‘Victorian values’, extolling the ‘virtues’ of that era which she identified as thrift, industry, self-help and mutual aid, and making these the platform upon which she fought the 1983 election. Britain *would* become the prosperous nation of shopkeepers whose industry had built the greatest empire of the modern era. At first things did not augur well; the economic measures she imposed on entering office were deemed as harsh and she was deeply unpopular amongst her own party. In 1981 *The Times* was moved to declare her the most unpopular prime minister since polls began. In the 1983 election, however, not only was Thatcher re-elected but with an increased parliamentary majority. Something had clearly changed.

The change in attitude owed a debt to the Falklands War (2 April–14 June 1982). As the crisis unfolded, Thatcher had stepped effortlessly into the role of the resolute war leader, naturally inviting comparisons (particularly for gifted cartoonists) to Elizabeth I, Victoria, even Britannia herself. In both political rhetoric and in the popular press, the conflict was framed with constant reference to national pride, patriotism and British greatness.

Thatcher demonstrated the same singleness of purpose in her response to the resurgence of the Cold War. The division between the Western European nations allied behind NATO and those nations behind the Soviet Union’s iron curtain in the East had drawn a geographical and ideological dividing line across the continent since the establishment of the Warsaw Pact in 1955. During the 1980s hostilities resurfaced with renewed fears, on both sides, of the nuclear threat posed by the other. Whereas her predecessor, Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan, had not felt the threat to be urgent, Thatcher felt differently. Within a week of gaining office, the British Prime Minister was advising the German Chancellor (Helmut Schmidt) of the need for a greater nuclear capacity in Western Europe.9

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8 *The Times*, 9 October 1981.
9 McSmith, *No Such Thing as Society*, 44.
Though Thatcher was not the first politician to draw upon a vision of the national past to justify their politics, what was more striking was the extent to which it appeared to capture public imagination. Not only did Conservative victory in the 1983 election suggest public support, it was reinforced by the increasing popularity of the national past in popular culture. If British manufacturing languished in the doldrums, the ‘heritage industry’ flourished. History filled the contents of television listings, commanded large box-office takings at the cinema, prompted the mushrooming of multiple museums and public exhibitions, drove the boom in the antiques trade and saw thousands flocking to National Trust properties to peer into the inner chambers of the social elite and picnic on their lawns. The appetite for the English past appeared insatiable.

This was further compounded by an ineffective opposition. As Clive Christie argued, the Labour Party’s response to the Falklands War was divided, reflective of deeper divisions and ongoing disputes amongst the membership about what the party stood for. The protracted industrial disputes in the late 1970s had done much to damage the party’s traditional relationship with the labour movement. Its failure to respond effectively to economic decline had similarly discouraged the electorate. The crisis reached a peak in the disastrous 1983 election campaign. Led by Michael Foot, representing the ‘old socialists’, on a politically brave platform of unilateral disarmament, the party received its lowest share of vote since its official formation in 1918.

Left intellectuals and historians, meanwhile, recognised that the motivation behind the Falklands War followed no economic rationale but plumbed instead an ‘ugly nationalist sentiment which will cloud our political and cultural judgments’.

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cultured life’. Appeals to the splendours and glories of nation provided a spectacle that was fuelled by a manipulation of fears and desires, and crafted for the purposes of consolidating Thatcher’s neo-populist politics. On the growth and proliferation of history in the public sphere, art historian Robert Hewison’s *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (1987) launched an early critique of its intellectual cynicism, viewing it as clear evidence of a lack of strong cultural leadership.

The analysis flew freely but, as Eric Hobsbawm pointed out, this nationalism had been *tapped* not manufactured by the Tories, corresponding to deep-rooted emotions of humiliation. The left’s reticence to engage with the appeal of national identity in any great depth had rendered it remote and ineffective. Hobsbawm’s own efforts to address this issue, as coeditor of *The Invention of Traditions* (1983), cast an iconoclastic eye over the historical roots of the British national myths, puncturing many of its favourite conceits and revealing the extent to which so many appeals made in the name of great tradition were in fact no older than the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Elsewhere, Wright took a more serious approach to the appeal of the national in social psychology. His study *On Living in an Old Country* (1985) probed the internal dynamics of nostalgia in relation to Britain’s loss of global dominance, arguing that nostalgia articulated the confusion and trauma fostered by the violent pace at which old ways and means of living had given way to aggressive modernisation.

In disrupting some of the claims made in the name of the national past, books like *The Invention of Traditions* and *On Living in an Old Country* had greater appeal than much of the more overtly politicised writing.

17 Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*. 
While they unravelled or exposed, however, they offered little by way of a compelling alternative. Within history as a profession, the appetite for big stories (grand narratives) appeared greatly diminished. In an influential article in *Past and Present* (*P&P*), David Cannadine contended that the fracturing of the major political ideological positions (socialist, conservative, liberal) had prompted a breakdown in the ‘consensus’ which, according to Cannadine, had characterised the discipline during the 1950s and 1960s. There was no longer a common framework, a shared set of big questions or agreed definitions, to which historians, arguing from their respective political positions, all made reference.

The result, Cannadine argued, was the fragmentation of the discipline into a multitude of specialisms, with research carried out on more and more concentrated periods of time. The ferocity of the recent epistemological debates had further undermined confidence in the validity of history as a form of knowledge. So, whilst history on the ground and in the market boomed, history in the academy retreated further within the safety of the seminar room and library. He concluded with a call for historians to assert a more active presence in public and political debate.\(^\text{18}\)

Cannadine’s appeal was significant because it recognised that what was at stake was *not* only a scholarly battle but a political one. The rules of engagement and mode of thinking were, therefore, different from those of the academic historian. Such a battle was *exactly* the territory sought and occupied by Samuel who, after the travails of interminable epistemological debate, relished the challenge with gusto. In 1983 Samuel called a Workshop to confront ‘Victorian values’ head-on, the papers from which were published in a *New Statesman* supplement on ‘Victorian Values’.\(^\text{19}\) His own contribution, ‘Soft Focus Nostalgia’, followed Hobsbawm in juxtaposing the industriousness and enterprise invoked by Thatcher with the exploitation endured by the workforce that had made it possible. Like Hall and Wright, he reflected on the appeal of ‘Victorian Values’ which, he suggested, lay in the seductive aesthetics of the images chosen, the reassuring sense of solidity and stability that they invoked in what were highly uncertain times. The brevity of the article allowed him little time to elaborate on these insights.

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For all Samuel’s distaste for the neo-Tory version of the national past, personal abhorrence was also blended with fascination. He could not but be aware of the way in which Thatcher had successfully appropriated the language of the libertarian left for her own political purposes. Later, he would go as far as to describe her as the most ‘philosophically interesting Prime Minister’ of his lifetime. The invocation of individual responsibility, independence and autonomy chimed with the same spirit of self-help and independence that could be discerned in Young’s studies of community life in Bethnal Green, in Thompson’s self-creating English working class or his own recognition of the important role played by small-scale enterprise in Headington Quarry. Most importantly, it was popular, not just amongst the aspiring lower-middle classes but, critically, amongst members of the working class. It was not enough to suggest that the entire country had been skilfully manipulated or was suffering from a collective postcolonial breakdown: there was something more urgent, more profound about appeals to the national past.

The 1984 HW on patriotism was another major engagement with the issue, called to confront and combat the ‘jingoism’ of the Falklands War. According to Samuel’s earliest letter to the HW collective, the prompt came from an article written by Christopher Hill appearing in The Guardian:

I found Christopher Hill’s splendid article in The Guardian quite intimidating at first: how on earth could we match up to, be worthy of the place he had outlined for an expanded HW as intervening in a major way in the issues raised, from the Conservative side … Thinking about it, it seemed to me the article contained the answer and we should make its spoken and unspoken problematic PATRIOTISM and NATIONAL IDENTITY.

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This initial objective was quickly superseded by the reality of the conference, which revealed the extent of division and diversity amongst the broadly constituted left, on the subjects of nation, national identity and patriotism.25 Samuel’s notes reviewing the conference were untroubled by this; on the contrary they expressed his general delight with the event:

The week-end had a veritable feast of excellent, considered and accessible papers and will make a fine (and money-raising) book for the Centre; and it was, I think, thoroughly enjoyed by numbers of the participants.

His only reservation was over ‘the absence of a more central feminist component of the Workshop’, but he felt that was as much to do with the state of feminist history in Britain as it was with the HW itself.26

In the book collection that finally emerged from the HW (some five years later), national identity was viewed from a myriad of different perspectives and methodological approaches: the theoretical and the historical, the physical and the psychological, the religious, the gendered and the racial. Samuel’s preface boldly defined the collection’s common objective as an:

...escape from unitary or essentialist notions of all kinds; not only Tory ones of a supposedly transcendental national being, but also Gramscian notions of hegemony (that currently fashionable version of Marxism which emphasises the tutelary powers of the privileged); Weberian notions of social domination (rule by bureaucracies of elites); and sociological theories of social control.27

His own contributions combined long-standing interests with the fruits of more recent work with his partner Alison Light. ‘An Irish Religion’ revisited early research into the experience of Irish migrant workers in nineteenth-century Britain. ‘Doing the Lambeth Walk’ explored the depiction and portrayal of class politics in the contemporary stage musical ‘Me and My Girl’, and ‘Dockland Dickens’ charted the different interpretive registers applied to the work of Charles Dickens.28 His opening editorial, ‘Exciting to be English’, was a characteristically breathless

historical survey of the rise, fall and rise again of patriotism. Whilst still cleaving to a conventional ‘leftist’ position (evident in comments such as: ‘the more cosmopolitan capitalism becomes the more it seems to wear a homespun look; the more nomadic its operations the more it advertises its local affiliations’), the tone of the writing was curious rather than hostile conceding the attraction and ‘vitality of the national idea.’

The Workshop on patriotism had not produced an alternative left-wing narrative of the nation to oppose the Tory one. It had not used history as a means of analysing relationships of domination and social control or processes of manipulation and indoctrination. At best, if taken as an overall collection, it was a demonstration that the notion of patriotism was neither self-contained nor stable as a category of thought but always belonged as part of wider imaginative frameworks. Critics, such as Cannadine, found this eclecticism ambiguous and frustrating. Unsatisfied with Samuel’s editorial explanation, which he described curtly as a masterclass in ‘free association’, he found the collection incoherent, an ad hoc assemblage of different variations on the theme of patriotism, none of which had been fully explored. This view was echoed by historian Miles Taylor for whom the collection lacked a clear historiographical overview of patriotism (again targeting the ebullient introduction and its author), further proof of the political left’s uneasy and ambiguous relationship with the concept.

Nevertheless, the fact that Samuel recognised excitement, as opposed to melancholia, manipulation or mindlessness, as an important factor in the appeal of patriotism had significance. Furthermore, the fact that he was far from being downcast by diversity on the left all suggest that his modus operandi in this particular battle of ideas differed from his contemporaries. It was certainly more optimistic and, arguably, more strategic. The chance to develop a more substantial theorisation for his ideas came through the sixth international oral history conference on ‘Myth and History’, held at St John’s College, Oxford, in 1987. A book collection, comprised of some of the conference papers, was later published in the HW series as The Myths We Live By (1991).

Whilst not making a direct contribution to the book collection, Samuel, together with coeditor Paul Thompson, wrote the editorial introduction to the book, identifying the central theme and problematic as ‘the universality of myth as a constituent of human experience’ and advancing the argument that ‘[Myth] lies behind any historical evidence’; which was not to say that they were ‘working with memories of a false past’ but that the facts of the past were inevitably, necessarily, given structure and, therefore, meaning by their connection with larger frameworks of belief or hypotheses about the past.

Importantly, the editors argued, this process was not a specialised one. It occurred in everyday life, continually taking place amongst communities (‘imagined’ or actual), within families and by individuals, all drawing upon mythic frameworks, reinterpreted and adapted, in order to make sense of their own experiences and connect them in relation to others. Exploring the relationship between myth and history, the two editors concluded, offered not only clues to the past but the processes in which the ‘past’ was created. They pressed the need to formulate ‘a better understanding of a continuing struggle over the past, which goes forward, always with uncertain outcome, into the future’. So, in the year that Cannadine had written his lament for the big stories of history, Samuel was further discovering, with delight, the creativity inherent in the profusion of possible histories that rushed to fill the void.

History, the nation and the schools

Given Thatcher’s recognition of history as a critical tool in the restoration of Britain’s national fortunes (both morally and economically), it was little surprise that history should figure prominently in Conservative plans for a national curriculum. In the 1980s, Britain had one of the most decentralised and autonomous education systems in Europe. British teachers enjoyed considerable freedom in both the content and style of what they taught. Since the 1960s, a strong ‘progressivism’ had come to dominate pedagogical practices. In history this often involved

thematic project work, more sensitive to social issues such as class, gender and race than to strict chronologies. For Thatcher, and others working in education, such an ad hoc approach to education was creating a younger generation uncompetitive for the tough demands of the emerging world of commerce and work.

The *Education Reform Act* (1988) was an attempt to address this ‘problem’. The government proposed that the British education system be entirely overhauled and replaced with a government-approved national curriculum for all basic subjects including history. This was not a sudden development. The Conservative Government naturally favoured an emphasis on ‘British’ history and national culture, a view shared amongst some teachers and educationalists favouring ‘traditional’ values. Others, identifying with progressivist approaches, found any such suggestion of a return to ‘facts and dates’ teaching styles or ‘drum and trumpet’ forms of history unbalanced.

A National Curriculum History Working Group, chaired by Commander Saunders Watson (the aristocratic owner of Rockingham Castle, Northamptonshire), was set up to draft a curriculum. Caught between multiple contending camps and interest groups, their eventual report (published in April 1990) was a doomed document, destined to satisfy no one. Certainly, many of the participants felt the venture impeded from the start by political pressure and avid media attention. Ultimately, it would take a further six years before any sort of ‘agreement’ was reached.

The imposition of a history curriculum into the nation’s schools raised the stakes in the battle for the nation’s past considerably. Samuel was the first to sound the alarm, calling a forum on the subject published in *History Today* in 1984. In fact, no other British historian became so involved and vocal in these debates. He followed them intently, writing multiple articles which appeared in the national press and, of course, organising a series of Workshops to address the topic, culminating with a number of ‘teach-ins’ held at Ruskin College, the first two addressing the immediate

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national curriculum question’ (June 1989 and May 1990) in response to the working group’s report. A third (June 1991), on ‘The Future of English’, covered the prehistory of the teaching of English as well as providing a historical perspective on contemporary issues such as the teaching of English in schools.\(^{38}\)

Unlike the patriotism workshop, the ‘History, the Nation and the Schools’ series was not intended as a means of posing a left-wing alternative but as an opportunity to debate the teaching of history and, more specifically, the teaching of national past. Samuel personally approached figures far removed from the HW’s usual constituency including teachers and academics associated with the right (such as Robert Skidelsky, Jonathan Clark, Norman Stone), not only inviting them to participate but entering into protracted correspondence with some of them.\(^{39}\) His efforts went further still, involving members of the working party and the Chief Inspector of Schools R.H. Hennessey.\(^{40}\) He was, however, unable to entice the Labour Party into the debates.\(^{41}\)

Up until that point, the HW had been experiencing a more understated existence travelling around the country. The ‘History, the Nation and the Schools’ Workshops recaptured some of the old ambition and ferocity of the early days, although attendance remained in the hundreds rather than the thousands, and attendees were typically academics and educational professionals rather than hot-blooded unionists and anarchists. Nevertheless, the questions raised about national history and national education, combined with the lively media interest in the sessions, renewed some sense of political urgency.\(^{42}\) These Workshops also presented a rare

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39  Examples of this correspondence can be found in Samuel 038/History, the Nation and the Schools, RSA.


42  Ken Jones, a senior figure in the National Union of Teachers, remembers being warned against speaking to the media camped outside the Workshop. Oral communication with author, December 2012, London, transcript held in author’s private collection.
conjunction of the HW with the History Workshop Journal (HWJ), which published several of the papers from the HW meetings as well as carrying numerous readers’ letters on the subject.43

The intensity of the debates and the extremism of some of the opinions on offer, both from the left and the right, gave an unfortunate sense of pantomime to the proceedings. Speaking as a proponent for the ‘traditional’ history, R.H.C. Davies was quoted as telling one of the Workshops: ‘I don’t have any time for all this multi-cultural history … I have trouble with these foreign names’. Stone asserted that it was: ‘the responsibility of school teachers to ram home the national culture’.44 To the left of the spectrum, writer Gemma Moss assaulted the lines of scholarly propriety by suggesting that ‘there seems to be a view that Jackie Collins is degrading and Shakespeare morally uplifting: they’re different that’s all. There’s no reason why Mills and Boon shouldn’t be taught alongside Jane Eyre’. Another participant said more bluntly: ‘English is a white middle-class scene. Texts like Conrad’s Heart of Darkness are racist’.45 The ensuing headlines suggest some of the fun journalists had in creating their own villains and heroes out of the proceedings. ‘Raised Voices in a Very British Battle’, quipped the Times Educational Supplement.46 ‘Toppling the English Citadel’ sneered The Daily Telegraph before proceeding on a critique-cum-demolition of the English professor, Marxist and Workshop participant, Terry Eagleton.47

At the Workshops themselves, the ‘new historians’ ‘won’ easily (they had the best arguments and the funniest jokes) but this was unsurprising as they were on their home turf and playing, for the most part, to their ‘home crowd’, their internal differences allayed for the sake of a common enemy whose extremities were easily ridiculed. There was, however, a sense that all this drama, as intensely as it was contested, had a slightly tired feel of

47 Clare, ‘Toppling the English Citadel’.
a well-trodden ‘set piece’ between the ‘left’ and the Tories. As Roger West remarked in his report back for the HWJ following the first Workshop meeting, both the extreme right and the extreme left were minorities. The curriculum would be based on a ‘wissy washy liberal compromise’ and it was this, West suggested, that would have been more useful and informative to debate.48

In fact, some of the papers did reflect on what a contemporary national history curriculum might look like. In the second Ruskin ‘teach-in’, a stream on Four Nations History proposed Britain be approached in terms of the relationships between its component nations, Scotland, Ireland, England and Wales, or even through other geographic or cultural demarcations: North and South, East and West, lowlands and highlands, town and country.49 Another stream reflected on ‘The British Empire’ as a potential framework, having the immediate benefit of situating Britain within a global context and allowing room for exploring the transformative impact of cultural encounter and exchange.50

Samuel was also inclined towards a more complex engagement with the questions raised by the history curriculum debates. Practical experiences of teaching adult students for almost 30 years, along with growing frustration at the disconnection between intellectuals and the popular movement had sharpened his scepticism towards the extreme or doctrinaire. The patriotism workshop had demonstrated the sheer diversity of perspectives, as well as the depth of emotion, on the national question amongst the political left. The Myths We Live By had further emphasised the critical importance of large stories, myths, in actively making meaning of experience and the need, therefore, to approach such matters sensitively and with a degree of self-reflectivity. To substitute one set of beliefs with another was not education but indoctrination. Equally, to demolish all beliefs as false was little more than nihilism that silenced further discussion.

48 West, ‘History, the Nation and the Schools’, 197.
50 Speakers included: Polly O’Hanlon, Shula Marks, Stuart Hall, RS 7: History Workshop Events/History, the Nation and the Schools recall conference, 74, RSA.
Building on these insights, his position paper ‘Grand Narratives’, delivered at the first ‘teach-in’, argued that despite pessimism amongst the profession following the perceived break-up of overarching political ideologies – ‘liberalism, constitutionalism, socialism, imperialism’ (which he was not convinced had actually taken place) – there was no reason to assume history would cease to pursue large questions over long trajectories but these would assume quite a different appearance. Giving the example of feminism, he argued:

It gives gender, as a subject and as a problematic, the centrality which Marxists have given to class. It asks for, and builds on, a history addressed to the private sphere rather than the world of public affairs, and interprets the second in the light of the first rather than the other way round.

In a second paper, ‘The Case for National History’, given the following year, he advanced his reasons for supporting the presence of national history on the curriculum, saying ‘history, whether we like it or not, is a national question and it has always occupied a national space’, and going on to add that:

If British history is restored to the school curriculum, it should be for pedagogic reasons – because it is the country they know best (they are not obliged to love it) whose language (even if they are bi-lingual) they speak, whose literature they read, whose famous events are dramatized on TV or burlesqued by the stand-up comic.

To this end, history was part of a social conversation in which everyone was unavoidably implicated. It was, therefore, important to be able to follow and understand what was being said if one was to participate effectively.

Samuel’s articles, which appeared with remarkable frequency in the national press, elaborated on these themes. Writing for the mainstream media was very different from doing so for left-wing journals. It prompted greater deliberation over the choice of words. One worried note to Stephen Bates (at the time, editor for The Guardian’s education section) combined defiance: ‘I am leaving in Neo-Piagetian it doesn’t implicate you editorially … it ought to be possible to mention the name of the

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52 Raphael Samuel, ‘The Case for National History’, Samuel 028/History, the Nation and the Schools, RSA.
Freud of child development theory in pages devoted to education’ with a touch of anxiety ‘you have the liberty to cut out Neo-Piagetian if you can’t stomach it’.  

So, perhaps exercising a greater delicacy and care to come across as reasonable than he might have done otherwise, Samuel’s contributions contained words of critique for all sides of the political spectrum. Of a ‘traditional’ history based around big events and leaders: ‘a history of carriage folk which ignored the horses’ hooves, or a narrative of battles which only had eyes for the general staff, would be as airless as a bunker’. On the other hand, a history piously stripped of its colourful individuals was equally lacklustre:

If heroes and heroines are myth … they are nevertheless a necessary fantasy. We all need, at some stage in life, mentors. We all seek out people to believe in, patterns to follow, examples to take up.

On the subject of teaching methods, he acknowledged that it was the right, not the left, who had led the return to a subject-based teaching of history and conceded that ‘progressive’ history could risk too great an immersion in minutiae at the expense of larger questions. At the same time, the skills-based approach it advocated, ‘the critical reading of documents and original materials’, were the fundamental tools of the historian’s craft. Furthermore, its appeals to direct physical encounters and sensory experience were a vital means for rousing a sense of connection to the past.

At the core of his arguments was the view that the teaching of history should not lament the breakdown of consensus nor aspire to restore it, that it should neither pursue one particular version of the past nor one dominant method of teaching it. Far from being a symptom of decline, conflict was the lifeblood of history: ‘history is a house of many mansions and its narratives change over time’. The teaching of history needed to embrace such conflict because it was through the jostling and struggling of contending views and interpretations that ideas were challenged and changed.

53 Raphael Samuel, ‘Letter to Stephen Bates’, Samuel 038/ History, the Nation and the Schools, RSA.
At times, his position seemed discordant with many of his comrades and colleagues of the left. Notably, it received fulsome support from a most unexpected quarter, the Cambridge historian Professor Geoffrey Elton, a staunch supporter of Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher. Despite the apparent ideological chasm, or even abyss, between the two men, Elton found much to praise in Samuel’s work which he expressed in a letter dated 20 May 1990, shortly after receiving copies of the papers given at the second Workshop:

Do I detect a note of surprise on your part in finding the two of us so very widely agreed? My own sense that there are unbridged gullies about was restored by Stephen Yeo’s address which to me seemed to embody all the doctrinaire convictions of the so-called left, especially the obligatory genuflections before the deities of the Pantheon – Christopher Hill, Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson & Co. You talk much better sense because you are concerned about History rather than EDUCATION, that sad intrusion in teaching and learning … Now I find myself very much at one with you about the real role of history in education … I do think the dividing line lies between those to whom history … is an important element in the make-up of all the people, both in providing a three-dimensional setting to life’s experience and in offering a particular (critical and imaginative) training of the mind, irrespective of content, and on the other those who wish to use it to promote particular social or political ends.  

Elton concurred with Samuel about the transference of emphasis from a politics conveyed through the specific subject and object of history to the practice of history-making itself. On one point, however, he misread his unlikely ‘ally’. Samuel did not (could not) see the ‘real role of history in education’ as something that was possible to separate or even distinguish from politics. This was not politics as a tribal ‘war of position’ amongst creeds or factions, but as an ongoing process (a whole way of struggle) of negotiating and renegotiating social self-identity. As one of Samuel’s articles concluded:

If history is an arena for the projection of ideal selves, it can also be the means of undoing and questioning them, offering more disturbing accounts of who we are and where we come from than simple identification would suggest.

58 Geoffrey Elton, Letter to Raphael Samuel, Samuel 038/History, the Nation and the Schools, RSA.
It was against the backdrop of these debates about national identity, popular memory, history and education that Samuel came to write his own ‘more disturbing’ account: Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture (1994).

**Theatres of Memory**

In a tribute to Samuel published shortly after his death, Stuart Hall said of *Theatres of Memory*:

> Of course, in one sense he had been preparing to write such a book ever since he first recognised the social history of working-class life as his true vocation in the early 1960s. In another sense, the book, … was the product of a kind of expansion of sympathies, an opening up of himself to the ‘play’ of the sheer abundant, tumultuous variety of the popular, of which the early Raphael would not have been capable.\(^{60}\)

As Hall suggested, the book, whilst no simplistic ‘history as autobiography’, bore many of the ‘enthusiasms’ collected over the course of his life. Unsurprisingly, reviews of the book reflected the sort of conflicting opinions that its author engendered. Writer and biographer Fiona MacCarthy praised its humanity and creativity, seeing Samuel in the same tradition as Hill and E.P. Thompson.\(^{61}\) Clark was also receptive, expressing particular pleasure at the book’s critical stance towards elements of the political left. Keith Thomas offered more cautious praise whilst still noting some of the book’s more eccentric qualities.\(^{62}\)

Other responses were cooler. Wright, whose own book was subject to cheerful pillory in *Theatres of Memory* (depicted as one of the prompts for po-faced academics to denigrate heritage in the name of cultural studies), suspected that Samuel’s abrupt shift towards a militant support of popular history-making was the gratification of a personal vanity in his aspiration towards the role of the ‘people’s historian’.\(^{63}\) Richard Hoggart, recently retired from the assistant directorship of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), disliked what he took

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63  Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, 263; Wright, ‘Review of *Theatres of Memory*’. 
Historian Stefan Collini, writing a few years after the book’s publication, provided a more measured assessment of this tension. Whilst not denying the book’s imaginative qualities, he saw Samuel’s rejection of a privileged role for the trained historian as a restriction on his own capacity to make effective social criticism. Like Wright, he also hinted that this was a slightly disingenuous posture to assume given that some of the book’s best passages were clearly the work of a historian who had himself undergone a thorough historical training.65

The critics, in particular Wright and Collini, raised an important point concerning the contending, sometimes clashing, agendas within the book. *Theatres of Memory* was inherently protean, containing multiple strands, any one of which might have formed the basis of a single monograph. Such a study, however, was not the main objective of *Theatres of Memory*. Arguably, the book covered three overlapping areas, all of which corresponded to those most persistent in Samuel’s own intellectual identity and background. It was at once a historical study, a political polemic and an educational philosophy, the arguments from which were inextricably entwined with one another, yet retaining their distinctive features and implications.

On one level, *Theatres of Memory* was a history of popular-history-making in postwar England. As such it followed a recurrent theme in Samuel’s overall body of work, the ‘Nineteenth Century Cromwell’ project for example, or the ‘People’s History’ editorial and most recently the ‘Exciting to be English’ essay. Set out in its pages was an ethnographic survey of the forms and uses of history in contemporary popular culture combined with a shrewd analysis of the ways in which they were negotiated with the wider conditions of their times. Particular impulses or inclinations, he noted, were both ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ in their origins. For example:

The revival of brick, possibly, owes more to sociological changes than it does to aesthetics. It is the business recolonization of the inner city which has turned warehouses into hot properties … Likewise it is the formation of new housing classes – ‘gentrifiers’ in the inner city, long-distance commuters on greenfield sites in the countryside.  

Equally:

Andy Thornton’s, for instance – a husband and wife team who set up as architectural salvage merchants in 1975 – now find themselves manufacturers of replica ware for hotel groups and brewery chains right across the country, as well as for the theme parks and open-air museums: among their clients, as well as McDonald’s … are the House of Lords, the National Museum of Photography and Eurodisney.

The historical argument of the book was that in this postwar world the past had ceased to be viewed as the prelude to an inevitable present. Rather than a linear march through time, it lingered in places and moments, no longer seeking explanation but the shock of encounter and the thrill of enchantment. The past had become a plaything, a product and production. Far from undermining the discipline the result was, potentially, democratic; an expanding, as opposed to contracting, historical culture.

The book’s political philosophy was asserted from the outset:

It is the argument of Theatres of Memory … that memory, so far from being merely a passive receptacle or storage system, an image bank of the past, is rather an active, shaping force; that it is dynamic … It is also my argument that memory is historically conditioned changing colour and shape according to the emergencies of the moment … Like history, memory is inherently revisionist and never more chameleon than when it appears to stay the same.

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66 Samuel, Theatres of Memory, 128.
67 Ibid., 102.
68 Never one to be pinned down, elsewhere in the book Samuel flipped his own argument on its head suggesting that if one looked outside of ‘official’ history texts and included novels, plays, nursery rhymes, place names, material culture and so on, this sort of playful memory work was not a new, ‘post-modern’, development, but business as usual.
The recognition of memory as a product of both individual psychology and social conditioning reasserted Samuel’s fidelity to the socialist humanism of the first New Left but also showed a more sophisticated understanding of pluralism and complexity.

His final chapter, ‘Who Calls So Loud: Dickens on Stage and Screen’, showcased his credentials as a cultural analyst, probing the intellectual work being done during that most passive of activities, watching a screen (‘There is no reason to think that people are more passive when looking at old photographs, or film footage …’)?71 In a disarmingly anecdotal style, belying the seriousness of the analysis, he recounted how his own interpretive responses were shaped against an array of material factors including technological medium (book, film, television, stage), time (a Christmas-time cinema outing), location (the windswept Hebrides as opposed to London in the festive season) and emotional contexts (the first Dickens film seen as a child, a Dickens novel read on honeymoon, later seen as a film). His account reflected upon the fusion of new information (the experiences gathered through adulthood) with existing impressions (the lingering ghosts of childhood), and the subtle negotiations that this prompted. By the time he reached his closing scene, there was little doubt that even when sat before a moving image, memory was hard at work, contesting every frame.72

As part of his case for memory work as a valid form of history-making, Theatres of Memory contained a lively polemical attack on those who he considered denied its vibrancy. The culprits, familiar villains on the Samuelian stage, included professional historians, cultural critics and sociologists. The conceits of professional historians, those who would claim a privileged position over the study of history, were ruthlessly parodied, the equally ‘theatrical’ nature of the academic world exposed:

The enclosed character of the discipline is nowhere more apparent than in the pages of the learned journals, where young Turks, idolizing and demonizing by turn, topple elders from their pedestals, and Oedipal conflicts are fought out … Academic rivals engage in gladiatorial combat, now circling one another warily, now moving in for the kill. In seminars such conflicts service the function of blood sports and are followed with bated breath.73

71 Ibid., 271.
72 Ibid., 413–28.
73 Ibid., 4.
As a result, much valuable research work went unacknowledged, biographers were not counted, antiquarians were deemed a ‘different species’, local historians were scorned for their parochialism and oral historians deemed guilty of naive empiricism. What this amounted to, Samuel continued, was ‘the unspoken assumption that knowledge filters downwards’ and the preservation of a hierarchy in which the professional enjoyed the top position, enthusiasts a lowly second and, condemned to the periphery, ‘the commentators and communicators who will present garbled accounts of scholarly controversy to the general public’ and who ‘might exist on another planet for the attention they receive in the tea-room circles at the Institute of Historical Research’. 74

And yet, this hierarchical structure was founded on an illusion of authenticity that was entirely misplaced:

Professional historians are poorly placed to condescend to retrochic since … it is one of the currencies in which we deal. We too put the past in quotation marks, as a way of marking our distance from it, and often as a way of extracting some quaint comic effect. … In any event, our work is always an imaginative reconstruction of the past, never – for all the elaboration of our footnotage-mimesis. 75

Or, later:

Are we not guilty ourselves of turning knowledge into an object of desire? And is it not the effect, if not the intention, of our activity as historians to domesticate the past and rob it of its terrors by bringing it within the realm of the knowable? 76

Similarly, the cultural critics, both left and right, who saw the ‘heritage industry’ as a crass assault on the past and further evidence of a wider moral and intellectual decline, failed to acknowledge the substantial quantities of significant, original historical research that it involved:

Another sphere where heritage could be said to have a definite edge over academic history … is in the history of the environment. Here it is showing signs of re-uniting natural history with archaeological inquiry … 77

74 Ibid., 4–5.
75 Ibid., 114.
76 Ibid., 271.
77 Ibid., 277.
Or, with its ear positioned ‘closer to the ground’, its shrewd understanding of how the ‘collective unconscious’ experienced and made sense of the contemporary world:

In the spirit of the age – the here-and-now – it is centrally concerned not with politics or economics, the subjects of yesteryear’s grand narratives … but essentially with that great preoccupation of the ‘Me’ generation: lifestyles. It privileges the private over the public sphere … when it seeks to reconstruct grand narrative it is through the medium of the history of the self.\textsuperscript{78}

As for the sociologists who attributed the ‘heritage disease’ to the triumph of an aggressive Conservative cultural hegemony, the unfolding cultural logic of late capitalism, or the fulfilling culture of national decline, their eagle-eyed perspective overlooked what a closer one revealed to be more complex:

So far as being the medium through which a Conservative hegemony of the national past becomes hegemonic, one could see its advent as part of a sea-change in attitudes which has left any unified view of the national past – liberal, radical, or Conservative – in tatters. Culturally it is pluralist.\textsuperscript{79}

Furthermore, the lack of concern for authenticity was, in some cases, a deliberate and self-conscious part of its aesthetic politics:

It is deficient in what the Victorians called high seriousness, drawing much of its pleasure from the play of the incongruous or the bizarre. Its tastes are cavalier and eclectic, syncretizing ancient and modern and accommodating a promiscuous mix of different styles … It approaches its work in the spirit of the beachcomber, or the snapper-up of unconsidered trifles, rather than that of the antiquarian or the connoisseur collecting gems, treasuring relics and worshipping at time-hallowed shrines.\textsuperscript{80}

Moreover, Samuel pressed, its detractors neglected the politically radical components in its expansive repertoire of instincts:

One way of attempting to account for the popularity of heritage … is as an attempt to escape from class. Instead of heredity it offers a sense of place, rather as environmentalism offers the activist and the reformist an alternative to the worn-out routines of party politics.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 196–97.  
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 281.  
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 112.  
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 246.
As McCarthy noted in her review, the book’s populism followed in the tradition occupied by figures like Hill and Thompson. But in an important way it also departed from the two men by being dramatically more expansive and receptive in its definition of ‘the people’ and the wide range of their imaginative activities.

It was in this openness that his critics claimed he teetered dangerously on the brink of relativity, of accommodating too much, discriminating too little and undermining his own powers of critique. Symptomatic of this, as Bill Schwarz noted in his otherwise positive foreword to the second edition of the book (released in 2012), was the ambiguity surrounding the difference between memory work and history that seemed at many points to dissolve altogether in the impassioned defence of the popular. The key issue at stake was how to reconcile plurality with the ‘trained scepticism’ critical to historians’ craft.

Here, the educational philosophy of *Theatres of Memory* came into effect. Characteristically, this was not clearly set out in the book although the concluding paragraphs gave some intimation of its nature. Repeating his welcome of an expanding historical culture and the exciting challenges it presented to individual and collective identities, Samuel urged historians not to attempt to return to history as a single master narrative, or retreat to ‘the cloistered seclusion of a library carrel’ but to engage with it. The manner and form of this engagement went unstated and unspecified, but in another sense the book performed the role he was proposing for the historian in an age of plurality.

Clues about the nature of this role could be discerned in the sheer liveliness of the writing, the energy with which the smallest of details – in the most mundane (or profane) of places (‘Jemima Puddleduck has been annexed for potty training, a grimacing figure on nursery toilet rolls’) – were illuminated, made to sparkle with hidden promise. They were also present in the playful mockery of ‘scholarly seriousness’, in which trips to the supermarket yielded as much treasure as those to the archive (for example, note 68 in ‘Retrochic’ reads: ‘Notes on a visit to Sainsbury’s, Islington, 21 September 1993’) and *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* lay cheek by

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82 McCarthy, ‘Treading Softly on Our Dreams’.
83 Schwarz, ‘Foreword’.
84 Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*. 444.
85 Ibid., 93, 107.
jowl with The Eagle comic in the footnotes. Or, again, in the book’s self-identification as an ‘open text’, to ‘be read by different readers in different ways for different purposes’, a gleeful relinquishing of authorial claims to sovereignty over meaning and use.

Above all, this role was showcased in his ‘teacher-ly’ notes, the points at which he strayed from argument and analysis to discuss potential avenues of research. On the use of photographs, for example, he advised:

Formal analysis, in terms of composition, lighting and frame – the grammar of photography – could tell us something about what the camera is up to … Record linkage, illuminating the visible by the evidence of things unseen, and focusing on what the frame excludes, might help us piece together the original contexts.

He went on to suggest that ‘school photographs, if they were illumined by comparative analysis might equally be serviceable for the study of corporate loyalties and pedagogic ideals’, or the field of ‘bodily theatrics’ generously enlarged if it took account of the ‘fantastic wealth of imagery in which notions of masculinity and femininity … are refracted through notions of family and community, youth and age, culture and class’. Elsewhere, the ‘return to brick’ in architectural design might prompt a discussion on ‘double-coding’, in which meanings referenced both past and present simultaneously. A friendlier stance towards heritage could ‘begin to educate us in the language of looks, initiate us into the study of colour coding, familiarize us with period palettes’. Through these and dozens more insights like them, Theatres of Memory, as a text, revealed its basic purpose: to issue an open invitation to think and rethink about the past.

In the making of such an invitation, it is possible to venture a reply to the book’s critics. Whilst not all forms of history-making provided equally ‘good’ (authentic) accounts of the past, they all had the potential to provide an insight or perspective into both the past and the present. The value of history as a form of knowledge (and also its main point of distinction from memory) was not as an object in itself, but as a conscious process

86 Ibid., 117, 47.
87 Ibid., x.
88 Ibid., 330.
89 Ibid., 332–33.
90 Ibid., 130.
91 Ibid., 274.
of critical inquiry. The role of the historian was, therefore, to facilitate the making of such an inquiry, to provide it with guidance, probing at memory’s silences. This drive to galvanise participation and create spaces for different voices in a shared conversation had been the ‘simple truth’ behind the History Workshop.\(^{92}\) It had been the enduring motivation of the long-term adult educator, the source of residual hope for the New Left activist, the main function of the party organiser and the underpinning political and intellectual values of the youthful Popular Front communist.

Samuel intended to continue the project marked out in *Theatres of Memory* with *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain* (1998), the second of his intended trilogy on the multiple notions of nation and the role of place as an optic in historical analysis. He had had a second volume ready for publication but in the two years following the publication of *Theatres of Memory* up to his death in December 1996 he had substantially reworked it, writing whole new essays that reflected the continual shifts in his interests and insights. Whilst there is, of course, no way of knowing what the book would ultimately have looked like had he lived to finish it, his wife Alison and his close friends Gareth Stedman Jones and Sally Alexander compiled the collection in tribute to both the ideas and issues motivating his current interests but also to those ideas that had underpinned Samuel’s historical work over the course of his life.\(^{93}\)

The new essays in the book, many of them unfinished and unedited, showcased Samuel’s capacity for imaginative historiographical surveying. One addressed some of the many ‘genealogies’ of the term nation. Another considered the different variations on the notion of British. In ‘Four Nations History’ he sketched out both the uses and the restrictions of the four nations approach to history, which had become increasingly popular following the intensive debates over the writing and teaching of British national history. ‘Empire Stories’ provided a powerful example of his capacity to transform even the most minute and quotidian of subject matter (such as the popular availability of exotic fruits, such as bananas) into a connection with wide analytical frameworks such as empire or the idea of ‘modernity’.\(^{94}\)

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94  A lengthy extract from Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel *Cranford* (1851) is used to open ‘Empire Stories: The Imperial and the Domestic’, in *Island Stories*, 74–75.
There was a review of Asa Briggs’s history of broadcasting, which saw Samuel, in the familiar guise of the people’s historian, probing the ‘silences’ in Briggs’s account. What of regional broadcasting? What of the technologies involved in children’s broadcasting? What of that omnipresent, all-knowing figure; the BBC secretary? Buoyantly, he concluded by congratulating Briggs for having written such an ‘open text’ that others could use as the platform for their own inquiries.95 Further pieces paid homage to the enthusiasm for popular history and heritage that had characterised *Theatres of Memory*. Tourist attractions such as the Lost Gardens of Heligan and the Tower of London, both destinations for an afternoon outing, were potential portals for historical inquiry. How could the gardens reveal something of the impact of the empire on the study of natural history? How could the tower provide a portal into the practical realities and imaginative lives of generations past? There was an entire section devoted to the question of history teaching in British schools, the subject that had so preoccupied Samuel during the 1980s. Another section on the political uses of history challenged the Tory notion of ‘Victorian values’, the invocation of R.H. Tawney by the short-lived Social Democratic Party and Labour MP Tony Benn’s account of the Labour Party’s ancestral roots.

One of the essays, ‘Country Visiting: A Memoir’, gave another tantalising glimpse into what might have formed the subject matter of the intended third book, *Memory Work*. In *Theatres of Memory*, Samuel had envisaged it as a study into the intimate processes in which an individual comes to construct and formulate memory, intending to argue that: ‘subjectivity, like history itself is socially constructed, a creature or child of its time’.96 He had already sketched this out in significant sections of his ‘Lost World’ essays, alluding to the intimate ways in which belief is constructed and, as discussed above, in his closing chapter in *Theatres of Memory* had explored the dialogue between internal and external factors in the formation of interpretation.97 In the essay included in *Island Stories*, he advanced this theme. Using the memories of his mother, Minna,

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95 Ibid., 191. It is uncertain whether Briggs, after 30 years and five volumes worth of work on this project, entirely welcomed being credited as the author of an ‘open text’.
96 Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, xi.
and his own recollections of their experiences and relationship to the British countryside, he set out to further demonstrate how perceptions were framed in negotiation to both wider contexts and personal histories.

Keeping up a brisk pace, the essay explored the intricate connections that united personal motivations behind the perception of the countryside, such as the desire for activity or enchantment, with the political philosophies with which they became entangled. He brushed on the role played by artists, writers, photographers and filmmakers in the creation of symbolic narratives of place and the consequent development of rural tourism and infrastructure, such as the Youth Hostels Association or organised rail tours, designed to facilitate access to and use of the countryside. All these factors working in dialogue at different levels provided the available resources with which to think and construct a viewpoint.

Within this process, the individual perspective was both framed but also framing, selecting from the information available to it the elements most familiar, most reconciliatory with its existing experiences and impulses. The potency of this framing was only fully revealed when the perspective was disrupted, an experience Samuel provided a personal example of in the essay: ‘Five years ago, walking in the Cévennes, it struck me that I had been seeing the same scenery all my life, even though it was in different places and under different names’.98 His point here was that the way we view the world becomes so embedded and normalised that the tell-tale signs of construction, the seams at the sides, are not easily apparent. But, as his comment intimated, moments come when the discrepancies between what we perceive and our means of explaining them grow too wide. This sense of the limitations of our existing knowledge is the spark required for a process of inquiry, a need for new information with which to resolve the disturbance: the search for new histories.

‘Country Visiting’ gave no clues about the result of his investigations into his residual ideas of the countryside. The essay had been left unfinished, subject to a further inquiry, to writing and rewriting. Perhaps this incomplete, in-progress, personal-memoir cum critical-essay is a fitting analogy for his history-making. Stemming from an experience of disruption to the way he had viewed the world – the breakdown of his

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98 Samuel, Island Stories, 130.
communist belief – he had embarked on an intensive and wide-ranging investigation into the world around him, restlessly seeking out every possible angle from which to view it.

What drove this process? Was it fear of once again being subject to self-deception, to delusion? Was it hope of once again finding a sense of all-encompassing belonging? Looking over the course of his life, there were elements of both fear and hope but there was also a third possibility. Gradually, the excitement of discovery and the feeling of solidarity with those silenced and forgotten had eroded the search for a great cause. There was something defiantly liberating about not uncovering that single explanation but on finding instead a myriad of peculiarities and possibilities, an infinite number of lost worlds, hidden threads and stranger memories.