

# Introduction

## A man of paradox?

For the British historian Raphael Samuel (1934–1996), the making of history was inextricably linked with politics. Best known as the moving force behind the History Workshop (HW) and as a founder editor of the *History Workshop Journal* (HWJ), Samuel's self-identified objective was the democratisation of history-making. Yet accounts of him and reactions to his approach to history are characterised by paradox: a born organiser renowned for the chaotic nature of his activities; a trained historian who attacked professional history-making; a lifelong socialist whose relationship to the wider left was often strained; a thinker celebrated for originality and condemned for conceptual confusion. His long-term legacy is no less conflicted. Dismissed by some as a relatively obscure figure, for others he has assumed almost mythical properties as a far-sighted 'prophet' with a vision ahead of his times. Taking these incongruities as a point of departure, this book illuminates Samuel as a neglected but important thinker and asks what, if any, significance he has for modern historiography.

Born into an extended Jewish family in London, Samuel, in his youth, was a devoted Communist Party activist. Like many others, he left the party in 1956; becoming a key figure in the first British New Left movement (1956–62) and later an adult education tutor at the trade union-affiliated Ruskin College. Here, he became the key organiser and, for some, the living personification of the HW's moral, political and methodological agenda.<sup>1</sup> Later, he was instrumental in the creation

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1 David Feldman and Jon Lawrence, 'Introduction: Structures and Transformations in British Historiography', in Feldman and Lawrence, eds, *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 11.

of the *HWJ*. Towards the end of his life, he was a prominent voice in the British history wars, the national curriculum debates and a seemingly unlikely champion of the heritage industry. In different guises, the one consistent motif of his working life was a sustained attempt to recognise history-making as common social activity.

For all this activity, much of it in the public eye, he is an elusive figure in the existing literature surrounding contemporary British historiography, a passing mention or footnote at most.<sup>2</sup> There are several possible reasons for this. His work lacked ‘scholarly’ impact within the profession, he produced only one sole-authored monograph, *Theatres of Memory* (1994), in his lifetime, which he published through a political press (Verso, formerly New Left Books). Despite its ambitions, the book did not set out a clear theoretical position or advance a specific argument about the British past. Further, his career had few of the traditional markers of professional success: he did not gain a doctoral qualification, he worked mostly in a further (rather than higher) education institution and only in the year of his death was he appointed to a professorship and given a prominent chair at a university (University of East London).

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2 Existing engagements with his life and work include the following: Robin Blackburn, ‘Raphael Samuel: The Politics of Thick Description’, *New Left Review (NLR)*, 1/221, Jan–Feb (1997), 133–38; Alison Light, ‘Preface’, in Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism* (London: Verso, 2006); Sally Alexander, Alison Light and Gareth Stedman Jones, ‘Editorial Preface’, in Raphael Samuel, *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain* (London: Verso, 1998); Ken Jones, ‘Raphael Samuel: Against Conformity’, *Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education*, 5, 1 (1998), 17–26; Bill Schwarz, ‘Foreword’, in Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: The Past in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 2012).



Raphael Samuel, Ruskin College, Oxford, 1993

Source: Photographer Stefan Wallgren. Picture from Raphael Samuel Archive, Bishopsgate Institute, London, courtesy of Alison Light and the Raphael Samuel Estate.

Not only did he lack these attributes, he also spent much of life openly criticising them, prompting those with a vested interest in identifying the discipline's innovators (namely, professional historians) to dismiss him as inconsequential, a minor figure embedded within a minority culture of radical left-wing British intellectuals. Even here, his position appears tenuous. He is far less prominent and celebrated than his close contemporaries E.P. Thompson, Stuart Hall and Perry Anderson.<sup>3</sup> Compared to the narrative power and historical vision of Thompson, or the theoretical might and imagination of Hall and Anderson, Samuel seems a man condemned to the margins.

Yet what engagement with him and his work as exists is far from indifferent, but deeply conflicted and emotive. This minor figure was a deeply divisive character, attracting both strong adulation and equally strong critique. His critics, notably figures on the hard intellectual left or professional historians, ranged in their positions. Some lamented that his romanticism and sentimentality had clouded his judgement, squandered his talents and resulted in missed opportunities. Take, for example, this from his former comrade and fellow historian Eric Hobsbawm:

[H]is history had neither structure nor limits. It was an unending and astonishingly learned perambulation round the wonderful landscapes, of memory and the lives of common people, with an occasional intellectual pounce suggested by some particularly fascinating insight glimpsed along the way.<sup>4</sup>

Although charmingly phrased, 'an occasional intellectual pounce' is not a consistent body of work and a 'perambulation', no matter how learned, is still an aimless walk (rather than a forward march). Harvey Kaye, in his

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3 On E.P. Thompson: Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London: Verso Editions, 1980); Scott Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory: E.P. Thompson, the New Left and Post War British Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Bryan Palmer, *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London: Verso, 1994); Harvey Kaye and Keith McClelland, eds, *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990). On Perry Anderson: Gregory Elliot, *Perry Anderson: The Merciless Laboratory of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Paul Blackledge, *Perry Anderson, Marxism and the New Left* (London: Merlin, 2004).

4 Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life* (London: Abacas, 2002), 212.

study of British Marxist historians, reinforced the point and extended it across the wider HW movement suggesting that the eclecticism of its research often caused it to lose focus on *class* struggle.<sup>5</sup>

Others took a darker view, not only condemning Samuel for lack of rigour but for inconsistency and inauthenticity as well. The former Ruskin tutor David Selbourne advanced this critique of his one-time colleague:

Samuel embodied a peculiar style of privileged patronisation of working people ... He often seemed a kind of vicarious proletarian himself, romanticising the lives and labours of the industrial working class whilst flattering as well as encouraging his students. This often silly class condescension was an uncomfortable thing to observe.<sup>6</sup>

Richard Hoggart, reviewing *Theatres of Memory*, went further, arguing that Samuel's openness was the product of a 'traumatised Marxist' struggling (and unable) to come to terms with the breakdown of his earlier communist identity amidst the wider disintegration of the political left.<sup>7</sup> Patrick Wright, also reviewing *Theatres* (in which his own book had been subject to strong critique), substituted trauma for vanity, arguing that Samuel's impassioned defence of the popular was part of his desire to 'play the part' of the people's historian.<sup>8</sup> Stefan Collini, whilst not putting the case as bluntly, followed in seeing a lack of sincerity in Samuel's attack on professional historians given that, as Collini argued, the book's best passages were unmistakably those of a professionally trained historian.<sup>9</sup>

By contrast, his supporters, many of whom were former students or colleagues closely involved in the HW, transformed romanticism, lack of structure and inconsistency into kindness, intellectual openness and creativity. For Gareth Stedman Jones, a friend and journal co-founder:

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5 Harvey Kaye, *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the Writing of History* (London: Routledge, 1992), 122. See also: Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 187; Kynan Gentry, 'Ruskin, Radicalism and Raphael Samuel: Politics Pedagogy and the Origins of the History Workshop', *History Workshop Journal*, 76 (2013), 187–211.

6 David Selbourne, 'The Last Comrade', *The Observer*, 15 December 1996, 24.

7 Richard Hoggart, 'Review: Theatres of Memory', *Political Quarterly*, 66, 3 (1995), 215–16.

8 Patrick Wright, 'Review of Theatres of Memory', *The Guardian*, 5 February 1995.

9 Stefan Collini, 'Speaking with Authority: The Historian as Social Critic', in *English Pasts: Essays in History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 95–102.

He was also an inspired teacher and the author of books and essays, which have expanded beyond recognition the intellectual and imaginative ranges both of English history and of the writing of history itself. But he was not a teacher and a writer; he was also an organiser and a prophet, a close and sometimes uncanny reader of ‘the signs of the times.’<sup>10</sup>

An ‘inspired teacher’ was also how a former student (and later deputy British Prime Minister) recalled him, saying: ‘He made me do something I thought I’d never do. Not just write an essay – that was difficult enough for me – but use the experience of poetry to illustrate a point’.<sup>11</sup>

Samuel’s mercurial qualities have also been re-visioned. Ken Jones recast ‘insincerity’ into ‘non-conformity’, contending that he did not easily align with the orthodoxies of the wider political and intellectual left. This view was echoed by Robin Blackburn, a former editor of the *New Left Review*, who pointed out that his distinctive approach to history often posed a challenge to many of the settled concepts and categories of left-wing political thought.<sup>12</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, an early HW participant, developed this, adding that:

While Raphael the organiser was a benign despot, his creative imaginative leaps and his interest in all and sundry made space: for people, for cultural insights and for original approaches to history.<sup>13</sup>

And elsewhere:

Raphael was not simply a writer but a renowned organiser, the kind who was an initiator of great projects with the capacity to yoke his fellow to the concept and carry them on regardless of grizzles and groans ... He was the world’s most adept hooker, and ruthless behind the charm.<sup>14</sup>

Rowbotham’s insight tacitly acknowledged his role as a *teacher* as well as researcher of history, an aspect underplayed or misunderstood by the critics. Hilda Kean also stressed the importance of the pedagogical (as much as historiographical) significance of the HW method. She traced its connections to older traditions of democratic education in which the

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10 Gareth Stedman Jones, ‘Obituary: Raphael Samuel’, *The Independent*, 11 December 1996.

11 John Prescott, ‘Genuine Love for Others’, *The Guardian*, 11 December 1996.

12 Jones, ‘Raphael Samuel: Against Conformity’, 17–26; Blackburn, ‘Raphael Samuel: The Politics of Thick Description’, 133–34.

13 Sheila Rowbotham, *Promises of a Dream: Remembering the Sixties* (London: Penguin, 2000), 142.

14 Sheila Rowbotham, ‘Some Memories of Raphael’, *NLR*, 1/221, Jan–Feb (1997), 128–32.

authority of the tutor to determine the historical agenda was broken down and the student placed in a more active, directing role in the learning process.<sup>15</sup>

Despite interpretive differences, there are recurrent and common themes relating to Samuel as an individual. These include his intimate and empathetic style of teaching, his heterogeneous range of historical interests, and his fluidity in conceptual, political and personal positioning. Undeniably, he was a distinctive personality. It is this strange combination of obscurity, emotive critique and heated controversy that makes a study of his life worthwhile: what was it that so dramatically divided interpretations of him or that simply went unrecognised?

This study contends that the most significant aspect of Samuel was his entire way of being a historian. For him, democratising history implied more than changing the content or epistemological structure of history, it required that he, as a historian, ‘concede the practice of democracy’.<sup>16</sup> The practical impact of this not only affected his personal conception of history but implied a larger shift in his working values, behaviour and practices. It meant a move away from determining the object of study towards enabling the emergence of a common discursive framework, capable of accommodating a diverse range of history-making activities and perspectives.

I further argue that his life and work has an enduring contemporary relevance by offering an insight into a response, at the level of practice, to history in the plural, without succumbing to unexamined relativism. In *Making History: Historians and the Uses of the Past* (2012), Jorma Kalela addressed this within a theoretical context. Kalela contended that, at a time when we have become more accustomed to thinking of histories instead of ‘History’, the impact of this on the day-to-day work of professional historians has been left relatively unexamined.<sup>17</sup> He proposed that such an epistemological transition challenged historians to abandon their traditional, authoritative position of deciding what

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15 Hilda Kean, ‘Public History and Raphael Samuel: A Forgotten Radical Pedagogy?’, *Public History Review*, 11 (2004), 51–62; Hilda Kean, ‘People, Historians and Public History; De-mystifying the Process of History Making’, *Public Historian*, 32, 3 (2010), 25–38.

16 A phrase taken from Raymond Williams, *Samuel’s New Left contemporary*, in: *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958), 341.

17 Jorma Kalela, *Making History: Historians and the Uses of the Past* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

was or was not of historical significance and adopt a facilitating role, enabling popular participation in historical research. This did not mean perpetuating academic conventions across a wider constituency, but lay in propagating the critical-analytical skills that characterised professionalism across a broader spectrum of subjects, sources and mediums. Such a move, he insisted, would mean ‘an attitudinal change amongst scholars in giving respect and creating trust’.<sup>18</sup>

In the opening to *Making History*, Kalela drew on Samuel as a supporting point of reference. As both admirers and critics acknowledged, Samuel consciously styled himself as a people’s historian and deliberately attempted to reflect this choice in his work as a historian-educator. As well as providing the first overview of his life in relation to his work, this book also uses him as a lens to examine history-making as a politics of personal disposition and practice.

In doing this, a biographical approach provides an indispensable tool of analysis and methodological approach. The philosopher and biographer Ray Monk, in a provocatively revisionist argument, made the case for biography as a ‘non-theoretical activity’ that, rather than privileging one or other explanatory model of human life (social, cultural, historical or biological), reconstructs the individual within a constellation of interwoven relationships.<sup>19</sup> Arguably, Monk’s ‘non-theoretical activity’ can equally be construed as a *multi*-theoretical one without damaging the integrity of his main point: the study of a life both accommodates and requires a range of critical insights acting upon an eclectic array of empirical evidence.

To fully comprehend Samuel and his approach to history, it is necessary to understand the nature of his life, the interplay of all his histories. This approach offers three particular benefits. Firstly, bringing the social role of the historian into focus requires sensitivity to personality as performed politics. As Kalela indicated, democratising the teaching of history is dependent on an ‘attitudinal change’ in cultivating relationships of trust. Samuel’s personal behaviour as a historian was as important to

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18 Ibid., 162. For a sociohistorical discussion on the changing role of the contemporary intellectual see Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Postmodernity and Intellectuals* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

19 Ray Monk, ‘Life without Theory: Biography as an Exemplar of Philosophical Understanding’, *Poetics Today*, 28, 3 (2007), 527–70.

‘read’ as his historical writing. His thinking was performed physically, through social interactions, as much as it was on the page. Discerning and defining these requires the intimate perspective that biography can offer.

Secondly, ‘democratising’ the role of the historian-educator by making them more accountable to their students (rather than the other way around) demands that the scholar responds to the conditions created within a given context. In this case, democratic practice is not defined by a set of static prescriptions on behaviour but by the adaptive application of ethical values (such as equality and inclusivity). The methodological impact for this study is a close consideration of the implications prompted by the specific social structures and environments in which he worked. For example, as indicated by Kean, Samuel’s pedagogical priorities alongside the practical implications of Ruskin’s worker student body were influential factors in determining the HW’s research approach, a factor often overlooked by critics.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, biography allows these personal and social contexts to be brought into dialogue with the larger intellectual and cultural history of late twentieth-century Britain. This period is typically defined by the sense of dramatic and complex change across every area of social life. On the one hand, Britain’s position as a political and economic world power declined, on the other a flurry of ‘modernisation’ ushered in the welfare state, expanded the public sphere and bolstered the perception of Britain as an affluent society.<sup>21</sup> Politically, concepts such as class, socialism and democratisation came under scrutiny, losing some of their cohesion in the face of emerging social movements (in particular, the women’s

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20 See also Sophie Scott-Brown, ‘The Art of the Organiser: Raphael Samuel and the Origins of the History Workshop’, *History of Education: The Journal of the History of Education*, 45, 3 (2016), 372–90, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0046760X.2015.1103907](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0046760X.2015.1103907) (accessed 15 December 2015).

21 For overviews on different aspects of postwar Britain see: Boris Ford, ed., *Modern Britain: The Cambridge Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Kenneth Morgan, *Britain since 1945: The People’s Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Paul Addison and Harriet Jones, eds, *A Companion to Contemporary Britain 1939–2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

movement). Intellectually, the confidence of the modern sciences was subject to interrogation and challenge from the so-called ‘linguistic and cultural turn’.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, Samuel offers a particularly unique insight here. As Stedman Jones noted, as well as being a product of his times, he was also an ‘uncanny reader’ and responsive participant in them.<sup>23</sup> The cornerstone of his historiographical thought was an emphasis on the role of the present in shaping consciousness of the past and he took an active interest in the turbulent debates surrounding the nature of knowledge. Further, his individual life course, his journey from the settled convictions of a young communist activist to the unabashed pluralism of *Theatres of Memory*, offers an insight into the fragmentation of epistemological certainties and the range of responses to that process.

It should be stressed, however, that this study is not a full biography of Samuel; that is yet to be written. What is offered here is a portrait of him as a ‘people’s historian’ who cultivated a deliberately conscious politics of performance, shaped by his times and continually reshaped by the particular contexts of his life and work.

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22 For overviews of political thought in late twentieth-century Europe see: Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe 1850–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). For more specific studies on the question of political consensus see: Jim Tomlinson, *The Politics of Decline: Understanding Post War Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014). For a contrasting interpretation see: Peter Kerr, *Postwar British Politics: From Conflict to Consensus* (London: Routledge, 2005). For an optimistic perspective on the breakdown of class-based politics see: Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hillary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism* (London: Merlin Press, 1979). For general overviews of postwar historiography see: David Cannadine, ‘Viewpoint British History: Past, Present – and Future?’, *Past and Present*, 116, 1 (1987), 169–91; Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Wiedenfield and Nicholson, 1997), see in particular chapters 6 ‘From Social History to the History of Society’ and 16 ‘On History From Below’; Perry Anderson, ‘A Culture in Contraflow II’, *NLR*, 1/182, Jul–Aug (1990), 85–137; Ioan Davies, ‘British Cultural Marxism’, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 4, 3 (1991), 323–43; Jim Obelkevich, ‘New Developments in History in the 1950s and 1960s’, *Contemporary British History*, 14, 4 (2000), 125–42; Peter Lambert and Phillip Schofield, eds, *Making History: An Introduction to the History and Practices of a Discipline* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004); Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2005); Geoff Eley, *The Crooked Line: Social History to Cultural History* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History: What’s Left of the Social?* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2007); Georg G. Iggers and Q. Edward Wang, eds, *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (London: Routledge, 2013).

23 Stedman Jones, ‘Obituary: Raphael Samuel’.

In undertaking this study, I have drawn on various sources and modes of analysis. Given that the focus of this study is on Samuel as an intellectual personality, his published texts provide a major source for analysing both his ideas and his politics of practice. As an intellectual, his written work – articles, editorials, essays and monographs – constituted the main means by which he performed such a role in the public sphere. The argument presented here, that this performance posed a challenge to the traditional or conventional practices of a professional historian, assumes that, naturally, his published texts were a crucial part of this. The study, therefore, approaches his writing not only for descriptions of his ideas but also for the way in which it embodied and performed them.

Given that one of his principal objectives was to use history as part of a battle of ideas and that he was also an experienced political activist, I have placed his writing and activities in relation to the wider issues that they referenced, taking into consideration other individuals involved, the intended audience and the mediums through which different views were aired. This allows a sense of the choices he made in positioning himself and how he deliberately adapted this in accordance with the occasion. So, for example, the heated epistemological debates that raged across the pages of the *HWJ* and in the HW 13 meeting elicited from him a conciliatory response in those outlets but a more heated one in *New Left Review*, which he felt to be responsible for fuelling the drift towards theory.

In order to explore the deeper political and conceptual structures of his thinking, I have also considered the ‘internal’ features of the text. These include his selection and use of language, the general tone and style of his voice as a historian. Did he make assertions or suggestions? What emotional qualities (such as humour or sadness) do his texts evoke? I have also looked at the spatial qualities, the organisational structure, of his writing, attempting to discern the shape of his narratives and to consider their significance for his thought. Samuel typically rejected linear narratives in favour of a thematic approach. What does this suggest about his conception of time? He often approached an issue through deconstruction (the breakdown of concepts into component relationships), or through decentralisation (placing issues into wider contexts and frameworks). What were the underlying political implications of these techniques?

Finally, I have examined the genealogical relationships acknowledged in his texts; the extent to which the literature he referenced in making theoretical or historical arguments shared common or associational conceptual traits, or had roots in broadly defined philosophical traditions.

In attempting to discern the relationship between his thought and how it ultimately came to be expressed in his published texts or translated into his organisation of events, I have drawn on Samuel's archive, housed in the Bishopsgate Institute, near to his former residence in Spitalfields, East London. The archive is comprised of papers and oral recordings ranging across Samuel's life. *History Workshop: A Collectanea 1967–1991* (1991), a commemorative volume published by the HW to mark its 25th anniversary, was also a valuable collection of primary documents that charted the HW's development and various incarnations. These sources were accompanied by editorial commentaries from Samuel and other key participants providing some explanation and contextualisation for the material presented.

Whilst Samuel's archival collection was generous, not all of his more intimate personal correspondence was available for public access. Given that the focus of this study is on his public performance as a historian, this was not an insurmountable problem. Material relating to his teaching practices was ample and included course outlines, notes and oral recordings of HW meetings. I have emphasised the items that, within the outlines set out for this particular project, best illustrate the forms of intelligence in planning and organising that are not as readily apparent from reading his published writings.

Further critical insight was provided by a series of interviews given by Samuel to his friend and fellow historian Brian Harrison.<sup>24</sup> The first of these was held in 1979 to discuss methodology in oral history. The second and third were held in 1987, in conjunction with Harrison's research into left-wing politics at Oxford University.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, they focused on his student years at Oxford and the origins of the first New Left. These interviews were crucial for illustrating some of the difficult periods in Samuel's life. Furthermore, they were conducted in conjunction with

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24 Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 23 October 1979; 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 18 September 1987; 'Interview with Raphael Samuel', 20 October 1987, all held at 19 Elder Street, London, transcripts held in Raphael Samuel Archive (RSA), Bishopsgate Institute, London.

25 Brian Harrison, 'Oxford and the Labour Movement', *Twentieth Century British History*, 2, 3 (1991), 226–71.

research into separate topics, not as part of an intentional biographical study. They were conducted with someone familiar to him with whom he had worked closely in the past. Harrison, an experienced oral historian, noted on the transcripts that he:

talked freely, and had no objection to very personal types of question, standing up for much of the time, and occasionally walking about, thinking deeply on how to answer some of the questions I asked. Although he was so deeply involved in these events at the time, he is remarkably distanced and objective in talking about them, though in no sense disengaging himself from the loyalties and affections that were so important to him at that time. A very fruitful discussion.<sup>26</sup>

In the interview context, Samuel was not able to control the questions posed to him (which was clear from the nature of his answers, which were not always fluent, occasionally stumbling on matters he found difficult to express). He did not have any responsibility for the final transcripts. Taken together, these factors suggest that the interviews took place in a relatively open and candid atmosphere in which Samuel spoke frankly and according to his true feelings as he experienced them at that particular time.

As personality is as much, if not more, to do with the ‘impression’ that it leaves upon other people, I have also drawn on autobiographies and memoirs written by his friends and colleagues. These were useful as they were not specifically about him as an individual, but refer to the ways in which people encountered him in the course of their own lives and activities. The best examples of this come from Hobsbawm’s *Interesting Times* (2002), which provides a sense of how Samuel appeared to the ‘older’ generation of which Hobsbawm was a part. Equally, Rowbotham’s *Promises of a Dream* (2000) gives an insight into how a figure like Samuel appeared to a younger generation within the giddy context of a 1960s radical culture.

I have also benefited from extensive discussions with Samuel’s former colleagues and students, friends and family members. I carried out interviews with Alison Light, Anna Davin, Dave Douglass, Hilda Kean, Barbara Taylor, Sally Alexander, Gareth Stedman Jones, Stuart Hall, Alun Howkins and David Goodway. I also had a written correspondence with four former students: Paul Martin, Ian Manborde, Paul O’Connell

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26 Brian Harrison, ‘Interview with Raphael Samuel’, 20 October 1987.

and Robert Micallef.<sup>27</sup> The purpose of these discussions was not to create a formal oral history of Samuel, but to guide my interpretation of his texts, to elucidate some of the more obscure references within them, and to gauge some sense of the atmosphere in which his activities took place. The oral discussions also went some way to addressing the lack of access to his more intimate personal correspondence. Above all, however, they were important in providing insight into him as a physical presence and intellectual persona.

The interviews, both written and oral forms, revealed a number of important methodological issues. One of these was a matter of proximity. Samuel died in 1996. There has been no previous in-depth, individual study of him. Furthermore, Samuel inhabited a world largely dominated by a framework of radical left-wing politics, the recent history of which was dominated by conflict and tension. Many contentious, difficult or even painful memories were, therefore, still relatively fresh and unprocessed.

Whilst the context of the interviews undoubtedly informed the nature of response, the accounts given of him, and the ways in which they were delivered, were nevertheless striking. This was true in particular in reference to the sheer number of ‘folk legends’ that have grown up around him, including a collection of anecdotes told about his supposed exploits, many of which were impossible to verify – not only told, but actively performed with his voice and mannerisms mimicked: ‘Comrade, darling, could I just pick your brain...’, followed by a reenactment of the subject’s own mock exasperation: ‘Oh Raphael!’

All this served to reinforce my view of the significance of performativity in Samuel’s activities and self-deportment. Undoubtedly, he left behind a highly distinctive impression of himself. This, it should be stressed, is not to say that he was mendacious or manipulative in a cruel way, but that his political ideas, and ideals, were articulated through and imposed onto his physical being as much as they were on the page. Given his activist rather than scholarly background, these were most likely subject to a species of slight exaggeration. To foster interest and passion for historical research amongst those not necessarily predisposed to have either, he was, perhaps, compelled to be overly emphatic in the enthusiasm and exuberance that

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27 All audio and written transcripts of communications are held in my private collection. They are available upon request and with the interviewee’s consent. These will be deposited in the Raphael Samuel Archive at the Bishopsgate Institute.

he conveyed. So, rather than concern myself too deeply with the literal veracity of these stories, I approached them as authentic examples of the potency of his all-important personal charisma.

Whilst this intellectual persona and performance was crucial, there was still a need to gauge a sense of him in less guarded moments, such as his response to the breakdown of his earlier communist political convictions after the Khrushchev revelations of 1956. Here the interviews with long-term friends were critical. The account given to me by the late Stuart Hall was particularly helpful in providing a vital sense of Samuel's response to the events that caused him such acute emotional and mental discomfort.

The study takes the form of an analytical narrative that follows a loosely chronological order, which I found to be the most useful form for exploring the interaction between different factors that shaped the evolution of his thought. Whilst chapters 1 and 2 are quite clear in their periodisation, covering 1934–56 and 1956–62 respectively, chapters 3 to 6 take a more expansive approach, with overlapping features reflecting the dynamism and complexity of this period.

Chapters 1 and 2 concentrate on his formative years, experiences and encounters. They examine the nature of his early political convictions and how these were subject to dramatic change in young adulthood. Chapters 3 and 4 consider his early days as a Ruskin tutor, the impact of adult education on his historical thinking and how this contrasted with close contemporaries. Chapter 5 turns to his positioning within theoretical and political debates amongst the left, whilst Chapter 6 examines his responses to issues in public history and heritage.

Through his ideas and practices of history, he continually attempted to outline a democratic politics of practice that borrowed from many existing political ideas and traditions but cannot be easily conflated with any one alone. He never formally articulated this project. It was driven as much by his personal temperament and activist instincts as it was a fully formed conception. It was, however, guided by the notion of a dynamic common culture in which all people actively participated, a culture continually reflecting upon and renewing its own ideas of itself.

There are many places that Samuel's story could begin. For the sake of starting somewhere, this account of the life and work of this unique British historian begins deep in the Buckinghamshire countryside on a hot night in June 1944.

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