

Jim McAloon review of Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times* and Richard J. Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm*

Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times. A Twentieth Century Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), 447 pp., ISBN 0713995815

Richard J. Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History* (London: Little, Brown, 2019), 674 pp., £35, ISBN 9781408707418

To state the obvious, autobiography and biography are different. An autobiography, as Hobsbawm knew, is an exercise in memory; it is frequently personal and sometimes selective. Hobsbawm thought that a scholar's autobiography would necessarily be very different from those of politicians and others who might be said to have made history. Richard J. Evans's biography complements and extends Hobsbawm's 2002 memoir, at a length justified by his assessment of his subject's significance.

In discussing his early years, Hobsbawm's purpose was to explain (to himself?) who he was—a central European Jew, of the educated but precarious middle classes. There are noticeable silences: there is little about his father's occupation. There are hints of more trauma than he wishes to note. Certainly Hobsbawm was an orphan, dependent on (kindly) relatives from the age of 14. As Evans suggests, reading and the life of the mind were a refuge from unhappiness.

Berlin in the early 1930s shaped Hobsbawm's politics for the rest of his life. Hobsbawm writes evocatively; Evans's account, as often, is fuller. Arriving in England in 1933—a British citizen—Hobsbawm was fortunate in his London grammar school, especially compared to his Berlin gymnasium. Evans writes perceptively of this self-conscious, bookish youth, and the biographical accounts of Hobsbawm's encounter with Popular Front Paris, and Spain at the outbreak of civil war, are absorbing.

For all his awkwardness, as Evans notes, Hobsbawm had far more life experience than most young men entering Cambridge, and far better intellectual preparation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Mounia Postan, another transplanted polyglot continental, was the only one he really respected. A historian as biographer can note the influence of Postan's *Annales*-inspired approach on Hobsbawm's later work and from this point Evans's account of Hobsbawm as a historian is deft and never intrusive. Hobsbawm was also absorbed in communism, and he recalled of Margot Heinemann, John Cornford's 'last love', that 'through a lifetime of comradeship, example and advice, she probably had more influence on me than any other person I have known' (Hobsbawm, p. 122). Unfortunately, neither volume explores this.

Hobsbawm's experience of World War II was tedious and frustrating. After a spell in the Engineers, he was confined to the Education Corps rather than the intelligence work for which he was surely fitted.

The most positive consequence was Hobsbawm's decision to become an academic historian. His PhD thesis was a critical study of the Fabians, written at Cambridge even as Hobsbawm began his lifelong association with Birkbeck in 1947. Hobsbawm might reasonably have expected his thesis to be published. Evans details the ungenerous (and ideologically motivated) act of turf protection by which Richard Tawney blocked this, as he also blocked the subsequent dissertation on the New Unionism that Hobsbawm wrote as a Cambridge fellow.

Hobsbawm emerged as a historian of consequence in the 1950s, a period in which he was 'lonely and emotionally vulnerable' after the end of his first marriage (Evans, p. 298). His autobiography recalled more publications blocked, more jobs not offered. He had a complex relationship with Postan—he respected his old teacher, took Postan's advice about teaching to heart, even though 'every one of [Postan's] job references was a poisoned arrow' (Hobsbawm, p. 184). Yet Hobsbawm notes that things were nowhere near as bad as they would have been for him in the United States.

Throughout the 1950s Hobsbawm travelled, partly to relieve his unhappiness and partly to keep in touch with a wider world. Paris was almost his second home, and Henri Raymond and Hélène Berghauer were 'the closest thing to a family I had' (Evans, p. 329). Here as on other points, Hobsbawm's memoir was circumspect; Evans fills in the silences. The Historians Group was his intellectual home, and an enduring legacy was *Past & Present*, inaugurated in 1952. Evans highlights Hobsbawm's commitment that the journal should be intellectually open and his implicit defence of 'ambitious and sweeping generalisation' (Evans, p. 318) in *Annales* style. This was rare for an English historian, and the academic establishment, even the Fabian one, wouldn't touch the journal at the time.

The year 1956 looms large in accounts of the Historians Group, and both memoir and biography deal with events in some detail. Evans suggests that 'Eric wanted to have his cake and eat it' (p. 352)—to be a communist but not adhere to party discipline. Perhaps, rather, Hobsbawm hoped to foreshadow a democratic communism. Hobsbawm testifies to the extraordinary tension of those months and, unlike John Saville and E.P. Thompson, recalls the schism with some pain. Hobsbawm is also coldly realistic about the New Lefts that came out of 1956—'intellectually productive' but practically negligible, combining 'ideology, impracticality and sentimental hope' (pp. 211–12). Even though Hobsbawm had long been on the edge of the party—too sympathetic to Yugoslavia, writing too much for the liberal bourgeois press, too fond of jazz—he refused to leave the party

and the leadership refused to expel him. Addressing the dimension of his life that attracted most criticism, and some vituperation, Hobsbawm devoted a chapter and more to reflecting on 'being communist' at length, and in more than personal terms.

Jazz became increasingly important in the late 1950s. Evans's wry observation is that as the *New Statesman's* paid jazz writer Hobsbawm 'became a participant observer of Soho life in the late 1950s' (p. 362) and that 'Francis Newton' was an alter ego, not simply a convenient pseudonym. By 1960 Hobsbawm was very different than he had been in 1950—personally, politically and intellectually.

The year 1962, almost exactly halfway through his life, was a turning point. His marriage with Marlene Schwarz lasted until his death and gave him the emotional and domestic security he had longed for. Hobsbawm says little enough about home life; while Evans gives a good account of his strengths and (sometimes) weaknesses as a parent, Marlene is very much in the background.

Also in 1962, the first volume in *The Age of* quartet was published. Evans's discussion of the book and its reception is succinct and apt. The year was likewise Hobsbawm's first encounter with Latin America, an area of increasing interest. Evans gives an engaging account of Hobsbawm the Birkbeck teacher in the 1960s (in those days when university teachers were not discouraged from developing idiosyncrasies). Denied other chairs, Hobsbawm was promoted at Birkbeck in 1970. He said that the lack of preferment meant that he didn't peak too soon, an unduly modest comment given his sustained output into old age. At the end of the 1960s there were the *Industry and Empire* and then *Captain Swing* (with George Rudé). A new and rewarding departure in the early 1970s was forays into Marxology, Evans emphasises the significant contributions here.

Some reviewers of *The Age of Extremes* (1994)—which dealt with Hobsbawm's own lifetime—wanted a more personal account of the short twentieth century. To a significant extent, Hobsbawm gave them that in *Interesting Times*. Hobsbawm himself understood that 1962 was a watershed, but he wrongly thought that domesticity made his life much less interesting. From that point, the 2 volumes diverge and the reviewer finds it less useful to alternate between them. *Interesting Times* becomes a succession of thematic chapters—reflections on Hobsbawm's generation, his own account of jazz and jazz journalism, and evocative discussions of places and regions (with some inconvenience in returning to late 1930s travels that would have been better in the first half of the book).

Hobsbawm admitted to difficulty in understanding the revolutionary currents of 1968. He himself was a Prague Springer, insisting on a disciplined party. He lamented the rise of nationalist terrorists like ETA and the Provisional IRA. 'Marxists are not separatist nationalists' (p. 260). He maintains a certain dignity: 'What I have written about the 1960s is what an autobiographer can write who never wore jeans' (p. 262).

More generally, as Evans shows, Hobsbawm remained in some sense committed to a Marxist view of historical study as a science. His reservations about the early History Workshops were justified; Evans is more acerbic even than Hobsbawm.

In 1978 Hobsbawm's lecture 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?' marked a new stage of political intervention. Looking back, Hobsbawm remained critical alike of the Bennite and Militant 'left' and trade union leaders who won battles but in doing so lost the war. Alongside the tartness, there are kindly, if perceptive, portraits of Healey, Foot and Benn. Evans's detailed analysis of these points is valuable. By now Hobsbawm was firmly convinced of the need for a broad coalition to defeat Thatcher. We cannot know whether Hobsbawm could have done more to map out alternative strategies, but perhaps he was wary of how politics had consumed E.P. Thompson. Surely, though, Hobsbawm was exaggerating when he described the 1992 election night as 'the saddest and most desperate in my political experience' (p. 276). Worse than 30 January 1933?

Hobsbawm retired from Birkbeck in 1982, and immediately took a position, part time but lasting many years, at the New School for Social Research in New York. By then, too, some of his limitations were becoming clear. *The Age of Empire* (1987) had a chapter on 'women', he still compartmentalised them. Gender was not within Hobsbawm's frame of reference.

After 1989, Hobsbawm's historical analysis became engaged with an increasingly complex present. The state of Europe did nothing to warm him to nationalism. He remained uncompromisingly of the view that historians had to resist nationalist and ethnic myths, developing these themes in his 1990 *Nations and Nationalism*. Again Evans carefully discusses the book and its reception.

Hobsbawm had already begun, in 1987, to think about the fourth *Age of*. He was now eminently marketable, and publishers competed. Where Hobsbawm does not come off well, as Evans implies, is in having a young woman, Lise Grande, as an unpaid research assistant. She found him cranky and irritable. Only at the end of 3 years did he make a token payment of US\$1,000, and acknowledge her contribution (they remained in touch). Grande suggests that he was confronting his own disillusionment, anger and sadness at the course of the century and especially at the 1980s and 1990s.

As he moved through his 80s, Hobsbawm became something of an institution. Birkbeck welcomed him back into an office. There he could talk: 'Eric did not care whether you were a junior colleague or a student, as long as you took history seriously. History was a mission, not a job' (Evans, p. 559) as one said. At 85, in 2002, Birkbeck made him president. Hobsbawm was close to Gordon Brown, Labour chancellor from 1997, and the new government gave him due recognition. Knowing

full well he would not have taken a knighthood, they made him a Companion of Honour. Hobsbawm quite rightly said that any order that included James Larkin Jones was worth being in.

Hobsbawm lived for 18 years after *The Age of Extremes*, still publishing, if now often in collections of articles or extended interviews. His mind remained sharp until the end. He described himself as an ‘eccentric elderly grandee’ (p. 305) and was perceptive enough to note that his reputation as a Marxist at last helped his profile. One has the impression he enjoyed old age, as he found much to enjoy even in difficult times.

Evans’s account of Hobsbawm’s death and funeral is surprisingly moving. No one would have been surprised that the Internationale was played at the funeral. Some would have been surprised that he requested Ira Katznelson to say the Kaddish for him. As Hobsbawm himself had written at the beginning of his memoirs, his mother had enjoined him never to let anyone think he was ashamed of being a Jew. A final touch was his daughter Julia placing the current *London Review of Books* on his coffin—just so that the old man could have one last thing to read. Reading the 2 volumes together means an extended time in Hobsbawm’s company; they are hours well spent.

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