

Christopher Hill – A Man with a Mission

V. G. Kiernan

I first met Christopher Hill in London in a big upstairs room of a not very elegant restaurant, now I believe disappeared, called the ‘Garibaldi’, a name commemorating the hero’s visit to England. It was a warm, sunny day of 1946, and Christopher, in shirt-sleeves, was seated in the middle of one side of a long table. He had, in those days, a quite pronounced stammer, which gradually faded. He was going into some question about the Revolution of 1640. There was no dissent, and it appeared that the 17th century section of the Communist Party’s Historians’ Group had already fully explored the matter, and reached agreement. To me the conclusions reached were novel, and struck me as unconvincing. I had no real right to butt in, having been away for years in India. I did venture to object, and the outcome was a long-drawn controversy, which ended with my feeling obliged to withdraw my argument, which had left me in a minority of one.

In retrospect I think we were both in some ways wrong. Years later, when Christopher dedicated to me a volume of his collected essays, he credited me with talents including ‘wit’, not a gift he aspired much to himself. By then he could acknowledge that everyone who had struggled with the Revolution had fallen into miscalculations of some kind, and that in history there is always something more to be explained. None the less, he was piling up from year to year a prodigious quantity of historical explaining.

He was born at York in 1912, his father a solicitor, both his parents Methodists; the Nonconformist enlightenment, of which we both inherited a share, was still not exhausted. He once remarked to me drily that he has been sent to a certain school ‘to be turned into a gentleman’, and I have wondered whether this had anything to do with his stammer. His early mentor as a Marxist historian was Dona Torr, from another religious background as the daughter of a canon of Chester Cathedral. He

V.G. Kiernan, the celebrated historian of imperialism, remembers Christopher Hill, the doyen of British socialist historians.

got to grips with the Soviet Union by spending a year there and learning Russian; he did this, he told me, chiefly by conning the speeches of Stalin, which contained a few linguistic puzzles.

Dona Torr was a believer in strict adherence to Party rules, and when Christopher became a Party member he may have taken this over from her. Meetings of the historians had for some time been open to all; but he was one of those who insisted on everyone proving himself a bona fide member by showing his Party card, fully stamped up. Anyone eating a restaurant meal ought, he felt, to make an equivalent contribution to the always hard up *Daily Worker*. It had been customary for travel expenses of those attending the historians' meetings to be pooled and divided equally. When some members wanted to give up this socialist principle, he was firm on keeping it up. With all his sterling qualities, it was not easy to feel that one was getting to know him well. He could be genial enough when the occasion warranted it, but any wastage of useful time was not to be thought of. E.P.Thompson once surprised me by saying 'I'm afraid of him', but I could understand the feeling. Christopher was a man with a mission, which demanded some Puritan austerity.

His first marriage demanded some breakaway, beginning, as he confessed, with a scene *in flagrante delicto*. The lady was small, dark-haired, vivacious, and smoked cigarettes, which he never did. It may have been a case of the attraction of opposites. It soon ended, however, and in 1956 his second, permanent marriage took place. Bridget Hill gave the impression of a practical business-like mind. She had been teaching, and was interested in history, and became a college bursar. They stayed with me once in Edinburgh, to escape the thought of a daughter killed in a car accident. One day we had a long walk over the Pentland Hills and lunch at the old Alan Ramsay hotel. At my own rather rough and ready table Bridget tactfully took over the cooking. I visited them in a cottage they had at one time, not far from Oxford, and we tramped energetically through the thick clay soil.

The Party was still small and declining from its wartime peak, and solidarity was a prime virtue; policy directives from the leadership were to be accepted because it could be assumed that they came from Moscow. But an opposite feeling was growing on more and more minds that such directives were not infallible, or might not be well adapted to the British climate. More democracy, more freedom of speech, might be needed. At last, a committee including Hill was appointed to review these questions. It was given much greater impetus by the Soviet military occupation of Hungary, one of the vassal states of Eastern Europe. A large proportion – in Edinburgh, half – of the membership resigned. Hill and others on the committee produced a minority report calling for reform. In 1957 he resigned (in 1959, finding no signs of improvement, I did the same).

When I next met him he said gloomily that he and Bridget were living now in a political vacuum. The Labour Party was not to be thought of as an alternative. Most unexpectedly, the gap was filled by his becoming, in 1965, Master of his College, Balliol. He agreed to stand for election, he told me, on the

understanding that he would be left enough free time for writing; and he did go on writing book after book, always in his chosen field of 17th century England.

A Master of late Victorian times, Benjamin Jowett, had turned Balliol into a *serious* place, chiefly in order to supply the empire with reliable administrators. The Master's lodge needed renovation; Christopher did not bother with this, but continued to live outside in his own house. A professor I met at Balliol, who was only there because his Chair was attached to the College, lamented that it was a 'penitential' abode, bereft of social jollity. Christopher was concerned with weightier matters. He wanted to have the college opened to girl students, and he wanted to open its doors to more students lacking the Oxford label of 'effortless superiority'. He even brought some undergraduates onto the college council, remembering perhaps how he had been balked of something similar in the Party.

He was Master until 1978, and must have found his dozen years of it a strain. He left Oxford, whether or not by way of shaking its dust off his feet, and sought peace and quiet – not idle leisure – in an old township called Sibford Ferris, near Banbury. My last meeting with him – and thanks a good deal to my wife being with us, the happiest – came about when he was asked by some Oxford association to give a talk on the 'English Revolution'. I too was invited to say something, and amused him and the audience with an allusion to our old controversy.

My wife had driven me to Oxford; we were invited to stay the night at Sibford Ferris, and Bridget drove us all there. After some thirty cups of tea Christopher brought up, a little to my surprise, the topic of sloe-gin. He had been learning, as a hobby, to make his own, and brought out two different sorts for us to taste. He added that he and Bridget liked to drink red wine of an evening. Was this a needed protection against the Methodist legacy of over-seriousness? We were then conveyed to Banbury and a lengthy convivial dinner, with a good allowance of the gifts of Bacchus. Bridget drank little, and deposited us safely at their door; Christopher and my wife, however, both stumbled out of the car into a dry ditch beside the road, and I was, for a moment, unsure of my footing.

In the morning we were taken for a windy walk round the neighbourhood, and then for a car ride to where we could catch a bus back to Oxford. On the way, Christopher related a ludicrous story about his undertaking to complete the splendid book on the Levellers that H. N. Brailsford was still busy with when he died. Unluckily, the author's widow was a believer in the spirit world, and at night she would get in touch with her deceased husband and receive his instructions for the next pages of his book, which she handed on to Christopher, to his considerable embarrassment.

My last letter to him was a request for help with an entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography* on his old friend Dona Torr. It was unanswered, until Bridget wrote to tell me of his mental collapse. Perhaps he had at last overloaded his inexhaustible memory; but it was she who was to die first, perhaps from the shock. He followed on February 23.

I happened to be in Los Angeles, where I was meeting Eric Hobsbawm and others who knew Christopher, some years before his death. Several of us were together when news came of his being awarded the Biography prize for his book on Bunyan. I scribbled a congratulation on a postcard, and we all signed it. I had once argued to Christopher that Bunyan must have been a man morbidly self-absorbed. He disagreed, and showed a strong sympathy with Bunyan and his rugged life. Perhaps he was comparing the Pilgrim's progress with his own arduous journey through life, and the failure of so much that he had hoped to see.



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August 2003 £10.99 - ISBN 0 7453 2191 7

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