

# "These the times ... this the man": an appraisal of historian Christopher Hill

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Christopher Hill, the renowned expert on seventeenth century English history, who died on February 24 at the age of 91, lived through the great upheavals of the twentieth century. Its wars and revolutions moulded the mind of a historian who looked back from one revolutionary century to another, giving him a unique insight into his subject and his books a lasting value that few historians can claim.

Hill influenced the way in which an entire generation of students and general readers saw the English Civil War, and even when in more recent years with the fall of the Soviet Union his view that the events of the 1640s constituted a revolution has been widely rejected, academics still define their position on the period in opposition to his analysis. Within a week of his death, however, it was not just the value of his academic work that was being discussed in the press but his own political activity as a member of the Communist Party, when it was alleged that Hill had been a Soviet agent.

Hill seems to be a mass of contradictions. There is Hill the Master of Balliol College, Oxford and prestigious academic; Hill the popular historian who would give lectures at the Socialist Workers Party summer schools where masses of young people would crowd in to hear him speak about the seventeenth century revolution—and now we are told there is Hill the Soviet mole. If we are to draw a coherent picture out of all this, we have to see Hill in the context of his time. As his fellow Yorkshireman Andrew Marvell said of Oliver Cromwell, “If these the times, then this must be the man.”

Hill was himself part of an historical phenomenon. Born in 1912 the son of a well-to-do solicitor, he was educated at St. Peter’s School York. It was a privileged existence, but its apparent security was overshadowed by the great political and economic turmoil of the period. A child of five when the Russian Revolution broke out, Hill grew to maturity at the time of the abortive revolution in China, of the British General Strike of 1926 and the Great Crash of 1929. The 1920s saw mass unemployment and hunger marches. By the time Hill went up to Oxford in 1931, unemployment had risen to nearly 3 million. As one historian has said of the 1926 General Strike, “The class divisions of the country were starkly revealed, even if they did not spill over into violence.”

He was already expressing left-wing views as a schoolboy, although it has never been clear when precisely he joined the Communist Party. This was one of the areas of his life about which Hill was always reticent. At Oxford he came under the influence of Humphrey Sumner, an expert on Russian history who arranged for him to go to Russia for an extended stay in 1935. He came back fluent in Russian but never spoke about what he had done while he was there, pleading that he had been ill most of the time. In 1936 he became a lecturer at University College Cardiff, but in 1938 returned to Balliol where he remained until he retired as master of the college in 1978. His 40 years at Balliol were only briefly interrupted by his wartime service, during which he was seconded as an intelligence officer to the Foreign Office.

His period at the Foreign Office was another aspect of his life that he

was reluctant to discuss. The historian Dr. Anthony Glees, a specialist in modern German history at Brunel University, now claims that he has discovered documents which show that Hill kept his membership of the Communist Party secret while he was working at the Foreign Office. Dr. Glees, who has not published the evidence to back up his allegations, claims that Hill acted as an agent of influence on behalf of the Soviet Union while he worked first as a liaison officer for military intelligence and then as head of the Russian desk at the Foreign Office. Glees considers it inconceivable that the Foreign Office would have employed Hill if the security services had known about his party membership. He told the London *Times*, “His failure to own up to his party membership was outrageous, sinister and highly suspicious.”

There is something more than a little artificial about this indignation. It would have been rather more surprising to find that Hill was not a member of the Communist Party by 1940, since so many young intellectuals of his generation were either members or sympathisers. Nor can it be assumed that such an orientation inevitably implied support for revolution. It was entirely possible in this period to be both a patriotic subject of his Britannic Majesty and a “friend” of the Soviet Union, as for example the Fabians Sidney and Beatrice Webb were. As Trotsky pointed out in his *Revolution Betrayed*, in the case of people like the Webbs, “Friendship for the Soviet bureaucracy is not friendship for proletarian revolution but on the contrary insurance against it” ( *The Revolution Betrayed*, Labor Publications, Detroit, 1991, p. 258).

There was a significant section of the British ruling class who saw in the Soviet Union their best hope of preserving Britain’s position in the world and preventing revolution at home. Hill’s selection for an extended stay in the Soviet Union and his secondment to the Foreign Office suggests that at an early stage in his career he was being groomed by a section of the ruling class who looked on the Soviet Union under bureaucratic control as just such an insurance against revolution.

Ever since the end of World War I, Britain had faced a thoroughgoing political, social, economic and intellectual crisis as the position it had held since the mid-eighteenth century as the leading world power was eclipsed by the rise of the United States. For a time it even seemed possible that the next major world conflict would be between Britain and the US, until the older power learned to accept its newly subordinate position. At the same time class relations that had been based on Britain’s position of world dominance, which had allowed the creation of a large labour aristocracy and trade union bureaucracy who worked with the Liberals to maintain social peace, were seriously destabilised by Britain’s relative decline.

With its rapid industrialisation, the Soviet Union seemed to offer a model of how Britain’s declining industries might be revived and its increasing weight internationally offered a potential counterbalance to the growing power of the US in world affairs. But most of all the example of the Stalinist bureaucracy impressed reformists like the Webbs as the means by which the working class could be brought under control.

If Hill had remained a civil servant or died in the war before he wrote

his books, it is doubtful whether anyone would have been very interested in his political activities. He would have been one among many and would certainly not have rated any media interest. Guy Fawkes would still be the most famous old boy of St. Peter's school. What makes his wartime political activities significant is the question of how it affects his reputation as an historian of seventeenth century England and that question was there to be asked long before the recent revelations.

What any serious reader interested in history or politics wants to know is, when we read Hill's books are we reading the work of an apologist for the Stalinist bureaucracy or of someone who was genuinely struggling to make a Marxist analysis of an aspect of English history? It has to be said that this is a complex question. Not everyone who was attracted to the bureaucratically degenerated Communist Party could be classified with the Webbs. The most gifted and outstanding representatives of the British intellectual elite, whether poets, novelists, scientists, musicians or historians, associated themselves with the Communist Party because the old institutions of church and state had lost their hold over the imaginations of the young while the Soviet Union seemed to embody all that was new, modern and progressive.

The Communist Party attracted minds of the very highest intellectual calibre, as can be seen from the fact that many of the developments that were made in biochemistry during the post-war period were prepared by the group around J.D. Bernal, J.B.S. Haldane and other biologists who were prominent supporters of the Communist Party at Cambridge. For minds of this order of brilliance, the Communist Party became a pole of attraction since despite its degeneration under Stalin it still retained vestiges of the immensely powerful intellectual heritage of Marx and Engels.

They could not pursue their intellectual work in isolation from the influence of the Stalinist bureaucracy, however. Despite the fact that the Cambridge biologists were all leading geneticists they accepted the fraudulent work of Lysenko because Lysenko had Stalin's support. The influence of Stalinism on the historians was if anything even greater. The Cambridge biologists never adopted Lysenko's theories in their own work, but historians associated with the Communist Party developed an approach to history that was directly influenced by the politics of the bureaucracy.

The Communist Party sponsored a form of "People's History", which is typified by A.L. Morton's *People's History of England* in which the class character of earlier rebels, revolutionaries and popular leaders was obscured by regarding them all as representatives of a national revolutionary tradition. This historical approach reflected the nationalism of the bureaucracy, their hostility to internationalism and their attempts to form an unprincipled alliance with the supposedly democratic capitalists against the fascist Axis countries. People's history was an attempt to give some historical foundation to the policies of Popular Front—the subordination of the working class to supposedly progressive sections of the bourgeoisie and the limiting of political action to the defence of bourgeois democracy—which provided a democratic facade to the systematic murder of thousands of genuine revolutionaries, including Trotsky. It was the approach that Christopher Hill was trained in, along with E.P. Thompson, Rodney Hilton and Eric Hobsbawm, who were part of the Marxist Historians Group and came under the influence of Maurice Dobb and Dona Torr.

There is something Jesuitical about the relationship of these historians to Marxism. They seem to have been capable of partitioning their minds and pursuing a scientific Marxist approach to history up to the point where the Stalinist bureaucracy drew the line, like the Jesuit scientists who would pursue their investigations as far as the Church authorities permitted, but no further. It was an approach that was further encouraged by the extreme specialisation of academic life that enabled them to concentrate on very narrow areas of history that never brought them into direct collision with

the bureaucracy on political questions.

It is notable that of the Marxist Historians Group Hill wrote on the seventeenth century, Thompson on the eighteenth century, Hobsbawm mostly on the nineteenth century and Hilton on the Middle Ages. But none of them specialised in the twentieth century. In more recent areas of history, as in politics, the control of the Stalinist bureaucracy was too great to allow the free development of Marxist thought and whether deliberately or not they all avoided venturing into the modern arena. It is notable that E.H. Carr, who was never a member of the Communist Party but wrote on the history of the Russian Revolution and expressed a high regard for Trotsky, was for long periods unemployed and unemployable because his views clashed with those on both the left and right of British academic life.

Hill's sole attempt at modern history, his study of Lenin, is undoubtedly his weakest book. It is marred by repeated attacks on Trotsky, who is dismissed as one of the "Westernising theoreticians" of the revolutionary movement. Discussing whether Trotsky could ever have become the leader of the Bolshevik Party after Lenin's death, Hill concludes, "Such a view exaggerates, I think, the importance of Trotsky in the party."

As Hill should have known, the British government were well aware of Trotsky's importance since they would not allow him into the country when he requested asylum. But still Hill's historical faculties would not let him deny that Trotsky was a great orator, that he organised the insurrection which brought the Bolsheviks to power, and nor does he avoid giving Trotsky more references in the index than Stalin. At no point does Hill repeat the false charges that the Stalinists made against Trotsky and his followers at the Moscow trials. Even in this book, which is certainly hack work, Hill did not make himself fully a Stalinist hack. His criticisms of Trotsky are ill-judged and betray an ignorance of his subject, rather than being malicious and dishonest. He retained a core of intellectual honesty in a work that was written in 1947 as the lines were being drawn for the Cold War, which was designed to defend the Russian Revolution and not to win him friends in high places at home or in the Kremlin.

If his book on Lenin represented the low point of Hill's work, the best was yet to come as he began to publish his remarkable series of books on the English revolution that were to change the way in which the period was understood. His years of greatest productivity came after 1957 when he left the Communist Party following the Soviet invasion of Hungary that suppressed a workers' uprising. The fact that Hill was not among the most politically advanced elements of the party—those who then joined the Fourth International—is perhaps a greater tribute to them than it is a criticism of him. His subsequent work showed him to be a better historian than he was a political thinker.

Hill's great achievement as an historian was to challenge the accepted consensus of Whig history—that Britain had been peculiarly blessed with a tranquil history based on gradual change and had achieved peaceful progress through class compromise without the excesses of revolution. The most outstanding representative of the Whig tradition is Macaulay and it was continued in the twentieth century by his nephew Trevelyan. It had the advantage that it was at once suited to Liberalism and Labourism. It was a tradition that was physically embodied in the Trevelyan's country house at Wallington, Northumberland, where Macaulay's desk is preserved and which was the scene of annual Labour picnics. The roofed central court of this house is decorated with historical scenes and not a revolution among them—as the national epic unfolds from prehistoric times to the triumph of industry and empire in Victorian Britain. They were images that adorned children's history books well into the twentieth century and underlay much of the popular consciousness of British history.

The term the "Whig interpretation of history" dates back to Sir Herbert Butterfield's slim volume of that name. As a polemic, it was not

particularly well aimed and has often since been directed at economic determinism rather than the Victorian view of British history that was its target. But the name has stuck. The Whiggish view of history gained ground as Britain achieved a degree of social stability as its economic supremacy emerged that must have been surprising to many contemporaries given its turbulent past history. Writing in the midst of the 1848 revolutions and as the Chartists marched in London, the historian J.M. Kemble expressed the sense of Britain's special destiny:

“On every side of us thrones totter and the deep foundations of society are convulsed. Shot and shell sweep the streets of capitals which have long been pointed out as the chosen abodes of order: cavalry and bayonets cannot control populations whose loyalty has become a proverb here, whose peace has been made a reproach to our own miscalled disquiet. Yet the exalted Lady who wields the sceptre of these realms sits safe upon her throne and fearless in the holy circle of her domestic happiness, secure in the affections of people whose institutions have given to them all the blessings of an equal law.”

The sense that in Britain things were done differently and without continental excess was not entirely new. Burke had expressed it in his *Reflections on the French Revolution*, but there were plenty of voices to gainsay him and the social disturbances in the years of economic upheaval that followed the Napoleonic wars were a testimony to the contrary. Luddism, anti-corn law agitation, the anti-poor law movement, strikes and most of all Chartism demonstrated that Britain was not an island of social peace.

Nonetheless the Whig interpretation of history had deep roots in the consciousness of the British political class. The visitor to Chatsworth House in Derbyshire can still see in the great entrance hall a fireplace inscribed with the legend “1688 The year of our liberty.” It refers to the “Glorious Revolution” when James II quit his throne and his kingdom overnight and William of Orange was installed as king. This was the kind of palace revolution that the British ruling class increasingly preferred to look back on rather than the revolution in the 1640s when they had executed the king, conveniently overlooking the fact that James would not have run if he had not remembered the fate of his father—Charles I.

The myth of the “Glorious Revolution” was the target of Hill's first published article, which appeared in the *Communist International* under the pseudonym E.C. Gore in 1937. It was followed in 1940 by a short essay, *The English Revolution 1640*, which contained a concise statement of the arguments that Hill was to spend the rest of his life elucidating.

Hill never acknowledged having read Trotsky, but there are distinct parallels between his attacks on the Whig interpretation of history and Trotsky's brief but trenchant analysis in *Where is Britain Going?* in which he identified two revolutionary traditions in British history—that of the Cromwell in the seventeenth century and later of Chartism—both of which were denied by the prevailing conception of gradualism that characterised the Whig view of history. “The ‘great’ national historian Macaulay,” Trotsky wrote, “vulgarises the social drama of the seventeenth century by obscuring the inner struggle of forces with platitudes that are sometimes interesting but always superficial.”

Trotsky recognised Cromwell as a revolutionary leader of the bourgeoisie, whose New Model Army was not merely an army but a party with which he repeatedly purged Parliament until it reflected the needs of his class and suppressed the Levellers who represented the plebeian elements who wanted to take the revolution further than was necessary for capitalist society to thrive. Whether he got it from Trotsky, or arrived at his assessment of Cromwell independently by reading Marx and Engels, Hill reflected this analysis of Cromwell in *God's Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution* (1970) in which he explored Cromwell's revolutionary role. It was a measured portrait of the man that recognised his ruthless pursuit of the interests of the class he represented—as when he had the leaders of the Levellers executed and in

Ireland where he sacked the towns of Drogheda and Wexford, executing the captured garrison and civilian population. If in concluding that Cromwell's historical importance could be compared to that of Stalin as much as Lenin, Hill revealed that his affiliations still lay with the party he had left in 1957, he perhaps also revealed something of his own inner feelings when he said of the English revolution, “The dreams of a Milton, a Winstanley, a George Fox, a Bunyan, were not realised; nor indeed were those of Oliver himself: ‘would that we were all saints’.”

Employing the Old Testament phraseology of the seventeenth century he concluded, “The sons of Zeruah proved too strong for the ideals which had animated the New Model Army.” For the seventeenth century revolutionaries the Sons of Zeruah represented the forces of reaction that had prevented them achieving their vision of utopia. Perhaps Hill also thought of the Soviet Union as a country in which the Sons of Zeruah had proved too strong.

Hill's achievements were twofold. Firstly he identified the mid-seventeenth century crisis as a revolution, which in the case of Britain overthrew the rule of one class and brought another to power. Secondly he recognised that revolutions are made by the mass of the population and that for a revolution to take place the consciousness of that mass of people must change, since revolutions are not made by a few people at the top although the character of their leadership is crucial at certain points. These achievements were considerable at the time and are of continuing relevance today, when historians increasingly reject any serious economic or social analysis and argue that revolutions are nothing but the work of a tiny group of conspirators.

Hill conveys a sense of the organic character of revolution and views the many ordinary people who made the seventeenth century revolution with admirable humanity.

He has been criticised by later historians for only using the published sources and not making any use of the manuscript material that is available. Hill had some excuse for doing so, however, in that the amount of published material from this period when censorship collapsed is so enormous. In the 1640s everyone had something to say about the way the world was going and everyone who was literate wanted to get into print. It is a dramatic contrast with the preceding centuries, when only a small elite with government approval found their way into print. If later historians have made far greater use of unpublished manuscript sources, this to some degree reflects the extent to which Hill made the published sources his own so that they have had to look for new material.

What fundamentally separates Hill from his detractors is not that they have turned to new sources, but that they have rejected his conclusion that a bourgeois revolution took place in the mid-seventeenth century. The prevailing academic orthodoxy is that there was no bourgeois revolution because there was no rising bourgeoisie and that people from all social classes can be found on either side of the struggle. Even Cromwell, it is argued, can better be understood as a representative of the declining gentry rather than the rising bourgeoisie. He and those around him aimed not at revolution, but wished merely to restore what they believed to be the ancient constitution of the kingdom. The whole unpleasant episode could have been avoided if only Charles II had been a little wiser.

Hill, of course, was well aware that there were gentlemen and landowners on the Parliamentary side in the civil war and small farmers and artisans on the Royalist side. He had read enough Marx and Lenin to know that one could not expect a chemically pure revolution in which the members of one social class lined up one side of the barricades and those of the other on the opposite side. However, he was sensitive enough to his historical sources to detect the social currents that brought people of diverse social backgrounds into struggle against the king and well grounded enough in history to identify new and revolutionary ideas in the curious and archaic guise in which they appeared—as the ideologists of the revolution ransacked the Bible and half understood historical precedent

for some kind of theory to explain what they were doing.

Most of all he was sufficiently astute to realise that when the people execute their king after a solemn trial and much deliberation, it is not the result of a misunderstanding but has a profound revolutionary significance entailing a complete break with the feudal past. Although the monarchy was later restored and the triumphant bourgeoisie were soon eager to pretend that the whole thing had been a ghastly mistake, no monarch sat easily on the throne after that event until quite late in Victoria's reign.

More serious Marxist criticisms of Hill are that he always maintains an essentially national approach to the English revolution, which he does not place in an international context, and that he has a tendency to romanticise the religious movements of the period and to be too dismissive of their rational intellectual descendants such as Newton and Locke. In part these characteristics arise from the national orientation of his social class and reflect even in Hill vestiges of the Whig outlook that imagined a peculiarly English political tradition rooted in millennial seventeenth century visionaries like Bunyan that was entirely separate from Enlightenment thought. More significantly it reflects the influence of the popular front politics and national outlook of Stalinism. With Hill this is evident more in what he does not write than in what he does write.

Within the strict confines of the few decades that comprise the Civil War and Commonwealth period, Hill had some reason to concentrate on the many religious sects which to modern eyes are so strange that their connection with revolution is by no means obvious. In *The Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (1965), Hill performs a useful task in showing that although there was no Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Karl Marx in the English revolution the revolutionaries of the period were moved by definite social, political and economic ideas—albeit expressed in a religious form.

In the period after 1660, all these groups lose their revolutionary impetus, but Hill persists in pursuing them as though they retained their political significance. Like E.P. Thompson he was concerned to demonstrate that there was a distinctive English revolutionary tradition than ran intact from the Civil War to modern times. He had therefore no interest in showing the continental origins of many of the ideas that inspired the English revolution, such as natural rights theory that was to play such a significant role in the development of Enlightenment thought and the political ideas of subsequent centuries. Nor was he interested in examining how the English philosopher, John Locke, or the political theorist, Algernon Sidney, took up the ideas that had been expressed in the course of the English revolution and distilled them into a more precise programmatic form that could be developed in turn by American and French revolutionaries.

The science of the period that did so much to inspire a rational approach to politics and society was only of interest to him insofar as he could connect the scientists directly to the revolutionary movement. He never explored the complex relationship between the impetus to social revolution and the scientific revolution, because the increasingly rational and materialistic conclusions of science were uncongenial to him. The materialism of Hobbes and Spinoza was outside his orbit and even Newton, for all his mysticism and millennial visions, left Hill cold.

Yet within the 20-year period from 1640 to 1660, Hill's historical achievements were significant in his own lifetime and are likely to prove more so in the future because current academic history is hardly less complacent than the Whig interpretation of history was in Hill's day. Simon Schama, who recently presented *A History of Britain* for the BBC, declares himself to be "a born-again Whig". His account of the Civil War in volume two of the books that accompany the series is full of colourful incident and fascinating detail, but there is no analysis of the contending class forces involved and the clash of interests that led to the bloody suppression of the Levellers, or to Cromwell's repeated purges of Parliament and his personal dictatorship. The actions with which

Cromwell ensured the success of the revolution are, for Schama, excesses or deviations which violated "precisely the parliamentary independence that the war had been fought to preserve." This is Whig history indeed, although to be fair to Macaulay it is a neutered variety of the genre.

Set against this background Hill's analysis of the Civil War takes on a very contemporary significance. As an historian he stands head and shoulders above his detractors and his books deserve to be read and reread, and if with a critical eye, it should always be with the knowledge that his limitations and faults as much as his great historical insights and innovations are the product of his time. He may be bettered, but never dismissed, and only bettered by those who have studied him closely.



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