

Complementarities: Christopher and Bridget Hill and Literature & History

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Christopher Hill (1912–2003) and Bridget Hill (1922–2002) were two of the staunchest supporters of this journal and it is natural that the editors should mourn their deaths and wish to celebrate their lives. Christopher Hill was associated with the journal from the very beginning and contributed to its first issue in 1975. Over the years he supplied *Literature & History* with an article and several review articles, the most recent of them in 1998 in a special issue on the seventeenth century which was dedicated to him.¹ In all he reviewed fifty-four books for this journal. He gave papers at two *Literature & History* related conferences held at King Alfred's College, one in 1984 and the other in 1989, both of which resulted in publication.² Christopher was also very much in evidence, as was Bridget, at a conference held at Ruskin College, Oxford, in October 1984 at which the editors of *Literature & History* offered interim self-reflections on progress achieved in the journal's agenda.³ Bridget Hill's link with *Literature & History* started later; her first review did not appear until 1987. But in the following years she contributed a total of twenty-three reviews, the last of them appearing posthumously in the spring issue of 2003.⁴

Though Christopher Hill unswervingly applauded the aims of *Literature & History* – to investigate the relations between writing, history and ideology and to bring the practitioners of the two disciplines closer together – he was critical, nonetheless, of some of the results. A preoccupation with, and indulgence in, theory was something with which he himself was never comfortable and, significantly, despite his enormous output as a historian he offered no extended reflections on his working philosophy or even his craft.⁵

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Especially in later years he complained many times about his inability to tune in to the wavelength of modern literary criticism and he looked back nostalgically to an earlier generation of scholars – L. C. Knights, Frank Kermode, Margot Heinemann, Arnold Kettle *et al* – who had the gift of communicating in plain English to a wide audience consisting of many others besides fellow specialists. Convoluted jargon repelled him.⁶ As he saw it, it prevented literary critics and historians from working together – a vital task in a rigidly compartmentalised academic world. Commenting on his own field of study, he declared

It does not seem to me possible to understand the history of seventeenth-century England without understanding its literature, any more than it is possible fully to appreciate the literature without understanding the history. Increasingly this has come to be recognized by literary critics and historians of seventeenth-century literature: the liveliest and best workers in the field are fully aware of the importance of the connections; some, like Margot Heinemann, Michael McKeon and Susan Staves, write better history than many historians.⁷

Fundamentally, however, Christopher Hill was more interested in literature itself than in literary criticism as a discipline. Literature provided a special kind of usable evidence. It offered access to the social history of ideas, attitudes, beliefs, phobias, convictions, fears and prejudices. Bridget's view was essentially the same. 'Novels', she wrote in one of her books, 'are an excellent source for much often unwitting testimony about . . . attitudes . . . [and] customary practices . . . Many of the assumptions novels make . . . provide valuable information . . . that it is difficult to get elsewhere'.⁸ Taking literature seriously was one way, for both Christopher and Bridget Hill, of escaping from the prison of old-style, top-down political history and challenged the historian to address issues relating to ideology, discourse and language as major parts of their professional remit.

In many respects Christopher Hill led the way among English historians in the pursuit of this agenda over a very long and incredibly prolific career. He worked almost entirely from printed, not manuscript, primary sources but turned what might have been an obvious limitation into a principal virtue. Constantly interrogating, alert to nuances and hidden purposes, and exercising a disciplined imagination, Hill was equally at home in handling telling details and presenting the broad outlines of a big picture. His methodology – denounced by one acerbic American critic as little more than 'source-mining' and 'lumping' – did not command universal assent and his work in due course fell out of favour with revisionists.⁹ Even critics, however, paid eloquent tribute to the ways in which he had set seventeenth-century studies on a new track.¹⁰ He published twenty books and a hundred articles over a career which spanned six decades. His first book *The English Revolution* came out in 1940, his last *England's Turning Point: Essays on Seventeenth-Century History* in

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1998.¹¹ In between came textbooks, a much-used sourcebook, and a steady stream of research works which provocatively explored different dimensions, complexities, and resonances of the seventeenth-century English Revolution, a concept with which he became most closely associated.¹²

Puritanism and Revolution, the title chosen for Hill's first volume of collected essays in 1958, in a sense summarises his principal preoccupations throughout his entire career and his determination to move away from a simplistic, old-fashioned notion of the 'Puritan Revolution' beloved of Whig historians. The key words 'puritan' and 'revolution' – others were 'freedom' and 'people' – never ceased to preoccupy him and he took pains to examine their plural usage by contemporaries.¹³ Puritanism, for Hill, was both part of the intellectual origins of the English Revolution and of the experience of defeat which followed and was a changing ideology which neither had a life of its own nor existed only as an economic, social, theological or political reflex.¹⁴ He was always keenly interested in the ways in which texts and ideas derived from them were *used*. His study of *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (1993) is a stunning example of the fruits of this preoccupation. Losers and ideas which were defeated merited the historian's attention, he believed strongly, no less than noisy, self-congratulating, much-publicised winners. One of Hill's most significant contributions to the reinvestigation of the mid-century crisis in England was his seminal work on *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972). Here he offered a challenging 'history from below' of the failed social revolution of plebeian radicals whose notion of 'freedom' went far beyond that envisaged by the parliamentary leaders and generals. He returned to some of these themes in *The Experience of Defeat* (1984) and *Liberty Against the Law* (1996), a study of those who viewed the law and lawyers as enemies of their customary rights and of others who felt a religious duty to break civil laws perceived to be at variance with the higher code of Heaven.

For Christopher Hill literature was an integral dimension of the English Revolution. Writers actively participated in what was, partly at least, a war of words. There was a revolution *in* literature. Hill always foregrounded and deployed literature as source material. In numerous essays, indeed, literature provided the principal focus. Some of them were first published in *Essays in Criticism*. 'Society and Andrew Marvell' and 'Clarissa Harlowe and her times' in *Puritanism and Revolution* were early examples of his 'literary' preoccupations. *Writing and Revolution in Seventeenth-Century England* (1985), which formed volume 1 of his later collected essays, is stacked with others and dealt not simply with individual authors but with Hill's growing preoccupation with the effects of censorship on the production and reception of literature.¹⁵ *A Nation of Change and Novelty* (1990) included essays on 'Literature and the English Revolution' and 'The Restoration and literature'. *Liberty Against the Law* used Richard Brome's play *A Jovial Crew* (1641) and Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) as a way into its subject and devoted a

chapter to the poet John Clare, who was denied his freedom and confined to a mental asylum.

Hill's main literature-centred publications, however, were biographical studies of Milton and Bunyan. Not conventional biographies in any sense – the genre has few attractions for Marxist writers – these books firmly situated the two writers within the dialectics of the struggles of their times and depicted both as 'radical heretics' linked in different ways to the popular movements of the day. Hill's *Milton and the English Revolution* (1977), his longest book, boldly reclaimed the poet and prose-writer from literary critics interested only in the words on the page and placed him firmly in the revolutionary/republican ferment on which he drew and to which he variously, and at times defiantly, contributed. Readings of the great poems – seen as allegories of and for their times – occupy more than a hundred pages of his text. Hill's *A Turbulent, Seditious and Factious People: John Bunyan and His Church* (1988) was equally contextual and not simply biographical in approach. Bunyan's specifically local setting in Bedfordshire was carefully established. 'Bunyan's vast cosmic drama', Hill wrote of *The Holy War*, 'is rooted in the politics of a small town'.¹⁶ As in the Milton book, close readings of individual texts were provided, above all of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The importance of chapbooks as well as the Bible for Bunyan's style and subject matter was recognised. So were the ways in which the habits of Bunyan's preaching were incorporated into his prose and verse. Hill presented Bunyan as a writer 'in constant opposition' whose pilgrims were emboldened by 'an ideology of resistance'. Readers in later periods and other places, argued Hill, were quick to recognize the fact and saw the relevance of the book to their condition.

Bridget Hill's books, all on eighteenth-century England, were fewer and started later. A sourcebook *Eighteenth-Century Women: An Anthology* (1984), published when she was already 62, was the first. Next came her important edition of *The First English Feminist: Reflections on Marriage and Other Writings by Mary Astell* (1986). Her increasingly recognized place in the field of women's history was confirmed by the publication of *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (1989). It was a book which paid tribute to the pioneering efforts of the historian Ivy Pinchbeck in the inter-war period and which explored the commonly under-recorded different categories of female employment in agriculture, industry and the household. By so doing she brought social history and women's history into a closer working relationship. So did *Servants: English Domesticity in the Eighteenth Century* (1996). Though it dealt chiefly with the women of the species this book also included a survey of the men in this occupation. Really a collection of essays on the subject rather than a fully integrated book – this was also a feature of Christopher Hill's last publications – she provided fascinating insights into the social identity and moral economy of servants and their sexual vulnerability. Separate chapters dealt with the employment of kin and

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paupers as household servants. Her commitment, no less strong than her husband's, to the use of literature as source material, was witnessed in two chapters devoted to 'literate and literary servants in eighteenth-century fact and fiction' and to a case study of Richardson's *Pamela*. *Women Alone: Spinsters in England 1660-1850* (2002) took a somewhat longer timeframe than the earlier books but revisited some of the same territory. At the same time Bridget Hill reached out to discuss other fields of employment in which unmarried women engaged, some respectable (such as school-teaching) and others disreputable (prostitution). The foundations of female independence came under review as did the variety of, often hostile, social attitudes to spinsters as a group.

In Bridget Hill's books on women the human dimension was always prominent. They were constructed from large numbers of individual life histories. Like her husband, however, on one occasion she focussed on a single very remarkable individual and provided an important and perceptive biographical study of *The Republican Virago: The Life and Times of Catharine Macaulay, Historian* (1992). Notable as the first serious female English historian and as a republican applauded not only in her own country (for a time at least) but in post-colonial America and in Revolutionary France, Mrs Macaulay's substantial and well-researched *History* of seventeenth-century England was a work that readily provided Bridget and Christopher Hill with obvious common ground. They had collaborated on an article on Catharine Macaulay which appeared in the *Welsh Historical Review* in 1967.¹⁷ It was their only joint publication but they constantly worked together very productively as routine.

In their prefatory acknowledgements to their respective publications they invariably expressed their deep indebtedness to each other. In her last book, Bridget Hill declared 'my long-term debt to Christopher Hill is immeasurable. Without his generously given help and guidance this book would not only never have been finished, it would never have been started'.¹⁸ Christopher Hill, for his part, in his *Milton and the English Revolution* poured out his warmest thanks to Bridget 'for her sympathetic understanding, unfailing encouragement and judicious goading'. Similarly, in *People and Ideas in Seventeenth-Century England* (1986), the third volume of his later collected essays, Hill declared 'Bridget inspired me by her example, stimulated by exchange of ideas, and made it impossible for me not to keep at it'. 'She knows best', he echoed four years on in *A Nation of Change and Novelty*, 'that but for her nothing would get done'.¹⁹ Unobtrusively Bridget Hill created the right conditions in which her husband could write. No fewer than three of his books – *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (1964), *A Turbulent, Seditious and Factious People* (1988) and *Liberty against the Law* (1996) – were dedicated to her. They were indeed, as one obituary noted, 'deeply kindred spirits',²⁰ a truth which has no clearer expression than in the unselfish way in which Bridget concealed her own

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terminal illness while devotedly caring for Christopher as he lapsed into Alzheimer's disease.

Christopher and Bridget Hill were married in 1956. They had three children, one of whom died in infancy. It was a remarkable, mutually enabling and enriching union of two individuals who shared so much. Both were shaped by Nonconformist backgrounds – Christopher's in Yorkshire Methodism and Bridget's in a London Baptist congregation where her father, Harry Sutton, was pastor. Later both fell under the influence of R. H. Tawney, though Christopher Hill always claimed that it was T. S. Eliot's work on the metaphysical poets which first drew him to study the seventeenth century. Both were members of the Communist Party until 1956 and rejoiced in the fellowship of left-wing intellectuals into advanced old age. Both had links with the journal *Past & Present* – Christopher was one of its founders in the early 1950s – and with *History Workshop Journal*.²¹ Their political allegiances were shared as were their historical sympathies. Both lived through the harsh realities of the inter-war depression with its massive unemployment levels and desperate hunger marches. Both had hearts which warmed to the plight of the underdog in the past no less than in the present. Yet in a number of respects they were very different. Bridget Hill was very practical and was quick to embrace new technology. Christopher, his vast output as a historian notwithstanding, never progressed beyond a manual typewriter.²² Their submissions to *Literature & History* – Christopher's scruffy, full of hand-written alterations which were barely legible and Bridget's always immaculately word processed – mysteriously appeared to come from different planets despite bearing the same address and postmark. Their careers were very different, too. Christopher Hill was a student at Balliol College, Oxford in the early 1930s and was then successively Fellow and Master there for forty years after 1938. Apart from a few years as Fellow of St Hilda's College, Oxford in the 1960s, Bridget Hill – a graduate of the LSE – spent far more time working for the WEA and the Open University. Christopher Hill also moved to the Open University briefly after his retirement at Oxford.

Few retirements – theirs was spent in the Dordogne and in a Quaker village in rural Oxfordshire – have been more academically productive. The books just flowed from both of them. Simultaneously alike and different, Christopher and Bridget Hill were bonded together and were truly complementary. His work on the seventeenth century, depicted as the transforming stage in English history which effectively marked the end of the Middle Ages and which rendered possible the later Industrial Revolution, provided Bridget with the launching point for her work on the eighteenth century. And that she published so much on women's history helped Christopher Hill overcome the shame he came to experience for having neglected the subject for so long in his own work. He had pioneered 'history from below' but had somehow, by and large, left out the women.

Notes

1 C. Hill, 'Samson Agonistes Again', *Literature & History*, 2nd ser., 1:1 (1990), 24–39; 'Review Article: Varieties of Puritanism', *Literature & History*, 3rd ser., 7.2 (1998), 88–92.

2 C. Hill, 'Winstanley and Freedom', in R. C. Richardson and G.M. Ridden (eds), *Freedom and the English Revolution. Essays in History and Literature* (Manchester, 1986), pp. 151–68; Hill, 'Samson Agonistes Again'.

3 See R. C. Richardson, 'Literature & History: the identity and purpose of the journal', *Literature & History*, first ser., 11:1 (1985), 3–12.

4 The first was a review article on 'Women novelists' centred on Dale Spender's *Mothers of the Novel* (1986) in *Literature & History*, 1st ser., 13:1 (1987), 134–7. The last was a review of Bill Overton (ed.), *A Letter to My Love: Love Poems by Women First Published in the Barbados Gazette, 1731–37* (2001), *Literature & History*, 3rd ser., 12:1 (2003), 88–9.

5 The nearest he came to this was in two short fragments on history – 'Partial historians and total history' and 'Answers and Questions' – in his *People and Ideas in Seventeenth-Century England: Collected Essays*, vol 3 (Brighton, 1986), pp. 1–18, and in his essays 'History and the Present', in *A Nation of Change and Novelty: Radical Politics, Religion and Literature in Seventeenth-century England* (London, 1990), pp. 244–57 and 'Scepticism, values and the historian', in *England's Turning Point: Essays on Seventeenth-Century English History* (London, 1998), pp. 197–214. Christopher Hill also rarely provided even glimpses of his own autobiography. Readers must search hard to pick up the disclosures that one of his ancestors may have been a pirate, that as a young man Christopher smuggled into England from France a copy of the banned James Joyce novel *Ulysses*, and that his own first book was planned to serve (if he was killed in action in the war) as his last will and testament.

6 The same point has been made on a number of occasions in reviews in *Literature & History* by V. G. Kiernan, veteran friend of Christopher Hill. See, for example, *Literature & History*, 3rd ser., 8:2 (1999), 82: 'This book is written in the stilted dialect that now seems obligatory for academic work in America'.

7 Hill, *Writing and Revolution in Seventeenth-century England: Collected Essays*, vol. 1 (Brighton, 1985), p. 3.

8 She was referring specifically to eighteenth-century servants but the point was intended to be a more general one. (Bridget Hill, *Servants: English Domestic in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 20–1).

9 J. H. Hexter, *On Historians* (London, 1979), pp. 227–51. See also W. G. Palmer, 'The Burden of Proof: J. H. Hexter and C. Hill', *Journal of British Studies*, XIX (1979), 122–9 and R. C. Richardson, *The Debate on the English Revolution* (3rd ed., Manchester, 1998), pp. 136–40.

10 Richardson, *op.cit.*, pp. 138–9.

11 The latter was chiefly a collection of occasional pieces going back to the 1930s. Hill's last major work was *Liberty Against the Law: Some Seventeenth-Century Controversies* (London, 1996).

12 The textbooks were *The Century of Revolution* (London, 1961) and *Reformation to Industrial Revolution: A Social and Economic History of Britain 1530-1780* (London, 1967). The sourcebook was *The Good Old Cause: The English Revolution of 1640-1660* [with Edmund Dell] (London, 1949).

13 *Economic Problems of the Church from Archbishop Whitgift to the Long Parliament* (Oxford, 1956) launched the enterprise. *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (London, 1964) and 'The Word "Revolution"', in *A Nation of Change and Novelty* (1990), pp. 82–101 were two of the staging posts.

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14 *The Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1965, 2nd ed., 1997) and *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and Some Contemporaries* (London, 1984) embodied some of these aspects of his thinking about Puritanism.

15 Included in this collection are essays on Butler, Defoe, Marvell, Milton, Rochester, Traherne, and Vaughan.

16 *A Turbulent, Seditious and Factious People*, p. 240

17 Bridget and C. Hill, 'Catharine Macaulay and the Seventeenth Century', *Welsh Historical Review*, III (1967), 381–402.

18 *Women Alone*, p. viii

19 *Milton and the English Revolution*, p. xiv; *People and Ideas*, p. ix; *Nation of Change and Novelty*, p. x.

20 Penelope Corfield, their niece, in *The Independent*, 14 August 2002.

21 See C. Hill, R. H. Hilton and E. J. Hobsbawm, 'Past & Present: origins and early years', *Past & Present*, 100 (1983), 3–14.

22 On a personal note I cherish the memories associated with Christopher's receiving an honorary doctorate from King Alfred's College in 1996. Knowing (from my experience as a long-suffering editor of *Literature & History*) that his old manual typewriter was patently long past its best I presented him with the gift of a second-hand, but still gleaming, (and still manual) replacement. Unwanted by me, it was joyfully received by Christopher as though it were the latest deluxe, state-of-the-art model from Rolls Royce!

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