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Lionel Munby, Marxism, and Local History

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Abstract

A member of the Communist Party for thirty-four years, and a key participant in the post-War Communist Party Historians' Group, Lionel Munby (1918-2009) is not among that Group's best-known historians. Yet arguably he was more typical of its membership and outlook. A prolific author, an extra-mural department lecturer, he was committed to bringing history to a wide public, and helping ordinary people become architects of their own histories. He struggled to persuade the Group to take local and regional history seriously, and to overcome disdain for a type of history regarded as antiquarian and reactionary. Munby converted to socialism while a schoolboy and saw Nazi Germany at first hand. As an Oxford undergraduate he organised the Oxford Left in the momentous appeasement by-election of 1938. This article draws on interviews with Munby, on his writings, and on the archives of the Communist Party Historians' Group. The investigation allows us to recalibrate the preoccupations of the Group, to explore its interface with what today we call 'public history', and to show how one historian fused socialist theory with histories of regions, landscapes, and local communities.

I

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 accelerated a drastic change in the character of twentieth-century intellectual life. That change was the retreat of Marxism. From the 1930s to the 1980s Marxist ideas informed practically every discipline in the humanities. They were part of the ambient culture, and knowledge of them was taken for granted. In the twenty-first century, school and university teachers struggle to explain their hold to students for whom Marxism is as alien as Reformation theology. In Britain there were few survivors who could put on record their reasons for embracing Communism. Among historians, the best-known was Eric Hobsbawm, in his autobiography, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life*.[1] An unfamiliar figure is Lionel Munby. When Munby died in 2009, Hobsbawm saluted him.[2] Both were stalwarts of the Communist Party Historians' Group, founded in 1946, and both belonged to the Group until around 1970. Munby became its chairman in the late 1950s and his name occurs in several published accounts of the Group.[3] If the Group's most visible members are the 'three H's', the medievalist Rodney Hilton, the early modernist Christopher Hill, and the modernist Hobsbawm, arguably it is Munby who is the more typical, exactly because he was less prominent.

Munby was a lifelong teacher and writer. His career was spent not in the heart of university life but, so to speak, in its suburbs, for he was employed for forty years

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[1] London, 2002.

[2] Letters, the *Guardian*, 12 Aug. 2009. He singled out Munby's edited collection, *The Luddites and Other Essays* (1971). Munby's name crops up in Hobsbawm's MI5 file: The National Archives, KV 2/3983, available online. Munby's own file is not available.

[3] Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Historian's Group of the Communist Party', in Maurice Cornforth (ed.), *Rebels and their Causes: Essays in Honour of A. L. Morton* (London, 1978), pp. 21-47, at p. 25; Alastair MacLachlan, *The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England* (Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 358, 364; Raphael Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians, 1880-1980', *New Left Review,* 120 (1980), pp. 21-94, at p. 73; Bill Schwartz, '"The People" in History: the Communist Party Historians' Group, 1946-1956', in Richard Johnson *et al.* (eds.), *Making Histories: Studies in History Writing and Politics* (London, 1982), pp. 44-95, at pp. 73, 77. On the Group see also Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*; Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (Cambridge, 1984); Richard J. Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History* (London, 2019), pp. 309-20, 347-8. For a selection of the Group's discussion papers see David Parker (ed.), *Ideology, Absolutism, and the English Revolution: Debates of the British Communist Historians, 1940-1956* (London, 2008).

by the University of Cambridge's Department of Extra-Mural Studies,[4] teaching adults in the wider community. His commitment to adult education, the pursuit of people's history among the people themselves, was passionate, and there was a small note of resentment, in this most unresentful of men, against the more celebrated Marxists who became intramural, such as Hill, who rose to be Master of Balliol College, Oxford. Munby's life was characteristic of the adult education tutor, with its long, dark, winter evening drives to village and school halls in scattered towns and villages to meet students who were not generally in search of degrees or diplomas. Munby shared this commitment with Edward Thompson, the Marxist historian who held a 'normal' university post only for a short time and who taught for the Extra-Mural Department at Leeds University; with Henry Collins of the Oxford Extra-Mural Department; with John Morris, a founding editor of *Past & Present*, an adult education tutor at University College, London; and indeed, in a fashion, with Hobsbawm, who taught at Birkbeck, London University's college for working adults pursuing part-time degrees. Hobsbawm has remarked, citing Munby, Thompson, Collins, and Raymond Williams, that the late 1940s 'was not yet a time when all people with a serious interest in history automatically envisaged a university career, since openings were few, except in university-linked adult education departments into which a number of the ablest went'.[5]

Like the more prominent figures among the Marxist historians, Munby found time to write history too. His publishing career was lengthy, spanning half-a-century from 1948 to 1997. There are more than forty items to his name, in a variety of genres, including guides for researchers, editions of primary sources, collections of local histories, children's books, and articles in academic as well as in Communist Party

[4] Today called the Institute of Continuing Education, based, as it has been since 1951, at Madingley Hall near Cambridge. See Edwin Welch, *The Peripatetic University: Cambridge Local Lectures, 1873-1973* (Cambridge, 1973).

[5] Hobsbawm, 'Historians' Group', p. 25. For overlaps between adult education and the Communist Party see John McIlroy and Sallie Westwood (eds.), *Border Country: Raymond Williams in Adult Education* (Leicester, 1993). Four of nine contributors in Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History* (London, 1960) and three of ten in Asa Briggs (ed.), *Chartist Studies* (London, 1962) were extra-mural lecturers.

journals, including several published in Communist Eastern Europe.[6] There are two overlapping phases to his writing career: work in the Marxist historical tradition, followed by studies in Hertfordshire local history. To place these two side by side is to invite bathos, for Marxist historiography was apt to operate on 'world-historical' canvases, harnessed to revolutionary ideals, while local history had tended to be antiquarian and socially conservative, grounded in reverence for ancient particularisms. Munby rejected such an antithesis. Although the doctrinaire character of his first phase is absent in the second, nonetheless his engagement with local history was premised on the idea of 'history from below', the Marxists' most lasting legacy to the wider profession, and it constantly involved nurturing collective historical research undertaken by non-professionals. For him, socialist history meant not just writing *about* ordinary people, but encouraging them to *be* historians. In the 1940s he construed this as a revolutionary task: he believed that the people's seizing of their own history, wresting it from proprietorship by the elite, was a vital strategic goal in the march of proletarian consciousness. He remarked that in the nineteenth century local history had been in the hands of gentlemen amateurs, preening their escutcheons but yet also creating thriving regional publication series, but that this movement had become overridden by the dead hand of academic professionalization and state-dominated universities. He objected to the presumption, in Cambridge, that 'research' meant working for a PhD: his student-citizens did research too.[7] Old gentry amateurism had given way to the iron cage of professionalization, and the people were excluded from both.

In truth, Munby's later career represents the outer husk, with much of the ideological inner core hollowed out. The zeal was gone, and his latter-day colleagues and students were scarcely aware of his Communist roots. From 1955 to 1975 he edited the journal *The Local Historian* (at first called *The Amateur Historian*), and from 1995 to

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[6] Articles appeared in the East German journal *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik,* 1960-4; also (in Hungarian) 'Adult Education in Britain: The Working Class Movement and the Universities', *Vilagtortenet* ['World History', Hungarian Academy of Sciences],12 (1966), pp. 456-67.

[7] Lionel Munby [hereafter LMM], *Local History since 1945* (London, 2005), pp. 4-8.

2000 he was president of the British Association for Local History. In 1964 he was anchor for a series of eight conversations on local historical archives broadcast on the BBC's Third Programme.[8] He became known for his handbooks for researchers. He played a key role in the development of the Hertfordshire Record Office, was chair of the Hertfordshire Local History Council, and the moving force in creating the Hertfordshire Record Society. In 1991 a *festschrift* was published in his honour, *Hertfordshire in History*, and after his death an annual memorial lecture was established in his name. The *festschrift* contains no mention of his Communist past.[9]

Munby was a member of the Communist Party for thirty-four years, from 1937, when he was an undergraduate, to 1971. He stayed in the Party longer than most of his contemporaries. The largest exodus occurred in 1956 after the Soviet invasion of Hungary. Another occurred in 1968 after the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Munby was relatively untouched by the New Left movement that developed in the late 1950s, Marxist but detached from the Party. Indeed, he later moved pretty directly from the Communist Party to the Liberal Party. He was always a natural libertarian, in the sense of belonging to that broad English stream that was anti-authoritarian, anti-establishment, and tolerant of diversity. As with many Party members, there was an aching disjunction between his authentically liberal, and gentle, English sensibility, and his commitment to the British arm of one of the twentieth century's most murderous tyrannical regimes. Munby never met Joseph Stalin but his friends in the Party hierarchy did and he reported conversations they had had with the Soviet leader. It is certainly striking to find this mild-mannered extra-mural lecturer sharing the pages of the *Communist Review* with Comrade Joseph himself.

Today, there is a good deal of morally hectoring hindsight about those who were members of the Party. When Hobsbawm's autobiography appeared, Jeremy

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[8] Frederick Emmison, 'BBC Popularizes Archives', *American Archivist,* 28 (1965), pp. 43-5.

[9] Doris Jones-Baker (ed.), *Hertfordshire in History: Papers Presented to Lionel Munby* (Hertfordshire Local History Council, 1991). There is a Lionel Munby Room at the Record Office. The most recent Memorial Lectures were delivered by Susan Oosthuizen, 'Commons and Common Rights' (2023), and Mike Noronha, 'The Battle of Barnet Project' (2024).

Paxman's television interview of 2002 aimed at extracting contrition.[10] When, in 1983, the Oxford historian Jenifer Hart, wife of the philosopher and wartime intelligence officer H. L. A. Hart, was 'exposed' as a former Communist, the *Sunday Times* headline was: 'I was a Russian Spy, says MI5 man's wife'. But she was no spy, had joined the Party as an undergraduate and left by 1939.[11] An effort of historical understanding is needed to grasp why tens of thousands of people, especially among the young, joined the Party in the 1930s. They joined out of moral revulsion against poverty and inequality during the Depression, from a sense of betrayal by Ramsay MacDonald's Labour leadership in its capitulation to the National Government, dismay at the appeasement of fascist dictators, and out of solidarity with the Republic in the Spanish Civil War. Most joiners were utopian socialists of liberal and internationalist instincts: communism represented progress and modernity and hope in a world of decaying and cynical capitalism and an oppressive class system.

The following account draws upon conversations with Lionel Munby,[12] and his publications and papers. It is a record of one man's experience of the British Left. The first part is an informal biography, giving space to Lionel's remarks. The second discusses, more systematically, the aims of the Communist Party Historians' Group, seen from his perspective.[13] The third explores Munby's historical writing, to exemplify some characteristic preoccupations of the Group and his own advocacy of a socialist turn toward the study of local history. Munby accumulated an archive of the Group, possessing a rare set of typescripts of its papers.[14]

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[10] Available on YouTube.

[11] Nicola Lacey, *A Life of H. L. A. Hart* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 66-7, 338-9.

[12] A tape recording was made on 6 March 2004. I have also used a talk he gave to the Churchill College (Cambridge) History Society in 1990: copy in the Labour History Archive, Manchester (hereafter LHA), CP/HIST/2/6. All quotations without citations are taken from these two sources.

[13] I call him Lionel in section II and Munby thereafter.

[14] Currently in my possession. There are archived minutes in LHA, CP/CENT/CULT/5/11-13, 6/1, and 13/1.

II

Lionel Maxwell Munby was born in Leeds on 7 May 1918. Like so many members of the British Left his background was solidly middle class, but if his youthful embrace of the Left had something to do, as so often, with reaction against his parents, that reaction was rather against his father than his mother, whom he admired rather more. His father was an ear, nose, and throat surgeon. He was a 'harmless Conservative, no nastiness about him'. His mother was more radical, an Edwardian New Liberal. She had supported the suffragettes. Unusually for her generation, she had a science degree, and a career, being a 'lady factory inspector'.[15]

After attending the Dragon School (1926-31), one of Oxford's favoured preparatory schools, Lionel was sent at the age of thirteen to Clifton College, the public school in Bristol (1931-6).[16] Its aura was Arnoldian, heavily burdened with muscular Christianity and under the gaze of its alumnus and patron Field Marshal Earl Haig.[17] He came to dislike it intensely. In 1936 Lionel went up to Hertford College, Oxford, to read History. His uncle was an influence: R. V. (Reginald) Lennard (1885-1967), Fellow of Wadham College, an historian of medieval agriculture, and, as Lionel recorded, a 'pioneer Workers' Educational Association tutor'.[18] At Oxford, *avante garde* poetry was fashionable, and the first thing Lionel did was buy a signed first edition of Ezra Pound's *Umbra*.[19] He graduated with a First in 1939.

He had turned to socialism before going up to Oxford. One catalyst was The People's Bookshop in Leeds, which opened in 1933.[20]

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[15] William Munby (1881-1968), FRCS; Janet Munby (née Lennard) (1887-1969).

[16] S. P. Beachcroft, *Clifton College Register, 1862-1962* (Bristol, 1962), p. 297.

[17] C. S. Knighton (ed.), *Clifton College* (Bristol, 2012). See pp. 196-7 for LMM's wholly conventional report of a school visit to Bristol Cathedral.

[18] LMM, *Local History since 1945,* p. 3.

[19] Provenance recorded in Christie's auction, 7-8 Apr. 2004, lot 4256728 (sold for £1,434).

[20] Workers' Bookshop, Hunslet Road, founded by Party activist Ernie Benson, for whom see *To Struggle is to Live: A Working Class Autobiography*, 2 vols. (Newcastle, 1979-80). The shop windows were several times smashed.

> I would go there to browse and buy books and magazines. I remember precisely what it was that persuaded me. The year was 1934. It was an article in *Labour Monthly*, on the social background to Nazism. Then – it must have been through the bookshop – I attended an anti-war conference in Sheffield. Charlotte Despard the famous suffragist and sister of Field Marshall French was there.[21] The Romillys were there too, Winston Churchill's Communist nephews.[22] I got mixed up with that lot. There was also a socialist magazine I can remember, designed for, and read by, public schoolboys like me.

The magazine was the Romilly brothers' *Out of Bounds,* (the editors were aged 17 and 15), which combined Marxist politics with bashing the suffocating constraints, militarism, corporal punishments, and hypocritical moralising of the public schools. Rather as Marxism would attract the young again in the 1960s, there was here a mixture of socialist doctrine and the politics of personal liberation from 'bourgeois' constraints.

Another catalyst was a visit to a South Wales mining community. This was an organised trip from Clifton College. Many privileged schools, and Oxbridge colleges, had, from the 1880s onwards, established links with working class areas, driven by social reformist New Liberalism, or High Anglican, even Romantic Tory, ethical dismay at the cruelties of industrialism. Usually these initiatives took the form of

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[21] 1844-1939, novelist, socialist, Irish nationalist; friend of Eleanor Marx; Labour then Communist Party member; visited the Soviet Union in 1930, secretary of the Friends of Soviet Russia. John French was British commander during the First World War.

[22] Esmond (1918-41) and Giles (1916-67) Romilly, called Churchill's 'red nephews'. Esmond ran away from public school in 1934, worked in a Communist bookshop in Bloomsbury, giving refuge to boys in flight from public schools, published an autobiography aged seventeen, joined the International Brigade in Spain, married Jessica Mitford, joined the RAF and was killed over Germany. Giles became a journalist, and was held captive in Colditz. See their *Out of Bounds* (London, 1935, republ. 2015); Kevin Ingram, *Rebel: The Short Life of Esmond Romilly* (London, 1985); Philip Toynbee, *Friends Apart: A Memoir of Esmond Romilly and Jasper Ridley in the Thirties* (London, 1954). *Daily Mail,* 2 Feb. 1934: 'Red Menace in Public Schools. Moscow Attempts to Corrupt Boys.'

establishing charitable hostels, often called 'settlements': some Oxbridge colleges still have them. It was in this way that Clement Attlee turned towards socialism, through Haileybury School's Stepney boys club, Haileybury House. In Clifton's case, the scheme involved taking boys for a few days stay, led by the school chaplain.

> We stayed with a coal miner's family. We went down a mine. We heard horror stories of the pits. Social class differences were brought home to me. Especially in a couple of incidents. I was larking about in the street with the miners' kids. A copper gave us a right bollocking. But as soon as he heard my accent, he said 'Sorry, Sir', and walked off. I also remember a local girl encouraging me to walk her home across the moor. A lad warned me off. He said she'll try to get you to get her pregnant so she can get out of here.

Twice during the 1930s Lionel had the opportunity to visit Germany and witness Nazism at first hand.[23] His mother was keen that he should spend time abroad. Having finished school in March 1936, and taking a gap year before university, Lionel spent several months in Germany. He stayed with a family in Marburg. Part of the time was spent at a summer school for British and German youth. Hitler admired the English public schools and was keen for opportunities to emulate their ethos. A number of the boys whom Lionel met were members of the Hitler Youth.

> It was possible to see the attractions of Nazism, especially to the young. It offered a sense of togetherness. It seemed romantic, slightly mystical. And, politically, the Nazis seemed to be facing up to the problem of unemployment and class inequality, which so contrasted with Baldwin's and Chamberlain's governments, which couldn't care less. The young were taken with it. I knew a boy who had a Jewish father, an academic,

[23] For British visitors to Nazi Germany see Julia Boyd, *Travellers in the Third Reich* (London, 2017).

> who committed suicide, but he, the son, was a Nazi. I did see some evidence of official antisemitism. I remember seeing a virulently anti-Jewish poster. (There was, by the way, a separate Jewish house at my public school.)[24]

Lionel learnt to fly, which was the occasion of an extraordinary incident.

> I wore my (British) Boy Scout uniform. In a black and white photograph it was hard to tell it apart from a Hitler Youth uniform. One day I was photographed at the controls of a glider. Next year, 1937, the photograph appeared for the month of May in the annual Hitler Youth calendar. Under the picture was a quotation from the Führer. I doubt if Hitler intended to salute a young British Communist. During the War my mother threw it away. I so wish I had it now.

Lionel again went to Germany in the summer of 1938. This time his host was the wife of Friedrich Werner von der Schulenberg, German ambassador to Moscow, later executed for his role in the July Plot to assassinate Hitler.

> We drove around in a big Mercedes. We would drop in on castles for tea with the von this and von that. One afternoon we drove into a small market down called Naumburg and had coffee at a street cafe. When it came to time to pay, the *patron* said, 'No, no, the gracious countess does not pay'. Another time we visited a Luftwaffe aerodrome. The pilots made no bones about the fact that they had been flying bombing raids in Spain, though Hitler completely denied this was happening.

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[24] Derek Winterbottom, *Dynasty: The Polack Family and the Jewish House at Clifton, 1875-2005* (Clifton, 2008).

That summer of 1938 saw Lionel also in Paris. There he met people on their way to and from Spain to join the International Brigade, fighting Franco.

At Oxford, Lionel quickly joined the Labour Club. In that period about a thousand students, one third of the student body, were members. The Club combined Labour people and Communists. He reckoned there were about 300 student members of the Communist Party and proudly recalled that in 1939 two of the eleven History Firsts and half of the Firsts in PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics) were members of the Party. There was at that time no bar on Communists joining the Labour Party; nor was Communist affiliation furtive in the way it perforce became during the Cold War. Equally, Communists were encouraged to work alongside other socialists. It was the period of the Popular Front. The Comintern had adopted a new strategy in 1934, encouraging a united coalition of the Left against fascism. In Oxford, the Left staged demonstrations about Spain and Munich, under physical attack from Oswald Mosley's fascists.

> In my second term, early in 1937, Peter Hewitt, a poet, came to my room and asked me to join the Communist Party.[25] I did, and I remained a member until 1971. I became secretary of the Labour Club. We organised meetings. Clement Attlee came to speak. And Pandit Nehru. (Nehru's daughter got drunk in my room.) We led May Day rallies. We organised in Cowley. I remember a tremendously gifted speaker, Abraham Lazarus. Among my fellow students, Denis Healey was also a CP member. I knew him, and Edna, whom he married. Edna was glamorous; everyone chased her; we all tried to sit close to her in lectures; I took her out on the river.[26]

[25] 1914-? See Robin Skelton, *Poetry of the Thirties* (London, 1964). Hewitt also persuaded Denis Healey (1917-2015), matriculated Balliol, 1936, future Labour Chancellor, to join the Party: Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London, 1989), p. 34.

[26] Attlee (1883-1967), Prime Minister, 1945-51; Nehru (1889-1964), Prime Minister of India, 1947-64; Indira Gandhi (1917-84), Nehru's daughter, Prime Minister of India, 1966-77, 1980-84, matriculated, Sommerville, 1937; Lazarus (1911-67), Party organizer, led the 1934 Oxford steelworkers' strike; Edna Healey (née Edmunds) (1918-2010), matriculated, St Hugh's, 1936, chaired the Labour Club; the Healeys

During Lionel's time as an undergraduate the momentous Oxford by-election of October 1938 occurred. It provided a stage for the national controversy over appeasement. People of many political colours were appalled by Chamberlain's kowtowing to Hitler and demanded that the government stand up to fascism. The government's pro-appeasement candidate was Quentin Hogg (later Lord Hailsham and Conservative Lord Chancellor). 'A vote for Hogg is a vote for Hitler' was the slogan.[27] Against him, standing as the sole anti-appeasement candidate, the result of a remarkable cross-party pact, stood the Master of Balliol College and recent Vice-Chancellor, the philosopher Alexander Lindsay (later Lord Lindsay). Liberals and socialists rallied behind Lindsay, and, in the spirit of the Popular Front, Communists were instructed to follow suit. At first the Labour candidate, Patrick Gordon Walker, refused to stand down, until his party forced him: he complained of student Communist influence. Thus it was that Communist undergraduates and shop stewards from the Cowley motor factory found themselves canvassing on behalf of a distinctly bourgeois Master of an Oxford college. As secretary of the Labour Club, Lionel was at the helm in this joint Labour-CP campaign. *Picture Post* reported 'the intense interest taken by undergraduates – who had no votes'. But Hogg won with a modest majority.[28] Lifelong Oxford activist Olive Gibbs recalled, 'for ten glorious days

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married in 1945; see her memoir *Part of the Pattern* (London, 2006), ch. 2. The suburb of Cowley was the home of Britain's largest motor car factory. LMM knew other student members of the Party: Robert Conquest (1917-2015), historian of Stalin's Purge; Philip Toynbee (1916-81), first Communist president of the Oxford Union, later novelist and journalist; (Sir) Leo Pliatzky (1919-99), economic adviser to the Wilson government; and Iris Murdoch (1919-99), philosopher and novelist. See Toynbee, *Friends Apart,* chs. 4-6.

[27] Coined by the philosopher J. L. Austin, who went out to heckle Hogg. See M. W. Rowe, *J. L. Austin: Philosopher and D-Day Intelligence Officer* (Oxford, 2023), pp. 140-1.

[28] On the 'Appeasement By-Election' see Duncan Bowie, *Reform and Revolt in the City of Dreaming Spires* (London, 2018), ch. 38; Roger Eatwell, 'Munich, Public Opinion, and Popular Front', *Journal of Contemporary History,* 6 (1971), pp. 123-30; Iain McLean, 'Oxford and Bridgewater', in Chris Cook and John Ramsden (eds.), *By-Elections in British Politics* (London, 1973); Tom Hopkinson, *Picture Post, 1938-1950* (London, 1970), pp. 24-30; Drusilla Scott, *A. D. Lindsay: A Biography* (Oxford, 1971), ch. 14; Lord Hailsham, *A Sparrow's Flight* (London, 1990), ch. 17. An astonishing galaxy of contemporary and future political figures supported Lindsay: Sir William Beveridge, Lady Violet Bonham Carter, Randolph Churchill, G. D. H. Cole, Richard Crossman, Harold Macmillan, Frank Pakenham, and Ellen Wilkinson.

we became fanatical followers of Lindsay'; when the result was announced, 'I stood in stunned disbelief, with tears pouring down my face'.[29]

The Popular Front collapsed with the announcement of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939. By May 1940 the Labour Club had broken apart, after a furious battle of words between Labourites and Communists in the pages of the *Oxford University Labour Club Bulletin.* Students Antony Crosland and Roy Jenkins squared off against Munby, Edmund Dell, and Sheila Rogers,[30] although Crosland used his own articles to work an intellectual passage away from orthodox Marxism towards Labour. Munby's line was unambiguously Soviet. The Chamberlain-Hitler War was a quarrel among capitalists and imperialists, it was 'appeasement in arms', designed merely to tinker with the German capitalist-fascist state; semi-fascist Poland deserved no sympathy; Finland, under the fascist Carl Mannerheim, was a forward base for Europe's capitalist regimes and a legitimate target for Soviet invasion; Chamberlain abandons England's suffering masses leaving them to take the brunt of war; the Soviet Union is a place where the 'common people govern the country', and 'economic and social progress … has outstripped all other countries', where 'unemployment and poverty have disappeared for ever, along with racial hatred and inequality'.[31] This was fantastical nonsense from the twenty-two year old Munby, and when Germany invaded Russia he quickly swerved.

If Lionel's post-war Communism might best be described as 'Eurocommunist' (he was an admirer of the Italian Party leader Palmiro Togliatti) and hence a Communism semi-detached from the Soviet Union, his pre-war stance was entirely pro-Soviet. This is now hard to understand.

Among LMM's undergraduate confreres active for Lindsay was the future Tory Prime Minister Edward Heath.

[29] Olive Gibbs (1918-95), *Our Olive* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 95-7.

[30] Crosland (1918-77), Jenkins (1920-2003), and Dell (1921-99) were all future Labour Cabinet or government ministers; Rogers became a Workers' Educational Association lecturer and married Oxford academic Saul Rose.

[31] Archives of Balliol College, Oxford: *Labour Club Bulletin* (1939-40), issues 2, 5, 9, 16. See V. Purton, *An Iris Murdoch Chronology* (Basingstoke, 2007), p. 23.

> In the 1930s the Soviet Union could do no wrong. Lots of influential British people went to Moscow, who were not Communists, and found that it was good: H. G. Wells, Sidney and Beatrice Webb. I felt no reason to be doubtful of the Soviets. There were some rough moments. The Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 was difficult for some. I had just graduated, but stayed on in Oxford. I remember, at the beginning of the autumn term, going round every college to talk at meetings, to persuade comrades about the Pact. Russia had a right to protect herself. Britain was totally failing to stand up to Hitler and was indifferent to Russia. Russia needed allies.

When did people know about Stalin's purges and show trials?

> We knew about them at the time. This is where you will see how awful I was. The reports of the trials were published. I remember reading them avidly. I spoke in defence of them. It seemed perfectly plausible that there were traitors to the cause. We didn't know the other side of the picture. You see, I have always been a good teacher, not an innovative intellectual. I knew how to absorb information and explain it to people in simple terms. I believed what I read. We thought that the world was not all like England. There were places where things were tougher. There were traitors to the cause. You might have to eliminate some to survive. We believed people like Bukharin had done the dirty.[32]

In this stance there is a large element of romantic transposition. In contrast to the prosaic timidity of British politics, its complacency in the face of social and political calamity, there could be imagined a more heroic and purer politics existing in a New

[32] Nikolai Bukharin was executed in 1938, one of the most prominent victims of the Purge.

World Order being constructed elsewhere. It was certainly true that Wells and the Webbs brought home idealised pictures of that new order. It is also true that a ruthless utilitarian might reckon that transitional sufferings could be justified in terms of long-term benefits. Lionel pointed out that capitalist historians were just as ready to appeal to such a calculus, for they argued that the sufferings of working people during the birth-pangs of industrial capitalism were a price worth paying for the long-term material gains of economic modernisation. Furthermore, it is now readily forgotten the extent to which, even for non-communists, the Soviet Union, right down to the 1960s, offered an awesome model of modernisation, technical progress, and meritocracy.

Lionel was a postgraduate student for a year, 1939-40. He was not called up to military service immediately. His Communism was known to the Oxford dons. Because of the by-election, Lindsay knew that he was a Party member, and he told Lionel's tutor at Hertford College, C. A. J. Armstrong, a Roman Catholic and supporter of Franco, ('naïve … charming'), that he ought not to be called up. Lionel was recommended instead for service in Ernest Bevin's Ministry of Labour. Lionel commented: 'Lindsay called himself a Christian Socialist. A bloody great hypocrite, more like. He always got somebody else to do his dirty work for him'. But, in 1940, Lionel was, after all, conscripted into the army. For five years he served in the Royal Artillery, first in North Africa and then in the invasion of Italy in 1943, seeing action in the battle for Monte Cassino, where the Germans held a line against the Allies. At first he remained a private, blacklisted, and forbidden promotion above the ranks.

> MI5, incidentally, was incompetent. The only Communists they knew about were those whose names were public. I knew people who were secretly Communist who became [army] officers. I also experienced another example of the idiocy of the security services. At one point I was summoned to the War Office for an interview, for what I did not know. A donnish semi-circle quizzed me, and seemed to like the fact that I could speak German. It turned out that it was MI6 and I was being considered for work at Bletchley Park [the secret code-breaking unit].

> MI6 were wholly unaware that I was on an MI5 blacklist, until my commanding officer told them.

Eventually he was promoted lieutenant. He reckoned it saved his life, for otherwise he would likely have been killed in a tank in Sicily. He fought his way up the Italian peninsula as an officer. Promotion came because his colonel took a Churchillian line on Communism.

> 'Munby, you're a Communist, aren't you?' 'Yes, Sir.' 'Look, I've been making reports on people like you for years. But we shouldn't be doing it now. Because, I ask myself, who are killing Germans wholesale? The Russians are.'

Munby was witness to a notorious military injustice, the so-called 'Salerno mutiny', in which nearly 200 loyal and disciplined troops were improperly court martialled, victims of official bungling and deception. They had been told they were to rejoin their own units but were then abruptly sent to new ones; their protests were interpreted as mutinous cowardice. Munby was put in charge of escorting them from North Africa to Italy and quickly accepted their side of the story.

> They told me that they had been perfectly willing to go and fight and that their only crime had been loyalty to their units … 'We were just trying to get back to our regiments as we had been told to do.'[33]

By 1945, Lionel had for several years been in the Party and the army, and these two institutions, he remarked, had much in common: highly disciplined organisations with powerful senses of solidarity. He thought that the military experience of members

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[33] This and his further recollections are quoted in Saul David, *Mutiny at Salerno: An Injustice Exposed* (London, 1995), pp. 169-71.

of the post-War Historians Group helped their sense of discipline and discouraged the usual individualism of humanities academics.

After the War, Lionel briefly returned to Oxford and began research in labour history under the direction of G. D. H. Cole, professor of social and political theory, and a powerful influence on the Labour Party as well as on 'university extension' – the movement into extra-mural teaching. Amid Oxford's devotion to 'high political' history, Cole's advocacy of labour history was a powerful tonic.[34] In December 1945 Iris Murdoch's lover David Hicks reported seeing Lionel at a friend's party in Pusey Street.[35] Lionel applied for a post in Oxford, a joint appointment between Balliol College and the Extra-Mural Department. It was a natural career option for one of his convictions and during the period of the Attlee government national funding for university adult education tripled and the number of full-time extramural tutors increased sixfold.[36] 'Extramural teaching in Mr Attlee's new Britain was an exciting enterprise'.[37] Two of the four-man interviewing panel were Communists, Christopher Hill of Balliol, and Henry Collins, head of the Extra-Mural Department. Lindsay was on the committee too, and so was the Dean of Christ Church. 'So the score was two-all.' Hill later told Lionel that Lindsay had ensured that he didn't get the job. Two jobs were available, three candidates were interviewed, one was appointed; the two Communists were not.[38] Instead Lionel moved to Cambridge, where in 1946 he was appointed to a staff tutorship in the Extra-Mural Department. Oxford's department

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[34] George Cole (1889-1959), leading Fabian socialist intellectual, pluralist rather than statist; regular Workers' Educational Association lecturer.

[35] Iris Murdoch, *A Writer at War: Letters and Diaries, 1939-1945,* ed. Peter Conradi (London, 2010), p. 270.

[36] Lawrence Goldman, *Dons and Workers: Oxford and Adult Education since 1850* (Oxford, 1995), p. 250. For the ethos of the adult education movement see also Goldman, 'Intellectuals and the English Working Class, 1870-1945: The Case of Adult Education', *History of Education,* 29 (2000), pp. 281-300; Roger Fieldhouse, *A History of Modern British Adult Education* (Leicester, 1996); Miles Taylor (ed.), *The Age of Asa: Lords Briggs, Public Life, and History in Britain since 1945* (Basingstoke, 2015), pp. 115-23.

[37] Peter Scott, *Knowledge and Nation* (Edinburgh, 1990), p. 51.

[38] The appointee was the political scientist Samuel Finer (1915-93). The other rejected Communist was the economist Ron Bellamy (1917-2009) who was, however, appointed to a part-time tutorial post, held conjointly with a lectureship at Christ Church; he would spend 1961-2 as a Senior Research Fellow in Moscow. Obituary, *Guardian,* 17 Apr. 2009.

was investigated in 1948 for Communist influence, an early symptom of the Cold War. Frank Pickstock took to vetting tutors and syllabuses and held that the Communist Party was instructing members to infiltrate adult education departments, a conspiracy theory which Lionel called 'bunkum', since adult education was a natural pursuit for idealistic socialists bred in the popular front tradition. Cambridge seems to have been free of the 'eddies of McCarthyism' running through extra-mural departments nationally by 1950.[39] At Cambridge, Lionel's initial remit was to cover modern economic and social history, and to devote special attention to trade union education. Demand in the latter field proved less strong than anticipated, and he soon turned to teaching Hertfordshire local history. He remained on the staff until 1982 but continued to teach until 1986.

Lionel did not leave the Party until 1971. He says that finally he 'not so much left, as faded away'. In 1956 he was sympathetic to those who broke with the Party over Hungary; but when the Party stuck to the Soviet line, he stayed. Why did he remain so long?

> Loyalty, and friendship. I had lots of friends in the Party, people I admired. The CP wasn't just intellectuals. For me, Christopher Hill wasn't the CP. There were working men. A Vauxhall shop steward was one of my closest friends, a cockney Londoner, who had served in the International Brigade in Spain. He was a first-class human being. The elite of working class cadres, so we called them. To me, admirable human beings. ... The Party was a mix. Some were nasty pieces of work. On the bandwagon; they thought the Party was the thing of the future, and wanted to be on side. I suspect Ramelson was one of those.[40] Others

[39] Roger Fieldhouse, *Adult Education and the Cold War* (Leeds, 1985), pp. 10-11, 30, 35, 51, 97, 100; quotation at p. 22. Also: Goldman, *Dons and Workers,* pp. 268-86; Ben Harker, *The Chronology of Revolution: Communism, Culture, and Civil Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Toronto, 2021), p. 268.

[40] Bert (Baruch) Ramelson (1910-94), wounded in the Spanish Civil War; full-time Party activist. In 1956 he visited Soviet leader Khrushchev to discuss the future of the British Party. Henry Pelling, *The British Communist Party* (London, 1958), p. 172.

> I respected. Harry Pollitt I had enormous respect for. An honest working man.[41]

Throughout the 1950s and the early 60s Lionel remained active in the Party. He lectured on British labour history to Party summer schools in Sheffield, alongside Leslie (A. L.) Morton[42] and James Klugmann.[43] In early numbers of *Marxism Today*, launched in 1957, his articles appeared alongside those by the leaders and principal intellectuals of the Party, Klugmann, Pollitt, Palme Dutt,[44] Willie Gallacher,[45] and John Gollan.[46] But his doubts are visible in a 'lucid, forceful report' presented to the Cultural Committee in 1965 which made no bones about the unacceptable restrictions on intellectual and artistic freedom in Eastern Europe and insisted on the need for cultural pluralism and autonomy under socialism.[47] His final Party publication dates from 1968: 'Working for Left Unity', written jointly with John Foster, author of *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (1974).[48]

For two decades, Munby led an apparently double life, as Party activist and local historian. But, for him, these were not distinct avocations, and we need now to explore how one informed the other.

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[41] 1890-1960, son of a blacksmith and cotton spinner; frequent visitor to the Soviet Union; sacked as Party Secretary, 1939, for refusing the Moscow line against the War; reinstated 1941.

[42] 1903-87; schoolteacher, journalist, Party employee, independent scholar; best known for *A People's History of England* (1938).

[43] 1917-77; executive committee of the Party and its historian; KGB spy and one of the recruiters of the 'Cambridge Five' in the 1930s.

[44] 1896-1974, journalist, Party theoretician, of Indian-Swedish parentage; loyal Stalinist.

[45] 1881-1965, Scottish trade unionist, one of the few people elected to Parliament as a Communist; praised Stalin at his death; author of *The Case for Communism* (1949).

[46] 1911-77; assistant editor of the *Daily Worker*; General Secretary of the Party, 1956-75. A survey of the half-dozen British Marxist journals shows how small the British Communist authorial intelligentsia was, and how conspicuous historians were amongst them. For the earliest generation of British Party intellectuals, see appendix in John McIlroy, 'The Establishment of Intellectual Orthodoxy and the Stalinization of British Communism, 1928-1933', *Past & Present,* 192 (2006), pp. 187-230, at pp. 227-30.

[47] Gary McCulloch, Antonio Canales and Hsiao-Yuh Ku, *Brian Simon and the Struggle for Education* (London, 2023), pp. 102-3.

[48] *Comment,* 6 July 1968. Not traced.

III

The Communist Party Historians' Group was formed in 1946. It is often assumed that it lasted ten years and collapsed after the Hungarian *demarche*.[49] Certainly there was a secession, marked by the founding of *The New Reasoner* (predecessor of *New Left Review*) in 1957.[50] But Munby was keen to emphasise that the Group continued, not least because he himself was elected chairman in 1959.[51] In fact it continued until the dissolution of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1991, and was then re-invented as the Socialist History Society. Munby stressed that the Group was not founded on orders from Moscow.[52] It was the spontaneous creation of a cohort of mainly young graduates. There was a 'huge group' of members, he says, by which he means perhaps 'thirty or forty' – in fact his own papers suggest around sixty.[53] His point is that the Group was much bigger than the handful of well-known historians most often associated with it. And also that it included young students as well as established academics. Raphael Samuel joined the Group as a schoolboy. Munby read later accounts of the Group, notably that by Harvey Kaye. His sense was that these concentrate too much on the handful of historians who later achieved public recognition. The 'three H's' reached the pinnacles of their careers in the 1960s and

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[49] E.g. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 191; Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians', p. 91; Evans, *Hobsbawm*, p. 347.

[50] Founded by Raphael Samuel, John Saville, and Edward Thompson.

[51] He served alongside Joan Simon as secretary and Alfred Jenkin as treasurer. He appears to have remained chair until 1964. He first joined the committee in 1951; treasurer in 1954. For acknowledgement of the Group's continued flourishing – 'well run' and 'still active' - see Harker, *Chronology of Revolution*, pp. 113, 135, 183 (LMM listed among the post-1956 remainers).

[52] Daphne May in *Communist Review* asserted that attendance at Group meetings should be considered 'a definite Party duty' (May 1949, p. 541).

[53] In 1964 he gave a figure of 'some fifty members': 'Studying/Writing Working-Class History', *Marxism Today*, 8 (1954), pp. 309-13, at p. 310. Henry Pelling gives a figure of about 100: *British Communist Party*, p. 139. Parker, *Ideology*, reckons 86 in 1947: p. 246. Harker, *Chronology of Revolution*, gives about 100 at the beginning, 37 in 1958, 56 in 1964: pp. 85, 135. I know no published list of the full membership: a prosopography would be valuable.

became powerful influences on the historical profession: hindsight tends to overplay their position in the Group's early history. The latter-day emphasis on them was, Munby said, a 'travesty'.[54] By no means all the Group became professional historians.

> What was remarkable was the mix of people. It wasn't just intellectuals. There were working men, shop stewards and bus drivers, from Birmingham or Sheffield. They were intelligent men, and were treated with respect.

Munby also noted that, in the period before the Group's formation, historians had had a disproportionate presence in the Party as a whole, from its foundation in 1920. These included Robin Page Arnot, Gordon Childe, Palme Dutt, Benjamin Farrington, A. L. Morton, Roy Pascal, Andrew Rothstein, and George Thomson.[55]

The Group was divided into four sections based on period: ancient, medieval, early modern, and modern. The whole Group, Munby recalled, met only once a year. He attended meetings of more than one section, being interested in every period, a teacher rather than a specialist, though he concentrated on early modern and modern history.

The Group began by reading, with a view to a new edition, Morton's *People's History of England* (1938). Another key starting point was Maurice Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (1946). The Group debated colleagues' work-in-progress, and critiqued 'bourgeois' historians, such as Lewis Namier and Hugh Trevor-Roper. (It debated R. H. Tawney's 'Rise of the Gentry' thesis a good deal, and Trevor-Roper became a *bête noire* of the Left for challenging it.) It analysed key concepts in Marxist historiography, such as the 'transition from feudalism to capitalism', the 'immiseration' of the working class, and the 'labour aristocracy'. The summer schools

[54] Besides the three H's, the other names most often singled out are Maurice Dobb, E. P. Thompson, and Donna Torr. See Kaye, *British Marxist Historians.*

[55] See Neal Wood, *Communism and the British Intellectuals* (New York, 1959).

of 1952-3 aimed to produce collaborative works. Morton's and George Tates's *The British Labour Movement* (1956) emerged from the first.[56]

The Group drew up a bibliography of socialist historical writing. This project was first envisaged in 1946 when Diana Poulton offered to compile it, and a mimeographed version emerged in 1956. This evolved into *Marxism and History: A Bibliography of English Language Works* (1967), jointly compiled by Munby and Ernst Wangerman.[57] It was confined to works having a Marxian perspective, though interpreted in a 'non-sectarian' way, and Lionel recalled rows about whether to include the work of E. H. Carr, the non-Communist who admired the Soviet Union and produced the massive *History of Soviet Russia*, and Sidney Pollard,[58] but also about whether to exclude old Stalinists like Dutt and Rothstein.[59] Munby's insistence on the autonomy of the Group is perhaps belied by a letter of 1958 from Bill Wainright, Assistant General Secretary of the Party, reporting that the Party's Political Committee had discussed and rejected the opinion of 'Comrades Hobsbawm and Munby' that articles in the New Left's journal, *New Reasoner*, might be included in the bibliography: the comrades were instructed to think of the good 'of the Party as a whole' … 'yours fraternally'. It turns out that Group member Betty Grant had taken the matter of the bibliography to the Party General Secretary; accusations of Trotskyism flew; Joan Simon denounced Grant as 'mentally ill' and in need of seeing a 'Party psychiatrist'. 'What on earth has Trotskyism to do with bibliography?' A letter to Munby concerning this affair survives in Hobsbawm's MI5 file: how often do historians' bibliographies become a matter for MI5? [60] Autonomy from the Party hierarchy had asserted itself by

[56] Collaborative too was a series of primary sourcebooks, including that edited by Edmund Dell and Christopher Hill, *The Good Old Cause* (London, 1949).

[57] 1925-2021; later an historian of the Austrian Enlightenment. One of the *Kindertransport*; studied under Hill at Balliol.

[58] LMM recommended Pollard's *Development of the British Economy, 1914-1950* (1962) as 'near-Marxist'. LHA, CP/IND/MONT/7/9.

[59] The bibliography lists 1234 works.

[60] Wainright to [?LMM], 14 Nov. 1958; Grant to LMM, 13 Feb. 1959; LMM to Group Committee, 20 Feb. 1959; Simon to LMM, 24 Feb. 1959. LHA, CP/CONT/CULT/8/4. TNA KV 2/3983. For MI5 and Historians

the time the published version appeared, for it did include articles from *New Left Review.* The balance between autonomy and Party control was a fine one and the Group policed the boundary. In 1948 Group members objected to the showing of Party cards at meetings as proof of entitlement to attend.[61] In the mid-1950s Betty Grant protested against the Party seeking to vet the contents of its people's history journal *Our History.* On the other hand, it could not but be flattering to Munby that his 'excellent' lecture of 1962 on English radicalism from the 1760s to the 1870s was recommended by Klugmann to the Party's Press and Publicity Officer.[62] Munby remained close enough to the Party that in 1963 he published, in a Soviet journal, an extended survey of the Group's historical work, and in 1967 he lectured at Marx House on 'The England that Marx wrote about in *Capital*'.[63]

Rather than the Group's dominant personalities, Munby preferred to emphasise three strands in the Group's activities. First, a principal aim was to break down barriers between academic and amateur history. Theirs was a campaign for people's rather than professional history. Munby was involved in one of the Group's first projects, a proposed pageant at the Albert Hall to mark the tercentenary of the English Revolution. This was intended to follow one marking the centenary of the *Communist Manifesto* held in 1948.[64] Much of the writing programme of the Group was concerned with producing popular, readable histories. Hence the influence of Morton's *People's History of England* and the desire to emulate it. The commitment to adult education was part of this. Munby regretted that too much later Marxist history retreated to the universities, to ivory towers, to arcane scholasticism and impenetrable jargon,

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Group members see David Caute, *Red List: MI5 and British Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2022), ch. 7.

[61] Minutes, 10 Apr. 1948. LHA, CP/CENT/CULT/5/11.

[62] LHA, CP/CENT/PUB/2/2.

[63] 'Some Issues of the Development of Progressive Historiography in England', [in Russian], *Voprossy Istorii* ['Studies in History'] [Russian Academy of Sciences], 1963 (no. 5), pp. 76-90.

[64] The 1946 minutes show Munby as convenor of a group to organise this; its other members were Hobsbawm, Martin Milligan, Max Morris, and Andrew Rothstein. For the 1948 pageant see: https://historicalpageants.ac.uk/pageants/1342/.

inaccessible to ordinary readers. There are signs of tensions within the Group between the professionals and the amateurs. Betty Grant complained to him of the snobbishness of university types within the Group, though her animus may have something to do with anger that the Group had become more a 'club' than 'a Party organisation'.[65] The young Raphael Samuel, who joined in 1951, echoed these sentiments, calling *Past & Present* 'belligerently professional'; he celebrated instead the local history phalanx, praising Betty Grant, and regretting that *Our History* was the 'poor relation'. Samuel found in the *Our History* approach the lived experience of working class history, rather than theoretical and schematized debates about 'class struggle' or economic 'transitions'.[66]

Secondly, Munby stressed the importance of ancient history. Most of the later attention given to British Marxist historiography has been to the English Revolution of the seventeenth century and the emergent industrial proletariat of the nineteenth. Yet a good deal of the Group's focus was upon ancient history and archaeological pre-history. This had much to do with the fertile connection forged in the 1930s between history and science – particularly the biological and evolutionary sciences – which led in turn to connections between history, archaeology, and anthropology, in a search for a unified theory of the stages of human development. Prehistoric eras, lacking in records of individuals, lent themselves to theorising about socio-economic determinants and structures, in contrast to the methodological individualism of modern history, so abundant in personal records. A book which especially impressed the Group was Gordon Childe's *Man Makes Himself* (1935). (Munby emphasised the connection between scientists and the Party in the '30s and '40s: the Cambridge geneticist J. B. S. Haldane, the physicist J. D. Bernal, and the biochemist Joseph Needham were all Communists. Needham wrote a history of the seventeenth-century

[65] Grant to LMM, 20 Oct. [1958?]. LHA, CP/CONT/CULT/8/4.

[66] Sophie Scott-Brown, 'The Art of the Organizer: Raphael Samuel and the Origins of the History Workshop', *History of Education,* 45 (2016), pp. 372-90, at p. 377; idem, *The Histories of Raphael Samuel* (Canberra, 2017), pp. 41, 187-8. See J. Callaghan, *Cold War, Crisis, and Conflict: The History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1951-1968* (London, 2003), p. 101.

Levellers under the pseudonym J. Holerenshaw.) A Group paper on 'Stages of Development' sweeps through history from the Stone Age onward, citing the Old Testament, Diodorus Siculus, Marx and Engels, and Gordon Childe. A striking propensity of the Group was its willingness to consider broad sweeps: to those inured to present-day specialisms their papers are breath-taking in their expansiveness. The abiding focus on England since the sixteenth century was always contextualised within broader Marxian theses about the evolution of societies since primitive times.

IV

Thirdly, Munby was anxious to emphasise the role of local history. This was his signal contribution, and it required an effort to educate the Left in its virtues. The British Marxist historians' greatest contribution to British historiography, beyond its own ideological redoubt, was in promoting 'history from below', social history. During the 1960s university history courses were transformed by the arrival of social history to stand alongside 'high' political. The Group focussed attention on the history of the working class and showed that such a history was possible, for in myriad ways the lives of those who left few written records could be recovered. No book showed this so richly as E. P. Thompson's celebrated *Making of the English Working Class* (1963), with its often-quoted aspiration to recover lives buried by 'the enormous condescension of posterity'. Even so, there was resistance on the Left to the pursuit of local history. Marxist history tended to be national, and international, in orientation, and its templates were those of broad structural socio-economic change. The dynamics of class mattered more than spatiality and locality.

Local history could indeed be a tool deliberately targeted *against* Marxism. This was so, for instance, in the movement for regional and county history which grew up in the 1970s among historians of the English Civil War. Local and regional history, by revealing the filigree of local society and the conflicted nature of local identities and loyalties, was used as a solvent of Marxian categories, with their schematic and

national-minded clashes between feudal and bourgeois classes. Once revisionist studies of 'county communities' made their impact, it became impossible ever again to draw a line on a map between the Severn and the Wash and pronounce that the south-east was advanced, capitalist, and Parliamentarian, and the north and west was feudal, reactionary, and Royalist.[67]

Well before the 'county community' historians of the 1970s, English local history had been inimical to a socialist approach, in part because rooted in Victorian gentlemanly antiquarianism – brilliantly parodied by Osbert Lancaster in *Draynflete Revealed* (1949). It was country house and ecclesiastical history for squires and parsons, which had distant origins in early modern 'chorography', with its feel for England as a federation of landed estates.[68] Also, local history tended to mean rural and agrarian history, whereas the heartland of socialist historiography tended to be urban and industrial.

Nonetheless, the Group came to recognise, in the early 1950s, that many people among grassroots socialists were interested in local history. A Group paper in 1951 referred to the creation of a local history section and noted that the response showed 'that there are many Party comrades interested in history whom the activity of the Group has not touched'. Local branches of the Group were set up in Manchester, Nottingham, and Sheffield. The initial proposal came from Betty Grant in 1949; in the following year she advocated local history in the Party journal *World News,* and offered to 'organise work in local history' as a tool for 'preparing ammunition for the class struggle'. The Group's *Local History Bulletin* was launched in 1951, later renamed *Our History*, with Grant as the first editor and which Munby edited from 1963 to 1970.[69] It

[67] I think here of the work of Alan Everitt and John Morrill and their objection to the structural schemata offered in Lawrence Stone's Marxisant *Causes of the English Revolution* (London, 1972).

[68] Rosemary Sweet, *Antiquaries: The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London, 2004). For the evolution of the study of local history see John Beckett, *Writing Local History* (Manchester, 2007).

[69] Grant edited nos. 1-8; Allen Merson 9-14; Joan Simon 15-28; and LMM 29-54. In 1958 it had a circulation of 232: 135 personal subscriptions, 66 to bookshops, 31 complimentary. LHA, CP/CENT/CULT/8/4. See Andrea Bonfanti, 'History as a Weapon: Betty Grant and the Local History Section of the CPGB Historians Group', *Socialist History,* 56 (2019), pp. 89-102.

is striking that the launch coincided with the creation by other members of the Group of the vastly more famous journal *Past & Present* and may have been in conscious reaction, or contrast, to it. This was not only a matter of defending local history as a subject, but also the work of local and amateur historians. The localists demanded that 'academic historians [should] pay more attention to the applied side', particularly in collaboratively helping comrades in their work. Rodney Hilton replied that 'the battle of ideas had to be fought indirectly as well as directly, and especially in the universities'. Grant complained of the remoteness, especially in the Group's nineteenth-century section, from the working class, whereas local history led to 'direct contact with … the working class movement'. She battled on, protesting in 1953 against the formalisation of a sub-group of professional historians.[70]

In the mid-1950s the quarrel took on a broader form. Should the Group publish in journals beyond the Party's and *Past & Present*? When Samuel Aaronovitch called for wider outreach, the reply was that there was now *P&P*. Yet there occurred, in autumn 1954, a deliberate drive towards what today would be called 'public history': the use of popular journals, children's books, anniversaries and dramatisations;[71] work with schoolteachers; joining the Historical Association's panel of lecturers; broadcasting talks on the BBC;[72] boosterish book reviews; and so forth. Likewise there was a push to broaden the scope to embrace histories of gender, education, popular culture, leisure, and welfare.[73] Comrades must reach out to 'lovers of history generally' and write good 'narrative history'. The Group embarked on a popular front movement in the field of mass education; and the new agenda also reflected a cultural turn away

[70] Minutes, 8 July 1950; 8 Nov. 1953. See Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Post-War Britain* (Durham, NC, 1997), pp. 23-4.

[71] Candidates proposed were the Tolpuddle Martyrs, Peterloo Massacre, Dock Strike, Jarrow March, and Mary MacArthur (suffragist and trade unionist).

[72] The Group was alarmed by Peter Laslett's attack on Marxism in the pages of the BBC magazine *The Listener* (Minutes, 20 Mar. 1955). But a decade later the demographer David Eversley reviewed Laslett's *World we have Lost* alongside LMM's *Hertfordshire Population Statistics* as providing theoretical and empirical building blocks for the Cambridge Group for the Study of Population and Social Structure. *Economic History Review,* 20 (1967), pp. 169-71.

[73] Minutes, 10 Oct. 1954, 14 Nov. 1954.

from narrowly economistic class history. It was in this context that Munby was advised by the Group to accept the editorship of the non-Party *Amateur Historian*.[74] The Group's ambitions were apocalyptic. 'By 1964 we must supersede most [non-Marxist] work with our own.' But the Party's Cultural Committee was not amused: Comrade Munby was reprimanded for 'insufficient stress on the class emphasis of Marxism'.[75]

Munby took inspiration from the 'Leicester School' of English local history (as did the anti-Marxian county historians of the Civil War), with its strong emphasis on topography, geography, and regional economy. Inspirational was the work of W. G. Hoskins, especially his *Midland England* (1949), which Munby praised as the foundation charter for the marriage of 'history from below' with local and regional history.[76] Hoskins was one of the non-Communists who braved Cold War suspicion by publishing in early issues of *Past & Present*. At Leicester, he was succeeded by H. P. R. Finberg and Joan Thirsk. 'These three', Munby remarked, 'opened the whole world of pre-industrial rural England and its records for the non-academic reader.'[77] Munby remarked that whereas in 1945 he was a labour historian, by 1948 he had become a local historian, a 'devotee' of Hoskins. One like-minded colleague among the Communist historians was Eric Kerridge, historian of agriculture, whose paper for the Group in 1948 offered a strikingly topographic and 'ecological' approach to popular movements in the English past. His discussion of the socio-economic roots of Civil War allegiance in the 'chalk country' and 'cheese country' anticipated David Underdown's later book, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion* (1985). In the bibliography to Kerridge's paper, works by Hoskins sit beside those by Lenin. The trajectory of Munby's work lies somewhere between Kerridge and Underdown, the latter a historian of the Left though not a Marxist. Kerridge took Betty Grant's and Munby's side in their struggle within

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[74] Minutes, 14 Nov. 1954.

[75] Minutes, 20 June 1955. These tensions show that it is misleading to suppose that the Soviet invasion of Hungary was the sole disrupter of the Group's relations with the Party. Nor did that split destroy amity. The 1960 preface to Hill's *Century of Revolution* thanks LMM alongside Hobsbawm and Morton. For the Cultural Committee see Harker, *Chronology of Revolution.*

[76] LMM, *Local History since 1945* (London, 2005), p. 5.

[77] LMM, *Local History since 1945,* p. 9.

the Group, and found himself criticised by comrades for his undue emphasis on agrarian history: Munby offered to help him write a book on that subject.[78]

In another respect, Munby's trajectory reflects that of Edward Thompson, for his immersion in the particularities of local history unavoidably lessened the methodological role of socio-economic determinism and increased the sense of the agency of individuals within contingent settings. Thompson's historical work was far removed from the agent-less structural schemas that characterised Marxist work bred within the discipline of economics which dominated the Group's earliest deliberations – notably in Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*; it dwelt instead on the actions and subjective perceptions and voices of individual actors.[79] Thompson's *Making* has achieved such a classic status that it overshadows developments in its direction within the Group's discussions in the mid-1950s. The Group's decisive turn away from the reductionist tendencies of economic history towards a more flexible social history of 'the people' – away from 'structure' and towards 'agency' – can be associated with its 1954 conference on 'The Development of British Capitalism'. Leslie Morton's paper on 'The Role of the Common People' was especially admired, and Munby's historical writing thereafter took its cue also from Morton. Bill Schwarz has written:

> Little survives from this conference – certainly not the prestigious volume which was once projected. However, some sense may be gained from Lionel Munby's 'People or Mob' and Morton's 'Sedgemoor' which were later circulated in the *Our History* bulletin (February 1955), and later still, supplemented by some of Rudé's work on the eighteenth

[78] Minutes, 14 Jan. 1950, 12 Jan. 1951, 16 Mar. 1951.

[79] I may here have overdrawn the contrast. See Timothy Shenk, *Maurice Dobb: Political Economist* (Basingstoke, 2013), p. 164.

century, as contributions to the slightly grander *Our History* devoted to 'The Common People, 1688-1800'.[80]

Munby's 1954 paper, 'People or Mob', succinctly sets out the parameters of the historiographical revolution in the study of the English and French crowd that Hobsbawm, Rudé, and Thompson were to effect in the late 50s and early 60s, albeit that his tone had more of moral indignation than methodological discrimination.[81] Traditionally, he complained, 'the "mob" is ignorant, irresponsible, easily influenced to riotous and illegal acts, and often the mere tool of unscrupulous agitators'; the term 'mob', he noted, was routinely used 'to denigrate the struggles of the common people, those who challenged the ruling order in pursuit of their rights'.[82] This thought would be at the core of Thompson's classic paper, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd' (1971).[83]

Munby's initial turn toward local history arose from a request, in 1948, from Jack Simmons of Leicester University[84] to write a history of Oxfordshire or Gloucestershire for a new series which the publisher Collins was to launch, following the success of their 'New Naturalist' series, under the general title 'A New Survey of England'. The invitation arose because A. L. Rowse (a Popular Front Labourite in the 1930s) was struck by a passage on Gloucestershire history in Munby's dissertation submitted for a Prize Fellowship at All Souls College. Munby responded by saying that as he was now based in Cambridge he ought to tackle Hertfordshire or Bedfordshire. The book was a long time coming, but it retained its Leicester School

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[80] Schwartz, 'Historians Group', p. 73. The latter pamphlet is no. 20 (1960). LMM's papers show the following contributed to the 1954 conference: Andrews, Collins, Davidson, Dobb, Hill, Hilton, Hobsbawm, Kerridge, Kiernan, Morton, Savile. George Rudé's *The Crowd in History* appeared in 1964.

[81] LMM reviewed Rudé's *The Crowd* (1959) and Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* (1959) in *Marxism Today*, 3 (1959), pp. 348-52.

[82] 'People or Mob', in [LMM and Morton], 'The Common People, 1688-1800', *Our History*, 20 (1960), p. 5.

[83] *Past & Present*, 50 (1971), pp. 76-136.

[84] 1915-2000; the first professor of history at the university; passionate about topography.

connection, for *The Hertfordshire Landscape* (1977) appeared in Hoskins's series, 'The Making of the English Landscape'.[85] Munby's Hoskinian ambition for accessible regional history for a wide audience is attested by a series he himself edited, the 'City and County Histories', which, however, did not survive beyond the first three volumes.[86]

The Hertfordshire Landscape integrates archaeology, topography, and history. It opens with quotations from E. M. Forster's *Howard's End* and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. It avoids the gentry's country houses and dwells on patterns of agriculture and the morphology of towns and villages. It sweeps from prehistory to the post-War New Towns. There is neither sentiment nor a false prospectus about the 'natural' or the 'rural': Munby is emphatic that the landscape is a human artifice. 'None of it is natural'; 'the countryside ... is ... entirely man-made'. He exudes an instinctual modernism: post-War architecture and technology he admired, and his approach lacks the nostalgic anti-modernism of some of the British Left's critique of industrialism. 'Modern pylons have a Regency grace; glistening in the sunshine or glowering in a storm'.[87]

Munby's Hertfordshire histories are in the spirit of Thompson and Hill. Thus, in introducing his later book, *The Common People are not Nothing* (1995), he writes that his aim is to write history 'from below': 'the reverse side of traditional history'. He argues for 'the existence of a continuous undercurrent of social opposition to established society', for the 'long-term existence of a discontented, anti-authoritarian section of society'. This opposition often 'found religious forms of expression' and Munby pays considerable attention to Quakers and Dissenters, emphasising the 'democratic views of the sects'. He tends to conflate diverse forms of nonconformity, and in turn to read these as forms of social protest, so that recusancy and witchcraft

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[85] The anchor text in the series is Hoskins's of that title, published in 1955. Other authors included H. P. R. Finberg and D. M. Palliser. LMM said that the Hertfordshire book should have been written by William Branch Johnson, another prolific county historian.

[86] C. M. Fraser and K. Emsley, *Tyneside* (1973), J. H. Bettey, *Dorset* (1974), and J. D. Marshall, *Lancashire* (1974), published by David and Charles (Newton Abbot). Twelve more were said to be in preparation.

[87] Quotations at pp. 252, 254.

and alehouse disorder fall under a common rubric of resistance to 'the establishment'. And he has a Whiggish tendency to construe seventeenth-century monarchs simply as despots, James II as a tinpot Hitler. A constant assumption is that, but for the instruments of 'social control' exerted by the ruling class, the common people were truculent rebels ready to overthrow their social superiors. That the people might have been authentically deferential or given to 'Church and King' Tory populism is not entertained.[88]

Most of Munby's local history work was done through branches of the Workers' Educational Association. Few local history tutors can have been so energetic in bringing the work of their students to the point of publication. Munby edited no fewer than ten books and pamphlets compiled by collectives of local amateurs.[89] It was often he who put students' findings into connected narratives: the writing up, he found by experience, was the hardest part for the non-professional. His pedagogy deliberately confined itself to providing broad national and county frameworks, leaving the local spadework to local people, who were thus drawn into becoming expositors to him.[90] The confining of research to universities he thought a 'bourgeois' tendency. He enjoyed being applauded by East European comrades: when, in 1962, he gave a talk on adult education in Czechoslovakia, his translator remarked, 'It is ironic, Mr Munby, that in our socialist country our best teachers can only describe the work of individuals, while you from a capitalist country tell us how to organise collective work'.[91]

Munby celebrated Victorian working-class audodidacticism, and the self-organised and philanthropic movements of Mechanics' Institutes, town Reading

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[88] LMM, *The Common People are not Nothing* (Hatfield, 1995), pp. xi, 25, 73. For a stringent critique of this model, directed against a later generation of New Left historians, see J. C. D. Clark, *Revolution and Rebellion* (Cambridge, 1986).

[89] For example, *Hatfield and its People*.

[90] LMM, 'Running a Local History Class', *Amateur Historian,* 2 (1954), pp. 8-11. His own tally is ten classes in Hertfordshire and three in Cambridgeshire leading to publications: *Local History since 1945,* p. 16. See Sarah Lloyd and Julie Moore, 'Sedimented Histories: Connections, Collaborations, and Co-production in Regional History', *History Workshop Journal,* 80 (2015), pp. 234-48.

[91] LMM, *Local History since 1945,* p. 16.

Rooms, Literary and Scientific Societies, and Quaker evening schools.[92] His ideal type of the local historian was Job Legh, a character in Mrs Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), the working man whose local knowledge, scientific collecting, and meticulous learning exceeded the antiquarian tradition of 'squires and parsons'.[93] This relishing of amateur historical research carried an echo of Marx's idyll of unalienated labour. By labouring upon their past a people takes possession of their history and makes it expressive of themselves. The modern enemy, Munby felt, was less the squires and parsons than the university professors. Most academic disciplines, he wrote, tend toward 'the growing exile of the amateur'. Professionalization also self-alienates its practitioners; it was a 'reactionary' tendency.[94] In 1960, during a national debate on the expansion of higher education, Munby deprecated the elitists who thought that 'more will mean worse',[95] insisting that a broad 'democratic culture' was everyone's inheritance and that working class people had too little opportunity for higher education. At the same time, it is clear that his conception of 'higher education' was not confined to *university* expansion but embraced lifelong education, opportunities for which ought to 'expand enormously'.[96] As things turned out, and apart from the Open University, the next forty years would see a great expansion of universities but a steady erosion of adult education, not least because the remorseless credentialization of education marginalised study done for its own sake. Today very few universities have extra-mural departments and the great late-nineteenth-century 'extension' movement is all but dead. There are parallels in the sociologist and campaigner Michael Young's promotion of 'open learning' but dismay that the Open University which emerged had all the trappings of a traditional university.[97]

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[92] LMM, 'The Beginnings of Adult Education in Hertfordshire', *Hertfordshire Past and Present,* 6 (1966), pp. 34-40.

[93] LMM, *East Anglian Studies* (Cambridge, 1968), p. xi.

[94] LMM, 'Studying/Writing Working-Class History', *Marxism Today,* 8 (1964), pp. 309-12; quotation at p. 309.

[95] This slogan, much debated in the 1960s, was coined by Kingsley Amis in 1960.

[96] LMM, 'On Culture and Socialism', *Marxism Today,* 4 (1960), pp. 282-8; quotations at pp. 285-6.

[97] On Young see Asa Briggs, *Michael Young: Social Entrepreneur* (Basingstoke, 2001).

Munby's ideals were embodied in the Group's journal, *Our History*.[98] From it, he produced a book-length compilation, *The Luddites and Other Essays* (1971), for which Hobsbawm provided an introduction. Hobsbawm underscored Munby's localist vision. 'If the history of British labour is to progress ... one of its most important tasks today – perhaps the most important – is to discover the regional and local reality of the working class. To study Chartism in the Black Country, the farm labourers of East Anglia, the shop stewards of Sheffield, and General Strike in the North-East need not be local antiquarianism'. He likewise stressed the journal's union of amateurs and professionals.

There is a chameleon quality to Munby's writing: he was able to use the same arguments and materials in Communist Party journals and in 'bourgeois' journals, but tonally quite differently. They run without Marxist scaffolding in the *Amateur Historian* and *East Anglian Studies*, but in *Marxism Today* they carry Party terminology: 'the capitalist ruling class', 'the revolutionary bourgeoisie', 'feudal reaction', and so on; but the historical case is fundamentally the same. Some might find intellectual dishonesty in this, yet it betokens the extent to which Marxist and mainstream history steadily converged in the decades after the War, the substance much the same, whether dressed in Marxist language or not. There is another way of putting this. Munby's writing bore the stamp of the Popular Front of his youth. Its agenda was of the broad Left, to which Marxist categories could be incidental.[99]

The most striking instance of convergence is Munby's thesis concerning eighteenth-century 'Country Party' opposition politics. Like many mainstream historians in the 1950s, he took seriously the work of Lewis Namier, that most

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[98] Nos. 29-54. The journal began as a monthly *Local History Bulletin* in 1951, was retitled *Our History* in 1953, relaunched in pamphlet form in 1956, transmuted into *Our History Journal* in 1977, and, after the demise of the Party, re-emerged in 1993 as *Socialist History,* still publishing.

[99] It is important to stress how pervasive Marxist categories became for many historians in the 1930s; it was not merely sectarian theology. Here is the medievalist Edward Miller writing to J. H. Plumb in 1936: 'I think there is a basic struggle between feudality and the emergent bourgeoisie underlying the Wars of the Roses … broadly – Yorkist "bourgeoisie"; Lancastrian "feudality''.' Quoted in Michael Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism, 1870-1970* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 179.

politically reactionary of historians. Namier argued that the apparent two-party nature of Hanoverian politics was an empty charade, for behind the mask of the party labels 'Whig' and 'Tory' could be found the true motors of the historical process: sectional interest and kin connection. Namier's counterblast against the verities of old Whig historiography, with its stately march-past of Whig and Tory administrations, its picture of progressive and peaceful political evolution, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, was welcome, for, read by a Marxist, it exposed the 'bourgeois' myths of constitutionalism and the ordered rise of democracy. Namier revealed the oligarchic nature of politics and the tawdry faction fights within the ruling cliques seeking to grab the spoils of office. The unsentimental historical materialism of the Right could suit the Left. Paradoxically, therefore, Munby was an enthusiastic purveyor of Namierism, but only in its critical element. He found unsatisfactory Namier's insistence that politics meant only 'high' politics, reducible to interest and family connection among the elite. Munby proposed a middle way. Hanoverian politics exhibited two modes: on the one hand, the charade of elite Whig-Tory politics, a re-arranging of the deckchairs among the ruling orders; but on the other, there was a broad coalition of popular movements among the subordinate classes, whose access to the political process was at best partial. In outline, this model was common among the Marxist historians, for it involved the notion, to be found in Hill, Thompson, and Hobsbawm, that in the era of emerging capitalist society, elements of the bourgeoisie made tactical and temporary alliances with radical popular forces from below, thus intermittently incorporating the common people into the political process. For Hill, the classic case was Oliver Cromwell's temporary alliance with the Levellers.[100]

Munby's eighteenth-century test case was the Caesar family's rise to dominance in the town of Hertford. The oddity of Charles Caesar's success was that he was a Jacobite who relied on the votes of Quakers: an ultra-Tory squire in alliance with ultra-Whig artisanal, religious nonconformist, common folk. The first turning-point was the

[100] For Namier and other non-Marxian origins of 'history from below' see Miles Taylor, 'The Beginnings of Modern British Social History?', *History Workshop Journal,* 43 (1997), pp. 155-76.

remarkable trial of the Whig grandee Spencer Cowper in 1699 for the murder of a Quaker woman, Sarah Stout, which wrecked the old support of Quakers for the Whigs.[101] The second was the election of Charles Caesar as MP in 1727, despite the opposition of Anglican clergy and Whig grandees; now the Quakers supported a high Tory. The earliest Whigs of Charles II's reign had inherited the support of the Civil War radicals, the men and women of the Puritan 'Good Old Cause', commandeering them in their struggle against Stuart absolutism and 'feudal reaction'. But the later Whigs, having gathered the reins of power after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, lost the need for, and sympathies of, political radicals and religious Nonconformists. The closing of the ranks of the bourgeois elite provoked popular resistance, hostile 'to government, to the establishment, and to landlord control of local politics'. That populist tradition, remarkably, brought together common folk with Jacobite squires, whose alienation from the regime of the Whig oligarchs radicalised them. Munby had hit upon a theme that would later be noticed by other historians: that Jacobitism was not only the home of 'reactionary' ultra-Tory dynastic sentimentalism, but also a vehicle for radical opposition, involving 'Country' protest against Court and Cabinet, against the growing power of the state, and against emerging financial capitalism and metropolitan stock-jobbing.[102] He observed the appearance of a strange phenomenon, visible from the 1690s, of the 'Jacobite Whigs', former Whig radicals who became Jacobites in disgust at the authoritarianism of the post-Revolution Whig regime.[103] He was not alone among historians of the Left in exploring the paradox that Jacobitism

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[101] The Cowper-Stout case continues to be a laboratory for historians: Beverley Adams, 'The Body in the Water: Religious Conflict in Hertford, 1660-1702' (PhD thesis, London, 2000); Julia Rudolph, 'Gender and the Development of Forensic Science: a Case Study', *English Historical Review,* 123 (2008), pp. 924-46; Mark Knights, *The Devil in Disguise: Deception, Delusion, and Fanaticism in the Early English Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2011).

[102] The notion of 'Jacobite radicalism' is present in a paper for the Group by A. L. Morton in 1954.

[103] See especially LMM, 'Politics and Religion in Hertfordshire, 1660-1740', in *East Anglian Studies,* pp. 117-45; quotation at p. 138. Also, 'Parliament, Representation, and Party Politics', *Amateur Historian,* 2 (1954-5), pp. 65-8; 'The County Election of 1727', *Hertfordshire Past and Present,* 1 (1960), pp. 18-27; 'The Two-Party System in Britain', *Marxism Today,* 5 (1961), pp. 24-9. For Jacobite ideological versatility see Paul Monod, *Jacobitism and the English People, 1688-1788* (Cambridge, 1989); Mark Goldie and Clare Jackson, 'Williamite Tyranny and the Whig Jacobites', in Esther Mijers and David Onnekink (eds.), *Redefining William III* (Aldershot, 2007).

contained lineaments of populist politics, for it is a theme in Thompson's *Whigs and Hunters* (1975). The eighteenth-century 'Country' opposition was a rainbow alliance, a popular front, against emerging capitalism and an over-mighty bourgeois state.[104]

V

Munby's historical writing was not only in the sphere of local history. He contributed to the Left's attempts to understand two putative failures of British socialism in the second half of the nineteenth century: its failure to absorb Marxist influence and its failure to make political headway during the three decades after the defeat of Chartism. In the first issue of *Marxism Today* in 1957 he challenged the conventional claim of the non-Marxian Labour Left (he cited Clement Attlee, Ramsay MacDonald, and Evan Durbin) that the British labour movement had no Marxian roots. He insisted that, on the contrary, Marxism 'has long been a vital practical and ideological factor in British life'. This much asserted, he then conceded that Marxism had failed to take the leadership of the labour movement, and he asked why. Marxism, he argued, had re-ignited British socialism in the 1880s through the Social Democratic Federation, which had the support of Engels and the Marx family (Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling). But the SDF's energies had run into the sands. The chief thrust of his article was an assault on Henry Hyndman, the SDF leader, for his autocratic style, sectarianism, and failure to grasp the decisive transition of capitalism then occurring, from its *laissez faire* form to state corporatism. In rebellion against Hyndman, William Morris and the Avelings had split from the SDF, but their own Socialist League soon faded and drifted into anarchism. Socialism became impotently sectarian, and chronically evasive about the need for parliamentary 'entryism'. Munby, as a supporter of the Communist Party's programme, *The British Road to Socialism* (1951), and rooted in the Popular Front

[104] In the late eighteenth century there emerged striking connections between Jacobites and Jacobins, and in the nineteenth between Disraelian Toryism and Chartism. Munby wrote about another Jacobite dynasty in his pamphlet history of Madingley Hall, a house once owned by John Hynde Cotton.

mentality, approved of the need for parliamentary socialism: classical 'entryism'.[105] (Willie Gallacher sat as a Communist MP from 1935 to 1950.) Munby quoted Marx: 'communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working class parties'. (Elsewhere, he wrote that the revolution would not come 'by cliques or by putsch but only when the mass of the people are involved in struggle'.[106]) He applauded Tom Mann, who founded the parliamentary Independent Labour Party in 1894, 'the finest British Marxist working class leader of those years', for grasping that a working class electorate could bring about socialism by capturing command of the machinery of the state; and he deplored the SDF for standing 'on the touchline waving a clean red flag'. Praise for Tom Mann was *de rigeur* in the History Group: fellow member Dona Torr's lifelong project was to write Mann's life, and her biography appeared posthumously in 1956.[107] But Munby's deprecation of the SDF angered Party members, who responded in later issues of *Marxism Today* with refutations of 'Comrade Munby', whose 'caricature' of the SDF was 'harmful to our party'. The SDF, insisted Betty Grant, had organised for socialism at every level, in strikes, mass demonstrations, and through school boards and Poor Law reform, and to 'idealise the ILP' was to succumb to the delusion of a *purely* parliamentary road to socialism. Comrade Munby had leaned too far toward parliamentary socialism.[108]

The SDF's incompetence aside, Munby accounted for the post-Chartist 'sleep of socialism' and for the failure of socialism fully to capture the allegiance of working

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[105] David Childs, 'The Cold War and the "British Road", 1956-1953', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 23 (1988), pp. 551-72.

[106] LMM, 'The Common People are Rebels', *Marxism Today*, 3 (1959), pp. 348-52, at p. 349. He advocated spreading the struggle to such unlikely popular movements as the Women's Institutes, the British Legion, and tenants' associations. Communism must be 'embracing' of ordinary people's preoccupations.

[107] LMM, 'Marxism and the British Labour Movement, 1880-1900', *Marxism Today*, 1 (1957), pp. 73-8; quotations at pp. 73, 76-8.

[108] Betty Grant, 'A Caricature of the SDF', *Marxism Today*, 2 (1958), pp. 60-3. See also Frank Jackson and Desmond Greaves, *Marxism Today*, 2 (1958), pp. 63-4, 123-6. Greaves defended LMM's analysis as helping to prepare 'for the supreme class battles which many of us believe will fall in the 1960s' (p. 123). LMM pursued his theme in 'Ideological Trends in the Labour Movement' (n.d., typescript): LHA, CP/HIST/03/11.

people in two ways. On the one hand, in conventionally Hobsonian and Leninist terms,[109] he stressed the ability of imperialism to secure an improved standard of living and to delude by its jingoism: 'imperialism seduced the working class'.[110] On the other, he argued that Protestant Nonconformity had yoked elements of the radical working class to Gladstonian Liberalism. This was again a common Group theme, though while some (like Thompson, in *The Making*) tended to see Nonconformity, and especially Methodism, as deracinating class consciousness, Munby (with Hill) preferred to accept that religion could genuinely express 'the strivings of the working class'. This was as true in 1640 as in 1890. 'We must face the fact that in Britain the bourgeois revolution was fought in religious terms. This left a heritage of religious ideas with a positive and even revolutionary content.' As for religion in 1890, Munby had, in an earlier article in the Party journal, *Modern Quarterly*, perceptively noted the drift of Anglo-Catholicism toward a 'corporatist' theology – the mirror opposite, in the ideological sphere, of the rise of corporatist capitalism – in which the individualism of earlier Protestantism gave way to Christian organicism and communitarianism. As with other religious phenomena, this could both suffocate working-class aspirations but could also be a vehicle for them. He was right to notice how many Anglo-Catholics of the 1890s adopted a kind of 'feudal socialism' or 'guild socialism'.[111] Munby's Communism thus avoided sectarian exclusivity in its evaluation of the chequered means by which socialism might come about.[112] At least, this was so as regards varieties of Protestantism. His view of Roman Catholicism was, by contrast, wholly negative, and those who have written about the Group have taken the example of Munby as epitomising the visceral anti-Catholicism of the Communist historians. A deep-seated

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[109] J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism* (1902); Lenin, *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916).

[110] In 1953 he proposed a new Group section on imperial history. Minutes, 21 June 1953. LMM gave a paper in 1959 on 'Imperialism and the Labour Movement, 1880 onward' to a summer school at Sheffield, attended by Hobsbawm, Klugmann, and Morton.

[111] The Anglican monk and historian J. N. Figgis (1866-1919) influenced the socialists G. D. H. Cole and Harold Laski: selections from the work of all three were published by the Marxist Paul Hirst: *The Pluralist Theory of the State* (London, 1989). There is now a considerable literature on Figgis.

[112] LMM, 'Marxism and the British Labour Movement', pp. 73-4, 77; LMM, 'Religious Reaction in the Epoch of Imperialism', *Modern Quarterly*, 5 (1950), pp. 328-41.

English Protestant antipathy to popery was here married to a Victorian rationalist contempt for superstition and priestcraft: and this loathing was fed by the Left's witnessing of Catholic Europe's dallying with Fascism and, later, the Vatican's involvement in the Cold War crusade. In 1950 Munby wrote that 'the mantle of the most reactionary section of European capitalism has fallen from the shoulders of Nazism on to those of the Vatican ... the dominant policy of the Church is that of the extreme reactionary circles of international capitalism'.[113]

In deprecating Hyndman, Munby had praised William Morris, and Morris had been the subject of his first article in the *Communist Review* in 1948, prompted by an exchange in the House of Commons between the Communist MP Willie Gallacher and Prime Minister Attlee, who both claimed ownership of the soul of Morris. Munby dwelt on the later phase of Morris's career, his conversion to Marxian socialism after 1880. He attested Morris's 'greatness' in developing 'a fully-fledged scientific socialist understanding'; underscored Morris's paradoxical combination of Marxist activism in the SDF and the Socialist League and his simultaneous cultivation of a medieval aesthetic through the Kelmscott Press; and he dwelt on Morris's vision 'of the higher stage of socialist society' pictured in the novel *News from Nowhere* (1890). Munby spoke of Morris having 'submitted his intelligence and his creative genius to the transforming power of Marxism'.[114] Here again, Munby, the essayist, shared the common stream of the Group's historical sentiments, which would yield, at fuller and more scholarly length, Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955).[115] One historian of the Group has written:

> The ideological struggle [to reclaim Morris] intensified at the end of the 1940s when Attlee began a concerted attempt to win Morris for the

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[113] LMM, 'Religious Reaction', p. 328, quoted in Raphael, 'British Marxist Historians', p. 73. See MacLachlan, *Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England,* pp. 104, 358.

[114] LMM, 'William Morris', *Communist Review* (July 1948), pp. 215-20; quotations at pp. 216, 219-20. See also LMM, 'William Morris's Romances and the Society of the Future', *Zeitschrift für Anglistik,* 10 (1962).

[115] In a 'Postscript' to the 1977 edition Thompson acknowledged Munby's 1962 essay as among the earliest critical appraisals of Morris's romances in relation to his political ideas.

> Labour Party. The Communists were incensed by this campaign. Infuriated rumblings continued in Party publications for years after ... It is apparent that all the historians (Morton, Hill, Torr, Allen Merson, Lionel Munby, Thompson, Hilton, Hobsbawm) held the deeply felt conviction that Morris essentially constituted a vital part of 'our' history.[116]

VI

The passion of the 1940s was gone by the 70s. By then Munby had left the Party and was, inter alia, writing illustrated books for children. To a degree he deferred to the norms and expectations of trade publishing for the popular history market, which prefers kings and queens to class struggle. Yet even here he interjected a broad Left agenda, and his approach was symptomatic of the extent to which the Left, by the 60s, set the general tone of historical writing in Britain. His *Concise Encyclopaedia of World History* (1977) has sections called 'The Feudal World', 'The Commercial and Industrial Revolutions', 'The Struggle for Markets'. This emphasis on the economic and social in children's history was unusual. Especially pointed are his remarks that the Russian Revolution 'turned a bourgeois, or middle-class, revolution into a working-class revolution', and that the West's welfare systems might be construed ambiguously either as 'a measure of socialism' or as a means 'to reconcile the working man to existing society'.[117] Likewise, in *Kings and Queens* (1974), he offered the Marxian commonplace that 'during the century of the Stuarts Britain changed from a near-feudal society into a modern commercial one'.[118] Earlier, in 1966, he had invited his old Party comrade, Leslie Morton, to contribute to *Everyone's Story of Britain*. Here, amid

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[116] Schwartz, 'Historians' Group', p. 77.

[117] LMM, *Concise Encyclopaedia of World History* (Maidenhead, 1977), pp. 179, 220. He did here condemn Stalin's 'ruthless purges' under which 'human freedom vanished': pp. 152, 242.

[118] LMM, *Kings and Queens* (Maidenhead, 1974), p. 31.

illustrations of kings and battles, highwaymen and fighter planes, Sir Francis Drake playing bowls and Daniel Defoe in the pillory, Morton begins a chapter, 'During the fourteenth century English feudal society entered a deep and prolonged crisis'.[119] The book is not segmented into royal dynasties but into chapters with such headings as 'The Age of the Squire' and 'The Age of Machines'. In the sphere of children's literature, Munby was purveying the Leftish reading of history that Hill and Hobsbawm had successfully disseminated to adult audiences far beyond the pale of the Marxist redoubt. If they never succeeded in seizing the commanding heights of the capitalist state, they did at least seize the commanding heights of the historical publishing trade.

Lionel Munby died in Cambridge on 19 April 2009, aged ninety, one of the last of a formidable generation of British Marxist historians and foremost among those who lent a spatial – a regional and local – dimension to history conceived as the struggle of working people to come into their own inheritance. His career exemplifies one liberal Englishman's engagement with Soviet Marxism, illustrates the manifold pursuits and disputes within the post-War Communist Party Historians' Group, and offers a counterpoint to a dominant account of the personnel and subject domains of the members of that Group.[120]

The world of 'extra-mural' teaching that Munby cherished has largely disappeared. But it would be a mistake to suppose that the decline of university extra-mural departments equates with a demise in bridge-building between professional and 'amateur' history. The bridges are different. Several universities now have Master's courses in 'public history' for those who seek careers in the heritage or museum sectors, in film, television, or popular print.[121] The Historical Association flourishes, as do innumerable local history societies. On television channels, few

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[119] LMM, *Everyone's Story of Britain* (London, 1966), p. 65.

[120] Obituaries: David Short, *Guardian*, 23 July 2009; idem, in Local History Online: www.local-history.co.uk/newsarchive/090724LionelMunby; Graham Stevenson, website on Communist Party history: www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php/biographies/m-o/m/1247-munby-lionel.

[121] For public history see Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London, 2000), ch. 6.

subjects capture more airspace than history. The character of ‘public history’ of course remains contested, a repository as much for conservative nostalgia as for the recovery of subaltern identities.