

**CHRISTOPHER HILL:  
THE MARXIST HISTORIAN AS I KNEW HIM**

**By Penelope J. Corfield  
written October 2004; very slightly adapted 2018.**

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NB: A short personal appreciation of Christopher Hill by PJC  
was also published in *The Guardian*, 6 March 2003

This memoir covers some details about Christopher Hill (1912-2003)  
which I have already discussed elsewhere. But as this  
previously unpublished account  
contains fresh family information and personal memories  
I have decided (Nov. 2018) to web-publish it as it stands.  
In parallel, I am uploading my published essays on Hill – at a time of renewed  
and welcome public interest in his life and thought.  
It should be apparent that I write from a position of deep personal affection,  
without necessarily agreeing on all intellectual and political points.



Christopher Hill in his north Oxford back-garden, Spring 1965:

© photo by PJC

Hill, who lived and dressed simply and had no desire for personal publicity, was on the point of expostulating that he did not want to be photographed; but too late, the photo had been taken.

This posting is its first appearance in public, with thanks to Suzanne Perkins for upgrading its technical quality.

My oldest memory of the eminent Marxist historian Christopher Hill is as the shy uncle – my mother’s admired older brother – at Hill family gatherings, who needed a moment’s coaxing to join the children’s games in the back garden. Then he did so with great enthusiasm, especially at cricket. I remember that Christopher at one party wore a big surgical collar to relieve pain at the top of his spine. In an old photo of the event, he looks like a slightly impish vicar, friendly but shy. On the improvised cricket pitch, however, he was energy itself. He confided that his youthful ambition was to play for his natal county of Yorkshire. To us kids, imbued with stalwart Yorkshirism from our mother, Christopher’s first aim in life seemed entirely laudable and natural. ‘I practised and practised’, he then explained, ‘but I wasn’t any good’.

Of middling height and very sturdy, Christopher was always very energetic. He walked fast and ate fast, with a liking for burnt toast and China tea. In physique and looks, with his wavy dark hair and square face, he resembled his mother’s family, the Dickinsons. But, in his robust health and staying power, he was definitely a Hill, from a sporting family which had a generation earlier fielded its own cricket team from a tribe of Hill brothers and half-brothers.

Like his own father, Christopher throughout his life was a great cyclist and walker. On one family outing in North Oxfordshire, his teenage daughter

Fanny began the march in her highest high heels. Christopher teased her about this sartorial unsuitability, drawing attention instead to my sensible flat lace-ups. But I was the one who ended the day with painful blisters, as Christopher and Fanny then together teased me on my unpreparedness for country life. I was mortified.

As children, we knew nothing of Christopher's historical writings. My mother, who in her youth felt overshadowed by her brilliant older sibling, shielded us from information about his academic successes. But, without knowing much, we approved of Christopher's evident kindness and benevolence, which was not hard to sense behind his august facade. He never forgot our birthdays and sent amusing notes in his illegible scrawl.

When therefore Christopher's first marriage to Inez Waugh ended in the mid-1950s – the first divorce that I had encountered – I was a strong partisan on behalf of Christopher and their daughter Fanny. Later in life, as an adult, I got to know Inez better and I moderated my stance. Her charm, vitality, generosity, and sensuality were unmistakably magnetic. It was apparent why Christopher had loved her and also possible to guess why the marriage eventually collapsed. Their lifestyles were too disparate to reconcile. Inez enjoyed crowds, attention, mischief, and improvisation, while Christopher liked those things but only up to a point, also seeking order and calm to conduct his academic career and solitude to write. Their strong bond began to fray, although neither found it easy to make the break. Inez left and came back more than once, until finally there was some sort of showdown: she moved to London with Bob Nimmo-Smith, who left his own family, and Christopher resolved that the marriage was over. Divorce was sufficiently rare those days for the situation to be very tense and difficult for all the parties involved,

including the children. Christopher's parents were aghast and distressed too, as they believed in marriage as a religious sacrament.

The period of the divorce and its aftermath was a deeply unhappy one for him. I remember one summer holiday at the seaside with Christopher and Fanny, when he struggled as a new single parent to entertain two teenage girls. We had fun but I am sure that Fanny and I enjoyed the experience much more than he did. Christopher did not find parenting as easy as he would have liked. He was caring but he found it hard to be demonstrative, echoing the pattern of his own upbringing. So while he certainly intended to be more immediately accessible to his own children than his parents had been to him, Christopher's reserve and his august reputation made that more complicated than it might have been. But he was absolutely devoted to all he loved, as I realised later as an adult, when we talked about the intricacies of family relationships.

Another personal crisis followed for him in 1956-7, in the form of furious debates within the communist movement following the Soviet invasion of Hungary and the campaign for internal democracy within the British Communist Party. Christopher was a leading Marxist intellectual, who very publicly flew the flag for the cause. He found himself in the thick of the arguments, which pitted comrade against comrade. But the reformers failed and many, including Christopher, resigned, with much anguish and heart-searching.

At the height of the controversy, he received an angry private letter from his friend and fellow historian Edward Thompson, strongly criticising Christopher for failing to provide more decisive leadership for the reformers. He felt wounded, although his friendship with Edward survived the blow. Later, when recounting these bruising events to me, Christopher expressed

sadness that the reformers had not managed to hold together and, more importantly, that they had not won.

After 1957 he described himself not as a communist but as a Marxist. Unlike some former comrades, Christopher did not glide across the spectrum to become a conservative. Instead, he joined the Labour Party, which remained his political home for the rest of his life. But he was never very enthusiastic and, with time, grew less so.

Talking to him about politics in the early 1990s, I was not surprised to hear that he heartily opposed New Labour. Speaking of Tony Blair, he snorted: ‘That young man takes too much upon himself’. When I objected that this was rather steep coming from the Christopher who had shocked his parents by becoming a Marxist and who had written a book *The World Turned Upside Down* to extol England’s radicals in the 1640s, he just snorted again, rather more emphatically.

Christopher loved to talk about current affairs, history, and literature; but was very reticent about his own personal life and feelings. He was a stoic by preference and by upbringing. ‘No fuss’ was the Hill family motto. Christopher lived up to that when, very rarely, he was unwell. In August 1986, he suffered an attack of Bell’s palsy, a virus that froze his facial muscles into a bizarre mask. Christopher did not complain and continued to meet people as though nothing had happened. In private, however, he admitted to some urgency in the ‘whistling’ exercises that were prescribed to restore muscle elasticity. Eventually, Christopher’s face returned to its normal expression of benign inscrutability. But I have no doubt that, even had he never regained his old looks, he would have continued to go out and about without a word of comment or complaint.

Despite his personal reserve, Christopher was a warm, wise, and witty friend. When immersed in his reading and writing, he was oblivious to the rest of the world. But when at ease and entertaining, he was convivial. He loved quips, repeated jokes, family nick-names, word-play, ironic quotations, and quick-fire repartee. When young he had been very shy with a marked stammer, but he had overcome his nervousness and retained enough of a pronounced style of speaking to be very distinctive. Sometimes he would drawl a particular word, such as saying 'Thaaaaank you' with prolonged emphasis, even if the gift was nothing more than a cup of tea.

While he liked debate and argument, Christopher did not indulge in idle chit-chat. He expected people to talk sincerely and he never worried if they needed time to formulate their views. Like the Quakers, he was happy to sit wordlessly through long moments of 'holy silence'. It must be admitted, however, that the pauses in his conversation could unnerve the unwary. I have known his students worry to me that to fill the gaps with Christopher they had themselves taken to babbling nonsense. But he stuck to his guns, believing that tutorials should allow the students to talk rather than the tutors to soliloquize.

In other contexts, Christopher was exceptionally quick and smart in repartee. It was always stimulating to be with him, as he often answered with ironic laughter or unexpected jibes, trying to catch his listener off-balance, in a friendly but jousting way. In the 1960s, I loved attending his famous parties at Balliol College, where he and his fellow historians Richard Cobb and Maurice Keen acted as verbal sparring partners. Their clever banter inspired us to join the fun, while Christopher kept the wine and beer flowing, smiling quizzically.

His election as Master of Balliol in 1965 marked a liberal moment for the College and a significant moment of public recognition for himself. I

personally doubt whether Christopher would have been chosen if he had still been a card-carrying member of the Communist Party. As it was, the College's vote for a committed Marxist ruffled some feathers on the political right. But, once the deed was done, it was clear that 'Christopher was good for Balliol', as one of his supporters urged. And he too admitted that he enjoyed being Master, especially at first.

Christopher was nicknamed at this time, jokingly, as 'SuperGod'. The name was not, however, a serious reflection upon the powers of the Mastership, which were always limited. The joke began by chance, when Richard Cobb left a phone message, barking out his own monosyllabic surname. When Christopher returned home, he was informed by his mystified young son that someone had called: 'He said his name was God'. Much confusion and laughter followed. Eventually it transpired that 'God' was 'Cobb'. Both Richard and Christopher were delighted by this mishearing; and Richard was the one to improve the joke: 'If I as a Fellow of Balliol College am God, then you are SuperGod'. And they enjoyed badinage on this theme for years.

Following the unhappy mid-1950s there followed for Christopher many years of fulfillment, public position, his torrent of historical writings, and his happy second marriage. His major regret, he once told me, was his own delay, after his divorce, in deciding to marry Bridget Sutton, his 'beloved fellow pilgrim' and deeply kindred spirit. She had recovered from her own failed first marriage and was sure of her love for Christopher. He, however, was initially indecisive. After some time of uncertainty, Bridget strategically departed from Oxford and went to live in London. Christopher, still gloomy in his bachelor rooms in College, persisted for a while alone. But one day he saw the light. He

unexpectedly telephoned Bridget and, without any further explanation, asked her to meet his train at Paddington Station. They arrived together and at once became inseparable.

Throughout all the upheavals in his life, which included the deaths of two daughters – an enduring grief of which he very rarely spoke – Christopher maintained his qualities of simplicity, tolerance, and dignity. He was often criticised, either for his politics or for his history, and sometimes for his actions as Master of Balliol. In reply, he defended his corner, but without rancour. I rarely saw him seriously ruffled, though he was particularly sorrowful when publicly savaged by friends, as happened in October 1975 when his fellow historian Jack Hexter launched a fierce and unexpected attack in the columns of the *Times Literary Supplement*. But Christopher did not mind criticisms *too* much provided that the accuser was sincere and not acting out of malice or prejudice. ‘Sincerity’ was one of the most important words in his lexicon.

Immediately after his death in 2003, Christopher Hill was melodramatically denounced in *The Times* as having been a secret spy or clandestine agent of influence on behalf of Soviet Russia, when he worked for the British Foreign Office in 1942-5. The charge is highly implausible. Christopher was a plain-dealer, not a man for subterfuge. When the mandarins of the Foreign Office recruited him from his prior job in army intelligence, his left-wing political stance was well known. Indeed, in 1940 he published *The English Revolution 1640* with its uncompromising Marxist interpretation of English history for all to read.

Speaking fluent French, German and Russian as he did, Christopher was a useful recruit to the international desk. Afterwards, he rarely discussed his war-time role, because he felt pledged, as did others of that war-time



generation, to absolute discretion. However, he did recount with some affection how his boss in the FO, a convinced Tory of the old school, kept a huge map of Russia on his office wall, on which he moved little red flags to mark the Soviet resistance to Hitler. The war years were one of the few periods in Christopher's life when his own views were in synchronisation with Britain's foreign policy.<sup>1</sup>

Morally, he was deeply influenced by the Methodism that was the family faith, shared by the Hills and Dickinsons. From earliest youth, Christopher attended chapel regularly and, in his teens, earnestly discussed the weekly sermon with his parents. Throughout his life, he never shed the aura of an upright old Puritan, although he developed liberal views on sex, booze and alternative lifestyles. Before his first marriage, Christopher is known to have had at least two love affairs (there may have been more) but once having made a personal commitment, as in matrimony, he was devotedly constant.

Politically, his deepest commitment was to the principle of egalitarianism: he believed that true liberty must include equality for all. This was initially based upon the universalist credo that he heard from a radical preacher on the Yorkshire Methodist circuit: 'We are all one in the eyes of the Lord'. Later, as a student, Christopher shed his religious faith. But he transferred his belief in equality into Marxism, which he saw as simultaneously explaining conflict in the past and predicting the desired future of equality for all. Accordingly, Christopher supported Soviet Russia and in 1953 he wrote a favourable obituary of Stalin for a Marxist journal. He later regretted that, and the item was never reprinted among his enormous output. His uncritical support for Stalin can now be justly challenged; but it should be noted that it sprang from Christopher's deep commitment, not to an individual leader (his obituary of Stalin concentrated heavily on Stalin's Marxist theories of history)

but to the communist vision of a just society without poverty and exploitation – an egalitarian vision that always remained Christopher’s ideal.

I miss our many debates, including moments of Hillish silence, on politics and history, as well as updates of academic and family gossip. I miss his stream of amusing letters and cards from around the globe. One postcard from a famous American university town urged in capitals: DO NOT COME HERE! I miss the chance to ask him more questions about his past, to which, in the right mood, he would respond thoughtfully. And, like his many friends, I miss Christopher Hill just as he was: a very public figure among Britain’s intellectual left for much of the twentieth century and a very loveable private person.

**The author:** Penelope Corfield, who is niece of Christopher Hill, is Emeritus Professor of History at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her essay “‘We are all One in the Eyes of the Lord’: Christopher Hill and the Historical Meanings of Radical Religion’, was published in the Autumn edition of *History Workshop Journal*, no. 58 (2004), pp. 114-31; her resumé of ‘Hill and Methodism’, was published in *The Historian*, 87 (Autumn, 2005), pp. 21-3; and her short account of Hill at Balliol in *Balliol College: Annual Record* (2009), pp. 39-41.

PJC’s separate account of ‘Christopher Hill’s Intellectual Trajectory: From Biblical Protestantism to Humanist Marxism’<sup>2</sup> has been published twice in translation; firstly by Paola Redaelli as ‘Il percorso intellettuale di Christopher Hill: Dal protestantismo biblico all’umanesimo marxista’, in *Italia Contemporanea*, 232 (2003), pp. 491-505; and then in Japanese by S. Sugawara, in J. Iwai and H. Onishi (eds), *The Seventeenth-Century Revolution Debates* (Kyoshin Ueno, Tokyo, 2005), pp. 103-30.

## Endnotes:

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- <sup>1</sup> An example of changed attitudes towards Russia, post June 1941 when Hitler invaded, was recorded in a private wartime diary: R. Malcolmson and P. Searby (eds), *Wartime Norfolk: The Diary of Rachel Dhonau, 1941-2* (Norfolk Record Society, Vol. 68, 2004), pp. 77-8, entry for 13 December 1941: ‘Everywhere the main remark about the war seems to be “Aren’t the Russians doing well?” ... I think for me the change of attitudes towards the Russians is best illustrated by Miss A. She was a real Tory – and hadn’t a good word to say about the Russians. They were atheists, baby-murderers, polygamists, etc. etc. but all this week she has been going from house to house in the town [Sheringham] selling flags for Russia. It is really incredible. ...’
- <sup>2</sup> With thanks to Irene Corfield, Tony Corfield, Lyndal Roper and Susan Whyman for helpful criticisms of an early draft of this essay; and to Dorothy Thompson for illuminating discussion of the Historians’ Group of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and its intellectual milieu.