Stefan Berger interviews John Halstead

The Society for the Study of Labour History

The Society for the Study of Labour History, founded in 1960, has been the oldest and arguably most important professional association promoting the study of social movements in Britain. To date, no account of its foundation, development and impact on the study of labour and social history exists. John Halstead, currently Chair of the Society, has been very closely involved with the Society from early on. The interview took place at the University of Glamorgan on 14 April 2002.

SB: Perhaps we could start off by you saying a bit about yourself and your career in labour history and within the Society for the Study of Labour History.

JH: The first point about my career is that I was a civil servant for ten years. I didn't go straight to university from school. I took three 'A' levels and two scholarship papers and the marks were sufficient to get me into university. But the Headmaster told me that my youthful appearance (at 17 years of age I looked like 14 or 15) meant that I was not mature enough to go to university as an undergraduate. Family circumstances were very difficult, so I had to get a job as a warehouse boy in a textile mill. On the advice of my former headmaster, I then took what were competitive examinations for the executive civil service. I came out of them ok and began a career as a civil servant. Then I studied in the evenings at the LSE and graduated four years later in 1963. My tutor at the LSE was Ralph Miliband. Despite Ralph, I was not and have never been a member of a very left-wing party. I had been a Liberal but later joined the Labour Party, and have always seen myself as a reformist rather than a revolutionary. I was successful in the civil service administrative class examinations in 1983 but in 1965, when employed in the Nationality Division at the Home Office, I became unhappy with the weakness of government policy towards the threat of the Rhodesian unilateral declaration of independence and took a job at Sheffield University in adult education. From that point I was teaching coal miners, steelworkers, railway and other industrial workers. In adult education you became a jack-of-all-trades, you had to respond to demand all the time. Many of us taught quite a wide range of subjects; in which history played an important but not the only part.

I became involved in the Society for Labour History because Royden Harrison was a member of my department when I joined it in December 1965. There was a crisis in the finances of the Society and they were looking for a treasurer. Royden asked if I would be interested in the job: that was in 1968. John Simpson, a lecturer in the Scottish History Department at the University of Edinburgh, had been in the job before I took it on in the autumn. I was in place for the Spring 1969 *Bulletin*. At the time, the Society had the very low subscription

rate of 50 pence a year – something had to be done. I was invited to Birkbeck College to a meeting of the SSLH Executive in Eric Hobsbawm's room. I said I'd do the job provided that I had complete freedom of action. I wanted to spend some money on administration and double the subscription rate to a pound. The only test was a successful financial outcome. That we achieved. Then eventually Sidney Pollard, who with Royden had edited the *Bulletin* since its inception in 1960, decided he was going to leave Sheffield. He'd been over to the University of California in Berkeley and enjoyed his trip there. They offered him a job and Sidney decided to accept so Royden invited me to join him as an editor. As it happened Sidney could have continued as editor because after he had accepted the post and made travel arrangements the United States' immigration service discovered a problem. Sidney had been a member of the Communist Party in his youth, probably for a short period. I don't think Sidney was ever politically active in the UK: in my view, his views were broadly left; but in the UK he avoided associations with particular political parties. Nonetheless, he was denied entry into the US and had to stay in Sheffield while I carried on with Royden as an editor. I carried on as an editor of the *Bulletin* for a long time. Royden eventually left Warwick and retired from the job. I recruited David Martin at Sheffield, Laurence Marlow and Alan Campbell, both originally from Warwick (now at South Bank and Liverpool respectively) and, in due course, Malcolm Chase from Sussex, but now at Leeds. I retired at the end of 1996 after the Research Assessment Exercise had prompted the Society move to a journal. The first issue from Edinburgh University Press was at the beginning of 1996.

SB: Was the *Bulletin* originally established because there were few other outlets for labour history at the time?

JH: There was no shortage of outlets for labour history in the early 1960s, and the *Bulletin* was meant not so much as another journal but as a communication platform for members of the Society. The Society did not want to establish a proper journal: the founders took the view that Society members should publish in the established journals. Journals were not in shortage and we thought good quality material would get published. Eric Hobsbawm had already been publishing in *Economic History Review* and elsewhere. I think Royden Harrison had already started publishing in the *International Review of Social History*. It was important to establish the credibility of labour history by publishing in existing journals. Edward Thompson was associated with *Past and Present*.

But there was a point when a discussion took place within the Society about establishing a journal. The Executive agreed to explore possibilities. Royden, Sidney and I were given the job of looking into this; however, I never took part: Royden and Sidney did it. It came at a time when commercial publishers were not interested in journals in a way that they have been subsequently. It was at a time when members of staff at Hull University had already started, or were about to start, *Social History*. John Saville, on our executive committee, was rather upset that his members of staff had started this new journal without consulting him or inviting him to participate. I suspect that the founders were never really keen on the idea of chang-

ing the *Bulletin* into a journal, though that was what subsequently happened. I think they were a little reluctant to undertake editing a journal. The senior people were already heavily engaged in their work. So we carried on with the *Bulletin* though its character changed somewhat as time went by. Geoff Brown, one of our Executive Committee members, referred rather sarcastically on one occasion to our publication of 'surrogate articles'.

SB: By 1960 labour history could already look back on a long and distinguished tradition. You already had the Webbs, Tawney, and Cole. Why do you think that it took until 1960 for the Society to get established?

JH: I'm not sure that connecting these people amounts to a tradition in any coherent sense. There is the question of the attitude of what Edward Thompson called 'history proper' to labour history that may have something to do with it. I think the starting point for the Society is G D H Cole. The events of 1956 also had something to do with it. Cole had always taken an interest in adult education, as well as the Labour Party. He was a key figure in the 1940s and 50s to whom many people related. Royden Harrison was his post-graduate student. Cole was getting old in the 1950s and his birthday in 1959 [Cole died in January 1959] was the impetus for producing the first volume of *Essays in Labour History*. Contributors to this volume were the key people who founded the Society. The roll call includes such members of the British Communist Party who had left it in 1956 as Edward Thompson and Royden Harrison. I am not sure about Henry Collins position at the time, but he had certainly been a member and Eric Hobsbawm's membership was well known. We have talked about Sidney Pollard already. Of course, one of the editors, John Saville, was also a Communist Party member to 1956. As I understand it there was at least one meeting in Leeds to discuss the *Essays in Labour History* volume and there was also a meeting to discuss the foundation of the SSLH. The Society planning group also included Stephen Coltham from the *ELH* volume; and J.F.C. Harrison, who had no communist affiliation, of the Leeds University adult education department. The meetings took place in Asa Briggs' room.

The key question is why did Asa Briggs and John Saville come to edit this particular volume and why did the meeting take place under the auspices of Briggs in Leeds? I think the answer to that is that Briggs was the only professor – he was professor of Modern History at the University of Leeds – and was a part of 'history proper'. If you were going to set up a journal, that was a good thing. John Saville was a senior lecturer. I think that at that point in time academic rank and status were extremely important. Royden Harrison, for example, remembered being treated by John as somewhat junior. People in 'proper' university subject and degree-teaching departments were in a superior position to those in adult education. Coltham, Collins, Thompson, Royden and John F.C. Harrison, were all in adult education. But adult education provided the space to 'think outside the frame' and develop a new subject. It is significant in this context that, unlike other members of the CPGB, Royden Harrison hadn't joined the Party Historians' Group: he did not want his intellectual activity to be subject to any kind of party pressure.

SB: It was also after the Second World War that we begin to see the institutionalisation of social history more generally with the founding of *Past and Present* in 1952 and the establishing

of the first lectureships in social history in the 1950s. Presumably labour history was within that trend?

JH: I suppose that you can say that. Initially after the Second World War, the subject of economic history attracted more interest than social history. Everyone was keen to get away from the 1930s, and there was great interest in economics. English social history, of course, was Trevelyanite: that is to say, the manners of society with the politics left out. But with the rise of sociology in the 1960s, social history did of course become more important while economics fell out of favour.

SB: You mentioned Edward Thompson's comment on 'history proper'. How much opposition to labour history was there from 'history proper'?

JH: One illustration is the apparent reluctance of the Institute of Historical Research to allow the use of its premises for London conferences, though this eventually changed. There is the way in which Eric Hobsbawm's promotion was blocked by the professor of medieval history at Birkbeck. In the Sheffield history department, there was no interest in labour history. It was full of people from Oxbridge who would have rather liked to put the clock back. In as far as there was any room for labour history, it was in the department of economic history which Sidney ran. That was formed after Sidney had been a success in labour history.

SB: How important was the split in the CPGB Historians Group in 1956 for the eventual establishment of the Society?

JH: We have touched on this already. People who had left the Communist Party Historians' Group were looking for a new kind of forum. Thompson had been an orthodox Communist, and quite hard-line really. As he once said, 'In my 32nd year I began to reason': he might as well have said he had begun to think. The break with the CP was important. But the foundation of the SSLH did not immediately follow and the non-communists amongst the founders also believed that labour history should be promoted against 'history proper'. Quite apart from that, everyone knew that conventional history had ignored important and large subjects in turning its nose up at labour. I wrote an article[1] which distinguishes between three kinds of labour history. One is the institutional stuff; the second is the social history of the class; and the third is this challenge to 'history proper'. The latter is best exemplified perhaps by Royden Harrison's work on *The Second Reform Act: the 10th of April of Spencer Walpole*, which produced a furiously extended response from Maurice Cowling at Cambridge. The series of one-day conferences that SSLH instituted twice a year, in the spring and autumn, became the new forum for former members of the CPGB History Group, but many others too.

There was an interesting little dispute at the preparatory meeting preceding the foundation of the Society. John Saville wanted to have a socialist history society: to recreate the CPGB Historians' Group under a different name. Many years later John Saville participated in a Marx-

1 John Halstead, 'Labour history', in: David Hey (ed.), The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History (Oxford, 1996), pp. 257–262.

ist history group over in Manchester. The suggestion to call the SSLH a socialist history society was resisted. Royden wasn't in favour, neither was Sydney Pollard, and John F C Harrison certainly wouldn't have supported it. Perhaps Edward Thompson would have supported it but I think that John was probably an isolated voice. I don't think he was even supported by Eric Hobsbawm. The consensus that emerged was for a society that would admit people of all political colours so long as they were interested in the subject. I think it had the advantage of damping any separatist tendency that could have arisen from disputes between people in various left groups. The decision, for all these reasons, was not to call it the Labour History Society but the Society for the Study of Labour History. I think there was a point to that. It is unfortunate that over the years the late Raphael Samuel, a long-serving member of the executive always referred to the SSLH as the Labour History Society. I always thought that this schoolboy member of the CPGB History Group knew perfectly well what he was doing and it had some political edge To say LHS rather than SSLH is to convey the impression that everybody was a card-carrying member of a certain political complexion, which was not the case.

SB: From the outset the Society was a broad church. It adopted a motion published in the first issue of the Bulletin saying that the Society wanted to promote the study of social history as a whole. Labour history was seen as an important sub-theme of social history. Marxists could work alongside people who did not have a Marxist perspective.

JH: Yes, indeed. From the start, the Society included people like Henry Pelling, who was no communist. When Henry was alive, various disputes arose in print over the years with other members of the Society; disputes over the history of the 'labour aristocracy', for example. Henry was able to be within the Society and to be quite happy with it, at the same time as being in dispute with other members over academic questions which had a political edge to them. Norman McCord from the University of Newcastle, a sort of Tory Radical, was a member; and another academic from Edinburgh University became a Conservative Member of Parliament. These people were exceptional of course since most members of the Society were broadly left in a British sort of way, but nevertheless the Society was a broad church and didn't want to exclude anybody, whatever their politics.

SB: One of the early aims of the Society was to make sure that labour history records were being preserved. Could you say a little more about that, please?

JH: Yes. That was built into the Society's objectives right from the start. The founders saw the building of archive resources, enabling labour history to be written, as an important aspect of their work. An archive sub-committee was set up and Royden Harrison and George Bain created the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick to take over the collection of trade union records, the enterprise that had died at the LSE with the Webbs. Our important campaign on the administration of public records can also be seen as part of this concern.

SB: Most of the founding members of the Society, and most of those who have been prominent in the Society, have been concerned with British history. Was there a conscious notion

of creating a kind of alternative history, a national history with labour history at its core?

JH: I don't really think so. An alternative history in the sense of challenge and exploration of previously neglected subjects, as we have noted, but I don't think people were much interested in the notion of national history. Of course, the Society was intended to be a British society, not an English society. The problem was largely to do with distances. At various stages in the Society's history we tried to work with the Welsh and the Scots. For example, at one point we reserved some places on the executive committee for them. When Angela John was based in London we hoped that she could come and represent the Welsh Society. On occasion, some did turn up. I remember Deian Hopkin coming once. But it was a question of cost, expense and distance. The Society ran on a shoestring: we did not pay expenses to anybody. We also tried to have the Scots come down. Friendly relations were always maintained with Ian MacDougall, for example. But it was a distance question. I think that both the Welsh and the Scots felt that they should establish their own societies, and had very understandable reasons for that. I have never felt that there was any edge between us.

SB: The Society's name was the Society for the Study of Labour History and not the Society for the Study of British Labour History.

JH: Yes. That's right. but there was no intention to make it an English history society. I think that the focus on British history in the historical practice of Society members relates to the British difficulty with languages. It is not that no British scholars speak foreign languages. But they tend to be organised in separate fraternities. Most founding members of the Society did not speak foreign languages and were working on British sources. I think it is as simple as that. As to the Society name, in the country of Tom Paine, I don't think people saw any point in referring to the notion of 'British'. I am sure there was no lack of interest in foreign labour, whatever the primary research focus of most members.

One thing I was keen on as editor was the introduction of essays in comparative labour history. But it was very difficult to get anyone to publish comparative articles. John Breuilly published a fine piece,[2] which was helpful, but too little material was forthcoming. Of course, some historians who were interested in foreign countries were not interested in doing comparative work on Britain. People without fluency in foreign languages were reluctant to go abroad to conferences.

SB: According to Eric Hobsbawm, Anglo-French historical discussions were particularly important for British social historians like Eric in the 1950s.

JH: I think Eric may be referring to the influence of *Annales*. The Society did issue an invitation to the French to come and meet with us in London in 1966. It took place and it was fruitful. Eventually, the French invited us back for a meeting organised by François Bédarida about issues connected with the publication of labour history journals. I went with Adrian

2 John Breuilly, 'The Labour Aristocracy in Britain and Germany, 1850–1914: a Comparison', in: *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History* 48 (1984), pp. 58–71.

Oldfield, the secretary of our Society at that time. Deian Hopkin was there for *Llafur*. The *History Workshop* journal was there in the form of Gareth Stedman-Jones and Raphael Samuel. Patrick Fridenson represented *Le Mouvement Social* and I remember a very elegant presentation from Michelle Perrot. It was very interesting and enjoyable, but it was also the only other serious Society interchange with French labour historians.

We had an excellent relationship with the Dutch. We had regular joint conferences with them. We went there every four years and they came here: every two years there was a conference in either Britain or the Netherlands. All of that preceded the setting up of the American-style social science-history conference by the IISG at Amsterdam. Apart from that we also had several other joint meetings: with Scandinavian labour historians, Americans and Commonwealth historians.

Since the collapse of the financing of post-graduate work in Britain a great deal of PhD-type work is being done in English by Americans. They have all the money and resources and this is something we have to watch carefully. In my view, it can be dangerous for the subject by introducing into the British discourse preoccupations that are largely and appropriately American. One can be taken over – in the way that literary criticism tries to take over the discipline of history via post-modernism.

SB: If relations with continental Europe were difficult because of language barriers, how about relations with labour historians in the English-speaking world?

JH: The problem with the USA is that it is so big. We have had meetings with Americans but they haven't really had a labour history society. We did have decent relations with people in New Zealand. Herbert Roth was in regular correspondence with us. We had an ok relationship with the Australians and the Canadians, who have labour history societies.

SB: I'd like to return to methodology. From very early on, figures like Edward Thompson, Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart provided a bridge between social and cultural history. Were their writings influential for labour history and for the intellectual development of the Society?

JH: The first point is that people of my generation read Hoggart. The development of cultural studies had a lot to do with him. Hoggart was in adult education. Adult education was the space within which one could do different and new things. This was extremely important. I am fairly sure Hoggart was never a member of the Society. I don't think there was any direct influence from him on the working members of the Society, although we were all aware of his work and read it. Raymond Williams was never involved with the Society either. He was not an historian, he was a literary person. Edward Thompson was involved with the Society, but he never played a very large part in its affairs. He spoke from time to time at conferences, but was never on the executive committee. Edward's real interest was literature, more than history, despite the fact that he wrote much-admired history. The *History of the English Working Class* had a big impact. I remember buying it as a student in early 1963 and then, later, the revised edition of 1968. I'm not sure that Edward's approach was highly influ-

ential in a direct sense within the Society. Obviously his book was influential, but I'm not sure that it was influential from a methodological point of view. It may well have been more influential in America in terms of methodology.

SB: The Society was a professional body for labour historians. But many of its leading members also were political activists. To quote E P Thompson again, 'historical consciousness ought to assist one to understand the possibilities for transformation and the possibilities within people'. Was that political mission one that was shared more widely among members of the Society?

JH: That is a very interesting question. Many were involved in adult education; people like myself and Royden were engaged in teaching industrial workers. We all had a sense of mission in dealing with this particular occupational group. But not necessarily to encourage them into a particular position on any specific political question. We were all broadly left in sympathies, but, speaking for myself at any rate, one was sometimes accused of being more left *(-wing)* than one actually was. Some people called what we were doing indoctrination. I would answer this by saying, 'In the psychology department there is a padded room where light and food can be controlled. They can empty your head and fill it again: brainwash you to come out a new man. But that is not what happens in this room. Of course, you may be influenced by what we say, but you will take from it what you want'. You felt that people ought to have an informed view of whatever it was they wanted to think about.

If you were teaching political science or philosophy, or even history, you could say that you were educating people politically; but it was not in any particular sense. If you had a tutor who was distributing *Socialist Worker* in the class, that would have been regarded as unprofessional behaviour. In so far as members were involved with anything political they did it outside the Society in a personal capacity. For example, my group of tutors who were teaching miners during the miners' strike of 1984/5 did give financial support. But that had nothing to do with the Society. We did that as a group of tutors because we were in a relationship with these people.

SB: Many leading members of the Society were involved with adult education and therefore dealt with workers. However, looking through the pages of the bulletin and the journal, the articles have been largely written by professional historians; very little has been produced by amateurs.

JH: Yes. But there were members of the Society who were students in adult education who came from working-class backgrounds. Some of them became active as writers. My very first class in Sheffield included, for example, one Dave Douglass. He was a member of the Fourth International. Dave went on to Ruskin College and under Raphael Samuel produced one of *History Workshop's* first pamphlets.[3] I doubt that Dave ever actually joined the Society. Raphael was once described by a former review editor, Lawrence Marlow, as 'a Machiavel behind the

3 David Douglass, *Pit Life in County Durham*, History Workshop Pamphlet no. 6 (London: Ruskin College, 1972).

Dickensian exterior'. Of course, *History Workshop* was established to promote worker historians. Royden and I had a disagreement with Raphael about this. My view was not to discourage people, but there was a question of craftsmanship. Work that was published had to be of a certain standard. From time to time we did get something from someone who could be called a worker-historian and we did sometimes publish.[4] There was no deliberate policy to exclude particular categories and concentrate on professional historians. Provided the work was of an ok standard it would go in, but I don't think that we had many submissions.

SB: How did membership figures for the Society develop?

JH: Our membership in the very early days rose very rapidly to around 200–300. I remember the late Jim MacFarlane used to go around the miners collecting subscriptions. In the very early days, the support of adult education students was important in keeping us going. Then, as post-graduate students came out, membership built up. We used to print 1100 copies of the journal and reckoned on a membership of 950. We were normally running at a dispatch of 670 or 700 on mailing; about one-third of those, perhaps a bit more, were individual subscribers. Out of 900, some 400 to 500 were individual subscribers. The bulletin went out to 23 countries. We had strong support in Japan, but less strong support in the United States. There was a scattering of subscribers in continental Europe. The institutional subscription numbers seem to have been maintained. The fall in subscriptions since we went commercial seems to be among individuals. We were at the level I've just described for a very long time. Our policy was always to keep the subscription fairly reasonable. Yet we have largely lost control in taking *LHR* to commercial publication and I foresee problems if we don't work very closely with the publisher.

SB: What was the impact of the expansion of higher education in the 1960s on the fortunes of the Society?

JH: It was beneficial. A particular key here is the Centre for the Study of Social History at the University of Warwick. Post-graduate work at the Centre was very much concentrated in the labour history field and in social history. A bunch of very good students emerged there. Quite a lot went on to become active in the Society. One might mention Sheila Blackburn, Alan Campbell, Richard Croucher, the late David Englander, Bill Lancaster and Laurence Marlow among several others. Post-graduates from elsewhere were important too: there was money around until shortly after 1979 and the emasculation of the Social Science Research Council. Social history was seen as exciting. I think we did very well in that period.

4 See, for example, Eddie and Ruth Frow, 'The Modern Press and the Social Democratic Federation 1883–1887', in: *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History* 31 (1975), pp. 62–65. The Frows were trade union and labour activists, but also became accomplished historians and founders of the Working-Class Movement Library in Salford. See Michael Herbert and Eric Taplin (eds), *Born with a Book in His Hands. A Tribute to Edmund Frow, 1906–1997. Communist, Trade Union Activist, Co-Founder of the Working Class Movement Library* (Salford, 1998), and Ruth Frow (ed.), *Edmund Frow (Eddie) 1906–1997: The Making of an Activist* (Salford, 1999).

SB: Interestingly a lot of historians of labour today are in what can be called the new universities, which relates to a boom of labour history in what were then polytechnics.

JH: There are really two things here. There is the expansion of the university and higher education system and the question of post-graduate research. As we have noticed, until the Conservatives decided to move in on the Social Science Research Council after 1979 and Keith Joseph had its name changed to the Economic and Social Research Council, there was a good supply of post-graduate work. Within the Society there was enthusiasm for the establishment of the 1960s wave of new universities. Interestingly, Briggs went from Leeds to being the Vice Chancellor of the University of Sussex. J F C Harrison also went to Sussex and out of adult education. Thompson, followed by Royden Harrison, went to Warwick and the Centre for the Study of Social History. This was part of the general expansion of higher education The later re-designation and re-badging of the polytechnics and other institutions as universities did not add very much to the Society. But, of course, lots of people started to go into these institutions as we moved into a mass education system rather than the more selective system of the early 1950s. It was natural that labour history would emerge in these areas and would relate to the interest of some of the students and some of the staff. Even if most members of staff came from traditional professional backgrounds some did not and they had benefited from the new climate after the Second World War when there was a strong feeling that there should be more opportunity. In the days before the war, people who could pass examinations often couldn't take the opportunity because of lack of money. The situation improved after the war and this fed into the second as well as the first wave of institutional expansion, with some benefit to labour history.

SB: Moving forward to the 1980s and the early 1990s, some scholars in Britain attacked labour history. In particular, I'm thinking of Gareth Stedman-Jones and Patrick Joyce, who argued that labour history was old fashioned and hadn't kept up with the methodological changes of post-structuralism. My impression is that these voices are not influential within the Society.

JH: I think Gareth Stedman Jones has been more influential than Patrick Joyce, partly because he is not so obviously someone who has drawn on post-modern theory. His book on Chartism[5] was received more favourably than Joyce's work. But I expect this will be a long-running play.

SB: Are either of them members of the Society?

JH: I think they have been but I am not sure about the present position: the answer could be negative. Gareth was London-based and is now at King's, Cambridge and associated himself with *History Workshop*; he was a close friend of Raphael Samuel. Joyce is different. When he got into explicitly taking Derrida and other postmodernists on board, he became quite controversial. The problem concerns your conception of history as a discipline. Regrettably peo-

5 Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History* (Cambridge 1983).

ple don't talk about disciplines any more. The notion of a discipline carries with it certain methodological and procedural or craftsmanship requirements. As is well known, or ought to be, if you are going to write good history you have to check one source against another; you may need theoretical apparatus but sources cannot be reduced to any 'reading'; your empirical work is necessary or it is not history; if 'historical imagination' is required, the evidence places constraints upon it. I don't know if it is the North American influence, peddling second-hand continental European philosophy but the whole thing is breaking down a little bit. There is the issue of the invasion of literary theory into history: the imperialism of literature in treating history as fiction. I think there is much room for an argument that may have barely started.

SB: After the collapse of eastern European communism some commentators identified a crisis in labour history. Right or wrong, contemporary political events seem to influence the fortunes of labour history. Do you think that the current interest in the phenomenon of New Labour will generate greater interest in labour history?

JH: No: not really. It seems to me that the Labour Party, whether it is called new or old, will continue to be a subject of interest. People who are members of the Society, whatever their politics, will continue to have some interest in that and work will continue on it. I don't think that there has been an upsurge in interest in labour history because Labour has been successful in winning the election. There is much about the history of labour beyond any political party of course, and that should continue to be of interest, if, as in medieval history say, to smaller numbers of scholars! But I think that last scenario is too pessimistic. As I suggested in controversy with David Howell in *LHR*, I think people became over-heated when 'actual existing socialism' collapsed.[6] The consequences in politics and society are enormous of course, but I see no good reason why detached and committed scholars should not continue to follow the lives of labour everywhere. The ebb and flow of a fashion for labour history is something we have to deal with and people can call current movements a crisis if they will, but isn't it really rather uninteresting? I prefer the longer and larger view.

SB: Looking back over the history of the Society, where do you see the major caesuras in the history of the Society?

JH: Well, the collapse of communism is important in terms of its effect on interest in the subject but the dust will settle and it may be too early to say. The advent of Thatcher and her impact on the funding situation was very important. Indeed, the changes in the British university system, the move to a mass system and the introduction of new methods of administration, such as the Research Assessment Exercise are unlikely to have a particularly good impact from the labour history point of view. There is the question of what has happened to adult education. This affects the lay or non-professional audience, that formerly supported labour history, and I think will continue to do so in various ways. It is increasingly difficult, if not

6 John Halstead and David Martin, 'The Labour History Prospect', in: *Labour History Review* 60, 3 (1995), pp.51–53.

impossible to do sustained work. Consider, for example, Alan Campbell's two volumes on the Scottish miners.[7] That fine piece of work came out of ten years of investigation and interest in the subject. With the Research Assessment Exercise nobody is going to publish a similar book. If it is true, the higher education system stands to be condemned: changes introduced in the name of improving quality will have lowered it. You can't do serious historical work on the basis of a couple of months flipping here and there. As historical arguments are made through the detail, articles in refereed-journals, with tight space restrictions are not good for history. The prejudice against books and the preference for articles, which comes from the natural sciences and marks current practice, is bad for history generally, and labour history too. I must say that I am disturbed by many current trends and we need a debate of a philosophical kind that takes us 'outside the box' that many would put us in.

As this perhaps illustrates, overall, the question of caesuras is more of a question of external factors impacting on the Society, rather than some kind of dynamic being created by the Society. The Society has not been like a continental institution, with its own library. It has not had vast resources at its disposal, so it can't play a similar role to that of the International Institute of Social History at Amsterdam. I can quite understand their desire to be the imperialists of world labour history and, like Sidney Webb in his view of Rome, I see much good in it and will support them. The truth is that, even if we wanted to, we couldn't do anything like that from a British base. We are just a body that can provide a forum for people with common interests acting, as before, as a focal point for discussion. Now that our finances are in good shape, we can offer some limited amount of financial support to various activities. So long as we continue to manage our affairs in a sensible way and don't lose our sense of what the subject is about by writing about David Beckham and other media fripperies, or thinking that the only worthwhile work is that which projects authors into Schama-type celebrity, the future should be fine. We will not go under. Any influence will come from the quality of the work. We will have to be robust and firm in our view of the necessity of History, now under attack, as well in our commitment to the History of Labour. It is something we have to do as individuals rather than as a Society, but we should continue to ensure that the institution is more of a help than a hindrance.

7 Alan Campbell, *The Scottish Miners, 1874–1939*, vol. 1: *Industry, Work and Community* and vol. 2: *Trade Unions and Politics* (Aldershot 2000).