

**CHRISTOPHER HILL:
MARXIST HISTORY AND BALLIOL COLLEGE**

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Christopher Hill, the eminent Marxist historian, became Master of Balliol College Oxford in 1965. His election was considered a surprise by many, because his stance as a man of the left was publicly known. Therefore it was assumed – wrongly as it turned out – that such a provocative political outlook would prevent Hill from gaining the top job at an old-established College in an old-established University like Oxford.

In the pre-election debates, however, his supporters argued that he would be ‘good for Balliol’. One effective speech within the College making that case came from Maurice Keen, the historian of medieval England and a moderate Tory gentleman of the old school. His advocacy swung many waverers. After all, Hill was not an unknown quantity within Balliol, where he had studied as a student in the early 1930s and where he was elected to a Fellowship in 1938, returning in 1945 after his war-time secondment to Military Intelligence.

Nonetheless, there was some internal resistance to be overcome. Cold War hardliners remained deeply suspicious of Hill’s politics; and his divorce in the mid-1950s had met with voiced disapproval from traditional moralists such as Hill’s predecessor as Master, David Lindsay Keir. That reaction dated from the era when outsiders felt free to interpret other people’s

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matrimonial difficulties as a sign of moral turpitude as well as a symptom of social breakdown. It hurt Hill, who had not sought the divorce. And it also irked him, as a symptom of narrow-minded repression and an excessive reverence for outward forms with which he fundamentally disagreed.

The choice of Hill was therefore a moment when the Balliol selectorate overrode not only old Cold War battle-lines but also some long-standing cultural disagreements among the Fellowship. A new-broom atmosphere seemed at last to bring the College into the spirit of the 1960s. And Christopher Hill did indeed prove to be good for Balliol, to which he was staunchly loyal. He played fair with all, discouraging factionalism. His personal style was informal and unpretentious. In particular, Hill paid great attention to the College students of all backgrounds and views, keeping in touch with many long after his own retirement as Master. No advocate of the drugs culture, he nonetheless corresponded regularly with the convicted drug dealer Howard Marks when he was languishing in an American jail, on the grounds that here was a Balliol man in difficulty and in need of friends.

As Master, Hill proved to be a liberal rather than revolutionary figure. He certainly had no plans to make the College a hotbed of Marxism. In fact, the radical challenge in the later 1960s came not from old communists but from the New Left of student protesters. Hill saw the College calmly through these excitable days. He steered between agitated dons and passionate student radicals, wryly enjoying the Marxist reference when they painted '*Eggheads of the world unite!*' on the walls of Balliol, under his study window. But no revolution ensued. Hill worked behind the scenes to promote constructive outcomes, liaising late at night over glasses of whisky with the moderates among the Balliol students. One of these was Martin Kettle, now a distinguished journalist on *The Guardian*. Their debates were,

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in miniature, like the negotiations between Cromwell and the Levellers in 1647. In this case, however, the radicals were not shot or dismissed but student representatives were introduced onto College committees: a useful reform but hardly the full ferment of *The World Turned Upside Down*.

One joking nickname that Hill acquired at this time was ‘SuperGod’. The tag was invented by another of the College’s eminent historians, Richard Cobb. He left a phone message, barking out his own monosyllabic surname. When Christopher Hill returned home, he was informed by his mystified young son that someone had called: ‘He said his name was God’. After some confusion, it transpired that the divinity was ‘Cobb’. He was characteristically delighted when the error was reported to him, improvising in reply: ‘If I am God, then as Master you are SuperGod’. The joke name was later quoted with mock exasperation by Hill, especially when he was wearied by the un-divine compromises of College and University life. For most of the time, he loved the job of being Master. Later, however, he found the slow pace of change frustrating; and he was sad that the full admission of women as undergraduates into Balliol, for which he worked hard during the 1970s, was not achieved until just after his retirement in 1978.

With the effervescent aid of his second wife Bridget Hill, Christopher established an open and friendly atmosphere in College. He held regular parties, which were famed in 1960s Oxford, giving students a chance to meet the tutors informally. There was a ready flow of wit and repartee, as well as of wine, beer and cider. Women students from other Colleges were invited in some numbers – then a radical and popular move. Christopher Hill, smiling quizzically, would spar verbally with his fellow historians like Maurice Keen and especially with Richard Cobb, greatly entertaining the students who were encouraged to join the banter.

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While Hill relished debates, he did not indulge in idle chit-chat. Like the Quakers, he was happy to sit wordlessly through long moments of ‘holy silence’, if such were required. His conversational pauses could unnerve unwary students, who worried that, to counteract the cryptic Hill silence, they had themselves begun to babble nonsense. But he stuck to his guns in tutorials, believing that these were occasions for students to talk rather than for tutors to soliloquize. Once people got the measure of his style and his somewhat stylised stammer, they found his counsel both generous and wise.

Throughout his period as Master, Hill continued to publish a steady flow of major books and articles expounding his interpretation of seventeenth-century English history as an era of revolution. Having devoted the mornings, and often the evenings, to College business, he would disappear to his home in north Oxford and shut himself away to write. By this time, Hill described himself as a Marxist but not a communist. After bruising debates over Hungary and Stalinism in the mid-1950s, he and many others, like his fellow historian E.P. Thompson, had broken from the international movement. The defeat of their proposals for internal party democracy within the British Communist Party was occasion for their resignations. The break was anguishing for Hill but it gave him a greater freedom of manoeuvre, amounting to an intellectual liberation. His writings quickly shed the old Marxist vocabulary and a lot of the dogma. Moreover, it was his resignation from the Communist Party that made it possible for him later to become Master of Balliol. A Marxist proved to be just possible. But a card-carrying member of international communism would (in my view) never have succeeded, even in the liberal 1960s.

Given his decidedly left-wing stance and the fact that his views were always on the record, Hill was accustomed to criticisms, whether of his

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politics or his history. In reply, he defended his corner staunchly but without rancour or personal animus. As a result, his direct style made him widely respected across the ideological spectrum. In his later life, he was personally saddened by the collapse of communist Russia and what was revealed about the regime's shortcomings. But unlike some other former communists, Hill never claimed the fashionable tag of 'post-Marxist'. Perhaps because he remained a beacon of intellectual sympathy for egalitarianism, he attracted some lurid allegations, immediately after his death in 2003. It was claimed that Hill had acted as a secret agent for Soviet Russia during the Second World War. But such claims are implausible. Hill was a plain-dealer who disdained subterfuge. And it is significant that no-one dared to make such accusations to his face, at any point his long lifetime.

Arriving as a brilliant but shy young student from a provincial Methodist background, Hill in the early 1930s was keenly stimulated by Oxford's intellectual crucible. He shed his religion though not his personal morality, while gaining an intellectual cause as an international Marxist. In time, he himself became one of the University's iconic figures, as a quintessential Balliol man. His thirteen-year tenure as Master was comparatively short but he followed in the pathways of two liberal reformers among his predecessors, Benjamin Jowett (Master 1870-93) and particularly A.D. Lindsay (Master 1924-49), a man whose values Hill shared. Like them, he loved Oxford while simultaneously seeking to challenge its more restrictive attitudes and to widen its social access. Moreover, like A.D. Lindsay who became Keele University's first Principal after retiring from Balliol aged 70, Christopher Hill moved to the Open University when he retired from Balliol aged 65. Both were thereby signaling their continuing commitment to educational innovation. Hill enjoyed the challenge of the

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Open University. His two years there were busy and productive. Nonetheless, Christopher Hill's core identification remained with the causes he espoused in his young adulthood: Marxist history – and Balliol College.

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