

Raphael Samuel, *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain, Theatres of Memory, vol II*. (London: Verso 1998)

In her introduction to *Island Stories*, Alison Light describes the house in Elder Street, Spitalfields, she shared with Raphael Samuel during the last years of his life: “cliffs of ringbinders in every available space in our house (except the kitchen and bedroom), excitable, ever-mounting piles of file-cards, with their full bibliographical references, were packed uneasily into old Oxo tins, teetering on dusty windowsills or lurking beneath chairs. Since everything could, in theory, be revised, nothing could be thrown away.” (xx)

Island Stories is not unlike that house, overflowing, a little dusty, but full of wonderful, indeed excitable, material on every page. Although most of the essays for this, the second of Raphael Samuel’s projected four volume *Theatres of Memory*, were largely in hand before his death in 1996, short only a few paragraphs here or a conclusion there, they were never quite ready as far as their author was concerned. In one sense this posthumous collection is “unfinished,” but, as the editors point out, Raphael Samuel preferred to think of all history as an ongoing, unfinished collective enterprise. This collection is true to its author: deeply researched, intelligently argued, lovingly presented, thoroughly excitable and immensely stimulating.

Raphael Samuel is present on every page. His passions and quirks, his breadth of knowledge, but, above all, his intense curiosity about every dimension of the past are wonderfully evident. In this age of specialization and careerism, Raphael Samuel was almost alone in this compulsion to understand and engage with all dimensions of his island’s history, from ancient to modern times. In this volume, he shows himself as comfortable with seventeenth century sectarians as with Victorian nonconformists, as familiar with the townlands of Ireland as the streets of London. The author’s intimate, tactile relationship with the past is perhaps best revealed the book’s appendix, his meditation on the built environment — “Reading the Runes” — which ranges from bricks to hedgerows, and touches on follies as well as factories.

The author’s extraordinarily close and passionate relationship with the past began at a very early age, and it was the ability to sustain a child-like level of curiosity, even wonder, that provides a clue to Raphael’s genius at opening up topics previously closed to conventional history. In an revealing autobiographical fragment, “Country Visiting: A Memoir,” he recounts his earliest encounters with the countryside in companionship (he would have said in comradeship) with his mother, Minna Keal, who was a member of Communist Party hiking groups. In conscious opposition to the conservative cult of the countryside that prevailed in the 1930s and 1940s, these ramblers quickened their pace when encountering the manor house or churchyard, striding purposefully through the quaint villages to reach the untamed heath and mountain top. Even as a child, Raphael’s Britain was not that green and pleasant land of Tory legend, but rather the wastes

and backwaters that would become the focus of his later historical research. By his own account, Raphael arrived at Balliol College, Oxford, never having heard of, much less visited, the Cotswolds.

It was to his credit, however, that Raphael remained insatiably curious about that which he had missed as a child; and he was to devote at least as much of his research to village as to urban life. But it is equally notable that childhood remained one of his major foci. Exploring children's own perceptions of the past (though the history of children's literature and radio) is one of the most interesting dimensions of this collection. As his writings amply demonstrate, Raphael Samuel was heir to the Romantic tradition, believing wonder and fancy to be as important to the historian's craft as methodical research itself.

For Raphael Samuel "writing was a species of activism rather than withdrawal," notes Alison Light. (xvi) His history was a mirror of his life: multidimensional, densely packed, a perpetual dialogue between past, present, and future. History flowed through the house on Elder Street, often disrupting but always enriching the history that was produced there. Although the author of many important articles and the editor of several invaluable collections, Raphael Samuel did not author a volume of his own until the remarkable first volume of *Theatres of Memory*, published in 1994. In it he celebrated the many dimensions of historical consciousness that coexist with and challenge academic history. Raphael not only acknowledged the significance of oral traditions and collective memories, but dared suggest that myth and history are inseparable, indeed necessary, to one another. He came to view the "scientific" approach — a position which as a young Communist he had been so thoroughly grounded — as another form of faith, which must be subjected to the same scrutiny as the other myths that people live by.

By the end of his life, Raphael Samuel had come to see history as much closer to literature and theatre than to science. His own writing, though true to the fundamentals of historiography, became more experimental. History, he once told me, must evoke as well as describe; it must move as well as inform its readers; it must reach the heart as well as the mind. Aware that academic history was losing its audience, and that the Right had become far more effective than the Left in evoking the past, Raphael turned increasing attention to questions of the presentation and performance of history.

There is much in this volume that touches on the subject of the spirit, on religion and the larger subject of belief in all its myriad forms. Several of the essays, grouped until the title, "War of Ghosts," address the presence of religiosity in a supposedly secular culture. "The Discovery of Puritanism, 1820-1914," previously published, but deserving the widest possible readership, traces the changing meaning of the term, demonstrating that Puritanism as we have come to know it was largely an invention of the Victorians, falsely projected onto earlier periods. Although something he grew up in rebellion against, Puritanism, and its latterday incarnation, "Victorian Values," fascinated Samuel. In two probing

pieces on Mrs. Thatcher's highly effective evocation of the Victorian ethos, he deploys his own vast knowledge of the nineteenth century to expose the contradictions of Tory mythology, but also to explore its sources of appeal to contemporary British voters. He makes it very clear that the fascination with this version of a world that never was did not originate solely at Tory party headquarters or in corporate board rooms. As he argued in the first volume of *Theatres of Memory*, we are witness to a profound shift in popular consciousness, which combines reactionary with progressive elements, a volatile mix that deserves careful, respectful examination. He was convinced that in his own lifetime the past and future had changed places: "In place of a better future, we use as our critical vantage-point a more immediately accessible past, and it is to make-believe identities in the past rather than the future that we look to find a home for our ideal selves. The return to history, under this optic, appears as a displaced expression of contemporary utopianism." (221)

The irony, which the author was all too aware of, is the fact that history from below, which the Left did so much to stimulate, has been so successfully captured by the New Right. In Canada, the United States, as well as in Britain, left historians find themselves in the strange position of constituting a kind of establishment, now on the defensive against Tory versions of social history. Yet Samuel did not lose faith in the history from below that he and his co-founders of History Workshop did so much to make a part of the schools and university curriculum. He urges us to be even more attentive to the voices of working people, women as well as men, children as well as adults, even when they tell stories that do not fit well with our received wisdom. Here he provides a model of the kind of open, empathetic understanding that we must admire and emulate.

It is one of the central arguments of this volume that the current explosion of historical consciousness is a product of the disintegration of the post-war British political economy and the consequent deconstruction of the singular "island story" which had prevailed for almost two hundred years. The author embraces that which has come to be called "four nations" history, but only up to a point, suggesting that the story may not fall neatly into equal parts: Scots, Welsh, Irish, and English. There are other fissures — North vs South, Protestant vs Catholic, migrant vs naturalized, not to mention gender and age divisions — which complicate the picture.

In Samuel's view, Britain is "unraveling," both in the sense of coming apart politically, socially, and economically, but also in the sense of becoming more knowable, disentangled from the myths of Britishness which have obscured its internal divisions, hybrid characteristics, and ancient multiculturalities. As the central institutions of the unitary nation state unravel, so do the myths that have sustained them. This, in Samuel's view, is a development to be welcomed. Yet, he was no partisan of vague concepts of identity and was clearly uncomfortable with post-Marxist critical theory. Having endorsed the "four nations" approach, strong reservations remain: "It leaves unresolved fundamental questions as to

what history is about. The state? Civil society? Organized religion? Field-systems? Child-rearing? Is politics 'architectonic,' as some influential voices contend, or would the built environment serve better as a unifying tread." (36)

To these questions, Samuel provides no definitive answers, though it is clear he believes that any approach which disengages social from political history or neglects economics is at risk of running aground on what he calls the "shallows of post-modernism." (197) However, his repeated use of the term "unravel" reveals the limits of his own historical categories. In the end, Samuel's island stories are themselves insular. They are almost entirely internal to the four nations themselves. No wider world is allowed to intrude; Europe is treated as exogenous; and the Empire appears only as a distant horizon. These island stories have a temporality as well as a geography all their own. The World Wars pass without notice; the European Community is scarcely acknowledged; multinational capitalism is left unexamined.

The story Raphael Samuel tells is also peculiarly English. Despite all his efforts to unravel the tales of the four nations that share this small archipelago, it is English villains and heroes who engage the author's attention. Samuel is understandably obsessed with Margaret Thatcher, but he allows her persona to obscure the powerful international economic forces that were operating in the 1980s and made her rise to power possible, if not inevitable. Taking political economy more seriously would have allowed Samuel to see that the four nations were not so much unraveled as rewoven into new international relationships that have at least as much explanatory power as do the older internal ones.

The fact that Raphael Samuel remains an island man through and through should not be allowed to detract from his special genius as an historian. Islanders often feel that the world begins and ends at the shore, but their powerful sense of place, so evident in everything that Raphael wrote, produces a very special intensity of engagement with the past. His world was finite, but it was immensely full. And his involvement with the present and future as well as the past reveals a level of passion that those of us whose interests wander offshore cannot but envy. Raphael's life was far too short, but we can be thankful that this and subsequent volumes will provide us with the full corpus of his writings. We must also be grateful to Alison Light, and to his close friends Gareth Stedman Jones and Sally Alexander, for the energy and care they have put into this project.

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