

John Saville: a short biography

Two strands emerge from the life of John Saville: a commitment to socialist ideas in print and in lectures for over sixty years; and an academic career in economic and social history at Hull University, which included the founding of the *Dictionary of Labour Biography* and diverse articles, commentaries and monographs on nineteenth and twentieth century history.

Born Orestes Stamatopoulos in 1916, in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire, and educated at the Royal Liberty School, Romford, Essex, Saville was captain of soccer, swimming and athletics and, in the upper sixth, became captain of the school. Awarded a county scholarship and a bursary by the London School of Economics, he studied there for three years and graduated with first class honours in 1937.

Saville joined the Communist party in the autumn of 1934 and was among the anti-fascist student contingent at the battle of Cable Street. He worked for the party on the numerous issues of the day, including support for the Spanish republic and the growing opposition to appeasement.

But for the war, a career in business loomed, first at Dictaphone, which left time for activity with the London district of the Communist Party, and from early 1939 as a research economist at British Home Stores. Saville was despatched across the country, to 'learn on the ground' with the advice not to become over theoretical.

Although the huge expansion of the armed services required an officer class with knowledge of modern methods, the army staff remained traditional in fighting and treated the common soldier as quite separate, and inferior, to officers. Contrary to general advice given by the Communist party, Saville was steadfast in refusing a commission. By late 1940, he was a battery sergeant major in the royal artillery and ended the war with the rank of Warrant Officer 1, as a sergeant major instructor of gunnery.

With the anti-aircraft artillery Saville saw action early in London, the south coast and on the Liverpool docks, and was later sent with his unit to the Shetland Isles, crucial for contact with Norway and the Baltic, although there was much less shooting to be done, and little in the time Saville spent there. From 1944 to 1946 he saw service in India, in part preparing the artillery for the proposed invasion of Malaya. In between training, contacts were made with the Communist party of India in Bombay, now Mumbai, for whom Saville wrote a pamphlet on British workers in action. These were times of considerable agitation in the armed forces, for the election of 1945, and in opposition to the officers steeped in the reactionary attitudes of the Indian empire, which led on occasion to arrests and prosecutions of British soldiers.

On his return, Saville joined the chief scientific division of the Ministry of Works, which was then tackling the scale of the devastation and depreciation of stock wreaked by war. There was also the Communist Party history group, rapidly attracting some of the finest historical minds of the twentieth century; regular discussions were held with Christopher Hill, Dona Torr, Victor Kiernan, Eric Hobsbawm and Edward Thompson, amongst many others.

The post-war party was at loggerheads with the government of Clement Attlee on numerous questions of the day, and on some issues of individual rights, including the jailing of Arthur Attwood in July 1946. In this instance, Saville received information from Bombay about the disgraceful behaviour of RAF officers and briefed D.N. Pritt, 'whom I now regard as the greatest British civil liberties lawyer of the twentieth century'. The case is discussed in Pritt's memoirs, and in David Duncan's *Mutiny in the RAF*.

Appointed lecturer in economic history at the University College, Hull, in 1947, Saville became engaged in much political activity, including *Daily Worker* bazaars, meetings on industrial, port and housing issues, and the organisation of classes on public speaking for trade unionists. In Hull he engaged with a wide community of activists, including a longstanding association with Alec Horsley, the Quaker chairman of Northern Dairies, who was also a founder member of the committee of 100; on his death Saville delivered the eulogy at the memorial service.

In 1956, he started, with Edward Thompson and a group of like minded Communists, the *Reasoner*, which questioned aspects of party policy. On resignation from the party, the *New Reasoner* was launched as a journal of socialist humanism with Saville and Thompson as editors and an editorial board including Doris Lessing, Peter Worsley, Randall Swingler, Ronald Meek, Malcolm MacEwen, Ken Alexander and Alfred Dressler. The new journal ran for three years from 1956 until amalgamation to form the *New Left Review*. This is a period discussed by many involved, and is the subject of a chapter in Saville's *Memoirs from the Left*.

In the 1960s, as economic and social history attracted increasing attention, new resources came to Hull for more staff and facilities, including a new social science block and an important University library with an archival collection. Under Saville's guidance the subject area grew fast, and with a separate department, so did postgraduate and research work. Numerous scholars now in place across the globe studied at Hull. Saville's own work included master-minding the huge research project for the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, which reached ten volumes by the time the project was turned over to new editors. The *Dictionary* addresses the vast tapestry which has been British labour history, and the endless record of hostility and discrimination faced by trade unionists for over two centuries.

Saville's energy enabled him to work in a wide range of areas and in exploring previously neglected historical methods. He worked on Chartism, on agricultural change, rural migration, on the role of the state and the judiciary in politics, on the foreign policy of the 1945 Labour government, while seeking to explore new historical tools such as oral history and by giving encouragement to others.

Together with Ralph Miliband, and ably supported by Merlin Press, the annual *Socialist Register* was launched in 1964, and set a new tone in for socialist scholarship: the journal is now in the 42nd year of publication. The foundation of the Lipman Trust in 1974 owes much to his imaginative skills as to its potential in supporting socialist education. Saville has continued to offer discussions on

aspects of socialist history and contemporary affairs and to pen the occasional piece for the journal *Socialist History*.

When asked for his favourite adage applicable to socialist and historical writing, he cited Marx's favourite, *De Omnibus dubitandum*, which roughly translates as 'one should have doubts about everything'; and he would also repeat the masthead for the early *Reasoner* 'to leave error unrefuted is to encourage intellectual immorality'.

John Saville's books include:

Ernest Jones Chartist (1952);

Rural Depopulation in England and Wales, 1851-1951 (1957);

1848, the British state and the Chartist movement (1987);

The Politics of Continuity: British Foreign Policy and the Labour Government, 1945-1946 (1993);

Memoirs from the Left (2003);

Ten volumes of the *Dictionary of Labour Biography* (1972-2000).