



Asa Briggs (1921-2016)

The British Association for Victorian Studies is very sorry to learn of the death of Lord Briggs. Our condolences go to Susan Briggs and the Briggs family.

Historian, teacher, academic statesman, Asa Briggs was a towering figure who shaped the 'map of learning' (one of his favourite phrases) in profound ways. British higher education and the world of scholarship were both profoundly transformed by him. It is quite simply impossible to imagine the world of Victorian Studies without him. This short tribute cannot hope to do justice to his numerous achievements.

Briggs's world view was formed by growing up in Keighley during the Depression and then serving in the War (when he worked at Bletchley Park). It left him with a strong work ethic and a commitment to reform and social improvement. He quickly became one of the major intellectuals who shaped post-war Britain, comparable to figures such as Michael Young (the subject of a biography by Briggs) and his friend Roy Jenkins. Beginning his teaching career at Oxford, he quickly went on to a Professorship at Leeds and was then given the opportunity to shape the curriculum at the new University of Sussex in the early 1960s. I went to Sussex as an undergraduate in 1979, three years after he had left, and I can still remember the feeling that Sussex was still very much Asa Briggs's university. He turned Sussex into the great interdisciplinary university of the age, insisting that students had to learn from different disciplines and bring them into conversation with one another. The effect for students was intellectually dazzling. After becoming Vice Chancellor of Sussex, he took the position in 1976 of Provost of Worcester College, Oxford. He also combined this with the Chancellorship of the Open University, evidence of his commitment to life-long learning (he had previously been president of the Workers Educational Authority). He was truly one of the great and the good, serving on countless committees and jetting off to conferences around the world. He was a man whose engagement diary was always full and tales of his energy and perpetual busyness have been the stuff of conversation between academics for over half a century.

At the same time, he was the most fertile of modern historians. He was one of the pioneers of social history in the 1950s, in a similar way to his contemporaries Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson but without the Marxism. A strong Labour man, he pursued a form of undogmatic but ideas-driven inquiry. His history of Birmingham in 1951 played an important role in rescuing local history from the antiquarians, turning it into a vehicle for the exploration of vital questions about society and economy. He went on to launch urban history as an important sub-discipline as well as the histories of labour, technology, media, mass communications and the book. Much of his career was taken up with his role as official historian of the BBC. He therefore anticipated and indeed promoted the development of cultural history. Briggs was also a dedicated populariser, opening up

academic work to the general reader and driven by a mission to explain. *A Social History of England* was a best-seller in 1983. His impact was such that it became the subject of a book published at the end of his life: Miles Taylor (ed.), *The Age of Asa: Lord Briggs, Public Life and History in Britain since 1945* (2015).

BAVS hails Asa Briggs as one of the key architects of Victorian Studies. The interdisciplinary ethos that Briggs brought to the field still informs our work today. Typically, one of his earliest publications concerned the medical history behind *Middlemarch*. His path-breaking book, *Victorian People* (1954) helped prompt the first serious reassessment of the Victorians, liberating them from Bloomsbury disdain. It also commenced a major trilogy. The second volume was *Victorian Cities* (1963)--not only his best book but one of the best works of history produced by a modern British historian. It showed how the Victorians poured their genius into their cities, taking on the challenges of poverty and dramatic population growth. *Victorian Things* (1988) helped launch the current interest in material culture and consumption.

Briggs's edited volume, *Chartist Studies* (1959), was a major force in generating history from below, showing that working class people had a history that could be recovered (not surprisingly, he became the first President of the Society for the Study of Labour History). Most influential of all was *The Age of Improvement* (1959), still one of the best textbooks about the nineteenth century. Generations have come to the Victorians through Briggs.

A full bibliography of his works can be found here:

<http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/Asa%20Briggs%20master%20bibliography%207%20May.pdf>

This year's BAVS conference is titled 'Consuming Victorians'. We hope Briggs would approve. As early as 1956, he wrote a history of Lewis's chain of department stores in Liverpool whilst *Victorian Things* argued that Victorian culture needed to be understood through the objects that the Victorians produced and enjoyed. We salute his commitment to interdisciplinarity and belief in the inter-connectedness of things.

Asa Briggs shaped us all.

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